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By Linda Howard, Linda Jones

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Luca Ambrus is a rare breed: vampire from birth, begotten by vampire parents, blood born. He is also an agent of the Council—the centuries-old cabal that governs vampirekind, preserving their secrecy and destroying those who betray them.

When a cryptic summons leads him to the scene of the brutal killing of a powerful Council member, Luca begins the hunt for an assassin among his own people. But instead of a lone killer he discovers a sinister conspiracy of rogue vampires bent on subjugating the mortal world.

All that stands in their way are the conduits, humans able to channel spirit warriors into the physical world to protect mankind. Chloe Fallon is a conduit—and a target of the vampire assassin who's killing them. When Luca saves her life, an irresistible bond of trust—along with more passionate feelings—is forged between them. As more victims fall, Chloe and Luca have only each other to depend on to save the world from the reign of monsters—and salvage their own future together.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

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Prologue

Los Angeles, California She was losing her mind. There was no other explanation. She hadn't slept more than thirty minutes at a stretch for the past three days. How could she, when the dreams were so vivid and came so quickly, one after the other, startling her awake every time her name was called? Some of the details were murky, but two things she always remembered very clearly: the man, and the way he called to her.

It wasn't fair. She was twenty-three years old, healthy, unattached—at the moment—and living in the bustling and exciting city of Los Angeles, far from the family she'd left behind in Missouri. She should be having the time of her life, the way she had been just a few days ago, and not dragging herself around in a stupor of fatigue. Normally she wouldn't complain about vivid dreams of a very large and muscular, mostly naked, dark-haired hunk who felt so real there were moments she actually forgot he was the product of a dream, but she needed her sleep.

Now it was getting worse; he was invading her waking hours, too, though, to be fair, for the past three nights it seemed as if most of her hours had been spent awake. She'd started hearing him at different times, and the way he called her name was getting more and more urgent. Hearing him! Really, truly *hearing* him. It might be a whisper of her name as she walked down the hall, or a very faint yearning call as she stepped into the shower. She wasn't imagining the voice. It was real. Only it couldn't be real. She didn't do drugs, so that meant she was losing her mind. It was the only explanation. Fine. The mind could go, so long as she could get some sleep.

She'd been sitting slumped at the table, picking at an ordered-in meal, but she was too tired to eat and finally she gave up on the effort. Dragging herself to her feet, she cleaned off the table and tossed what was left of her supper into the garbage can. As soon as she lifted the lid, the strong, sour odor of several uneaten meals hit her right in the nose. Shit, she should've taken the garbage out before it got dark. Not that she was afraid of the dark, and the Dumpster for the apartment complex was in a well-lit area just a few yards from the end of the stairwell, but she'd already changed into her at-home grubbies, she was barefoot, and if she dared leave the apartment looking like this the odds were she'd bump into some really hot guy who'd take one look at her and decide she was about as attractive as her garbage. That was the way life worked. On the other hand, did meeting at the complex Dumpster qualify as "meeting cute"?

She could wait until tomorrow to take out the trash, but that would mean waking up to that smell. And that was assuming she actually got some sleep tonight. She was so tired, she didn't think anything could keep her awake, not even a naked dark-haired hunk.

She tugged the plastic trash bag out of the can and tied the top, tested the knot to be certain it would hold, then trudged out the door, down the flight of stairs just outside her apartment door, and around the corner. “*Johanna!*”

Her hair stood on end as her name echoed both in her head and from somewhere around her. It was spooky, the way the sound seemed to come from everywhere at once. It made her want to run home like a scared little kid, to hide her face in her mother’s lap. And that was the last thing she wanted to do, considering how dead set her mother had been against her moving away. Things hadn’t changed since then, either. Her mother was always warning her to be careful. L.A. was a big city. She hated the idea of her daughter being in such a heavily populated place. So many people! The lecture was delivered on a regular basis: *Lock your doors, don’t go out alone at night, watch out for strangers*. Yeah, right. That last one was a hoot. She was a hair stylist, so she met new people every day. Moreover, she was fairly new to the area, which meant almost everyone she met was a stranger. Why bother to live in L.A. if she was going to close herself off in her apartment every night? She was here to make her reputation as the hair stylist to go to if you had a special event, someone who could make you look both elegant and edgy. One of these days she’d be stylist to the stars. The strange sound came again. There was an urgency in this latest call of her name, as if it were a warning. “Leave me alone,” she whispered, focusing on the Dumpster straight ahead. The faint sound of her own voice made her sharply aware that there was no one in the parking lot of the small apartment complex at this time of night. People who had to be at work early were already asleep, probably having perfectly ordinary dreams. Those who worked at night weren’t home yet. All she saw were a few cars, including her own, a lamppost, and the winding sidewalk that led to the pool. It was all comfortingly familiar. This was her home now; there was nothing to be afraid of, except the possibility that she was going nuts.

She tossed the bag of garbage into the Dumpster, turned, and stifled a shriek as she lurched backward, almost bumping into the trash container. A tall man with long blond hair stood right behind her, reflective sunglasses making his eyes look like giant insect eyes, with the lights reflecting in the lenses. “Shit!” she exclaimed, then put her hand over her heart as if she could physically calm its frantic pace. “I almost jumped out of my skin!” He paused, his head tilting to the side. “Interesting,” he said. “I didn’t know humans could do that.”

She would have laughed if she hadn’t been so preoccupied with catching her breath. Where had he come from? She hadn’t heard a sound, though he had to have been following almost in her footprints. Surely she should have heard him leave his apartment, heard his door open and close.

She’d been right about something like this happening, she thought in disgust. Her hair was a mess, she didn’t have a trace of makeup on, and she was dressed like a bag lady, so of course a trip to the Dumpster would bring her face-to-face . . . well, face-to-chest . . . with a hunk. He was dressed all in black; he had a serious Johnny Cash vibe going on. Still, she should have seen him, heard him, but she supposed she could only blame her foggy state of mind.

She tipped her head back to look at him. What was with those pretentious sunglasses? It was night. Not that there wasn’t a more than fair share of pretentiousness in L.A., where everyone was a star or about to become one. This guy was no star. She would’ve remembered this face if she’d seen it before. *Wowza*, she thought dazedly. He could give her dream stalker a run for his money in the looks department.

Like she was in any kind of shape to admire handsome strangers.

“*Run!*”

The voice was the one in her dreams, and for a moment she was stunned that he'd said anything other than her name. Then the urgency in the faraway voice seeped into her weary mind and uneasiness chilled her spine.

"Excuse me," she said, stepping to the side to allow him access to the Dumpster. He moved, too, his action mirroring hers, and like a slap in the face she realized he wasn't carrying any trash. The taste of copper filled her mouth. Every cell in her body seemed to tense as a rush of alertness seized her, but before her brain could quite send the message to scream he lifted his hand and used one finger to pull his sunglasses down so she could see his blue eyes . . . his *glowing* blue eyes.

The scream never came. She felt herself sinking into that gaze, and the odd thing was, she didn't *want* to tear herself free. The growing fear of a moment ago vanished as if it had never existed; instead, she was filled with a sense of warmth and pleasure. He was beautiful. She wanted to please him, to do whatever he wanted.

"Oh," she said in a voice of wonder, reaching out as if to touch his face.

He caught her hand instead, lifting it to his mouth in an elegant and old-fashioned salute. The touch of his lips was warm on her fingers. "Good-bye," he said, and slid eight inches of a knife blade between her ribs and into her heart.

That hurts, she thought, but without any urgency. "I don't want to leave," she said, faintly bewildered. "I want to stay with you." Why was it so hard to talk? Why did she feel as if she couldn't draw a breath? She blinked at him, trying to formulate an argument, but thoughts kept slipping away from her and time faded away. She became aware, on some distant level, that somehow she wasn't standing in front of him any longer but was lying on the ground in front of the Dumpster. That wasn't right. She would never . . . too many germs . . . she should get up.

And there he was again, the man in her dreams, as vivid as he had ever been. He said her name once more and this time he sounded so sad and angry. Then he faded away . . . and so did she.

Sorin stared down at the girl's body. He didn't rejoice in her death, but he did regret that he couldn't feed from her. The conduits had to be killed in a normal fashion— that is, a normal *human* fashion, to keep from raising the alarm. This one had been very pretty, so pretty that, under other circumstances, he'd have liked to spend some time with her, feeding and fucking. She would have awakened the next day feeling unusually weak but otherwise in good health, and all she'd have remembered was having a really great time. Instead, an accident of birth had signed her death warrant.

He could mark her name off his to-do list. Northeast Alabama

Melody leaned against the passenger door of a black pickup truck, and relaxed in the warm evening air. A breeze kicked up, blowing warm Alabama air that smelled of honeysuckle across her skin. And there was a lot of exposed skin for that breeze to caress. Even back before she'd been turned, when she was just a silly human teenager, it hadn't taken her long to realize that men were suckers for big boobs, a flat tummy, and long legs. She had all three and didn't mind displaying them if it got her what she wanted.

She smiled as the door before her swung open and a couple walked out of the bar. Wouldn't be long now; it was getting late and there were only a few customers left. Before the door swung shut again Melody caught a glimpse of the men lined up at the rustic wooden bar, their beers or whiskeys sitting before them,

their gazes cutting to her. They knew she was here. Well, *he* knew she was here, and that was all that mattered.

The conduit caught her eye just before the door closed. She managed to tip her chin in way of a greeting. He was cute—dark-haired and rugged, fit and tall. He had workingman's hands and nice eyes. It was his truck Melody was leaning against, and she was waiting for him.

Less than a minute later, he walked out of the bar. His stride was long; his jeans were faded and nicely snug. His pretty green eyes were tired.

"Why don't you come back in?" he asked as he walked toward her.

"I don't really care for alcohol," she said.

"Then why are you here?"

Three nights in a row she'd visited this bar, coming and going quickly, getting a sense of who this man was. She had to be sure.

"I dropped in that first night by chance," she said. "Since then I came here for you."

He looked a little surprised but not shocked. A goodlooking man who had a decent job had to be in demand in this little town, which was seriously in the middle of nowhere. Melody smiled. She knew there was no one around here who could hold a candle to her when it came to blindsiding men. They were so predictable, so easy.

"Take me home," she said simply. "I can't stay around much longer. I have places to go, a job to do. But damn, I don't want to leave without getting a taste of you." He was definitely interested, but still wary. "I'm not looking for anything serious. I got divorced just six months ago and the last thing I need—"

"I just want your body," she said, and that was the truth. "Why don't we go back to your place?" He flinched a little, and said, "I don't want to go home." There was a fear in his eyes that told her she had the right man.

She looked around, blew out a huff of air. "It's been a long time since I had a man in a truck, but you've got an extended cab and the windows are tinted, so I suppose we can give it a shot."

The keys were out of his pocket in a flash. Melody stepped out of the way. It was a shame, really, but she had no choice. The conduit was a soldier in a war he didn't even know he was fighting, but he was a soldier all the same.

A gentleman to the end, he took Melody's hand and helped her into the backseat. They'd be in cramped quarters, but that didn't matter. They wouldn't be here long. He joined her, closed and locked the door behind him, and she moved in.

Occasionally she'd been chastised by her elders for playing with her food, but her elders weren't here, and Melody didn't see any reason why she couldn't make the end pleasant. It wasn't his fault that he was a conduit, that he had the bad fortune to have the blood of an Immortal Warrior in his veins, that he'd been contacted. She'd give the good ol' boy a little fun, in his final minutes. He could die now or later, but he was going to die. There was a little bit of light coming through the tinted windows, just enough for him to see her

face, though of course she could see his very well whether there was light or not. She smiled at him. She'd been turned in 1956, which made her all but a fledgling in the vampire world, but being so young—relatively speaking—meant that she still clearly remembered what it was like to be human, with all the flirting and drama that humans attached to sex. She still enjoyed some of those silly rituals. With vampires, it was fuck if you felt like it, and that was about as complicated as it got. Not that vampires didn't make great lovers—there was a lot to be said for both practice and stamina—but humans could be so *sweet*, both figuratively and literally. Why give that up when she could have both? She'd actually heard that some of the really, really old vampires eventually gave up sex completely, but she couldn't imagine that. She sure as hell wouldn't ever make that sacrifice.

Hell, she'd had to give up ice cream and sunbathing, and that was enough sacrifice for her.

The conduit was exhausted, robbed of sleep night after night by his warrior trying to contact him, but he wasn't so tired that he couldn't appreciate the view as Melody shimmied out of her clothes. When she was entirely naked she took his hand and guided it to her breast, where he held it as she slowly peeled his clothes off and trailed her mouth over each section of his body as she bared it. The anxiousness she'd seen in him for the past three days faded, replaced by desire.

She straddled him, took him in, closed her eyes and enjoyed the feel of coming together. Their position was awkward, thanks to the small space. His bed would've been better, but he didn't want to go home. Home was no longer a sanctuary for him, poor thing.

Home was where contact with one's warrior began, and sometimes ended. At home, alone, safe from uninvited visitors and the turmoil of public places, the conduits began to see or hear or simply sense the presence of their warriors. No wonder the poor boy had been sleeping on friends' couches and in this very truck, where he could have a few hours of peace.

The sex was fast and sweaty and satisfying for both. There was a touch of awkwardness that was almost endearing. He was manly but also shy. He wasn't a smooth operator with the ladies and never had been. If she hadn't made the first move, he never would've spoken to her.

When they finished, for a long moment they lay awkwardly tangled, sweating and sated. Melody lifted her head, shook back her thick blond hair, and looked him in the eye. Even in the dark, he saw her . . . and she saw him. She caught his gaze, pushed, and his mind was hers. She was charmed by how easy and pliable he was. She'd be tempted to keep him for a while, if she didn't have a job to do.

She extended her fangs, but because she'd already established a contact with his mind, he wasn't alarmed. She already had control, and he knew what she wanted. Obediently he tipped his head to the side, exposing a long, strong, salty throat.

Melody lowered her head and bit down, breaking the skin, opening a vein. She couldn't drain him; she'd been ordered to be cautious when killing the conduits, so there wouldn't be a trail of bloodless bodies that might lead the humans to the center of power and blow the whole revolution thing. He tasted so *good*, as if the basic sweetness of his nature flavored his blood. Melody hummed a little in delight, and because she was a generous person she reached down and stroked his penis while she fed. He gave a little moan and pumped his hips against her hand.

"That's good, sugar," she whispered. "Isn't it good?" Without waiting for an answer she drew deeply of his blood, lost in the moment, in the lovely feel of his body and the taste of his life force, in the energy that

coursed through her as she fed.

Finally she made herself stop drinking; she didn't dare take any more. With lingering movements of her tongue she licked his throat, waited for the healing to kick in and close the bite. That done, she placed a strong hand over his mouth and nose, cutting off his air. She hated that she had to use this method to kill when her own appetite was so much more efficient. It just made no sense to waste that much food. But she was a good soldier, so she did what she'd been told. He didn't struggle, except for a brief twitch. She kept his nose and mouth covered until his heart had ceased to beat. Her job done, Melody patted him on the head, then touched his cheek. At least his last few minutes alive had been happy ones. She found some comfort in that thought. She wasn't a monster, she was just . . . *different*. More than that, she was *better*. Better than she'd ever been before, better than humans, who knew so little and existed for the benefit of those like her.

She took her time putting on her clothes, watching through the tinted glass windows as the last of the bar patrons came out, got in their various vehicles, and left. They didn't pay a bit of attention to the truck. He'd left it parked here a few nights lately, getting rides with friends when he was too drunk to drive, or sleeping in the backseat.

When the last patron left and the neon beer sign went out, Melody climbed out of the truck, closing the door behind her.

It bothered her that the conduit hadn't fought. Even though he'd been glamoured, his body should have struggled for air. Maybe she'd taken too much. She didn't have the kind of control an older vampire possessed, but that wasn't her fault, was it? She'd get older . . . eventually. But if she'd taken too much blood and some backcountry coroner got suspicious, she'd be in trouble. It really would be best if there wasn't enough left of the body for any medical examiner to study.

The good thing was, she had a natural talent that had come to life when she'd been turned, one that came in very handy when she wanted to hide some evidence. She lifted her hand, applied some concentration as she stared at her palm, and a small lick of flame flared to life there. She didn't feel any pain or heat from the flames, because it was *her* fire.

She stood back and with a flick of her hand sent that flame toward the pickup. It caught, licked across the seat, and with her mind she sent it racing through the cab, where it engulfed the body. Stepping farther away, she drove the fire onward, sending it in search of the gas tank. That took some doing, because she really wasn't sure where gas tanks were located, but by the time she struck pay dirt—so to speak—she was far enough away that the explosion didn't do much more than ruffle her hair.

A man came running out of the bar, alarmed by the noise of the explosion. Taken aback, Melody stared at him. She'd completely forgotten about the bartender. The older man raced toward her. "Dear God, what happened?" he yelled as he fumbled for the cell phone in his pocket.

Dammit! Under most circumstances Melody wouldn't have cared that her presence had been noticed, but her orders were clear: don't draw attention to what was happening, or else. She didn't want to find out what "or else" meant, though she had a very good idea. The last thing she wanted was to make Sorin unhappy. She had to handle this, and do it fast.

In the blink of an eye she moved in front of the bartender, startling him. "Wha—" he began, already stepping back, but she caught his gaze and he was hers. She saw the reflection of the fire in his eyes, then she

was in his mind.

“I wasn’t here,” she said calmly. “That poor boy’s been sleeping in the back of his truck lately, and you knew that but didn’t mind.”

“I didn’t mind,” the bartender echoed.

“Poor fella,” Melody continued. “He hasn’t been himself lately. He’s been moping around about the divorce, and he just seemed so sad.” Slowly she walked away, and when she was out of the bartender’s line of sight she released his mind.

She watched as he fumbled with his cell phone, listened to the frantic call. “Send the fire truck, the ambulance, whatever you got!”

Walking down the side of the narrow road in the darkness, Melody smiled to herself. That had been fun. Another conduit would soon be hers. As soon as she reported in that she’d succeeded here, she’d be given another assignment. How would she kill the next one? Knife, pillow, gun, a shove off the side of a cliff . . . it all depended on who and where. She had to be more careful about taking too much blood next time, though, but when the rebels succeeded and vampires ruled, she wouldn’t ever have to be careful again. *Cool*, she thought. Very cool.

Chapter One

The Scottish Highlands There was something special about Scotland in the summer that made it one of his favorite places in the world. It was more than the rain and clouds and heavy mist that called Luca Ambrus here; it was the taste of what had come before, a palpable history that flowed so vividly in his memory that sometimes he could close his eyes and hear the voices of people long gone, feel the impact and vibration of a sword in his hands during countless battles, smell the peat fires. He’d actually been born in Greece—his olive skin gave away his Mediterranean heritage—but he’d spent many more years in Scotland than he had in Greece and was far more at home here. Greece was too hot and sunny; he much preferred cool, misty, foggy places.

There were times when he craved the noise and movement and excitement of a city, but more often he preferred his own company and his own thoughts. If he hadn’t been comfortable within himself, he’d have gone mad many centuries ago. But he *was* comfortable and grounded, to use the current phrasing, so he was very content to pass days, weeks, at a time without seeing another soul. The trick was to live in the moment, to enjoy each successive year for itself, for the changes that came both slow and fast, and for the things that never changed. He enjoyed life, and didn’t necessarily require companionship.

His home here in the Highlands was an elegant cottage with all the modern conveniences, far away from the larger cities. He saw no need to sacrifice his comfort for solitude when he could have both. Once he’d have had to choose between them, but no longer. Times changed. What good was living through the centuries if he couldn’t enjoy all that was offered?

The things he’d seen come into being during the past hundred and fifty years! Even he, who was seldom surprised by anything, had watched with bemusement as change piled on change. Electric lights, telephones, automobiles, airplanes—it was almost too much to take in, though he enjoyed them very much. He loved movies and television, the travel, the thrill of driving a fast car or getting on a plane and a few

hours later being thousands of miles away. The humans had even managed to go into space; the audacity of such fragile creatures was either valiant or incredibly stupid, and despite two millennia studying them he hadn't yet decided which it was. Both, perhaps.

He had money, and he had time. If he was in the mood for city life he stayed in his place near Seattle, Washington. When he wanted peace and quiet, he came here. In a while he would tire of the quiet and move on, but for now . . . for now the solitude was as necessary to his survival as blood. Immortality didn't come without a price.

Still, he never stayed in one place very long—"long" being a relative term. A month might seem long to some, but to him it was the blink of the eye, a heartbeat. It wasn't in his nature to nest. He was a hunter at heart, and he enjoyed the thrill of the chase even more than the inevitable end when the prey was his. One day soon he would feel the call—or receive an actual call—and in a flash he would leave behind his beloved solitude to lose himself once more in the blood hunt. When twilight came, Luca left his cottage and walked out into the cool fresh air. This was the time of day he liked best, when the fading light and gathering darkness accentuated the aloneness he sometimes craved as if it were as tangible as the earth he walked upon. He took a course that led him through a fragrant meadow, with the craggy mountains looming over him and deepening the shadows. His boots cut slowly through the tall grass. There was no hurry in his movements, no need beyond the moment. He was old enough that he no longer had to feed very often, unless he was burning a lot of energy, which allowed him to escape from the world for days, even weeks, at a time. The hunger, the *need*, would eventually come, and when it did he would feed.

But he wasn't hungry tonight. Tonight he was satisfied to walk these stark, dramatic hills and remember the battles that had been fought here. There was a lot to remember, because there had been so many battles, so many wars. Easily destroyed or not, his human fellow warriors had thrown themselves into war with such complete lack of caution that he could only marvel. It wasn't as if they didn't know they were mortal; they did. And still they fought, often long past the point where sanity or common sense should have kicked in. Even after centuries of watching them, preying on them, sometimes fighting beside them, humans could still bemuse him.

He didn't know exactly how old he was; he knew he was over two thousand, but he couldn't pin down a year or even a birth date, if he'd ever known it at all. Vampires in general weren't big on calendars, even assuming his mother had known the date he'd been born. He'd kept track for a while, the first four or five hundred years, but after that he'd lost interest because the number wasn't important; after all, no one would be throwing a birthday party for him. All that was important was his personal power, which had grown with each passing century and would continue to increase, until now the number who equaled him in some ways could be counted on one hand. In power lay safety, and one of the first lessons he'd learned was to always watch his back, even with his own kind, which was why he didn't live among them.

He had everything he needed here. In a lot of ways he was more comfortable with humans than he was with the kindred, because he could relax with humans. He didn't fear them, didn't have to be wary of them. They were puny in so many ways, a lot of fun in others, and best of all, they never remembered him.

A small village lay just over the farthest hill. When he had to feed, he went there. And when he left after feeding, the people he'd met, even those he'd fed upon, immediately forgot he'd been there at all. Every time he entered the village, the residents greeted him as a new visitor. That was his power, his curse, his salvation: no one remembered him. When he passed by, he passed out of their lives as if he'd never been there at all. Only the strongest of his own kind could resist the power, which meant he could come and go as he wished. To be forgotten as soon as he was out of sight was as good as being invisible, and gave him a freedom that

other vampires could only dream of having.

He was engrossed in one particularly delicious memory when the portable satellite phone in his pocket rang. He cursed under his breath. The one thing he didn't enjoy about modern life was the ease of communication. In the old days, the Council would have had to send him a written summons, which, depending on where he was, could take months to reach him. Not that the length of time mattered, because no matter how long a rogue vampire had to go to ground, Luca always found his prey.

Dammit. His position with the Council required that he always be available, but he'd just completed an assignment and he needed to get away from the irritation he felt around crowds of people. Normally months, sometimes years would pass before the Council summoned him again, but the call had to be from them because few others knew how to reach him. He didn't blithely give out his number, not even to the older, stronger vampires who could remember him. What was the point? Vampires didn't call to chat.

Besides, he made other vampires nervous. Even most of the Council members, who were powerful in their own rights, were wary of him. And as far as he was concerned, that was a good thing.

Politics didn't interest him at all, so his involvement with the Council wasn't entirely logical. The ruling branch of vampire society was as beset by back-stabbing, deal-brokering, lobbying, and special interests as any government yet devised by humans. But he had skills others did not, and for more years than he could count he'd been an integral part of the workings of the Council. His assignments gave him a sense of purpose, and besides, even this place bored him after a while. Individually and collectively the Council had offered him a more permanent position, a seat at the table of power, but he'd turned them down so many times he thought they should long since have stopped asking. The Council members were as heavily protected as any American president, and he'd go stir-crazy if he had to live all but imprisoned in the Council headquarters. Their quarters were luxurious, but a prison was still a prison, no matter how high the thread count on the sheets.

They would keep calling until he answered the phone. Annoyed, he pulled it from his pocket and glanced at the number. His eyebrows rose as concern replaced his annoyance, and he thumbed the talk button. "Ambrus," he said. Hector wasn't the member of the ruling Council charged with assigning Luca's missions, but he was an old friend and he wouldn't call unless it was important. In the more than six hundred years they'd known each other, they'd also learned to trust each other, something important in the vampire world. Together they'd seen a lot of changes in the vampire community. They'd kept the peace, and they had protected the secret of their very existence, using whatever methods were necessary.

Hector hadn't been a young man when he'd been turned, and though he was strong he wasn't at a physical peak, the way Luca was. Hector's strength was in his mind, his shrewdness and his control.

"There's a serious problem," Hector said without preamble. It wasn't like him to be so abrupt. He was almost twelve hundred years old, so he'd learned there was almost never a need for haste or impatience. Luca turned to walk back toward his cottage. A problem for the Council meant that, like it or not, he'd soon be on his way to D.C. "What sort of problem?" Hector hesitated. "I think there's a traitor on the Council."

Luca stopped in his tracks. "A traitor . . . How?" It was a serious accusation, but not one he could easily dismiss, simply because this was Hector. Treason in the vampire world meant one thing: a vampire doing something stupid that could result in exposure to the humans.

Still, exactly what did "traitor" mean? Attacks against the Council didn't count as treason, because

Council members, like all the other vampires, had to survive by their own strength and wits. If they couldn't manage that, then they were dead, and the stronger stepped into their places.

"A rebel faction has formed. Their position is that they're tired of living in the dark, that vampires are superior to humans—which is true—so they want to overcome the humans and take over the government. One of the Council has joined them. I'm certain of it, but I haven't been able to find out *who*."

Luca grunted, but otherwise restrained his reaction. If Hector was right—and he almost always was—then this was definitely a serious situation. Periodically someone or a group of someones would decide it was outrageous that vampires had to hide their existence, and they would have to be dealt with before they could expose the entire race. Never before had a Council member joined in that idea, though, which immediately made the situation more dire.

With some common sense and caution, vampires could live in relative peace because humans didn't believe they were real. The Council made the rules that ensured that peace, and whenever any vampire didn't obey, well, that was where Luca came in. A vampire who fed and killed indiscriminately risked them all, so Luca was called in to handle the problem.

Because he could come and go pretty much as he wanted, and no human remembered him, there were no repercussions. Not only that, he was old enough and strong enough that he could go out in daylight, which meant most vampires were helpless against him. He executed them during the day only under the most extreme circumstances, such as if the vampire had gone totally mad and any delay was too dangerous.

Otherwise, he faced his prey and at least gave them the opportunity to fight. They never won—obviously, or he wouldn't still be here—but the exercise gave him fighting practice. Executing a sleeping vampire wasn't any fun at all.

He could almost—*almost*—have some sympathy with the rebels. There were many vampires who considered all humans as far beneath them as a cow or a chicken might be to those humans. They were necessary for nourishment, but to be forced to hide from them out of fear, to be made to cower in the dark . . . some vampire egos couldn't handle it. Luca didn't quite see things that way. For one, he didn't cower. For another, he had fought beside humans, made love to human women, enjoyed their progresses and inventions, and sometimes laughed at their actions until he was exhausted and his ribs ached. Humans were endlessly entertaining, if nothing else.

"I'll be there tomorrow," Luca said as he resumed his distance-eating stride.

"Hurry," Hector urged, and his voice changed as his power surged, his tone and cadence sliding into the rhythm that said he was seeing the future. "*Battle is in the air. I smell it. I can almost touch it. Death is coming. Death is coming for us.*" With a click, the call disconnected. The powerful vampire sounded frightened, which alarmed Luca even more. Death. Vampires lived with death, but some clung to their new version of life with an almost panicked intensity. Others, after living for so many years, actually yearned for an end and would choose to die, but most didn't. Hector enjoyed life, even after all his years, but he wasn't afraid of death. What he feared was something bigger: the collapse of the wall of ignorance that protected the vampires from the humans.

Luca reached his cottage and began packing, making phone calls and arrangements of his own as he gathered what he needed. If Hector felt death was coming for them, as he'd said, then their world was in great danger and uncertainty.

Luca had many strengths and powers; as a rare blood born, conceived and born to a vampire mother and father, he was much stronger than those who'd been turned to the life. Prophecy, however, wasn't one of those powers. Despite the surety in his tone, Hector's gift of prophecy was relatively mild, and while Luca certainly believed Hector's prediction, he also knew there was just as much that Hector didn't see.

He'd have liked more time in Scotland, but as he prepared for the trip he felt his heartbeat increasing in anticipation for what was to come. If there was a huge battle, well, he hadn't been in a proper battle in a very long time.

Washington, D.C.

Chloe Fallon had just drifted off to sleep when the image popped into her subconscious: a long, thick, blond braid hanging right in front of her face. That was all, just a braid, but so real she felt as if she could reach out and touch it. The shade of blond was darker and more golden than her own, and it seemed to be streaked with several shades. Had to be a natural color, her dreaming mind thought; it would take forever for a hairdresser to work all those different colors in. She started awake, absurdly surprised to find herself alone in her own bed. That was the weird thing—one of the weird things, anyway. She didn't feel as if she was truly alone. She almost felt as if all she had to do was roll over and she'd find the person attached to the braid lying there beside her. Unable to stop herself, she lifted her head to take a quick glance at the other pillow. Nope, no one there. Good. She had the bed to herself, as usual.

She flopped over on her back and stared at the dark ceiling. Of all things to dream about . . . a *braid*. She kept having the same dream, over and over, about a damn braid. Maybe she had some deep-seated desire to be a hairdresser, though she didn't think so. She didn't even like spending much time on her own hair, which was why she got the most maintenance-free cut she could, short of shaving her head. So what did it mean that she kept dreaming about a braid? There had to be a person attached to the hank of hair, but she'd never seen a face. She didn't even know for sure if the braid belonged to a man or a woman. Her first thought had been "woman," since long hair wasn't exactly in fashion for men, but she got a sense of power when she was in the presence of the braid. It was definitely a strange thing to be obsessing over.

The braid dream had been coming for several weeks now. At first she'd decided stress was the cause. Her job and college classes were both demanding. She enjoyed them, but they didn't leave much time for a social life. Relaxation, laughter, fun . . . she'd had to put them all aside, but now she was out of college for the summer and thought a break would cure all her ills. *Not*.

It didn't make sense. All she had to worry about right now was her job—assistant manager of an upscale restaurant in Georgetown—and her parents' planned visit at the end of August. She had to get the guest room in order before they arrived; thankfully she had a couple of months to get ready. That spare room was presently a cluttered storage space, but it would only take a few hours to turn it into a decent guest room. Okay, it would take longer than that, but it was doable. Yes, she was obsessing a little over the pending visit. What sane, single woman of a certain age didn't obsess when her parents, who couldn't understand why their only daughter wanted to live so far away, came to visit? Her mother couldn't quite pull herself out of her protective mode, even though Chloe was scaring thirty and was determined to live a normal life despite having an aortic aneurysm. The way she saw it, the aneurysm was small and stable, and might never change or grow to a dangerous size. The way her mother saw it, however, was that Chloe had a ticking time bomb in her chest and could die at any moment. Finding a balance between those two viewpoints wasn't easy, though Chloe suspected that, if their positions were reversed, she'd feel exactly the same as her mother did. She growled at the ceiling, disgruntled at being awake and stressing over something that wouldn't happen for a couple of months. She loved her parents. They loved her. She could handle being

coddled for a few days.

But, dammit, the latest encounter with the ownerless braid had left her wide awake. Sighing, Chloe rolled out of bed and headed for the kitchen. A glass of milk would help; she'd rather have hot chocolate, but chocolate had caffeine, so she'd settle for the milk. She could sleep late in the morning. She could sleep as late as she wanted, because she worked the evening shift at the restaurant.

After pouring herself some milk, she leaned against the kitchen cabinet while she drank, and stared at her blurry reflection in the window of the microwave. Huh. Maybe there was a little bed-head going on there, which wasn't fair considering she'd been in bed maybe fifteen minutes, tops. She wondered how she'd look with really long hair, like that braid. She kept her hair just long enough that she could pull it back, sleek and neat, to keep it out of her way while she worked. Right now she just looked kind of mussed and messy, in soft, gray cotton shorts and a matching sleeveless tee, but what kept pulling her attention was her own baby soft, blond hair. Dammit, forget about the hair!

Impatient with the dream and with hair in general, she moved so she couldn't see her reflection in the microwave and distracted herself by looking around for things she needed to do before her parents came to visit. All in all, she was very happy with what she saw. Her rental house was small, but she loved it. A friend of a friend had moved to California, but hadn't been willing to let go of the little gem, though property values in the district were so high surely there would have been a hefty profit in selling.

Still, she couldn't blame them. The house was wellmaintained and the landscaping was great. It was the perfect size for her: two bedrooms, two baths, a decentsized living room, and a kitchen. It was practically within spitting distance of a Metro station. What else did a single woman need?

The kitchen was square and well-equipped, and had been recently updated. Chloe liked to cook when she had the time, so a decent kitchen was a necessity. She kept hoping her landlords would decide the move to California was permanent and they'd offer to sell her the house—she'd told them she was interested, basically calling dibs—but so far they showed no signs of giving it up. Just as well. She needed to save more money for a down payment. The house was small, but this was a very desirable neighborhood and at the upper limit of what she could afford.

Her parents would freak if she bought a house in the D.C. area. They kept thinking that when was she was finished with school she'd come to her senses and move home to Atlanta. After all, there were plenty of restaurants there that needed managers, as they'd told her time and time again. The truth was, Chloe loved living here. She loved the people, her job, the energy of the city. She had friends—even if her social time was limited when school was in session—and she loved this house. Maybe one day she'd have the man to go with it, even kids if they decided to go that route and her doctor agreed that the risk was acceptable, but for now she liked being independent. A few of her friends felt as if they had to have a guy in their lives or else they were at loose ends, incomplete somehow, missing out on life. Not Chloe. She valued her alone time and her independence. If and when the right man came into her life, that would be great. Until then, she wasn't looking, and she wasn't desperate. She'd watched too many of her friends end up with losers when they thought they couldn't snag anyone better. A time or two, she'd fallen into the loser trap herself. Okay, three times, before she'd come to her senses. She wasn't going to settle for Mr. Right Now because she was afraid Mr. Right wasn't ever going to materialize.

Chloe had often thought that if she had one major characteristic, it was that she was level-headed. Wow, wasn't that impressive? But she made a great assistant manager, and one day she'd make a great manager, with an MBA, her level head, and her organizational skills—which did not, she admitted, extend to

her guest room. She'd get there, though.

She had the whole summer ahead of her to get the spare room in order, get her responses thought out and lined up for the inevitable arguments her parents would fire at her, and get rid of the weird braid that had invaded her dreams. In the bright light of the kitchen, that last detail sounded downright ridiculous. Who let a dream about hair keep her awake at night? Maybe she subconsciously wanted to dye her hair. The color of the braid really was nice. Maybe she'd seen someone on the street with a long braid like that one and she'd mentally filed it away without realizing it.

But what about the sensation that she wasn't alone? Maybe she did need to seriously consider looking for that elusive permanent man, even though she wasn't quite ready to settle down. She could start cruising bars until she found a willing and acceptable man—nope, wasn't going to happen. Her level-headedness said that kind of behavior was both sad and dangerous. She'd have to take up jogging again, dammit. She should have been doing it all along, but she simply hadn't had the time. Now that she was out of school for the summer, she didn't have that excuse. Everyone in Washington jogged, so she'd get out and join the herd. "*Chloe . . .*"

The voice didn't just surprise her, it shocked her like a slap to the face. Her half-full glass of milk slipped from her hand and shattered on the floor, sending glass and milk shooting across her bare legs and the tile floor. Wildly she looked around, certain that someone was there. The voice, that hoarse whisper of her name, had been right *there*. The sound had been directly in her ear. No one. Nothing. She was completely alone.

She began shaking. She wasn't asleep, she couldn't write the whisper off to dozing in the middle of the kitchen while she stood there drinking milk and making plans to drag her running shoes out of the closet.

The voice had been real, as real as the mess she had to clean up, as real as the thin trickle of blood where a sliver of glass had cut her leg.

After a minute she controlled her ragged breathing, and her panicked senses began settling down. Stepping carefully to avoid the broken glass that surrounded her, she concentrated on cleaning up the mess, focusing on the task so she didn't have to think of anything else. By the time every speck of milk and glass had been cleaned up and disposed of, she could take a deep breath and let it go. She hadn't really heard anything; her imagination had gotten the best of her, that was all.

It was either that or admit that she was losing her mind, and pragmatic Chloe couldn't allow herself to go there.

Across the city, Hector paced in his private quarters. His ability to read energies, to see bits and pieces of the future, had grown in his years as a vampire, but he couldn't see everything. What use was such an incomplete ability in a time of turmoil? How did he benefit from knowing someone close by was a traitor who had aligned him- or herself with rebels, when the precise knowledge of their identity eluded him?

It was the sensation of battle, of coming turmoil, that most disturbed him. The last thousand years had been relatively peaceful, and his six hundred years on the Council had been productive ones. Order was required for the continued existence of his kind. He had done his part to keep the peace, and everything within him told him that the peace would soon come to an end. Hector had no great love for humans; he barely remembered being one himself. But humans were necessary for the existence of his kind, and as long as vampires were thought to be nothing more than myth or fantastical beings from horror tales, their survival was ensured. There were always a handful of vampires who thought differently, who wanted to openly take

their place at the top of the food chain, but they had never had the strength of numbers and were easily taken care of.

Until now.

There was a knock on his door, and with that knock an increased sensation of the end. He didn't answer, but he knew the locked door offered only a brief delay of the inevitable. He wasn't a warrior, had never been a warrior. If Luca were here . . . but he wasn't, and wouldn't be for a few more hours.

All he could do now was use his ability, and Luca's, to pass on what he could. Concentrating, Hector did his best to fill the air with his thoughts, his energy, and his knowledge. He was looking at the door when it flew open, and in truth was not surprised to see who was on the other side.

He thought the name, whispered it, imprinted the face in his mind, and set it loose.

He fought, of course he did, but he'd been old before he was turned and his physical strength had never been great. The outcome was a foregone conclusion, one he had sensed approaching. And he was aware, at the very end, that there was another traitor in the hallway, listening, waiting, hiding from the power she knew he possessed.

She.

Out of respect, the attacker didn't drink Hector's blood before he drove a long-bladed knife into his heart. Three times, it took, before the heart was so damaged that Hector's long life ended in a burst of bitter, gray dust.

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Vanessa's Hart's throaty, sexy voice and well-paced delivery make her the perfect choice for this dark tale of vampires who are conspiring to conquer the human world by breaking a witch's curse. The story is packed with fascinating characters who are well portrayed by Hart, including powerful and hunky Luca Ambrus, a vampire born of two vampire parents ("blood born"), and plucky Chloe Fallon, his love interest and a "conduit"--a human who can channel a warrior from another dimension to fight the bloodsuckers. A gaggle of vamps and witches also entertains and provides fodder for several sequels. Fun, campy, full of clever dialogue and interesting lore, this listen delivers. A.C.P. © AudioFile 2010, Portland, Maine

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