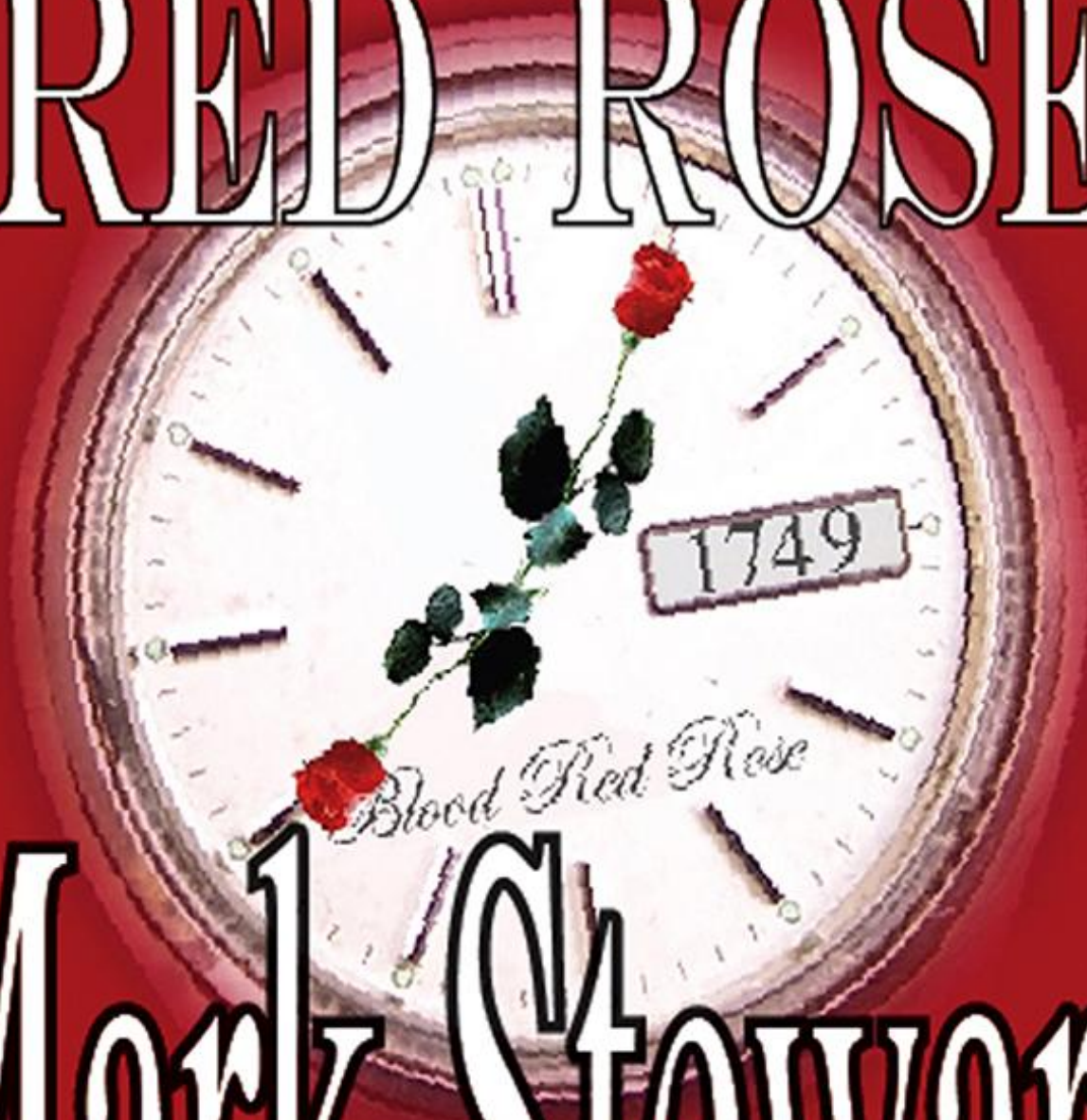


BLOOD RED ROSE



Mark Stewart

THE BLOOD RED ROSE

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The blood red rose

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THE BLOOD RED ROSE

CHAPTER ONE

England: Early Spring, 1749AD.

THE TALL athletic built man longed for the next female to walk his way. He loved this particular time of night when the moon had risen to the highest point in the sky and a gentle breeze started wafting in from the sea.

The man didn't blink, staring down the cobblestone sidewalk. His presence made whoever walked past the deep doorway he stood in, die of fright when they found him lurking in the shadows. He adjusted his tanned top hat and tails and tugged at his long sleeved frilly shirt to prepare himself for the arrival of the ladies. The man stepped further back into the doorway of the three-storey building which housed the city clock, watching the rats and mice scurrying about the rubbish in an attempt to discover food.

The man looked relaxed standing in the cold waiting to hear the scraping echo of ladies shoes. The giggling females always heightened the thrill.

William Haleton was told countless times by many a young lady when they danced he always acted as the perfect gentleman. His handsome features always attracted long luring looks. He lost count of how many times young single ladies commented on his strong shoulders, taut muscles, and dark hair. The only thing wrong, love had failed to mushroom in his life.

For several heartbeats he studied the ground he stood on. His facial expression looked drawn. He took to pondering what might be the reason for his loneliness. Finally, his thoughts fell on Alex Crompton. His murderous cousin must be stopped. He was the only one who could do it. Maybe after the death of the man, love will flow unhindered towards him. How he yearned for the warm embrace of a woman. He didn't want any girl; he wanted to be married to a beautiful woman. One he could love, cherish and adore. He wanted to smell the perfume on her neck, the sweet smelling oils in her hair. He wanted to buy the love of his life, gifts of expensive perfume and long flowing dresses. Soon he'd start his medical studies. He wanted to be the finest surgeon in the country. He wanted to see a room full of patients. To top his dream goal he prayed each night the young lady he'd marry embraced the medical side. Female surgeons were indeed a rarity. He needed to unearth the woman, even if fate took him to another country.

The familiar noise of flat heeled shoes scraping the cobblestone sidewalk quickly brought Haleton back from his daydream. He knew tonight will be the evening of Crompton's next victim.

To stop his cousin's murderous ways Haleton needed to be ready.

Crompton, wearing a black felt top hat and tails loosened his shirt collar. He hugged the wall of the only brick dwelling in the village. His cold murderous black eyes surveyed the area. Seeing no one he quickly marched across the dirt road, blending into the shadow of a large old oak tree.

Catching a whiff of enticing perfume from a young female, a satisfied expression wrinkled Crompton's brow. He looked to be almost lost in the aroma of the sweet perfumed scent.

Haleton spied Alex Crompton, placed his tanned coloured felt hat on the ground and slipped across the road, hiding in the deep doorway of the general store.

Two young females walking home from a nearby party, closed in. Every muscle in Haleton's body compressed to the point of cramping. He must win the fight. Crompton must be stopped no matter the cost. The lives of the young women approaching, not to mention his love life, depended on his victory.

The two females came soon enough. They were staggering from the effects of the wine they secretly drank. They were giggling at their noisy footsteps and slurred speech. One of the girls stopped walking. She swayed slightly leaning on the other's shoulder.

"Stand still for a moment I've broken the strap on both of my shoes. They keep slipping off my feet." The tall slender young woman leaned forward to pick her shoes up off the sidewalk. Her long blonde hair fell in front of her face, sweeping the ground. For a short time, the girl swayed trying desperately not to fall over. "Hey sister, thanks for catching me, I nearly fell," she stammered, straightening. "Okay, let's go home."

Both young ladies were dressed to impress every man at the local dance. They wore the same style of eveningwear. Their long-sleeved white pleated dresses kissed the ground while they danced around the floor. Tight corsets decreased the size of their already narrow waists and behind each ear the lingering smell of expensive perfume.

"We cannot walk about the streets with you wearing no shoes. What if we are seen?"

"Sister, I'm too drunk to bloody care."

"You should not use those sorts of words. What if someone hears?"

"Take a look around, I can't see anyone. Can you?" The young lady palmed an open hand around the deserted area. "Tomorrow I'm going down to the local peddler's shop to give him an extra round of strong verbal diarrhea. The small rat featured, irritating little man, kept my shoes for a whole week. Now they're broken."

"You should blame the well-rounded man at the dance. He stepped on your feet too many times to count."

"No, it's the peddler's fault for not making the shoe straps strong enough in the first place."

"Shhh, not so loud, this is the area where the last murder took place."

"Sister, lightning doesn't strike in the same place twice," hinted the taller of the two. She staggered over a cobblestone. Her sister caught her again, propping her up.

"I have a strange feeling we are being watched."

"Who'd bother with two drunks? Especially me, I've no shoes on my feet." The girl giggled. Again she leaned against her sister. "It sure is a nice night for a walk. Shame you're not a man."

Crompton slowly pulled his long knife from inside a pocket of his knee high left boot. He lifted it to eye level and slowly twisted it back and forth in his hand. The blade glistened in the light of the full moon. He stared at the blade, admiring its razor sharp edge. How he missed the feeling the custom-made wooden handle gave when he held it in his hand. The explanation he gave to the craftsman for wanting the knife perfectly balanced was for killing and dissecting rabbits.

The wind started to strengthen, blowing the dark clouds off to the South. Crompton slipped the knife behind his back. He glued his gaze on the two young ladies staggering past. He scraped his tongue across the surface of his lips. As the girls moved away Crompton made final preparations to pounce.

Haleton knew Crompton didn't care about his female victims or whether they were a mother. In life, the only way he could satisfy the constant hunger burning deep inside him was to kill a woman. The moment he found the perfect victim their time walking on the earth quickly came to an end.

Haleton studied the killer's face. Crompton looked disappointed. 'Could he be growing soft?' Haleton frowned at his thoughts. 'Not possible.'

Crompton marched up behind the girls, striking up a casual conversation. If the two young women knew of his intentions they'd have bellowed a blood-curdling scream.

Haleton estimated one girl to be around sixteen, the other nineteen.

"You're too drunk for my liking. Have a nice life," Crompton taunted.

The moment the nineteen-year-old blew him a kiss her younger sister grabbed her by the arm and marched her down the road.

The killer turned his collar up to keep warm from the cold. He changed direction, deciding to walk slowly towards the ocean. The moment he drew level to a doorway he stopped to stare at the tall figure watching him.

"Show yourself or suffer the consequences."

"You don't know the meaning of the word."

"I don't have to."

Haleton emerged, glaring at Crompton. "Haven't you scared every female in the fishing village enough?"

"William Haleton, I should have known you'd be lurking about."

"Answer my question."

"I want to be certain I haven't left any females off my list. Be told, my gang and I are going to continue. The twelve of us are unstoppable."

"Are you sure?"

Crompton laughed dryly. "Positive. When I feel the urge, another female will end up face down in the sea."

"I'm here to stop you," growled Haleton.

"Don't tell me you decided against joining my gang? It will be the biggest mistake you have ever made."

"You're wrong. Waiting too long in standing up to you has been my biggest mistake."

"Don't give me your high priced talk again," spat Crompton.

"You need it."

"You've always been weak Haleton. Mark my words, you always will be. All women were born to be used in whatever way men like me, want."

"You're crazy. A young lady should be gently romanced."

"You talk nonsense. Ever since we were old enough to walk we've never seen eye to eye on anything. For that I hate you," jeered Crompton. "I'll give you one last chance to join my gang."

"What if I refuse?"

"Your sour lonely life will draw to an end. If you think your way is the best, how come you're not married? Where's the good-looking woman who has skin like honey hanging from your arm?"

Haleton remained silent.

"It's just like I thought. This is your last chance. Join us or die."

Giggling from a potential new victim interrupted the standoff.

“Haleton, come, witness what you’ve been missing.” Crompton slipped behind a small upturned fishing boat to wait for the new arrivals.

Haleton slipped back into the shadow of the doorway. Every fiber of his being cried out for the love of a young woman. He sniffed the air, catching a whiff of an expensive French perfume wafting towards him on the wind. He’d entered many a perfume shop over the years to smell the delight from the endless array of small bottles only to be tossed out by the female owner.

Haleton replayed the last encounter in his mind.

The woman looked feisty when he stood in the doorway. Her yells almost woke the dead. “This is no place for a man. Get out,” she demanded.

Haleton’s thoughts were interrupted by a rat running across his feet. Its mistake was to stop and eat a morsel of food. Haleton squatted, killing the vermin. He kicked it into the rubbish before refocusing on the two young ladies walking his way.

Haleton readied himself. He carefully considered which girl will be Crompton’s next victim. One at a time is his first rule. His second rule he never broke meant she mustn’t be drunk. The killer never broke either rule. Which one will die first, the brunette who happened to be in the lead or the shorter blonde one? Haleton knew the pattern. Blonde first, a brunette second and the cycle starts again. Haleton frowned. Could Crompton let them live like before? Haleton shook his head. There’d been too many missed chances since the last killing four weeks ago. He viewed the corpse of the pretty brunette. His spirit grieved for the dead girl. He felt great pity for her family’s loss. He actually talked to the deceased girl when she was alive on several occasions. She didn’t act her age. Crompton destroyed the contents of several rooms of the house she lived in when he’d been told the girl was only fourteen. For the first time, he broke the third rule he lived by. The victim must be older than sixteen. Crompton was unstable and growing worse as the days wore down.

Haleton surmised his cousin would have a sensational appetite for blood, stopping at nothing to quench it. He cast his thoughts back to the scene of Crompton’s first murder. They were two young ladies. For reason unknown, he let the tall woman escape, if only for a time. He must have thought it more sporting to think she outwitted the murderer.

Haleton didn’t like hearing his name being mentioned in the countless whispers anymore. He wanted to make certain Crompton never accomplished another murder. Haleton pushed all thoughts of his cousin to one side. He started to think of the woman he dreamt about night after night. In his dream she was intelligent, the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. How he hungered to meet her. Other than the woman in his dreams the only real woman he loved happened to be married. He could never be a marriage breaker. He conceded in the fact they’d only ever be friends. He planned to leave England and try his luck somewhere else. England was a great place, but the ladies seemed to stay away. Maybe they were thinking Haleton or Alex Crompton might be the killer.

Haleton came back to reality by the sweet smell of the perfume both ladies were wearing as they strolled past the doorway. Their giggling muffled any noise he made. Their approaching presence momentarily distracted Haleton causing him to lose sight of Crompton.

The rat’s death surfaced in Haleton’s mind. He wondered if the young ladies might scream if they saw the carcass. Crompton loved the way women screamed. He’d brag down at the local pub how each one screams in a different way. The noise was sweet music to his ears.

“Curse you rat,” Haleton whispered a decibel too loud.

He’d tipped off the girls.

They started to run.

Crompton darted from behind the upturned boat.

The taller girl squealed when one of her shoes fell off. She kicked the other away, running ahead of the shorter in bare feet.

“Shantal wait, do not leave me. I’ll need your help if the man catches me.”

The young woman stumbled, falling face first onto the gravel. She rolled over onto her back, looking into the cold eyes of her attacker.

Crompton hovered over her. His evil smirk widened. He bent sideways so he could slowly slide his knife from a hidden sheath sewn into one of his long boots. Staring at the steel blade, his eyes glistened. He seemed to relish in the fact the woman will soon be dead. He switched his focus from the sharp blade to the woman cowering on the ground.

“Do you like the blade?”

“No,” she stammered. “I beg you, please leave me be.”

“You can beg all you want it will do you no good.”

Crompton stared into the woman’s eyes studying his reflection in her pupils.

“Please, I have a son. He has not been long in this world.”

Haleton started to move closer. He must be extra quiet if he wanted to get close enough to save the woman’s life.

Crompton lowered himself over her. He looked more than ready to accept his trophy. His lips parted, curling upwards. “You are my next victim,” he hissed.

The girl’s eyes widened to the size of golf balls. She tried to cower away on all fours, but Crompton held her a prisoner using a white-knuckled grip to her pink blouse. The girl watched the knife slowly rise into the air.

Instead of screaming one last time her terrified expression fell, lost to a cheap grin.

Holding the knife at a good height, the attacker paused. His eyebrows angled to a point. He looked totally puzzled.

From his new hiding place behind a tree, Haleton knew Crompton didn’t like what he saw. The woman will pay dearly for making him lose the edge. The edge he needed to satisfy his hunger.

Crompton lifted the knife higher into the air. At its maximum extended point, the young woman laughed in a cynical tone taunting the man to, even more anger. The noise placed the man deeper into the dark crevasses of his mind where he’d lose all logical thinking and go completely insane.

Haleton managed to get behind Crompton without him knowing. His fingers were so tightly compacted every knuckle on both his hands were the colour of a starched bed sheet.

Haleton thrust both fists against the murderer’s back. Crompton lost his vice-like grip on the knife sending it sailing through the air. The knife landed blade first into the ground two metres from the woman’s head. Crompton leaned sideways, reaching for the knife handle. He hurriedly jumped to his feet, lifted his gaze, glaring at his aggressor.

Haleton slid his knife from his long boot, pointing the tip at Crompton.

Giving no warning his cousin lunged, easily smacking the knife from his hand.

Haleton retaliated. He fought hard but quickly started to lose the fight. He could feel his life slipping away. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the young lady watching, crouched at the base of a nearby tree. The moment he died she’d be next in line. The reason why she didn’t take the opportunity to run eluded him.

‘Escape, escape, he yelled inwardly. I’m buying you precious seconds. Escape. Go now before it’s too late.’

Haleton knew Crompton will triumph in a matter of seconds. He’d always been the stronger, winning every fight. His cousin delivered a rock hard fist to Haleton’s jaw. He hit the ground, face first. Crompton towered over his victim. Conceding defeat Haleton closed his eyes. He felt the boot against his ribs as he was kicked across the cobblestones in an exact copy of how he discarded the dead rat. For what seemed like minutes Haleton lay in a crumpled heap on top of a pile of rubbish. Blackness blurred his vision. The stench from the rotting trash made him feel nauseated. He vomited before slipping into unconsciousness.

Crompton faced the woman, glaring at her with cold uncaring eyes. Casually waving her hand, she brought to his attention the gathering crowd. They were arriving in droves. The entire village came out of their homes to watch. They herded Crompton close to Haleton so a big heavy fishing net could be thrown over the top of them. Crompton’s eyes were wild. He twisted in tighter circles dragging and wrapping himself and Haleton into the imploding cavity. His struggles to escape were futile. Managing to slip his knife into Haleton’s hand, he fell to the ground gasping for air.

Haleton opened his eyes in time to hear the angry warning.

“Drop the knife,” yelled one of the King’s guards. “If you don’t listen to me you’ll be arrested.”

Haleton shook his head, trying to defend the charge.

For his hesitation, he received a kick to the ribs.

“You’ve finally been caught Haleton; your roaming torment and murdering days are at an end.”

“Yes arrest the murderer,” hissed Crompton, nodding viciously. “I followed the man to stop him before he tried to kill the young lady sitting on the ground over by the tree. My attempts to talk him into walking away were of no use. He didn’t listen. He pulled the knife he’s now holding from the inside of his boot, lunging at my throat. I managed to deliver one lucky punch to his jaw. If it weren’t for you good people, I’d be dead.”

“Is what he said true, Miss?” asked the King’s guard. Walking over to young lady, he noted she sat trembling in fright.

She looked up at him. Her quivering lips parted, but she failed to utter a word.

A man dressed in top hat and tails stepped to the front of the crowd. “I’m a doctor. I can tell this young lady is in shock. She’ll not be able to help you in any way. I saw the whole thing. I witnessed Haleton trying to fight Crompton. He alone wanted to attack the young lady.”

“Take both men to the castle,” yelled the King’s guard over the ruckus of the onlookers. “I don’t want either prisoner unwrapped before they’re behind bars and the door is locked.”

CHAPTER TWO

HALETON UN-WRAPPED himself from the net, watching the solid metal door slam shut. One of the King’s guards stuck his face against the small observation hole no larger than

his fist in the center of the door, looking content over the arrest. Haleton surmised the young man only recently joined the military. The arrest will be a talking point at the local pub for many nights to come.

Haleton turned from the door to study the cell. It was built as a rectangular shaped structure out of hand cut bricks. At a guess, the room looked no larger than three large steps long by two large steps wide. The barren room felt cold and hostile. A sliver of daylight seeped through the only window too narrow to escape through.

“Haleton you were always the predictable one. Before you decide to lunge for my throat let me remind you of my hidden knife. You know it’s real, I’ve shown it to you on several occasions in an attempt to persuade you to accomplish what I want.” Stepping away from the window, Crompton’s grin widened. “The way I see the situation laid out before me, you have no choice. Join my gang. With my brains at the helm, we’ll be unstoppable.”

Haleton walked over. His tight fist hit the man’s jaw.

“Enough out of you Haleton,” growled an older King’s guard, opening the door. “You’re wanted in the next room.”

The solid wooden whip the man held portrayed him to be unreasonable. He certainly didn’t come across as someone who’d be interested in an idle chat.

The moment Haleton stepped out of the cell he was pushed through the doorway on his right. The solid wooden door was promptly slammed shut. The guard inserted a large silver key in the lock and twisted it. Except for the small table and two chairs, the room looked identical to the one Haleton stood in moments earlier.

“Sit down,” yelled a man pacing the floor.

The tall solid built man glared at Haleton. His thick black mustache growing under his nose didn’t twitch when he talked.

“I want to plead my case!” exclaimed Haleton.

“I won’t ask you to sit again.”

“What happens if I refuse?”

“You’re kidneys will feel bruised.” The man behind the mustache gave a sharp nod at a second well-built man standing in the doorway.

Haleton didn’t want to antagonize the situation further and sat.

“Good,” replied the man. “I feel at this time I should formerly introduce myself.”

“I know who you are. You’re Vardum, Derrick Vardum. You live on top of the hill overlooking the sea. You have a petite wife who gave birth to a son six months ago. She almost died of a hemorrhage after giving birth to him on the last day of winter. I’ve heard she’s doing fine now. She has regained her strength and has never looked back on those dark days. Your two lovely daughters were a great help while she recovered. One is eight, the other is six.”

“You seem to know a lot about my personal affairs. This is of no consequence. I know everything about you.” Vardum glared at Haleton for a long time before continuing. “You are in big trouble. Your killing days are over. The women in the villages around the countryside can now breathe easy.”

“I suppose you’ll be there at my hanging?”

“I never miss such an exciting moment.”

“What if I were to tell you I’m innocent?”

“I find it hard to believe; you’re swimming in guilt.”

“Crompton was the one carrying the knife.”

“I have it on good authority you were the one holding the knife.”

“Your witness has led you astray.”

“What you have said is not new. All insane criminals say the same thing.”

“It’s the truth. I followed Crompton to stop him from murdering another young lady.”

“It makes no difference to me what you say. Crompton, you and your gang of thugs will be hunted down and incarcerated for eternity. The look on your face is telling me the rest of the gang members will never be caught. I have a dedicated man on the job. It’s only a question of time before the remainder is rounded up. They will suffer the same fate as you.”

“A hanging?” questioned Haleton.

“What is coming on the wind for you is far worse.”

“What could be worse than a hanging?”

“You’ll find out,” Vardum spat.

“How long before the act takes place?”

“It will happen soon.”

“Your reputation for being a tough military interrogator has gone before you. Seeing how you’re here I thought torture would be on your mind?” questioned Haleton.

“Not in the equation. I came to gloat. I have waived my special privileges owed to me by the king to give you a message. A special team known as the ‘council of four’ has devised a worse punishment than you could ever imagine. It will be a pleasure to rid this time zone of you and Crompton.”

“What are you implying?” asked Haleton.

“Banishment to permanent exile with no hope of a pardon is devilishly clever.” Vardum leaned on the table, looking Haleton in the eyes. “Chain this man. I want him and Crompton dragged to the town center. Make sure the chains are good and tight. I don’t want either to escape.”

A six-man lynch mob hauled the wretched prisoners in chains outside, dragging them past many market stalls. They were tied to a pole in the main square in the exact center of the castle grounds waiting for a crowd to gather.

Haleton and Crompton stared at the people scampering around them. When the young women who came to witness the end of their lives got too close Crompton spat at their faces, yelling.

“I will have my revenge.”

“May God have mercy on these men and us for what we are about to do,” yelled the priest over the ruckus made by the crowd of onlookers. He faced a military soldier. “Give the people a further ten minutes to taunt both prisoners before unlocking them from the pole and handing them over to me. I have been given special permission by the council of four to escort Haleton and Crompton to the dungeon.”

CHAPTER THREE

THE DUNGEON walls were wet from condensation. The air smelt stagnant and felt cold. Rats scurried about in their hundreds searching for food. The moment the rodents heard noises descending the uneven stone steps, they sprinted for their many hiding holes for safety.

A group of four hooded figures, each carrying a lit kerosene lantern momentarily stopped at the bottom step before walking further into the dark depths of the cavern.

Haleton watched every movement the black hooded figures made through swollen eyelids from the punches he received while tethered to the worn pole in the town square. His thoughts fell on Crompton, wondering how he could be feeling. Haleton lost count of the number of kicks he received. Many prisoners were brutally bashed over the years. Most didn't survive. He never wanted to see the worn poles again.

The faces of the figures remained hidden while they walked around him and Crompton. Their chantings were low, eerie, ghostlike noises. Every syllable seemed to bounce off the walls. When one of the hooded figures accidentally stepped too close and giggled, Haleton was alerted to the fact it might be a woman.

He studied the figure's shape and movements. The person looked to be the odd one out. The figure looked noticeably shorter than the other three. It seemed to bounce slightly compared to the others as it followed the one in front. Haleton took to studying the walk of each one of the four council members. He decided the person who giggled was definitely a woman. The longer he studied her movements the more convinced he felt. He needed to find a way to speak to her. If only he could remove her hood, he'd know if they'd met before.

Haleton glanced across at Crompton. The man wore a smirk as he licked his swollen lips. Dry blood stained his shirt. His eyes were half shut. Both his ears were thicker than they should have been. In the semi-darkness Haleton could tell he received a good bashing.

For a couple of antagonistic minutes, each of the black hooded figures stood in front of the prisoners before walking off. Haleton couldn't hold back his curiosity.

"Hello there," he whispered to the last of the hooded figures. "Please, tell me your name."

The woman lifted her head slightly. Her lips parted to reveal a warm friendly smile. "You should know me, I'm Rose-a-lee Cantala," she whispered.

"I thought it might be you," Haleton lied. "You have to help me. You know me well enough to believe I'm innocent. We go back a long way. Remember? Search your heart you'll know I'm correct."

Giving no sign of a response, Rose-a-lee Cantala walked to the opposite side of the dungeon and stood at a small oval shaped table. A blackened edged gold chalice and two small gold cups were in the exact middle.

Haleton started thinking their situation might soon get a whole lot worse.

Rose-a-lee Cantala looked to be busy preparing a drink. The other three figures walked over. They spoke first to Haleton then to Crompton.

"You show no remorse over your choice to be corrupt. You sealed your fate years ago by walking down the wrong path. One day you will wish you were never born."

"I'm innocent of all charges," insisted Haleton, coughing up blood.

One of the three raised his hand to signal for silence. "Your fate has been sealed. It makes no difference which way you plead. Your sentence will be carried out immediately."

The three hooded figures drifted off to the table where they stood waiting, their hands buried inside the sleeves of their black robes. They watched Rose-a-lee pour the bubbling white liquid from the chalice into the cups and place them back on the table, allowing the brew to cool.

"You can't make me drink that," spat Haleton, squirming.

Crompton echoed his concern. "What is it anyway, a poison?"

One of the four council members side-stepped, signaling both prisoners to be quiet. “This is far worse than any poison. Your incarceration is all thanks to the scientist who makes up one of our council members. She has perfected the formula to transform anyone we choose into a vampire. I’m not about to disclose the formula. To put the explanation into simple terms so even you two can understand, listen closely to what I have to say.”

After spitting a mouthful of blood at a rat who felt brave enough to walk out from the shadows to smell the prisoners, Haleton glared at the man facing him.

“In the thirteenth century, Transylvania sent a package. It took seven months to reach the shores of England. Many crewmen lost their lives battling through no less than eleven storms. Upon arrival, the council of science took delivery of the package and the official letter. In it the people in countless villages sacrificed many lives in an attempt to extract a sample of blood from a vampire. The creature of the night sneaks into many bedrooms places the young women into a trance, bite’s their jugular vein and sucks the blood from their bodies. When the full moon has risen to its highest point in the night sky, each new victim is transformed into a vampire. The posse they quickly formed to eradicate the vampires whose numbers seemed to be doubling by the month looked destined to fail before it began. Several brave men stepped forward, volunteering to collect a bile sample so it could be sent to us.

After the villagers collected the vampire bile they signed the letter in their quest to persuade us to help exterminate the vampires. Four hundred plus years later science has achieved the impossible. Although our ancestors failed to discover the exact antidote which kills the beast living inside a human, we the council of four have discovered something new. We have decided to use this knowledge to our advantage to go one step further. It is a branch or offshoot from the ancestry line of the Transylvanian vampire. I personally think it is a stroke of genius. The only difference being, there is no antidote for this new strain of vampire. One part of the formula is from the vampire’s venom and a mosquito’s abdomen. Of course, there is more to the formula than what I’ve stated. At this time, you have no need to know it. The combination of two main ingredients in exact proportions has given us the perfect solution to rid all evil doers from our society.”

“How is this possible?” questioned Haleton.

“Sounds too barbaric to be true,” growled Crompton. “It must be a joke. You’re trying to trick us into a false hope. It’s the ultimate taunt before you watch us die.”

“We the council of four have discovered special properties in the vampire’s blood. Careful examination after the death of a captured vampire, adding a few minor adjustments through genetic manipulation, plus several additives we threw into the mix and years of painstaking trials on various humans, we have finally succeeded in creating a potion which is one hundred percent effective,” explained another of the council members.

The woman of the group sidestepped next to Haleton. She waited for the other three in the group to walk back to the table before lifting a long slender finger to her lips. She leaned close to his ear, whispering. “I can’t stop the ceremony taking place. What I can do is in the years to come uncover the antidote so you will be free from the curse. Remember the following name and numbers. Haleton it’s your only chance to have an early release from the curse. His name is Priest P.T. Macularta. You can trust him. There’s one more thing, whatever you do don’t forget the numbers ‘777.’ Find Macularta even if he’s dead.”

Haleton tried to look past the large hood so he could see her eyes. “Please, let me see your face.”

The woman shook her head. “No. I must confess I have always loved you. I believe you were an honorable man.” She bowed her head before marching briskly over to the table to join the others before they looked around the semi-lit dungeon for her.

The four nodded at each other. In single file they started to slowly stroll around the dungeon, chanting. Slowly their circles tightened. Every few steps they hesitated long enough to stare at the two prisoners and curse the ground they stood on. Eventually, they stopped walking and faced the accused.

Three out of the four pointed a finger at the faces of the two prisoners while the woman peeled off to collect the two gold cups from the table. She handed one to a fellow council member and took a step towards Haleton and Crompton.

The tallest of the group spoke. His voice sounded monotonous. An ice shiver shot through Haleton’s body.

“These are the rules of the curse. You will hunt and kill no less than one hundred evil souls. Take a life of an innocent, their blood will taste like acid and you will start at the beginning of the curse again. Stay too long in the year without a kill; you will start over. You will never drink or sleep, only the blood of the guilty will you consume. After each meal of blood, you will be transported through time for the next kill. There is a mirror next to you. Look at your image. The mirror image will reveal a human form. Once you have drunk the vampire blood no more will you see your reflection! Eventually, you will forget what you looked like. Your blood will run hot till the last evil soul has been consumed. You will crave food, but you won’t be able to eat. Love and romance will escape you. The reason being you will not be in the same year for more than 48 hours. If you have failed to take the life of an evil soul in that time span, you will start again back here in 1749AD. You will never have a home or offspring.”

“Think about what you’re doing,” urged Haleton. “This isn’t fair, I’m innocent. I beg you, don’t do this.”

Haleton looked sideways at Crompton hoping for back up. The grin painted on his cousin’s face seemed to invite the torment. His eyes relayed the fact he felt excited at what might come.

“Alex Crompton and you, William Haleton, will be a hunter by night and a shadow by day. Your bodies will scream, your minds will scream, but neither of you will ever find sanctuary from the curse. You will never die at the hand of a mortal or any other like you who bears the vampire’s curse. Look out for them your paths will eventually cross. It is part of the curse. If you are wise you will know what to do.”

Haleton could feel anger welling up inside him. He didn’t care to control it. He yelled at the council of four through bloody swollen lips. “How many more have you condemned to this insane way of life, tell me how many?”

“Counting you, there are thirteen so far.” The tallest member of the council of four faced Crompton. “Don’t be alarmed, you’re gang has gone before you.”

“You’re all insane,” hissed Haleton.

The council member moved his stare back to Haleton. “After each evil soul has been consumed you will be transported back and forth through time. No two killings will be in the same time zone. This will be your punishment for your crimes.” The hooded figure waved his finger at two of the council of four. “Force the accused men to drink the vampire’s blood and prepare the special grains of sand. Their judgment is at hand.”

“I’m innocent,” yelled Haleton. “I’m innocent.”

Haleton struggled against the chains. His brow broke out in sweat. The violent twisting of his wrists was so powerful he heard a snap. In seconds, the excruciating pain registered in his brain.

One of the four council members grabbed him by the hair, yanking his head back. Haleton didn't have the strength to fight off the hooded man. He succumbed to the plans of the council of four after dropping to his knees.

His forearms were twisted up. Using Haleton's own knife the exposed underneath skin was cut. A small yellow oval object no larger than a grain of rice was inserted under his skin. His left forearm didn't escape a repeat performance. The difference being the granule looked to have a red center. The gold cup was pushed between his teeth. The vampire blood trickled down Haleton's throat. In a last ditch effort, he tried to avoid swallowing the liquid by forcing it out of his mouth. For his disobedience, he received a jab in the ribs. The gold cup was brought back to his lips. Gasping for air Haleton swallowed the liquid. A small transparent jar was placed open end down on his arm. He watched through bulging eyes, the skinny mosquito biting into his flesh. The combination of the bite and the vampire's blood felt like acid as the blood pulsed through his veins. He tried to slow his heart rate by relaxing. It made little difference. His temples started to throb. His head felt like his brain might explode at any moment. Haleton looked up at the council of four through blurred vision.

The tall man who made up one part of the council of four wore a wide satanic grin. He stepped over to Haleton, jabbing him in the ribs. He lifted the prisoner to his feet by his hair so he could stare into his eyes.

"Your first year will be 1849AD. Before you try to taunt me into thinking nothing happened and it's all a farce, guess again. Soon your cells will soak up the warm vampire blood and you will be gone. Take heart in knowing Crompton's turn will take place minutes after you."

"What did you put in my arms?" Haleton managed to mumble.

"The grains are the surprise. You'll find out soon enough. Even if you cut them out and throw them away, the grains will materialize exactly where they were placed."

"You could at least tell me what they are?"

"They have special properties which have been absorbed over the centuries. They act like magnets for what lies ahead. Enjoy your trip."

Haleton's knees gave way when the tall council member dropped him onto the floor. He felt faint. He used his entire strength just to keep his eyes open. The pain in his wrist started burning from the break. He closed his eyes so he could concentrate on his breathing. His lungs ached from the effort. He tried to force a yell, but only a feeble squeak passed between his lips. Thousands of red dots forming under his skin burst, causing blood to trickle down his body to the ground. He could plainly hear the throb of his heart pounding against his ribs. The noise slowly intensified. For a few seconds, he lost consciousness. He dreamt of falling from the edge of a high cliff. Four brave rats starving for food sprinted over to his feet. They started to eat and lick the blood. Haleton didn't have the strength or the willpower to kick them away.

Haleton glanced across at Crompton. His eyes were bulging, staring across the semi-dark dungeon. Foaming at the mouth his face looked distorted. Haleton grieved for the man till he saw the same evil smirk he always wore. His cousin opened his arms wide towards the council of four. Haleton could barely make out what he was saying.

"Give it to me. I want the curse. I want it now. Don't leave me in suspense. I want it all." He voluntarily drank the vampire's blood and held out his hands for more.

Haleton shook his head. He came to the conclusion Crompton was insane.

The council of four started walking towards the stairs. Climbing the rough-cut steps, the flame from the candles which were twisted into the candelabra each member of the council held in their hands danced wildly on their retreat.

Crompton's stare seemed to be transfixed on something across the room.

Haleton followed his gaze. The moment he saw it he pushed his back into the cold wet metal pole he was chained to. His mouth fell open. His eyes bulged. He yelled. "Rose-a-Lee Cantala, what have you done?"

He heard no reply.

The council of four quickly left the dungeon for the safety of their homes.

The pinprick of light measured no larger than the head of a pin. It hovered on the other side of the dungeon at knee height. In silence, it started to close in on the two prisoners.

Haleton's body started tingling. He fought to stay conscious.

The orb of light quickly grew. Haleton noted any noise in the room quickly died. He felt as though he'd gone deaf. He fought hard to persuade his mind not to panic. The task drained the remainder of his strength. No sooner did he start to relax when the panic onslaught came back with a vengeance. For the second time, he fought to relax. Even a few seconds would be a blessing. A fifth rat ran across the floor to join in on the free meal, deciding to gnaw at his ankle. Haleton managed to kick it against the wall. It and the other four scurried back to rat holes.

The orb of light started to pulsate. Its smooth sides radiated different colours from one second to the next, red and green then blue. It took seconds to double in size.

Haleton and Crompton watched their knives and personal belongings levitate off the oval table. The objects hovered in the air before both knives slid silently back into the men's boots. Crompton's hat dematerialized only to reappear on his head. It sat exactly how he always wore it. Both coats the men owned materialized over their shoulders in a perfect fit. They saw their boots vanish off the table only to reappear on their feet. The bone in Haleton's wrist realigned, knitting together. He felt no pain, only instant healing. The red drops of blood on his long sleeved shirt and any dirt quickly disappeared.

Haleton didn't have long to catch up on what was occurring. The orb of light quickly grew to the size of his fist. Small arcs of light resembling fingers shot out from the sides in every direction. The light show seemed hypnotic. Haleton closed his eyes to rid the numbing feeling from his mind. Four numbers flashed into his consciousness. '1-8-4-9.' His eyebrows angled to a point. He could do nothing to shake the numbers from his thoughts. While the clock counted down to zero the numbers increased in size and intensity. They started small but quickly grew too big bold numbers the colour of the midnight hour. Inside a minute, the numbers were the size of a house. He couldn't stop his mind being fixated on the black numbers. They occupied almost his entire thought pattern.

Haleton gulped, watching the orb of light close in on the two prisoners. He looked across at Crompton for the last time. He now wore the same satanic grin as the council of four.

Haleton's yell sounded almost nonexistent. Using his boot he scraped the ground in an attempt to rectify his hopelessness in making a sound. The growing orb of light swallowed virtually any noise in the dungeon. He could feel his internal temperature changing from normal to red hot. Haleton turned his head so he could look at the stairs. His yell sounded no louder than a croak of a whisper.

"Rose-a-lee, I'm innocent. Come back and save me."

Haleton knew from the start of his medical studies it won't be long before his heart malfunctioned, seconds later he'd be dead, so too was his dream of being a doctor and a fine surgeon. He only ever wanted to cure the sick and feel the love of a woman.

Haleton's body temperature suddenly plummeted. He felt cold shivers burn his skin. His heart pounded against his chest time after time. He tried to think of a nice warm place, but again he couldn't manage the feat. He pondered the fact this must be the moment before death. He stood at the door and commenced to knock. For a moment, he wondered why death didn't open the door to let him enter. Why prolong his misery? Was death that cruel he'd play a taunting game?

The orb of light started to change shape. It went from round to oval. It slowly rose above head height before centering itself over Haleton. The large blanket size object lit up the area engulfing him. The thick heavy chains keeping him a prisoner rattled violently before being flung to the ground. For a fleeting moment, Haleton thought he'd been freed. Instead, his feet were glued to the ground preventing him from running.

Particles from the net of light the orb emitted started to make him feel warm. He watched a rogue particle of light float down from the orb. More tiny particles the size of dust followed the onslaught, embedding in his hands and face.

Haleton lifted his hands. Through saucer sized eyes he witnessed the start of a metamorphosis. The blanket of light, his hands and arms were pulsating in rhythm. His limbs turned transparent while he watched. His clothes too started to pulsate and disappear before his eyes.

"What magic is this?" he tried to say.

The mirror on his right beckoned Haleton to look. He didn't disappoint.

Haleton focused on the image looking back at him. The figure looked scared. It seemed to be half out of its mind. Surely this is only a horrid nightmare, he thought, giving the image in the mirror a chuckle. It laughed back. His mind went blank. He glanced across at Crompton. He too suffered the same fate. His face lost its outline. For the last time, Haleton studied the image in the mirror. He could barely recognize any features.

The image staring back at him looked distorted. Haleton saw it disappear.

The only thing remaining was a wisp of black smoke. In seconds, it too had vanished.

CHAPTER FOUR

England 1849AD

HALETON WALKED down the long narrow road towards a wooden jetty. The lovely aroma of food being cooked in a wood fired oven blotted out the smell of the sea. A single sheet of paper caught his eye. He picked it up out of the long grass. More than half of the printed words were smudged. The date on the top right-hand corner of the sheet read: 31st October 1849AD.

"Halloween," Haleton mumbled, looking around the area.

In the distance, he noticed an old man carrying a bag slowly limping along the road. His back looked severely bent. When the man came to a head height kerosene lamp, he stopped,

refilled the empty bottle and lit the wick. A small mob of people holding lit kerosene torches was approaching him. They pushed the old man from their path so they could deliberately march in Haleton's direction.

A skinny black kitten looked up at Haleton through lonely eyes. Walking around his legs it started purring.

"Beat it kit, I'm no good for you. Where I'm going, you can't come." Haleton stooped, giving the cat a back rub. He picked it up allowing the cat to muzzle into his chest. "You do have nice sweet smelling blood for a cat."

Haleton placed the kitten on the ground, pushing it towards a mouse hole in the side of a wooden building before stepping into the shadow of the baker's mill. He compared it to the ones in the new millennium, quickly deciding the bakery belonged to a poor man. He spat at the ground, grumbling.

"The distasteful council of four certainly made my life a living hell. I thought they were joking when they forced me to drink the stinking vampire blood. Little did I know it was only the start of the curse? After entering a new year I have exactly forty-eight hours to kill a lawless person or I start again. No romance, no let up; no getting used to my surroundings. One kill followed by a new time zone. This back and forth through time has taken its toll on my patience. I'm on ninety-eight kills. I have two more deaths and two more different time zones and I'm home free. Maybe, just maybe, there will be no more Mr. Bad Guy. Over the centuries, I have witnessed many things a normal sane person should never have to see. How I long to be mortal. I crave for my life to be normal once again. Hopefully, soon I'll be able to put my horrendous nightmare behind me."

Haleton paused thinking of the future and what it might be like to start a new life. He completely missed the celebrations of the new millennium. Could he be so lucky to have a second chance at being at the party of all parties? Did he dare to imagine ever meeting a nice young woman whom he could fall in love with? He sighed. His thoughts immediately fell on Rose-a-lee Cantala. How he loathed the woman he loved. His unanswered question, 'why she didn't warn him about the council of four and what they were planning?' still eluded him.

Haleton pulled his knife from his boot. "Rose-a-lee, if we ever meet again, I'm sure I won't be able to stop myself from ending your life." He shook his head, cringing at the thought somebody might have overheard his moaning. Too many times he'd been caught unawares by his hatred ramblings. He stared down the road at the flickering flames riding on the top of the torches. They were getting closer.

Heavy drunken footsteps were almost upon him. Haleton shrunk further into the shadows to hide. He studied an old man carrying a wine bottle. He staggered slightly as he walked. Haleton watched him slowly hobble past.

"Evening," croaked the old man. "I'd stop for a chat, but by the time I get home the moon will be directly above my head. I don't like the dark."

"You stink worse than a sewer old timer," hissed Haleton.

"Whatever," the man stammered. He hunched his shoulders as if trying his hardest to pick up his slow shuffling pace.

The old man eventually turned the corner, disappearing down a lane. Haleton cocked his head to the side before deciding to follow. He easily jumped onto the roof of the building behind the man. He trailed the old timer by walking along the leading edge. The balding man's strides were long, deliberate; not frail as expected.

“Interesting,” whispered Haleton. “I can hear his heartbeat even from my bird’s eye view. It was beating slowly when we spoke earlier, now it’s pumping his blood faster by the second.”

Haleton quietly slid down the side of the building to the ground. He didn’t bother to scan the area or keep to the shadows like he normally did. He kept at arm’s length, copying the supposed drunken man’s style of walk. Haleton could sense trouble brewing.

One hundred yards in front of the man, at the exit to the only lane in the immediate vicinity, something scraped metal. To Haleton, the noise sounded all too familiar. Once, just for fun, he created the exact noise by scraping a knife’s sharp edge across wrought iron in an attempt to scare whoever could hear the noise.

The man’s walk slowed. In a slick move, he resumed his bent shoulder old man look, exaggerating the limp. His face changed from middle aged to a look which portrayed him to be a defenseless old homeless man who was frightened of the dark and half out of his mind.

Haleton jumped back onto the rooftop. Squatting, he watched, interested at the charade.

The noise came again, this time, a lot closer. Laughing filled the ink coloured sky. Haleton zeroed in on the voices, surmising there were at least five individuals, more than likely young males waiting to ambush the man.

“Correction,” he whispered, listening to their individual heartbeats. “There are six louts laying in wait to either steal from the man or to rob him of his life.” Haleton slid his knife from its sheath hidden in his boot. He lifted it to eye level, studying the long steel blade.

The old man clutched his chest, his eyes protruding from their sockets. Gasping for air he crumpled to the compacted dirt. The louts swarmed around the man, laughing and jostling each other. One young male ventured close, kicking him in the ribs. The old timer opened his eyes, managing to lunge a small knife at the closest youth. The sharp blade scraped his leg, ripping his pants. The youth retaliated by snatching the knife from the old man’s hand, thrusting the knife into his chest.

Haleton slid down the wall of the building, hissing. “Does murdering the old timer make you a real man?”

“No, it doesn’t. After you join the old fella on the ground our newest recruit will be a fully fledged member of our gang.”

An inked picture of a witch tattooed on both arms of the tall young man in question obviously was to help him look tough. He pointed directly at Haleton, spitting on the ground at his feet. “Prepare to meet thy maker.”

“Are you sure you want to pursue such a statement?” warned Haleton.

“Fellow gang members, we have a real tough jerk in front of us. Do you all agree to sever his lifeline?”

A roar of agreement hovered above their heads like a thick blanket of fog.

Haleton growled a deep throated noise. He raised his knife, flashing it in the face of the lad. “This is your first and last warning, leave the area before each one of you gets hurt. I only need one soul to help me on my way.”

Each gang member crouched, waiting to strike.

Hearing the old man exhale his last shallow breath a barrage of shouts came from the other end of the lane. Haleton watched the lads disperse faster than they arrived. He turned his head so he could view the lynch mob bearing down on him.

“You there, leave the old man alone. Step away. Put your hands in the air.”

“My name is William Haleton. Do you have any idea what my name means?”

The lynch mob looked to be at least twenty deep. The first man pointed a sword at HALETON and yelled again.

“Yes. We have all heard of your name. Now step away from the man. If you fail to do exactly what I tell you, I will be forced to hang you from the nearest tree.”

“Don’t make me laugh. A hanging can’t stop me,” HALETON taunted. “Besides, I came to the aid of the old fella. There were six young males looking to rob the man. He died from a knife attack from a lad with tattooed arms.”

The lead man stared at the accused. “Your story is highly unlikely. We’ve been watching over the area for years waiting for the time you might show your ugly face. Crime in this area has been stamped out.”

“I think you need to take stock. Look around at the supposed secure area,” suggested HALETON. “You’ll be surprised at what you find.”

Focusing on HALETON’s every move the lynch mob closed in.

“You are under arrest for the death of the innocent man,” screeched a military man pointing to the corpse lying in the lane.

“In my defense, I have to plead innocent. I didn’t murder the man. If I did, I wouldn’t be here.”

“We don’t care what you have to say. We’ve read about your goings on and the curse you were given in a textbook. It’s been years since you drank the vampire blood. According to the rules of the ancient scroll, you must start anew.”

The lead man turned his head and gave a sharp nod at a short stocky man holding a large metal net in his hands.

“The net won’t be necessary,” advised HALETON.

“We’ve been waiting a long time for you to arrive. If the rumours about you are true, the steel net will be used.”

“Again I tell you there is no need to use the net. I’m a gentleman. I offer you my word I’ll come peacefully.”

“Your word has no backbone to it,” growled the leader of the posse. “Use the net. If the prisoner tries to escape I want to see a sword cut his heart into little pieces.”

The net was thrown outwards into the air. HALETON’s vampire speed helped him to easily sidestep away. Every man present watched it fall harmlessly to the ground. HALETON glared at each man in the group.

“Now you can escort me to the courthouse.”

CHAPTER FIVE

EVEN THOUGH sunrise was still a few hours away, news of HALETON’s capture spread like a firestorm. While he remained chained, locked and guarded a crowd squashed into every crevasse of the small courthouse to watch the anticipated hanging. Each person bore their stares into HALETON.

At 7:00 in the morning a man wearing a confident expression and black clothes entered the room and marched to the front. He sat at a table directly in front of Haleton. The ruckus in the room was deafening.

The Judge seated at the table brought the gavel down hard. In seconds, the loud thud turned the noisy courtroom deadly quiet. "Haleton, after hearing the evidence against you, I sentence you to hang. Hearing the rumour you can't be killed, I've decided your preposterous words stating you are a vampire are not true. In the event I'm wrong, it won't change my decision. You will be hanged until you are dead, your body will be thrown to the gallows where your head will be cut from your shoulders."

Haleton was dragged into the next room and a noose placed over his head. His wrists were bound tight and his ankles were tethered. The coarse rope scratched his skin. In a heartbeat, the scratches were gone.

In less than three minutes the viewing area appeared full to capacity. Every woman in the room wore the same excited expression, while the men folded their arms across their chests, looking displeased at the whole affair.

"Silence in the room," shouted the Judge. "The execution will now take place." He faced Haleton. Using an ice-cold voice he rasped. "Is there any last words you wish to say?"

"I'd like to address each person in this room," replied Haleton.

"Be warned, everyone here is waiting to view the outcome of the hanging."

"I'd like to announce to all who have come to witness my execution, I pursue the length of road known as Innocent Street. I am not guilty of any wrongdoing. I admit I had been following the old man. Thanks to the vampire blood flowing through my veins I sensed he might be walking into trouble. I only wanted to help him to arrive home safe."

"Enough idle talk, get on with the hanging," spat a big man sitting in the front row. "There ain't no such thing as a vampire."

"What about the young man who died not far from where the old man breathed his last?" sobbed a woman at the rear of the room. "He told me he was standing outside the door of the bakery minding his own business when he heard a noise coming from inside. He went in to investigate. The robber attacked him from behind. My son died in my arms."

"Madam, did he give you a description of the murderer before he closed his eyes for the last time?" asked Haleton.

"He said you were the attacker."

"Your testimony is floored," insisted Haleton. "Your son couldn't have described me. If I murdered him I wouldn't be here."

"Enough delay," chorused several men from the center of the crowd. "Hang him now."

A stocky man standing at the side of the room picked up what looked like a black bag. Looking directly at the Judge he opened it using rock steady hands. The moment he received a sharp nod he walked over to Haleton. He was about to slip the bag over the head of the guilty when Haleton spoke.

"Can I have one more minute? Just thirty seconds perhaps?"

"What will a minute delay make? What is it you want?" growled the Judge.

"I'd like to feel the heat of the sun on my face one last time."

"I'm going to deny your odd request," growled the Judge.

"Complete this execution, my breakfast is ready," jeered the man holding the black bag.

Haleton turned his head to look at the Judge. "Please, Sir, a condemned criminal to a gentleman. Surely it's not too much to ask to feel the sun on my face one last time?"

The man puffed out his cheeks. Gazing about the small room at the sea of faces, he rubbed the stubble on his chin.

“Very well, I’ll grant your last request. Before the curtain is opened someone check to make certain Haleton’s hands are securely tied behind his back.”

The man holding the black bag stepped up to make the check. “He’s bound good and tight,” he reported.

The Judge glared at a woman standing in front of a black curtain. “Please, step to the right, dragging the material open. After you have counted to thirty close the curtain so we can complete the execution.”

“This is an entire a farce,” yelled a man sitting in the back row. “The prisoner is stalling.”

The Judge addressed the room. “Quiet each one of you. A condemned man has a right for one last request. We are not animals. A few more seconds will make no difference to the outcome.”

“What of the rumour he can disappear into another time?” spat a young woman in the front row.

“Any rumour is here-say.” The Judge re-focused on the woman clutching the black curtain. “Please, dear lady, if you’d open the curtain and count to thirty, thank you.”

The woman opened the curtain. A black cloud drifted in front of the sun making Haleton’s face to remain in the shadow.

“So much for the rumour,” muttered the Judge. “We’ll now finalize the execution. Close the curtain.”

“Please!” Haleton begged. “A few more seconds will see the sunshine. It’s the least you can do.”

A midnight hush fell on the room waiting for the Judge to give the final word.

Haleton switched his stare from the window to the Judge every few seconds. The sky started to lighten. He knew the sun’s lifesaving rays will be on his face in seconds. His eyes were bulging when he saw the Judge raise his hand to signal the close of the curtain. Haleton strained against the ropes tethering his wrists. The bones in his forearms were at breaking point.

“Sun, come on out,” he grumbled.

Groaning from the exertion of leaning to his left, the ropes creaking under the violent force, Haleton looked at the heavens.

“If there is a God watching me struggle, make the sunshine fall on my face. Do it now.”

The Judge felt a bead of sweat form on his temple. He swiped it away before it could tumble down the side of his face. The many rows of people were starting to fidget. Somewhere amongst the sea of faces, a man coughed. A baby started to cry. The Judge signaled for the woman to close the curtain.

“No,” Haleton yelled. “Wait, I beg you for mercy.”

The curtain started to close.

Sunlight suddenly beamed through the window. Haleton’s face shone like a beacon lapping up the warmth. He closed his eyes, yelling. “I’m a shadow by day and a hunter by night.”

Not waiting for the black bag the executioner pulled the long wooden handle next to the trap door. The mechanism triggered the flap in the floor Haleton stood on. The wooden square opened downwards. Everyone in the room heard a thud. Haleton laughed. His shadow slipped through the noose. Each person watched in disbelief the shadow climbing the wall. Ten rows of

citizens heard a laugh and saw the shadow move between the five horizontal bars covering the window before vanishing.

Haleton left the upheaval back at the courthouse in his wake, deciding the next town might be easier to walk around unnoticed.

By 8:00 o'clock in the evening Haleton arrived at an outdoor party. Several people, he smiled at when he started to mingle amongst the few hundred guests helped him to feel welcome. His top hat and tails made him look right at home at the masquerade ball.

'Nightfall on the evening of Halloween in 1849AD looks interesting,' thought Haleton glancing at the full moon rising over the treetops. 'It's a shame I have to leave so soon. What I'd give to hold a young lady in my arms and dance all night.'

Haleton left the party and walked along a narrow dirt road. Time was fast running out. He had only two hours in which to find the next guilty person. He needed every second to make sure evil filled the victim's heart. He couldn't afford another mistake. He shuddered at the thought of having to start again for the third time. Two more victims and he'd be finally free of the vampire curse.

A mid to late teen boy walked past the doorway where Haleton stood, waiting. He looked to be carrying something under his long coat. Thick English fog started to roll in from the sea. The vile smell of the remnant of fish guts in the many large fishing nets hanging up to dry filled Haleton's nostrils.

The young man checked the area before slipping into the doorway opposite Haleton. For over a minute the lad struggled to spring the lock. Opening the door he stepped inside the small general store, closing the door in his wake.

Haleton walked across the street. He looked through the window and watched the lad raiding the money draw. Crates of food, fishing gear, and material were set out ready for buyers when they shopped the next day. The young man held a brown leather bag open and was scooping up handful after handful of English pounds. He looked pleased with hitting the jackpot.

Inside three minutes the young robber ventured outside, closed the door, lifting his collar against the cold moist fog. He glanced up the road before walking towards the sea.

Haleton followed the robber through the back streets of England. He could hear the occasional muffled yell from women dancing in the arms of drunken males at the masquerade party. The robber kept to the shadows, never once looking over his shoulder. Haleton felt sure he'd eventually end up at the local ladies for gentlemen whorehouse.

The young man entered a lane. He squatted behind a stack of sea rotted wooden crates to count the loot.

"What do you think you're doing?"

The lad looked up, standing slowly. "It's all mine. If you act nice and leave the lane you won't be hurt."

"At a guess, you have never heard of the rumours relating to William Haleton." He stooped, pulling his knife from his long boot.

CHAPTER SIX

Melbourne Australia: 2010AD.

THE YOUNG lady hunched her shoulders reading the computer screen. She launched her chair back and stood. "I hate these machines," she yelled. "Why do they always stop working at the most inappropriate time?"

In her rush to get away from the computer, she knocked the crystal vase full of red roses from the side table. Water carried the glass fragments across the polished floorboards in a growing slick. The echo of the accident made her freeze.

Seven sharp knocks on the wall made her tremble.

"Amber Cantala, are you alright?" croaked the woman's voice from behind the thin wall. "I heard something crash."

The young lady sidestepped to the wall. Cupping her hand around her mouth she said in a calm voice. "I'm fine Mavis. Thank you for caring."

"I thought you might have fallen to foul play."

"I'm fine, really. I accidentally knocked the vase onto the floor."

"I hope you don't have friends over. You know the rules against a party. I'd have to report you to the building manager. I do like to have quiet. It's the reason why I live in this quaint old building. The tenth floor is my lucky number."

"I'll try to remember," called Amber. She walked into the bathroom and came back carrying the largest towel she owned, throwing it over the pond of water. Pulling her mobile phone from her pocket, she tapped ten numbers on the pad. While waiting for the person to answer she paced the floor. Standing square to the wall where Mrs. Mavis Croaky talked to her she growled through a locked jaw. "I'll remember the warning you interfering old biddy. One day soon I'm leaving this shoebox size room on the tenth floor to start a new life. It won't be long before I have my medical degree. I'll set up my private practice many miles from here. Close to the beach might be nice. You and I will never see or hear of each other again." Scrunching her nose at the wall she pushed her fist into the air.

"Good evening Amber," said a man's voice at the other end of the phone, interrupting her one-sided argument.

"Craig Benyon, could you be a darling and come over. My computer crashed again."

A short silence marred the phone line.

"Please," Amber pleaded. "I need someone I can trust to do a good job."

"Okay," Craig answered in a voice that sounded completely flat. "I'll be there in two minutes."

Amber opened the door wearing a schoolgirl expression. "Craig thanks for coming so quick. I love the way you always come running when I call." She leaned in to kiss his cheek.

The young man pushed his brown hair from his face, looking Amber in the eyes. "It's no bother."

"Are you sure? You seemed to hesitate before agreeing to my request."

"I just stepped out of the shower."

The girl looked doubtful.

“It’s God’s honest truth.”

Craig Benyon stepped into the small apartment and walked across the room to the computer. Glancing at the roses on the floor he asked. “What happened?”

“In my rush to ring you I bumped the vase off the table.”

“Did Mrs. Mavis Croaky from next door bang the wall over the noise?”

“She sure did. I hate this building. I hate this apartment. The slightest noise I make the old woman threatens to have me evicted.”

“If she’s successful you can live at my place,” suggested Craig.

“You’re so sweet,” replied Amber pinching his cheeks. She flicked her long dark hair from off her shoulders, flashing him a smile.

“Amber, I’ve something on my mind. I’ve waited for ages waiting for the right time to say it.”

“Speak your mind; I’m a brave girl.”

Craig looked around the room, starting to fidget. Focusing on the one remaining fragment of glass on the floor, he walked over to pick it up. “Forget it. What’s on my mind isn’t important.”

“It must be or else you wouldn’t have brought it up.”

“You should buy a good anti-virus for your computer.” Craig chuckled before settling himself at the table and readied himself to start work on fixing the computer. “I’m happy you called me. At least I get to see you every week,” he confessed.

“I don’t believe for a heartbeat fixing my machine is what’s on your mind.”

Craig ignored the taunt by focusing on the monitor in front of him. Inside half an hour he’d completed the task.

“All done,” he remarked.

Amber took him by the hand, escorting him to the door. In silence, they walked to the lift and stepped inside.

“What are you up to?” asked Craig.

“You’ll see,” replied Amber.

The lift doors opened at the roof.

“Sit on the seat so we can have a heart to heart chat,” hinted Amber, smiling at his sullen expression.

“You want to sit in the rain?” questioned Craig.

“I sure do. Up here Mrs. Croaky can’t hear our conversation.”

The pair sat on a two-person seat, looking at nothing in particular.

“Seeing how you dragged me up here, insisting we sit in the rain, you can start the talk,” said Craig fidgeting.

“Let me begin by saying you’re a great friend.”

“Before you say another word, I guess now is the right time to say what I’ve been thinking about,” said Craig, interrupting.

“I knew you were thinking something other than my computer and only needed an opportunity to say it.”

Craig sprinted over to where a rose bush grew out of a large pot, near the building’s wall. He stooped, picking a blood red rose. He sat next to Amber grinning as he surrendered the flower. “It’s the only thing I could find on such short notice.”

Amber gently took the long stem rose. Re-focusing on Craig, she looked directly into his eyes.

“Let’s hope old Mrs. Croaky doesn’t discover your vandalism or she’ll have your guts in a pot.”

Craig chuckled. Slipping off the seat, he downed his knee and looked up into Amber’s eyes. “I know your dream is to have a private medical practice. Mine is to build computers so I can sell them to help pay for my science degree. I know they are two totally different worlds, two different dreams. Please, Amber, consider being my wife. There’s no hurdle higher or wide enough we can’t conquer together.”

“I sensed you were going to ask me to marry you. I can’t say yes. Out there somewhere amongst the café’s, the nightlife of Melbourne, there’s a young lady waiting for you. She’s your Miss Right. It wouldn’t be fair of me to deny her a happy life. I know this might sound crazy, I have a feeling my Mr. Right isn’t far away. Our paths have yet to cross. If I pursue a relationship between us the two people searching for their rightful partners will be devastated.”

Tears began to flood Craig’s eyes. To hide his embarrassment he lifted his head to view the sky. “It’s still raining,” he commented.

“Craig, I need you to look at me.”

He slowly dropped his gaze and stared at Amber. “I want you to know from the moment we met in the lift I have loved you.”

“You’ve never said,” quizzed Amber.

“Not in so many words. None actually, but I hinted every chance I could.”

“Are you the one who left a red rose at my door every few days since I first moved in?” asked Amber.

“I didn’t know how to tell you they were from me so I kept quiet. Up till today, I’ve left seventy-four roses. The one in your hand is number seventy-five.”

“I’m flattered. I honestly didn’t know. Craig, can you understand I can’t love you? It’s not you, it’s me. One day a young woman will enter your life. You’ll spoil her rotten. The person isn’t me.”

“It could be?”

Amber reached for his hand. “No, it can never be me. Please understand when I say you are the nicest, sweetest young man I’ve ever known, but it won’t be fair if you and I were together.”

“I don’t see it your way. I will always respect and treat you properly.”

“I know you will.”

“I’d always be faithful to the most attractive, perfect person in the world.”

“I believe every letter of each beautiful word you’ve spoken.”

Craig bowed his head. “I understand what you’re trying to say. Deep down I know we’re meant to be together. I’ll be waiting for the time you come knocking on my door. My light will never be switched off for you.” He looked up, leaned closer and gave Amber a kiss on the cheek. Marching towards the stairs he didn’t look back.

In silence, Amber watched him leave.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Melbourne 2010

HALETON SPIED a newspaper carelessly left at a bus stop. He sat in the dark, noting the date. "Thursday 15th September 2010.

A bus rumbling along the road slowed and stopped in front of him. The door rattled open. The driver sat staring at Haleton.

"Are you getting on?" scoffed the driver.

Haleton shook his head, refocused on the newspaper and started to read.

The driver slid from his seat. Standing in the doorway of the bus, verbal diarrhea flowed thick and fast.

Haleton slammed the newspaper onto the ground. "You Sir, have a polluted mouth."

"It's been a long shift. If you didn't want to catch a bus, don't sit in the bus stop." The driver pointed at Haleton's attire, chuckling. "Top hat and tails; did your car break down on the way to a masquerade party?"

Haleton's growl came as a terrifying low rumble. The noise lingered in the air long after the bus traveled down the road and turned left at the next intersection. Haleton stood on the road listening to the sound of the bus' diesel engine. He muttered under his breath. "A person's attitude hasn't changed since 1749AD. Attack or be attacked. Kill or be killed."

The echo of heeled shoes rang loud in Haleton's ears. He quickly searched for the exact location of the noise before slipping back into the bus shelter. Sitting on the top edge of the seat, he waited patiently for the next potential victim to arrive. He looked relaxed, blending into the year.

The heeled shoes came slowly. Haleton fidgeted in the stagnant air. His next victim will soon be close. His mouth partially opened revealing long sharp eye teeth.

A young lady stopped to study the bus timetable. The information was typed on a single sheet of paper, placed behind a clear Perspex frame and screwed to a metal pole. Haleton could smell the woman's perfume wafting towards him. It was a strong desirable scent. He slid along the seat to get closer. She faced him. Her long dark hair glistened in the net of light from the overhead street lamp. She flashed him two rows of perfectly formed white teeth. Haleton noticed her pupils were dancing. He guessed she'd just been told exciting news. For a heartbeat, he wondered what it might have been.

"Do you know what time the next bus will arrive?"

The tone of the girl's voice seemed to mesmerize him. Haleton managed to stand, but he couldn't move his feet. The way she looked sideways at him aroused his inner man. The idea he needed to hurry to find his last victim was forced from his mind.

"Hello," said the young lady. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, thank you."

"Do you know what time the next bus is due?"

"No. I'm positive when the vehicle arrives the driver won't dare to drive past before picking you up."

"Why do you say that?"

"Such an attractive young lady shouldn't be walking about at a late hour as this. It's not safe."

“I needed to go for a walk to get out of my shoebox size apartment and to get away from Craig. Do you know he asked me to marry him?”

Haleton showed her a glazed look.

“I’m sorry, of course, you don’t know. I’m Amber Cantala.” She thrust her hand towards Haleton.

“I knew a Cantala once. Rose-a-lee was a polite sweet little thing. She’d always been a good wife. Her husband had been a stubborn mule. He forced her to work like a slave. What I’d give to help her get away from the man. I told her once in the secret garden at the castle wall I’d take her to another land. Maybe we could have discovered an island for just the two of us. It will be a slow journey. However, the reward, in the end, would’ve been worth it. I tried to explain she needed someone who’d treat her with all the love she deserved.” Haleton looked Amber in the eyes. “She reminds me of you, clever to the maximum. She was a scientist. It’s a shame she didn’t see me how I wanted her to.”

Amber pulled her hand away, glaring at the man. “You’re not making any sense.”

“I apologize for rambling.”

“I accept. I don’t know why, but I have to confess I feel drawn to you.”

“I feel the same way.”

“Any ideas?” asked Amber.

“I can’t think of a single reason. The only thing I know is in all the women I’ve come across you’d have to be the sweetest sounding; the most appealing woman I’ve ever laid my eyes on.”

Amber’s cheeks flushed red. “I hear the words you’re speaking. Instead of listening to what my mind is saying and run, I feel I should stay.”

“I feel I have known you all my life.”

“You didn’t say your name,” mentioned Amber.

“My name is William Haleton.” He extended his hand.

They shook hands in a business-like manner.

“Your name sounds old fashioned.”

“You don’t like it?” questioned Haleton.

“I didn’t say I hated it. Listen, don’t take my opinion the wrong way, as a matter of fact I think your name sounds kind of cute.”

Haleton knew deep down the young lady has an innocent heart. She certainly never did anything illegal. He needed to move on. The clock’s ticking. He didn’t have time for idle chit-chat. He took hold of her hand as if he picked up a delicate flower made of glass.

She gave him a provocative look.

Haleton couldn’t spare the time, but something about the woman intrigued him. Could it be her easy-going nature? Or was he being drawn to her, compelled to stay in her life? Maybe this is all part of the curse. Just when he hoped to run across the finish line the curse threw him a love curve to keep him going.

“I don’t mean to pry into your personal affairs, Miss Cantala. I have noticed your clothes are wet through.”

“I’ve never met a man so polite,” she replied.

“Again I thank you for the compliment.”

“I asked my friend Craig to follow me to the roof of the building where I live. I made him sit in the rain on a seat built for two. I sensed he wanted to say something important, but was

too shy to say. After a while, I convinced him to talk. Craig downed his knee in a puddle of water. I thought it a lovely gesture, highly romantic.”

“Did you say yes or no?”

Amber looked at Haleton wearing a coy expression. “What do you think, William?”

“I think you might have said no.”

“You’re right on the money,” advised Amber.

“Why did you say no?”

A second bus rumbled to a stop. Amber and Haleton got on. Amber paid for her ticket and started walking towards the second last row. The moment Haleton stepped onto the bus seven overhead fluorescent tubes blew, plunging the seats into darkness. In the confusion, he slipped past the ticket machine and caught up to Amber.

“Sorry folks the lights must have blown a fuse. You’ll have to ride in the dark,” called the bus driver.

“You haven’t answered my question,” said Haleton, sliding onto the seat next to Amber.

“I told Craig somewhere out in the world there is a Miss Right waiting for him.”

“Is there a Mr. Right out there for you?”

Amber looked out of the window, whispering. “I sure hope so.”

When the bus stopped to pick up passengers ten minutes from where Haleton first met Amber, he followed her off the bus. Before she could strike up a new conversation he bid her a good night.

Haleton watched her walk back the way they came. Almost immediately he saw a black shadow moving slowly along the wall of the building. He watched the figure crossing the road to keep pace with Amber.

Under his breath, Haleton hissed at his final victim. “Hey wiry built man, you’re so predictable in shadowing the young lady I can almost hear your evil mind swinging into action. I can certainly hear your heart pounding inside your chest. The only thought you are entertaining is; you want the small bag hanging off Amber’s shoulder, steal a few dollars so you can buy drugs. What’s different about this year to any other year which has come and gone over the last two-hundred years; nothing, nothing at all?”

The vampire blood raging through Haleton’s body flowed faster. The urge to protect the girl from the creep across the street surged through his body. He hadn’t felt the feeling in a long time. Could it be he might have fallen in love or was his body preparing him to be a mortal once again? He’d forgotten what both feelings were like.

Haleton darted across the street. At a safe distance, he slipped into synchronization with the man, well aware the whole scene could possibly be a trap.

“Who cares, I can’t die,” he mumbled. “The words that were sworn to me after my capture and when I was forced to drink the vampire blood still haunt me. Stay too long, the hunter will be the hunted.”

Haleton allowed his mind to wander. How many more vampires roamed the earth? How successful were Rose-a-lee Cantala and the council of four in turning mortal humans into vampires? If they met would they be on his side or his enemies?

Amber turned down a dark lane, picking up her pace. The wiry built man followed soon after.

The trap was set.

Haleton entered the lane. He immediately heard a flick-knife blade extend. If the young robber only wanted to steal from Amber Cantala why did he have murder on his mind?

Haleton's vampire fangs quickly grew. Silently, he cat leaped high above the attacker. He clung to a down pipe, viewing the scene below him. The thug smelt of murder. Other gang members closed in to watch.

Haleton decided to wait before springing into action. He knew their pattern. First, the louts will taunt Amber to unnerve her. Next, they'd surround her and slowly tighten the circle. They'd jostle each other waiting for the murder to take place. The leader was the only one who had the authority and the privilege of extinguishing her life flame.

Haleton would react before then. He couldn't afford to intervene till he made sure she'd be a victim. The smell of freedom from the curse grew steadily stronger by the moment. One mistake and he'd be at the beginning again. The thought was incomprehensible.

"Girlie, come closer to us," called the stocky gang leader. "We want to smell the perfume clinging to every strand of hair on your pretty little head."

"Stay away from me," Amber screamed.

"You look cold and wet. Come closer, I'll help you to feel warm."

"Correction, we'll all help to warm you," stated one of the gang members stepping next to the leader.

Each member of the gang burst into laughter when the leader punched him in the shoulder.

Amber's eyes exposed how she must have felt. At that moment, she feared for her life.

Her eyes were protruding to the point of bursting from their sockets.

"Come to me for a good time," jeered gang leader, opening his arms.

"Please, stay away. I have no money. Please, I beg you, leave me be." Amber backed stepped away from the group. Her heel hit a wooden pallet causing her fall. She hit the ground backside first.

The gang members grinned at each other. They sprinted towards Amber laughing satanically. Hovering over her they showed no remorse from their actions. The leader held out his hand as if he wanted to help Amber to her feet. She took his hand. For a few seconds, she stood trembling before crumbling into a heap on the ground.

Half carried and half dragged to the lift in the nearest building, the group stroked Amber's hair, waiting for the lift car to arrive.

"This thing will be a great trophy," reported the largest member of the gang. "Come sun up, we'll be able to say the tail end of the night more than made up for the boring start."

The lift doors opened on the unfinished seventh floor. Small shallow puddles of water pooled the area. The group walked across the floor to the open windows to look at the ground far below. The updraft of wind ruffled the leader's long mouse-coloured hair.

Haleton followed their every move. He felt hungry for blood. The gang of youths placed the girl face-up on the dirt covered floor. One of the boys straddled her. He squatted, tapping her cheek. Amber slowly opened her eyes. Once she realized what they were up to a blood-curdling scream flowed over her lips.

The whole gang jostled for position waiting for their turn.

"I think we should fight for the privilege of being first," jeered the weasel of a youth.

For his comment, he was pushed sideways. The lad lost his balance and fell into a puddle of water. Pointing their fingers at him the rest of the group laughed cynically.

Haleton saw his cue, stepped from the shadows, tapping the largest youth on the shoulder. He turned to face the intruder.

"Where did you come from?" growled the leader.

Haleton ignored the question. "I think the skinny weasel has a valid point. There should be an arm wrestle to see who has the right to be first."

The leader shoved a fist into the air. "I am the elected leader of the gang, I go first."

Haleton grabbed him by the collar, flinging him effortlessly through the air to the other side of the building. Three other boys crumpled next to him. They resembled a pile of wet disused rags. They slowly untangled themselves and started nursing their broken bones.

Haleton tapped the last youth on the shoulder. The weasel swung a white-knuckled fist. Haleton jumped back.

The youth seized the moment. He reached out, taking hold of Amber by the collar, dragging her to the window. "You want a piece of me?"

"It could be arranged," hissed Haleton.

"Can you catch the girl at the same time?"

"I doubt you have the strength to lift the girl into the air or brave enough to push her over the edge."

"I'll prove my worth. The death of this girl will clench the idea I'm the best one to govern the gang."

Amber lifted her hand, managing to slap the bloke across the face. He pushed hard against her shoulders. She overbalanced. Her stomach smacked the window frame, knocking the wind out of her lungs. Clinging to the ledge, staring at the ground she screamed at the top of her lungs. The young man readied himself for the fatal push.

"Are you sure you want to go so far?" questioned Haleton. "Your fellow gang members are hobbling over."

"Don't kill the girl," begged the largest gang member.

"You said it'll be fun," jeered the young man.

"Forget what I said. She doesn't deserve to die."

The skinny youth glared at the team leader. Yelling something inaudible he pushed Amber out the window.

In the time it takes lightning to fork across the sky, Haleton dived out of the window, easily catching Amber by the ankle. He jerked her back, holding her firmly in his arm.

The ground came up fast. Haleton reached out to grab hold of the second-floor window ledge. He didn't grimace at the superhuman effort. Using his head, he shattered the glass window, jumped through the square hole and gently stroked the woman's cheek. He pushed the wet hair from her face, looking at her in the eyes. He felt captivated by the tanned colour of her skin. He noticed the jugular vein on the side of her neck protruding slightly. He could smell her blood being pumped through her veins at speed. Haleton leaned forward. His lips brushed her neck. He wanted to taste her but needed to fight the urge to have a bite. He shook his head violently in an attempt to rid himself of the torment.

Haleton placed Amber gently on her feet, sighed, turned and started to walk away.

Amber managed to whisper. "Where do you think you're going?"

Haleton froze in his footsteps. He turned to face Amber. She stood staring at him, a glazed look in her eyes. He spoke to her in a deep sincere voice. His tone sounded, calming, almost hypnotic.

"I'll return before a minute has ticked away. I've some unfinished business to take care of."

"There is no way you should have been able to save me. How did you do it? Are you a magician?"

“No.”

The molester sprinted down the makeshift stairs and ran across the large room towards Haleton. “Leave, you’re not welcome at this two-some party.”

Haleton looked sideways at the man. “I believe it is you who should leave while you are still breathing.” He knew far too well he should have been the one to leave. He’d plenty of time left to find him later. The moment the young man’s life expired he’d be finally free of the vampire curse. The likelihood of ever seeing Amber again was remote at best. He couldn’t be sure if it were even possible. Something seemed to compel him to stay. He wanted to discover the reason.

Sirens grew louder. Blue and red flashing lights flooded the area. The walls of the partially completed building looked like disco lights which flooded the fashionable 1970’s era. Haleton gave the molester his undivided attention. His fingers beckoned the bloke closer, taunting him into attacking.

He retaliated by showing off a flick knife. Its blade glistened in the dancing police lights. “Come over, I’m more than ready to cut you in half.”

Amber glared at the young man through slits. She showed guts by stepping between the two men. “Mitch, stay away.”

The young skinny man holding the flick knife grinned. “Lucky for you I’m a nice bloke.”

“Do you know this creep?” questioned Haleton.

“Sadly, yes,” replied Amber. “Before he joined the gang he always acted like a well-mannered man.”

“We are a good batch of blokes. We rid the streets of bad dudes like this one,” yelled Mitch, pointing the flick knife at Haleton.

“You terrorized the young lady and threw her off the seventh floor.”

“I didn’t want to see her hurt. I just want the gang to accept me.”

“The death of an innocent woman is a strange way of showing how much you care.” hissed Haleton.

“I’ve seen your ugly face enough. Do yourself a favour, get out of the area. Go join your fancy dress party.”

“If I thought your idea sounded humorous I’d laugh.” Haleton let a deep-throated growl slip. “If I gave you my worst you’d be dead.”

“Mighty big words,” jeered Mitch.

“You look as though you’d never give a second thought if the young lady died.”

“Do us both a favour; disappear old man.”

“What you want is not possible. If it makes you feel better, try to make me.”

The rest of the gang slowly hobbled down the stairs. They stood in a tight group to watch.

Mitch pulled a small handgun from his back pocket. His smirk made him look evil the moment he pointed it directly at Haleton. “Who’s the scared one now? Old man I’ll give you three seconds to drop to your knees and start to convince me you’re a defeated foe. If you refuse I’ll deliver a bullet into your heart.”

“Hey, Mitch this ain’t part of the gang deal we live by,” shouted one of the gang members. Using his left hand to clutch his right arm he nodded at the gun. “Cough up the revolver. You know the rules of the leader; no guns.”

Mitch glared at him, sidestepping away. The other members ran back upstairs leaving only one.

“Mitch put the gun down. Murder ain’t worth it,” explained the leader, leaning casually against the wall. “If I could I’d come over and use my fist to break your nose.”

“Jake, you can be a chicken too. Go join the others,” spat Mitch. “This old dude is going out the window feet first.”

Seeing the police starting to fan out across the unfinished second floor, Amber began to shuffle away.

“Everyone freeze,” growled the closest cop. “You, holding the gun, don’t be a hero, put the weapon on the ground.”

Mitch arced up. “The man wearing the fancy hat attacked my girlfriend.”

“Son, I won’t tell you again, put the gun on the floor.”

“If I do, the old man is likely to break my neck.”

“He won’t move. I’ve got you covered.”

Mitch leveled his gun directly at Haleton’s heart.

“I’d do as you were told.”

“Shut up. I need to think,” spat Mitch.

The leader of the gang slid along the wall. He spied a big cop shaking his head. “Mitch, do what the cop says.”

Haleton raised his hands and slowly stepped closer.

“You’re close enough. I want you and hero boy lying on the ground,” barked the cop.

“Drop to your knees or I’ll give it to you right now,” barked Mitch glaring at Haleton. “This is your last warning.” He clicked the revolver’s safety off. “You’ve got guts mate. You don’t even look nervous.”

“Amber, don’t be afraid,” urged Haleton. “I’ll protect you come what may.”

“I don’t feel good,” she whispered back. “It must be the shock.”

“You can’t protect anyone,” yelled Mitch. “Look around the place, I hold all the marbles. If you can’t understand what I mean, take a long hard look at the barrel of my gun. The bullet in the chamber has your name on it.”

“Son, don’t be a fool, put the gun down,” instructed the uniformed cop. He looked ready to shoot if the stalemate came to an abrupt end.

Haleton remained in a standing position square to Mitch. He knew he could easily overpower him, but there were too many uniform witnesses. By the time he got through explaining to the cops they’d have him in a straight jacket and committed to the insane institution.

Mitch locked his wrist and pulled the trigger. The bullet entered Haleton’s heart. Closing his eyes he fell back against the wall, crumpling to the concrete floor in a sitting position. His head fell forward onto his chest.

Two police charged at Mitch, wrestling him to the ground. They quickly handcuffed him before dragging the lad to his feet. Giving him a clip behind the ears and a shove in the shoulder blades they escorted him from the building.

“The ambulance and the coroner have been called,” reported a rookie cop, viewing the gruesome scene. “The rest of the gang members have been handcuffed. I don’t think an interview at the moment is possible, they’re all in shock.”

The Sergeant in charge of the group turned his attention to Amber. “Miss, what’s your name?”

Amber stared at nothing in particular. Slowly turning her head, she looked at Haleton slumped against the wall. Her statement came as a mere whisper. “I don’t understand.”

“What don’t you understand?” asked the cop.

“I don’t understand,” she said again.

The Sergeant stood the moment the ambulance officers trotted over. They gave Amber a cursory medical checkup before bundling her onto a wheeled trolley.

“The young woman seems out of it, we’ll take her to the hospital,” advised the ambulance driver.

The Sergeant commenced pacing the floor. He waited for the lift doors to close before lighting a cigarette. He walked over to Haleton staring at the corpse. “Poor fella; I reckon he only wanted to help the girl. I believe he could’ve been innocent.”

The rookie cop strolled over and folded his arms across his chest. “The coroner will be here in a few minutes. They’ll take the trash to the morgue.”

“Don’t you have anything better to do?” blurted the Sergeant. He finished his cigarette by blowing smoke into the face of the rookie and throwing the butt on the concrete floor next to Haleton.

“No, I don’t.”

“Find something to do.”

The rookie scooted off towards the lift to busy himself writing the report.

Haleton opened his eyes. Lifting his head he whispered. “Sergeant, which hospital did they take the young woman to?”

The cop’s eyes popped almost out of their sockets. His mouth opened, but his words were drowned in the gargle of his saliva.

Haleton stood so he could look the cop eye to eye. “I don’t mean to shock you. Please, I must know if she’s alright.”

“Don’t twitch a muscle. Arrest this man,” yelled the Sergeant. He pulled his gun, pointing it directly at Haleton’s chest.

“I’m fine thanks. What is the name of the hospital Amber has been taken to and in which direction is the building?”

The rookie cop looked over his shoulder. His face immediately drained of colour. “How can this be? You have a bullet hole in your heart?”

A middle-aged cop stepped over, handcuffing Haleton. “We need to have a chat down at the police station.”

“What sort of chat?”

“It’s a chat to explain the magical trick on how the bullet bounced off your chest.”

“The bullet missed,” explained Haleton.”

The Sergeant grabbed hold of his shirt, pulling at the hole directly over his heart. “Do you want to change your story?”

“First thing which needs explaining is why you didn’t answer my question?”

“Quit talking or things will grow steadily worse for you. Faking a fatal gunshot wound is a serious offense.”

“What about the answer to my question?” Haleton asked.

“I don’t recall you asking anything.”

Haleton rolled his eyes. “I asked you where they took Amber Cantala.”

“Who are you talking about?”

“The young woman the ambulance took to the hospital.”

“She must have slipped out of the building when all the commotion erupted. Take this hero away,” growled the Sergeant. He reached for another cigarette. “I’ll be at police

headquarters soon after you arrive. I'm sure we'll get to the bottom of this mess one way or the other."

CHAPTER EIGHT

HALETON WAS marched down a short corridor which boasted four doors, two on each side and herded into the first room. The jab of a rock hard fist to the left shoulder blade helped him to sit on a chair. The door remained open. A tall well-shaven detective guarded the entrance. His square jaw line and dark beady eyes showed he wasn't in the mood for games.

"Have you been through a rough night?"

The cop sitting opposite Haleton snorted, extracted a cigarette, lighting the end. "I suppose you want one?"

"No thanks. Smoking is bad for one's health. Before you begin the interrogation, I'd like to take this opportunity to say thanks for agreeing to my odd request of having the lights in the corridor and to this room turned off well in advance of our arrival."

The cop snorted again. Clearing his throat he started. "What's your game?"

"I'm not playing a game."

"Playing dead is an offense."

"Is it?"

"Don't waste my time. Admit your guilt so we can move on. You have already stated on the way here the lights in this building hurt your eyes. If I were you I'd spill my guts real quick. The senior detective will be here in five minutes. He won't be as understanding as me. For one thing, he prefers to have the lights on." He exhaled a lung full of smoke into Haleton's face.

"I apologize," said Haleton.

"For what?" the detective asked, leaning forward in his chair. "Speak up I want the recording to be crystal clear."

"I'm sorry for faking my death."

"What's your name?"

"I've been called lots of names over the years. Which one would you like?"

"The name recorded on your birth certificate. It's the one your mother gave you."

"William Haleton."

"Middle name?" he spat in a droll voice.

"I don't have one."

"Let's say I believe you. What are some of the other names you go by?"

"Is there a need to know them?"

"I might want the computer to cross reference any other names."

"I've been known as the Hunter; Vamps; Hunter of the night; Hunter by day shadow by night; the man who never sleeps or eats."

The cop signaled a stop. "Let's backtrack. You say you're a hunter?"

"Correct."

"What do you hunt?"

“I can see where this is leading. You won’t believe me if I told you.” Haleton gave the cop the handcuffs which were securely fastened around both his wrists. “They’re a present. The cuffs were digging into my flesh. Let’s move on to more exciting questions like, where did the ambulance take Amber Cantala?”

“The hospital I guess,” the cop answered.

“Which one?” Haleton probed.

“The closest hospital from where we picked her up. What’s the Goss on the attack?”

“I happened to be in the right place at the right time.”

“I’d say wrong place at the wrong time,” suggested the cop. “Tell me something, what is the girl to you?”

Haleton shook his head. “She’s nobody special.”

“If you’re telling the truth why are you so interested in the young lady?”

“She has an aura around her.”

The cop inhaled more of the cigarette and blew smoke into the air. “Tell me something intelligent,” he urged leaning back in his chair.

“Like what?”

“Who is she to you?”

“I told you, she’s nobody special.”

“Why are you dressed in a seventeenth-century costume? Did you and the girl come from a fancy dress party? Is it where you two met?”

“Nothing could be further from the truth.”

“I’ll give you a few minutes alone to think through your answers. I’m sure when I return and the senior detective walks into the room behind me your story will have changed. Keep this warning in mind. If your answers stay the same there’s going to be a lot of trouble.” The cop stood glaring at Haleton for a few moments before marching to the door.

“Please, before you go, I need you to tell me the name of the hospital.”

“Don’t go away. I’ll be right back.”

“I won’t be here when you return.”

The detective collected the cop. Both stepped into the corridor. The detective tapped a rookie cop walking past on the shoulder.

“I need you to stand guard. I don’t want anyone in or out of this room except me.”

The rookie closed the door. He stood at attention in the middle of the doorway facing the corridor.

Haleton quietly walked to the window, pushing it open slightly before walking across the room to the door. He casually flicked the light switch on. His body instantly dematerialized into a shadow. Floating across the room to the window, he easily drifted between the bars and into the world outside.

CHAPTER NINE

THE SUN started breaking into the new day. Being a shadow made it easy for Haleton to escape the police complex. He headed south to an overpass. Under the bridge, he materialized.

Spying a pair of male joggers, he estimated inside a minute they'd be close enough to ask directions. Before finding Mitch again or a new victim Haleton needed to talk to Amber.

The joggers rounded a bend and ran for the bridge. Haleton called out before they got too close.

"Do either of you know where the nearest hospital is?"

Both men looked annoyed at being stopped. One decided to keep jogging on the spot while the other gave cursory directions.

"Down this road, turn left at the third corner and follow the road. It's the ten-storey building directly ahead."

"How long will it take to walk there?" Haleton asked.

"We could jog there in nine minutes. By the look of you, I'd say you'd call an ambulance at the halfway point. Tell me something, have you come from a fancy dress party?"

Haleton shook his head, gave a quick wave then watched the men jog away laughing at the clothes he wore.

Haleton's vampire blood almost got the better of him. He started to run after the men, but the sunlight saw him floating over the ground. He turned and headed towards the hospital.

'Being able to dematerialize into a shadow did have its advantages,' he thought, making a beeline for the building. In less than a minute he arrived.

Haleton stopped to survey the area. He spied a small truck being driven through a gate. "A local delivery, perfect," he whispered.

Haleton clung to the back of the truck as it was driven towards the kitchen. The moment he jumped onto the loading dock he marched towards the semi-darkened corridor. Haleton materialized, pulled a small black disc from his pocket, pushing the button on the side which caused the overhead lights to blow. He shouldered the heavy plastic doors and marched towards the lift. He spied a row of long stemmed roses in buckets leaning against the wall. He swiped up a flower and placed it inside his coat.

A bell at the other end of the corridor shrilled. The lift door started to open. Before stepping into the lift car he again clicked the button on his small disc. The interior light went out. He reached out, pressing the ground floor button. He gave the woman kitchen hand standing at the rear of the lift car a quick glance.

She returned a nervous look.

Haleton faced the door waiting for it to open. His thoughts drifted back to when he found the small black disc in the trash in the year 2109AD. The find was a God's send. Totally illegal, however, it served him many times. Pushing the button on the disc sends an electronic pulse which blows the light.

The hospital's general inquiries area looked busier than a grand ballroom filled to capacity. People were sitting on chairs in rows talking above each other, trying to be heard. The receptionist behind the glass administration window sat massaging her forehead in a feeble attempt to get rid of her headache. Haleton stepped out of the lift. Every overhead light made a popping sound when they blew, plunging the area into darkness.

Screams filled the emergency department.

Haleton stepped up to the small glass window. For a long time, he stared directly at the woman hoping she might look up.

She never did.

“My name is William,” he answered eventually. “I need to find the young woman who came in by ambulance not too long ago. She’s a brunette, about nineteen at a guess. Is there any chance you might be able to locate her?”

“Sir, please sit down. When the lights come on I’ll help you.”

“Please, I need you to help me right now.”

“I can tell by the way you’re glaring at me you won’t leave until I help you?”

“Exactly,” said Haleton.

“I need a name.”

“Yes of course you do. There’s a problem, I don’t know it.” Haleton lied through his teeth hoping he sounded genuine in the misleading information. He didn’t want the cops to arrive, throwing panic into the mix. He didn’t care too much over the ruckus he caused, he only cared how much time he’d waste.

“Sir, please sit down. When you remember the girl’s name come back, preferably when the lights come back on.”

“I don’t want to be any trouble. Surely you could look up the new arrivals?”

“Mister, don’t give me any grief.”

“The moment you tell me the information I’ll be out of here.”

“Look, Sir, I’ve been having a bad shift. It’s bedlam in here. Come back when you discover her name.”

“Her last name is Shine. Amanda Shine,” he lied.

“Now you remember!”

Haleton started to read the new arrival sheet upside down; grateful the names on the sheet were typed in alphabetical order.

“According to this sheet, I don’t have anyone by the name you mentioned. She might have been sent to another hospital?”

Haleton said genuinely. “Please, if you could check one more time I’d be most grateful.”

The woman sighed and started to run her finger down the ten or so new patient names. By the time the woman spoke Haleton already found Amber’s room number.

“Nope, sorry,” replied the woman, looking up.

“Thanks for your time,” whispered Haleton. He walked off down the corridor, stepped into the lift car and pressed the second-floor button.

“Room twenty-two is behind you,” said a woman who reeked of authority. She momentarily stopped searching in the dark for a torch in a drawer next to the computer at the nurse’s station on the second floor to look up. “I’m sure the young lady will love a visitor even if your presence is only to reassure her. You’re the first. Her room isn’t affected by the unexplained blackout, yet. I do apologize for the lack of lighting. Nobody seems to know what’s happening. My guess is it has to be a power surge.”

“No problem,” said Haleton. He bid the woman a good day and strolled over to Amber’s room.

Inside the room, the overhead fluorescent tubes were still burning bright. Sunlight streamed in through the wall to ceiling window. Haleton pushed the button on the black disc. The light blew. He dematerialized into a shadow and slowly floated across the ceiling, viewing the sleeping woman in the bed. In the darkness of the heavy curtain hanging over the window he materialized and pulled the drawstring to block out the sun.

The room plunged into semi-darkness. Haleton quietly walked to the foot of the bed. Focusing on Amber, he could feel love pangs starting to surge through his body. Frowning at

the emotion, he stepped to the side of the bed to study Amber's face. Haleton could smell her sweet blood being pumped through her veins by a strong healthy heart. Already his mind slipped into fantasy thoughts of how the red liquid might taste. He needed to fight if he wanted to control the urge to taste her.

Amber stirred, opening her eyes.

Not wanting to alarm Amber, Haleton talked in a gentle voice.

"Hi there young lady, it's about time you woke. Don't be nervous I'm a friend."

"William, I saw you shot. If you're not a ghost how come you aren't dead?"

"It takes a while to explain. Can I say at this time, he missed?"

"I'm not sure I believe you or ever will."

"I'll explain everything at a later date."

"Why is it dark in here?"

"The lights seem to have gone out," stated Haleton innocently.

"I'd like to see the daylight. Can you please open the curtains?"

"I have to insist they remain closed for now."

"You're a strange man. There's something definitely drawing me to you. It's hard to explain. It's like I know I should be afraid to talk to you, yet at the same time, I feel I should accept you for a friend whom I can trust with my life."

"Thank you for the compliment." Haleton looked at the door. "Someone is coming. I have to leave."

"Do you have to go right now?"

"Yes, it's important I do. I said before we'll catch up again, soon." He produced a long stem flower hidden inside his coat, placing it on the bed at Amber's fingertips.

She picked it up, breathing its sweet perfumed aroma. "A red rose. It's the biggest flower I've ever seen. Thank you."

Haleton reached for Amber's hand and kissed her knuckles. "The flower is a blood red rose."

Noise outside the door saw Haleton at the window in a heartbeat. He didn't want to leave. The vampire urges were definitely slowing. They were being replaced by feelings of love and compassion. Both were his original traits he valued. He kept them guarded so he'd never forget who he really is. He gave Amber a long seductive look before touching the brim of his hat. Amber responded by angling her eyebrows to a point.

"Till we meet again," Haleton whispered.

He opened the long heavy block out curtains. Sunlight filled the room. In a blink of an eye, he vanished.

A nurse stepped into the room. "There's nothing to be alarmed about, the maintenance man is on site. He told me the lights will be on soon. How are you feeling Miss Cantala?"

"I'm fine."

"The doctor will be here shortly. If he says you can go, I'll arrange the discharge papers. Is there anyone I can call to pick you up?"

"No, I'll be fine. Besides, I believe the man who has just left will be waiting for me when I walk outside."

"I didn't see anyone."

"He was standing at the curtains right before you entered the room."

The nurse walked to the window. Using a quick swipe of her hand she fully opened the heavy curtains. She looked outside at the warm sunlight before turning to face Amber. She gave her a doubtful look.

“I must have dreamt the whole thing.”

“I’m positive you did,” said the nurse. “If there isn’t anything you require I’ll go finish reassuring the other of the patients.”

“I’m sure I can manage,” said Amber.

The nurse nodded before walking out of the room.

CHAPTER TEN

A BLACK shadow peeled away from the doorway when a big man walked past the shop window packed full of home-wares. The shadow immediately mimicked the big man’s movements by blending into his shadow. They walked across the street together and entered the train station. The big man stepped onto an escalator and descended to the floor below the road. Inside a minute, he stood on the platform waiting for the next train to arrive.

Haleton materialized behind the man to join in on the wait.

The train screeched to a stop. The man and Haleton boarded. Before they sat opposite each other the overhead light above Haleton blew. He sat in the semi-dark watching the man start to read a horror paperback novel.

The train doors banged closed. There was a delay of a few seconds before the train started to pick up speed. The carriage they were sitting in commenced to sway from side to side. The big man hosed the novel back into the side pocket of his brown leather carry case and spoke in a deep whisper.

“Are you right mate? You look a little seedy. I hope you don’t chuck. The smell in a sealed train carriage ain’t good.”

Haleton looked directly into the eyes of the man. His distinct Australian accent sounded humorous. “I’m right. I’m only burning up time. Thanks for caring.”

“I don’t care at all mate, I just don’t want to smell vomit for the next fifteen minutes.”

Haleton decided to abscond at the next station. The moment he stepped onto the platform he dematerialized into a shadow. A truck being driven slowly over the train line momentarily stopped behind the car in front. Haleton jumped onto the roof of the truck. In twelve minutes the main entrance to the Hospital came into view. He jumped off. Using the shadow of a large tree he materialized, waiting for Amber to step from the building.

He didn’t have to wait long.”

Haleton saw Amber look around and check her watch. He saw her shrug a shoulder before bouncing down the steps and marching towards the train station. He blended into the girl’s shadow as she walked. He watched her purchase a train ticket. He even stood behind her as she waited for the train. He could smell the last of the perfume she dabbed on her neck hours earlier. He could also smell the shampoo she used the last time she washed her hair. It’s tantalizing scent made his knees feel weak. Haleton could also smell the hospital on her clothes. He scrunched his nose at the sterile scent.

Amber entered the carriage closest to the engine. Haleton stepped into the carriage at the other end. From the last seat at the furthest point in the carriage, Haleton sat watching. The shadow of the person he sat next to helped to make a perfect hiding place. Every couple of minutes Amber studied the interior of the carriage as if she knew someone was watching then she'd bow her head and close her eyes.

It was late afternoon, the few people riding the train got off at the next station leaving Amber to ride the train carriage alone.

The moment the train traveled under a bridge Haleton materialized. He quickly pushed the button on the black disc. The carriage plunged into semi-darkness. He walked the length of the carriage and stood in the shadow of the wall. He cleared his throat ready to announce his presence.

"Hi, there, we meet again."

Amber immediately looked up. "William, hi, I thought you would've been waiting for me at the hospital?"

"I have been waiting. I see you're carrying the red rose I gave you."

"A blood red rose," she corrected, muffling a giggle.

"Yes you're right," said Haleton. "May I have your permission to sit next to you?"

Amber palmed her hand at the next seat. "It's nice of you to give me the flower."

"Thank you for accepting it."

"Tell me, if you were waiting for me at the hospital why didn't you show?"

"The last of the day's sunlight happened to be still shining."

"Your reply sounds too much like a riddle. I'm tired. I haven't the strength to figure it out. Do you want to enlighten me?"

"Not at this moment in time. Before you anger, I will explain everything to you."

"Good. Start confessing."

"Not here. You deserve a nice quiet place. It'll help you to absorb the entire information."

Looking into Amber's eyes Haleton fell into a trance. His mind flashed back to when he visited her in the hospital room. Standing in the dark at the foot of her bed, smelling her sweet blood while her heart pumped the scent around her body, he did everything he could to stop himself from lunging at her. Now here she sat on the same seat using a rigid posture. He needed to control himself. If he took her life he'd never be free of the wretched curse, or for that matter, fall in love with possibly the only woman he might ever feel connected to. He'd come so close to freedom he didn't want to make a fatal mistake. Time was fast running out. He knew he must find Mitch for the last remaining kill.

"What on earth are you thinking about?"

Haleton focused his entire attention on Amber. He started his explanation using a friendly natural smile. "Giving you the red rose has been no bother."

"You've picked a strange opening line for a confession."

"I'm not sure where to start."

Haleton looked deep into Amber's brown eyes. He could hear her heart starting to pound harder. He wondered if it were possible she may have feelings for him.

"Thanks for visiting me in the hospital."

"Again, it's no bother."

Amber's eyebrows angled to a point. "How is it possible you're alive when I saw the bullet hole in your shirt? It was an accurate shot to the heart."

Haleton looked over Amber's shoulder at the blurred scenery whizzing past the train. "I have yet to mention your name matches your pretty face."

"Thank you for the compliment," said Amber, her cheeks instantly flushing red.

"I apologize I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"I know you're skirting the question I just asked."

"Yes, I am. It is part of my explanation which is forthcoming."

"When you choose how to relay your explanation I'd like you to add how you saved me from the fall?"

"It was no mean trick."

"I've come to the conclusion you must be a magician who preys on young ladies?"

"No, I'm not a magician. I certainly don't prey on pretty girls."

"I think you should quickly explain everything to me."

Haleton sighed. "A train carriage is definitely not the ideal place to talk. Seeing how we are alone I think I owe you at least a partial explanation."

Amber sat crossed legged. Her arms were folded across her waist. "I'm waiting. It needs to be good and believable. If your story isn't, we'll never see each other again."

Haleton smiled before painting an ice-cold expression on his face. "I knew before I dived out of the window after your scaffolding was directly underneath. I caught you just in time."

"I'm not sure if that washes, but it will do for now."

"The bloke who attacked you; was he your boyfriend?" asked Haleton.

"He's my ex-boyfriend. I've told him for weeks over the reason why I never want to see him again. He's so obsessive it's not a joking matter anymore. Where ever I go I feel he's spying on me."

"If nothing else I'm glad to have helped you. Soon he won't be any more trouble."

The train pulled into a station, jolting to a sudden stop. Five mid to late male teenagers full of testosterone boarded. Each one stared at Amber. One brave lad walked over and sat opposite her.

"Nice night," he said.

Haleton didn't comment.

"I said it's a nice night," yelled the lad, the moment his mates joined him.

"We don't want trouble," suggested Amber.

The group started snickering. "Girl, you smell very nice. Let's all walk to the other end of the carriage so we can have a good time."

Haleton stood square to the group.

"Are you looking for a fight?" questioned the first boy, curling his fists.

"What's your name son?"

"I'm not your son, so shove off. I'm going to get me some action by having a piece of the girl."

"I'd repeat my question, but I believe you won't answer. You're the one looking for a fight. By my reckoning, you won't stop until you find it."

"You got it in one, old buddy."

"My name's Haleton."

"Name's Lion," spat the boy.

"I suggest you and your friends leave this carriage at the next stop."

"Who's going to make us?"

"Lion, I'll be the one," suggested Haleton.

Amber shrunk deeper into the seat. After what she'd just been through, watching another fight put her nerves on edge.

Lion produced a pocket-sized knife. The train started to slow before stopping at the next station. Haleton moved at lightning speed. None of the boys knew where he was in any one second. When the door to the carriage opened, each member of the gang was found sprawled on top of the other on the concrete platform five metres from the train's door. They were moaning from bruises and sore ribs to sprained ankles or from the concrete scraping across their knees and elbows.

The train door closed. In a couple of seconds and a jolt, the train moved away from the station, leaving Amber staring through bulging eyes at the man who single-handedly defeated five louts.

Haleton noticed Amber slumped on the seat. Her arms were hanging by her sides and her hands were palm up. He strolled over, extending his hand so his fingers were touching her arm.

"We need to talk."

"Get away from me." She pulled her arm free and pushed her shoulder blades further into the back of the seat.

"Please, we have to talk."

"I certainly don't want to be anywhere close to you. Leave me alone." Her voice sounded dry, almost hostile.

"Amber, whatever you're thinking it's wrong."

"You don't have a clue what I'm thinking."

"I can guess."

"I don't care if I never see you again. At the next station, I'm getting off the train. Be warned, you won't."

"I'm someone you can trust," confessed Haleton, smoothly.

"I doubt it," she growled.

"Please, you asked for an explanation. I think you owe me five minutes to explain."

"Who are you?"

"Before I answer, I need you to have an open mind."

Amber started to tremble. Her face drained of colour. She pulled her knees up to her chin to hide her head behind her legs. Haleton knew the meaning of her white face.

'Maybe it's for the best,' he thought. 'Maybe if he pushed a little bit harder she'd faint.'

Haleton stared into her eyes. He could hear her heart pounding out of control inside her chest. It's melody sounded pitch perfect. It stirred and quickened his entire body to the core. It had been too long since he held a woman in a loving embrace. He couldn't wait for his killing days to be over. He thought back to the time when he was forced to consume the vampire blood and the feeling of helplessness waiting for the mosquito to bite into his flesh. It's an insane curse. One he was forced to endure whether he liked it or not. He still couldn't understand why the council of four never listened to his pleas for clemency, of his innocence. If Alex Crompton ever crossed his path he'd certainly stand up to the man. He wanted to fight and kill him for ruining his life. Of the many centuries, he'd wandered the planet, country after countless countries watching the continents being discovered then the inevitable world wars and the rich businessmen as they made their millions, only to lose the lot in the great depression of the 1930's, man's nature remained barbaric to the bone. To top it all he'd lived three lifetimes of long lonely nights without a woman in his arms. He certainly needed someone special he could hold, love and cherish for the rest of his days.

Amber's eyes were glassy. They rolled back the moment she fainted. Haleton scooped her up like a rag doll before walking towards the doorway.

"Is the girl okay?" asked a young railway employee the moment Haleton stepped from the train.

He barred his vampire teeth, hissing his reply.

The young man raised his hands. He quickly gave Haleton room by backing away.

Haleton easily jumped the two-metre high wire fence. Leaving a small dust cloud behind, he sprinted to the nearest building. He hesitated only long enough to count the number of floors to the top.

There were thirty.

Gripping the girl around the waist, he ran vertically up the outside wall to the roof.

Even in the dark the whole exercise took less than ten seconds.

Haleton gently sat Amber on the concrete roof, placing her back against the low wall. He side stepped so he could look down on the people walking past. No one noticed the stunt. Instead, they reminded him of ants he could easily squash.

Amber started to stir. Haleton swiveled his head to gaze at her. He knew he was already hopelessly in love. He needed to keep it a secret. He certainly didn't want the feeling to betray him too early. He must tread on eggshells. To explain his past life will undoubtedly unnerve the girl. The information might even take her to the edge of the cliff face in her mind. He didn't want her to jump into the world full of doubt. A person's mind is a powerful tool. One minute you could be sane and in seconds through devastating shocks a person could be thrust into an insane imaginative world with no hope of a pardon.

Haleton shook his head. "This will never work," he whispered. "How could she ever love me?" He walked to the other side of the building to yell. "I hate this curse. All I want is to find a way to love and be loved." He lifted his head to stare at the stars in the sky before shouting. "Hey, the being who says he is God of all creation, is it too much to ask that I be freed from this wretched curse? If you're real you'll do what I ask. Thanks for listening."

Amber opened her eyes. Slowly she got to her feet. Turning in circles she studied the entire building's rooftop. Looking over the edge of the building to the road below, her eyebrows angled to a point. She spoke in a feeble whisper.

"William, if you're nearby where are you hiding?"

Haleton stepped from behind a large air-conditioning unit. He walked over, standing square to her. To help ease the stress he gave a caring smile.

"The last thing I remember is sitting on the train watching you fight those boys."

"I protected you. Every cell in my body wants you to feel safe. I must emphasize if you're with me you will never be harmed. It is my sincere vow."

"You have vowed a large promise."

"It is one I intend to keep. I will never fail to live up to my promise."

Haleton showed Amber a warm friendly grin which he hoped might start to melt her heart so she could move logic to one side. He'd stumbled upon a chance to explain his life. Failing wasn't an option. He couldn't afford to let Amber slip through his fingers. Somehow he must find a way to convince her he'd fallen in love with her.

Amber looked at Haleton in the eyes. He backed away out of arm's reach. "You seem to be always in my line of sight. I remember you saying you wanted to talk. I don't know whether to yell at you, thank you for your interference at stopping a horrid crime or to scream at you so you will leave?"

Haleton took two steps closer. "First, I need you to understand I mean you no harm."

"You keep saying it's your solemn vow to keep me safe."

"Thank you for understanding."

"I'm not sure what I need to understand. I think to satisfy my mind I want you to stay away. Go over there." Amber pointed to a seat three metres away.

"If you so desire," said Haleton. He walked across the roof and sat on the seat. "If you don't mind me saying, if you remember the train incident so clearly, you will realize the distance between us is nothing. I might as well be holding your hand."

"That's not an option. Stay away."

"I'd like to have our chat now."

"You sat next to me on the train, saying the same thing."

"I thought this rooftop might be a perfect place to talk," suggested Haleton.

"Did you bring me here on your own?"

"Yes."

"How did I get here?"

"At the moment, the answer is not important."

"Mister, it mightn't be important to you, but it is to me."

"I'm concerned when I tell you everything I'll never see you again."

"You might be right. Did you pick the roof of a building to keep me a prisoner?"

"No. You are free to leave at any time. I won't ever stop you. It's your choice," advised Haleton.

"Are you an alien from another planet?"

Haleton chuckled. "No. I don't believe in life on another planet."

Amber seemed to relax slightly. "If you're out to please me I need you to swap places. The seat looks more comfortable than leaning against a concrete wall."

The pair traded places. Amber folded her arms, staring at Haleton. Her cold expression seemed to be melting.

"Are you giving me a sign which reads I can be by your side?"

"I'm not willing to be so friendly. How did I get here?" questioned Amber.

"You've already asked that question?"

"You didn't answer me."

"I suppose the explanation is inevitable. Whichever way I say the answer you won't like it."

"Is that why you brought me to the roof of a fifteen storey building?"

"There are actually thirty floors."

"Straight for the jugular," stated Amber.

Again Haleton chuckled. This time, it sounded more of a growl. He sprinted towards Amber. Before she could blink he stood next to her.

She screamed. Haleton sprinted back to where he stood only a second before.

"How can you move so fast?"

"I've started my explanation."

Amber prepared to leave. "I think I agree with what you said before. I'm not going to like the answer to my question. I'm not sure I want to find out the truth either."

"Please, stay for five minutes. I believe, come what may, you deserve the explanation. I'll try to explain it in simple terms. I ask only one thing, please, keep an open mind."

“Okay. I’m ready. Let me warn you, the moment you’ve finished explaining I’m walking to the lift door. Once it closes we’ll never see each other again.”

“Tough choice to make,” Haleton stated. “You will win no matter what.”

“It’s my idea, it’s my deal. If you don’t like it; then as they say in the movies, ‘suck it up, bro.’”

Haleton’s chuckle caught Amber off guard. She joined in on the laugh. Haleton finally felt she might be starting to warm to his presence.

“Firstly, I know what I’m about to tell you will sound like I’ve escaped from the insane asylum. Let me reassure you I’m not crazy. Second, when I reminisce over my life it does sometimes sound like I’m crazy. I have to convince myself what I’m enduring is not a dream or a nightmare. It is real.”

“Now I’m scared,” hinted Amber slowly, starting to walk towards the lift door.

“You promised I could have five minutes.”

Amber froze in mid-step. “I did.”

“Do you recall when I spoke to you about Rose-a-lee Cantala?”

“Yes, you said you knew her.”

“I did. To me, it seems like an eternity since I held her hand when we sat talking under the pepper bush tree. The sea breeze teasing the ends of her hair helped her face to glow. Each time I saw her she took my breath away.”

“I thought you stated she was married?”

“Yes, I did.”

“You and the woman were having a fling. What has it got to do with me?”

“Everything,” replied Haleton.

Amber placed her hands on her hips, glaring. “Here I am standing on top of this building hoping the rain won’t fall any harder than what it is, eagerly waiting for your five minutes to be up so I never have to see you again and you’re talking in riddles. I’m not a priest who you can confess your sins to just because you feel guilty about an affair you’ve had with a married woman.”

Haleton chuckled, looking sideways at her. She didn’t seem to be amused. “I love the way each long strand of your hair captures the fine drizzle.”

Amber blushed slightly. “I’m undecided whether I should stay or run like the wind. Do you understand what the word, fling means?”

“Of course, I do. She wasn’t my ‘fling’ as you call it in these modern times.”

“Mistress then?” questioned Amber.

“She definitely isn’t anyone’s mistress.”

“You’re not having too much success in confessing the affair.”

“I’d never contemplate such a thing; though she’d have made a great wife.”

“If she isn’t anyone special why do you talk like she meant the world to you?”

“She wanted to unburden herself on me.”

Amber let go of a whispered chuckle.

“I heard you laugh.”

“I didn’t laugh. I chuckled.”

Haleton chuckled at being laughed at. “You think I sound funny at the words I use?”

“They do sound a tad old fashioned,” confessed Amber. “I can’t say I’ve ever heard the word unburden said before.”

“Back in England, I used to say the word quite frequently. The woman I’m referring to thanked me wholeheartedly when I agreed to listen to her problems. All this happened twelve months before my forced exile. Before you ask, her husband had been working. He didn’t have a clue about me calling on her. Though come to think of it, maybe that’s why I was picked to be one of the thirteen.”

“I’m not following a word you’re saying,” advised Amber.

“It’ll be easier to explain myself if I give you another demonstration.”

Amber didn’t look impressed. She shrugged. Her raised eyebrow wrinkled her forehead. “Your time is nearly up. If you think this demonstration of yours might help, go ahead. It’s your five minutes.”

“Do you believe a man can jump from this building to the next?” questioned Haleton palming his hand at the gap which easily looked wider than a two-lane road.

“What are you trying to say?”

“It seemed like a simple question.”

“You’re not thinking of trying such a dangerous stunt, it is suicidal? There’s no way anyone could make it let alone get past the road.”

Haleton stepped onto the top edge of the wall. Amber started to back step towards the lift call button.

“You’re insane,” she yelled, growing more nervous by the second.

“Before you have a chance to enter the lift, I’ll be by your side to stop you.”

Haleton lunged for the building across the double lane road. Amber screamed. She reached out and pressed the lift call button. Haleton jumped back from the other building, landing by her side.

The lift door opened. Amber sprinted into the lift, quickly pressing the ground floor button.

“I can’t allow you to leave until I’ve finished my explanation,” said Haleton preventing the door from closing.

“I’m warning you, stay away from me,” yelled Amber, pushing her back into the wall of the lift.

Haleton entered the lift, determined to have his say.

“Please, don’t hurt me.”

“Amber, I’d never hurt a hair on your head. Of all the women I’ve known in my long exhausting life, you’d have to be the most pleasing on the eyes.”

“I’m not a stupid girl. This is the only life a human can live. You can’t be more than twenty. I don’t call it a long exhausting life. Even if I don’t recall any medical information I’ve been studying there’s no way anyone on the face of the earth could have jumped from one building to the next and back again from a standing start. Either you’re from another planet or I’m in a nightmare.”

“Neither assumption is correct,” answered Haleton.

“Who or what are you? Before you, answer let me give you a last warning. After you’ve answered my question I never want to see or hear from you again. Got it?” She wagged her finger at his face. “Got it?”

“I’ll do my best.”

Haleton walked to the other side of the building. Amber followed and stood at the seat. She pushed her fists onto her hips, glaring at the man.

“You have exactly one minute left before your five minutes is up.”

“Okay, but this is hard to say. Hell, I can’t understand it sometimes and I’m living in my nightmare. I’m from this planet. I’m nineteen, the same age as you.”

“You don’t look it.”

“Thanks, I’ll take your words to be a compliment.”

“You’re stalling and it’s raining harder. Make it fast.”

“It’s difficult to explain when I know you will never want to see me again.”

“I’ll be the judge.”

“Do you understand I never want to see harm come to you?”

Amber rolled her eyes. “I guess. You did save me from falling out of the building and from the louts on the train. Seeing how you’re having trouble explaining, try these questions. “Why do you wear top hat and tails? They never seem to get wet. I must add the bullet hole in your shirt has gone?”

“What if I explain to you, one plus one is equal to three?”

“Your words have explained nothing. Besides, the equation isn’t correct.”

“Okay. Let’s try it this way. When you were eight-years-old you fell off your bike. It happened when you rode a pushbike for the first time. You lost your balance, stabbing your knee into the wall. You cried for ages and needed five stitches in your kneecap. You thanked the doctor, whispering in his ear you wanted to be a doctor too.”

Amber stood frozen to the concrete, her eyes bulging at hearing the words.

“Please, you must have an open mind.”

“How did you know about the bike?”

“I’ve been watching.”

“What else?”

“I was around when you were on your first date. You kissed the boy after he walked you home.”

“How old were we?”

“You were both fourteen.”

“What time did we get home?”

“You arrived home after nine in the evening. Your mother was very upset. She informed you she placed the roast chicken dinner in the fridge.”

Amber folded her arms and frowned. “I thought I sensed somebody watching. I do believe I saw a shadow moving, but I couldn’t be sure. Come to think of it, I’ve seen a shadow moving about me many times over the years.”

“I was that shadow.”

“How could it have been?”

“We are now at the part which is hard to explain.”

Amber relaxed her arms by letting them drop by her side. “I’ve figured out you’re not trying to kill me and you believe you want to look after me.”

“It’s a good start,” suggested Haleton.

“In regards to my life, how far back do you believe you went?”

“I watched you being born.”

“It’s not possible. In my opinion, you need to see a shrink.”

“I don’t need a psychiatrist’s kind of help. I’m telling you the truth.”

“I understand you believe in your mind what you’re saying is the truth.”

“Again thanks for the compliment. What I’ve explained is all true,” added Haleton.

“If what you say is correct you’d have to be immortal. You certainly don’t look old. Can you grasp the concept your brain is living in a fairytale?”

Haleton looked at the sky. The rain had finally stopped. A few stars started to brighten. “Okay, the only way to explain all this quick and easily is to say. I’m a vampire. There you go, I’ve said it.”

Amber backed away. “Stay away from me you fruit cake. Leave me alone.”

“I can’t. I have loved you since the moment you were born. I have followed the Cantala genealogy from Rose-a-lee Cantala who lived in 1749AD right through to this year.”

“You believe in your twisted mind you were in love with my ancestor. You want to live a life through me.” Amber massaged her temples. “What am I saying? This is all a nightmare. I don’t believe a word of all this.”

“What about the accident on the pushbike?”

“A lucky guess,” suggested Amber.

“What about the jump I made?”

“I’ve yet to make up my mind on that one. You probably hypnotized me into thinking you jumped.”

A tall slim figure wearing a black top hat and tails stepped out from behind the air-conditioner unit on the other side of the building. He commenced to clap.

“Doesn’t he paint a pathetic picture?” he called.

Haleton faced the uninvited guest. “Who might you be?”

“I’m surprised you haven’t tried to guess. It’s been a long time. I’m shocked you don’t remember. I’ll come a tad closer.”

The figure moved like lightning. Both men stared at each other in the eyes. They were standing so close their breaths would have mixed if Haleton didn’t turn his head to the side.

Amber screamed. “Will someone tell me what’s going on?”

“She’s a trifle slow. Shall I intervene and try my tact at explaining our past?”

“Alex Crompton you old shady character, it has been a long time. I vowed the next time we crossed paths your life will end.”

The man ignored the taunt by pointing directly at Amber. “The chick has a strong resemblance to the woman you wanted to marry way back in 1749AD. She looks vaguely similar however her DNA is off a few degrees.” He sighed. “Rose-a-lee’s DNA lingers in your mind. This chick’s blood smells exactly the same as her ancestor. It’s been a long time since I saw the woman. I can scarcely remember the date. It’s a shame you didn’t want my help. I told you I’d fix it so she’d be a widow.”

“I think in your best interest you should leave.”

Crompton tilted his head back and started to laugh. The moment he stopped chuckling he lowered his head again and stared at Amber.

“I take it William hasn’t told you the story?”

Amber made a fast retreat away from the two men. She stopped walking backward when her shoulders slammed into the wall.

“William I’m shocked. Have you forgotten the clock is ticking? Our time is precious. Take my advice stop being so slow when you meet a woman and go straight for the jugular. If you allow me to help I’m more than willing to give a small demonstration.” He faced the girl wearing a sarcastic grin.

“No,” Haleton growled, a microsecond too late.

Crompton took off his hat, tossing it over the edge of the building like someone disposing of an old ripped cloth.

“What are you doing?” screamed Amber. “Your hat looked brand new.”

Crompton started to whistle before breaking out into humming a slow tune which quickened as the seconds ticked off. Amber’s eyes bulged the moment she saw the black hat materialize back on his head. The man’s smirk matched his confidence.

“Are you a magician too?” asked Amber, not sounding too convincing. “Wearing top hat and tails you look the part.” Her eyes looked sideways at Haleton. “The gag has gone on long enough. Confess you two are magicians and are having a good laugh at my expense.”

“We are both from the year 1749AD,” hissed Crompton in a matter of fact voice. “Hasn’t my cousin explained anything to you?” He sighed. “What a sweet innocent child. I’d never waste my unique ability on being a magician.”

“She’s no child,” jeered Haleton. “Let me warn you away from any more demonstrations.”

“Tut, tut, tut,” snickered Crompton wagging his finger. “I’ve two more demonstrations.” The sarcastic tone in his voice sounded evil.

“If you’re not a magician, kindly explain your presence?” growled Amber.

“What a feisty, sweet lovable girl. I can see why you two are drawn together,” snarled Crompton. “You’d make the perfect couple. If I dare say, it will never be.”

“What are you implying?” whispered Amber.

Crompton slowly extracted the long knife from his left black boot. He lifted it so he could study the sharp metal blade. He slowly twisted it circles.

“I love the way this particular blade has been forged. I made the blacksmith repeat the creation four times before it felt perfect. It stays sharp as a razor blade. Effortlessly slices through flesh. I’ve lost count how many victims the blade has known. If you side the edge across the victim’s skin slow enough, one can hear the tearing of the cells.”

Glancing at Amber, Crompton threw the knife, blade first directly at her.

Amber screamed. Haleton reached out his hand, managing to bump it. He watched it soar through the air and strike the wall.

Crompton started to whistle. He placed his hands behind his back. “Again watch the knife,” he whispered.

Haleton looked uninterested. Amber opened her mouth to scream again when the knife disappeared in a small puff of black smoke. She glued her gaze on the smoke wafting through the air, materializing into the knife and back in Crompton’s boot.

“Anyone for a replay?” he snickered. Slowly extracting the knife again, he stared directly into Amber’s eyes. “I know Haleton doesn’t care for a repeat performance. I guess you don’t either, judging by the number of tears falling from your lovely eyes.”

Crompton chuckled, replaced the knife in his boot and reached for the small short stem rose sitting rigidly in the button hole of his coat. His eyes shone like bright beacons on a dark dead flat sea. The ends of his lips curled upwards as he stroked each petal in turn.

“This beauty is a blood red rose. Miss Cantala would you like to own it?”

“Don’t agree,” warned Haleton.

Amber shook her head.

“Such a lovely flower should belong to someone. This glass rose is a lovely piece of art. Are you sure you won’t change your mind?”

“No. I don’t want anything from you.”

Haleton used a deep stern voice, causing Amber to tremble from head to feet. She swiveled her head to look at the stairs and the lift door.

“I know what both of you are thinking,” hissed Crompton. “Miss Cantala you’re thinking if you sprinted for the lift it’ll take far too long before it arrives here on the roof, so you’re next best option is the stairs. There’s the problem. You are wondering if my cousin, William, will stop me long enough for a successful escape. Part two of the problem is; will he want to fight his own cousin? What will happen if he doesn’t? What if he’s in cahoots with me? Haleton my dear boy you are thinking why haven’t I fought you as yet? What of this beautiful glass rose I want so desperately to give the young lady?”

Haleton took a slow step towards Amber.

“Don’t move again. If you do things will turn ugly,” hissed Crompton.

“Give it up Alex; I’ve heard you say the same line to countless women before.”

“You’re quite correct. Do you know how many times they have fallen into my trap? Women can’t resist the man who gives them a flower.”

“I can,” croaked Amber.

“Are you sure?” Crompton whispered. “You don’t sound too convincing.”

“I’m absolutely positive your charm won’t work on me.”

“What a pity.” Crompton extracted a small round plastic container from his side pocket.

“What are you up to?” Haleton spat.

“I almost forgot to explain what I’m going to do next.”

“I doubt it,” said Haleton.

“You’ve seen through me yet again,” injected Crompton. “I’m too much the professional to forget a thing. Please, give me a moment of your time. My explanation is short lived.”

“We’ve given more minutes than you deserve,” jeered Amber.

“Change your attitude girl. You sounded exactly the same as Rose-a-lee.”

“Get on with it,” barked Haleton.

Crompton’s smirk reeked of evil. He seemed to relish in the sudden fame of his captive audience. He lifted the small opaque canister no larger than a thumbnail to shoulder height. He gently twisted the cap off, sniffing the liquid contents.

“What’s inside the canister?”

“Amber Cantala you are a very nosy person. This little container is the highlight of my show. You can see from where you’re standing the small container is filled with a liquid. Do you know how an inkwell works?”

Amber gave the man a blank stare.

“I’ll take your silence for a no. Allow me to explain. You dip the ends of the feather into the ink so you can create poems. You write the words down for all to read. This liquid is similar. I place the stem of the glass rose into the liquid, wait a few seconds for the liquid to be absorbed into the tip before gently screwing the small lid back on the container and placing it safely into my pocket. You must have nimble fingers to accomplish such a feat. Now I’ve done that, I will again attempt to hand the rose over to you.”

“I don’t want it,” growled Amber.

“Are you sure you won’t change your mind?”

“Positive.”

“Let me try to convince you another way. The liquid I transferred from the container to the stem of the rose has three parts to it. One part is venom from a tiger snake. The second part is from a brown snake. The third part is from a red-belly black. The three slithering creatures are

from right here in the Australian bush. If I may add, they are highly venomous. I captured each of the three snakes and milked them. The venom is no more than an hour old. One scratch will see me planting a rose bush at the foot of your grave.”

Giving no warning Crompton threw the rose, stem first, at Amber’s neck. Its sharpened point was deadly accurate. It struck hard, easily piercing the skin on Haleton’s hand. He closed his fingers. Shards of glass cut into his palm. When he opened his fingers, Amber watched the coloured glass fall like dust to the roof of the building. The stem of the flower stuck firmly in his hand. He pulled it out and sniffed the blackened edge.

“There’s definitely fresh snake venom on the tip.”

“You have a keen nose; an eye for detail. If you were any slower the dart would have entered the girl’s jugular vein. Her death could have been something exciting to watch,” hissed Crompton.

He sprinted across the rooftop closing the gap between himself and Haleton, pushing his opponent in full flight across the concrete roof. Haleton slid through the closed lift well doors.

Haleton clung to the top edge of the lift well, watching over his shoulder as the doors plummeted to the ground floor. He reached out to start clawing his way out of the dark lift well.

Crompton dashed across the rooftop. Hovering over Haleton he readied himself to kick his cousin.

“After you have gone from here it will be a pleasure to extinguish the lifeline of the woman. Your pathetic vow you made to Amber Cantala means nothing. I Alex Crompton am immortal. I cannot die. You and I both know I have the upper hand and I always will. Haleton you’re weak. Let me remind you of the fact you have never defeated me.”

“Get a grip Crompton. This is all part of their plan. The council of four, they’re the insane ones.”

“Do you honestly think your thoughts are correct?”

“Yes. They have pre-ordered dates so both of us will eventually meet.”

“How did you come across the information?” jeered Crompton.

“You forget I used to listen to Rose-a-lee Cantala’s problems every night.”

“Why would they want pre-ordered dates, we can’t die?”

“It’s a way of wasting our time.”

Crompton growled. The expression on his face turned slate cold. Murder was written in his eyes. At speed, he kicked Haleton in the ribs which sent him crashing head first into the black void. Crompton cupped a hand around his ear, listening for the dull thud.

He wasn’t disappointed.

“My first problem is now solved if only for a moment.” Tapping the dust from his hands, Crompton turned his attention to Amber Cantala. “All there is left to do is kill the female.” He gave himself a victory clap. In a heartbeat he’d sprinted across the roof, reaching for her throat. “I can hear your young fit heart quickening. It’s music to my ears,” he whispered. “Did you know every heart has a tone of its own? Its rhythm is like a fingerprint, unique in every way. Yours, my dear, must be the sweetest sounding beat I’ve ever heard. Shame it won’t beat for too much longer.”

Crompton lifted Amber off the ground by the neck and started to examine her blue face. Her eyes were bulging from their sockets.

Amber lashed out at her attacker using weakening punches to his shoulders. Realizing her life was slipping away she changed tact. Grabbing hold of his wrists she attempted to pull his arms away. Crompton looked bored at her pathetic effort.

“Your time walking on this planet is almost exhausted. Your life flame is all but extinguished. Your feeble struggles will be over in seconds.”

He tightened his grip further. Amber’s eyes closed.

“I’d reconsider your statement.”

Crompton swiveled his head, glaring at Haleton. “I thought I’d have at least seven more seconds before you interrupted my victory.”

“Sorry for the intrusion.”

“You always were a party stopper.”

“The girl’s with me. Place her gently on the ground, feet first.”

“Since when have I ever listened to you?”

Crompton tossed Amber across the building’s roof. She resembled a pile of rags as she came to rest against the wall. Haleton only just managed to grab her before her head turned to pulp.

“There’s your big mistake,” hissed Crompton. “You’re weak.”

“It’s the love I have inside me trying to escape. The feeling is lacking in your nature. In a way I pity you. Loving a woman is the missing gap in your trait. You can’t understand the meaning.”

The stars were again hidden by the clouds. A sun-bright blue flash pierced the black ink sky. A deep rumble which seemed to vibrate the building quickly followed. Looking at the sky, Crompton outstretched his arms. “I love the smell of the air just before a storm hits, don’t you cousin?”

“I’ve never thought about it.”

In the rain, thunder and lightning, Crompton laughed a deep animal growl. Both men glared at the other. Large drops of rain fell about Haleton’s feet. Every muscle in his body tightened. He knew what was going to transpire next. He needed to be ready. He must win. Haleton glared at his opponent. This time, there will be no hiding. No cowering in a corner or backing away. Haleton made a promise to Amber which he intended to keep. This is where he will stand his ground.

Crompton walked in circles staring at his cousin. When he stopped he stood side on.

“So it’s come down to this?”

“You can always back away,” hissed Haleton. “It’s your choice.”

Crompton tilted his head back, laughing as the rain fell in torrents.

Amber stirred, forcing one eye open. She seemed to be watching the scene, unable to move.

Haleton signaled her to stay still.

Crompton slipped out of his coat, throwing it over the side of the building. “This torment has gone on far too long. I should have killed you back in 1749AD.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I used you for my scapegoat.”

“Your little plan to frame me backfired,” snarled Haleton.

“Maybe it did. There’s a reason behind everything.”

Crompton launched himself across the roof of the building. Haleton did the same. They collided in mid-air about five metres above the concrete. Both came crashing onto the

building's roof. Water was forced upwards like a blowhole out of the filling puddles. Amber struggled to a sitting position. Slowly she started to crawl away.

Crompton growled his bone-chilling words. "Thinking over my plan when we were tangled in the net I might have made a miscalculation. I should have killed you and pleaded self-defense."

"Maybe you should have. Now it's too late."

"You're right, neither of us can die."

"I've one more soul to catch and I'm free of the curse," yelled Haleton.

"Me too," hissed Crompton. "I'm going to make sure the victim is innocent." He looked across at Amber, grinning. "She'll do just fine."

"Why does it have to be her? Why an innocent? Don't you ever want to be rid of the curse?"

"Don't you get it? Being a vampire has made me invincible. Why do I want to be a mortal?"

"Our meeting must be to waste time. We'll be so locked up in fighting our valuable time will end. We'll have to start all over again. Can't you see it?" jeered Haleton, landing a punch to his opponents ribs.

"Yes, I want to waste time. Yes, a thousand times yes." He grabbed Haleton by the throat and lifted him into the air. He walked slowly to the edge of the building. "Once you're out of my way there will be no one to stop me or my gang. We will rule the world, year by year. Once I find the antidote to the vampire's curse, I'll alter the formula. Slowly everyone on the face of the earth will be changed into a vampire."

"You don't know the where-a-bouts of the formula."

"Yes, I do. You forget I've started again numerous times in 1749AD. I went and found where Rose-a-lee Cantala lived. I persuaded her to tell me the formula. To make sure she didn't lie I tried it out on a good friend of hers. I have a persuasive nature to help people see things my way. The only thing I have to do is find the note she left. You will have no choice except to join me in my quest to populate the world with vampires."

"You're insane," spat Haleton. "The curse has caused you to lose your mind."

"I don't disagree. I should feel compassion when I watch you fall from the roof to the road below. I don't think I can muster the thought."

Crompton threw Haleton from the roof and watched him fall.

"That should at least give me enough time to rid the girl of her life." He sprinted to where Amber decided to take refuge. "Too bad you're a pretty little thing. I must sever the bloodline so the Cantala name will be no more. I'm bound to keep my promise I swore to Rose-a-lee." He picked Amber up by the collar. "You'll be landing next to Haleton very soon."

Haleton flew over the wall, king hitting Crompton on the back of the shoulders. Amber fell to the concrete. Haleton managed to catch her in time. He gently placed her into a sitting position before facing his cousin.

Crompton jumped to his feet. He ran to the other side of the building to shake off the hit he received. In seconds, he came back. Standing in front of Haleton, he pushed a fist at his throat. Haleton ducked, grabbing his wrist. He heard it snap.

"I've some sad news to tell you," said Haleton. "I've thirty hours left before I'm in another time. If I don't find my victim I'll be back at the start in 1749AD."

Crompton ceased his struggles. Both men stared at each other, nose to nose. It was a stalemate, neither wanted to concede defeat.

“If what you say is true about the council of four bringing us together they’d know when the two of us are locked in battle neither one of us will back down,” growled Crompton. “We’ll both be back at the start at the same time.”

Haleton looked at the sky, laughing. “The first one to come to his senses will be the one to back away.”

Crompton stood his ground. He pushed his wrist straight. He curled his fingers on both hands into tighter fists and yelled. “I’m not weak. I will never back down. I’ve nothing to lose.”

Haleton stepped away. He strolled over to Amber. Looking at her tear filled eyes he said warmly. “Come.”

She looked scared and almost out of her mind. Haleton took her gently by the hand, pulling her to an upright position.

“You’re weak Haleton. You’ve always been the weaker. This love thing you so desperately want to cling to will be your down fall.”

Crompton watched his opponent scoop Amber up in his arms and sprint for the edge of the building.

In seconds both were gone.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

IN A semi-conscious state Amber watched the rooftops of building after building slip by under her feet. She looked at the serious face of the man carrying her.

Haleton landed on the roof of a building he’d visited a few times before. The rain slowed to a drizzle before stopping altogether. After analyzing a couple of different scenarios in his mind, he stood Amber in front of a seat built for two before retreating to a safe distance. He leaned casually against the building’s large air-conditioning unit, scrutinizing the expression on her face.

Slowly her facial appearance started to alter.

On the street below a truck sounded its horn. Haleton could hear a few angry shouts.

“You can sit next to me,” whispered Amber. Her voice sounded to be a decibel above a whisper. The tone she used sounded friendly but laced with a hint of skepticism. “I won’t bite.”

“I know, however, the security light behind you will force me to change to a shadow. I can blow the globe, but the action will alert security.”

Amber wore the expression of someone who appeared to be simultaneously frightened and excited. To relieve her fears Haleton spoke in a voice which would melt the heart of any woman who happened to be listening.

“This building is where you live. If you’d be kind enough to allow me to escort you to your door I promise you’ll feel safe. Nothing can get through me to hurt you. I will never allow anything or anyone to get too close to you again. Don’t worry about Crompton. He won’t be back.”

Amber slowly stood. She let Haleton escort her to the lift. When the lift door opened onto a corridor they walked arm in arm. When they approached an overhead light it blew plunging

the corridor of the old building into darkness. When they stopped at a door, Amber gave it a firm push, waiting for him to enter the apartment first. Haleton open palmed his hand signaling she should walk into the room first.

“Who are you?” she managed to whisper, jerking her head around to face the man. “Please explain how you can break overhead lights?”

Haleton’s genuine smile lightened his face. He wanted to be a man Amber could trust and fall in love with. He knew to tread carefully.

“Now might be the correct time to answer every one of your questions.”

Amber flopped onto a chair, staring at Haleton slowly pacing the floor.

“To cut three lifetimes into a few sentences which will make sense is something I don’t usually do. In fact, I’ve never done this before.”

“It’s your story. I’ve figured out on my own you’re telling the truth when you say you won’t hurt me, so please, I’m ready to understand. Enlighten my curiosity.”

Haleton shook his head. “I’m not sure if you really understand what being ready means, but I’m game.”

“Good, I am too.”

“In 1749AD, I look exactly the same as I do today. Alex Crompton is my cousin. He has turned down the wrong road. He’s a murderer. He will stop at nothing to attack any young lady. He happened to be an uncontrollable maniac for many years before our incarceration. After careful consideration regarding my actions, I decided he needed to be stopped. I am the only one who can do it. I was framed for being on his side when we were caught. We were both forced to drink a concoction which turned both of us into vampires. After killing a person who has an evil heart I am transported back and forth through time.” Haleton paused to study Amber’s blank expression. He wasn’t sure whether she’d accept his explanation or not. It was now too late to retract any detail of his story. “I know what you’re thinking. I’ll be the first to agree. Don’t do anything wrong, everything will turn out.”

“It’s exactly what I wanted to suggest,” said Amber.

“It’s not so simple. All I’ve ever wanted is to be mortal. To be loved by the same woman for the rest of my life. If I’d known Crompton and I was walking into a trap I’d have stayed away.”

“I don’t know what you want from me?” quizzed Amber.

Haleton downed his knee, looking her in the eyes. “I believe when love comes knocking you have to open the door. I’m willing to do the very thing I have never done in my entire life just so I can have you near me.”

Amber didn’t look happy marching across the grey carpet. She opened the door and stared at Haleton. “Leave.”

In a heartbeat, Haleton stood on the other side of the door. “Before I go, I want to say one last thing.”

“I’ll give you three seconds. To me, your story came from the heart of an insane madman. The moment you’ve finished speaking I never want to see or hear from you again.”

“I need your help. To ascertain whether I’m a bad person or not I want you to search your heart. I need you to recall the moment in the hospital when I handed over the red rose. Our hands touched for the first time.”

Amber slammed the door shut and melted to the floor. Haleton could hear her sobs. He slowly turned away and walked towards the rooftop.

Haleton stood in the lightening sky overlooking the busy street far below. He watched the people scurrying about like mice dodging the many puddles of water. He'd arrived at a low point in his long life. He knew the vampire blood raging through his body will be hard to keep control of. His mind needed to be at perfect peace if he wanted to win the war. He'd lost the battle twice before when it forced him back at the start in 1749AD. Tracking down Rose-a-lee Cantala happened to be the easy part. Trying to persuade her to hurry in finding the antidote to the curse was painfully slow. She agreed both times, but the antidote proved to be elusive.

Above the noise of the early morning traffic, Haleton heard a door squeak. It came from a rusting hinge. It sounded so quiet even he nearly missed it. When he turned his head he found Amber standing at the door to the stairs watching him. His eyes feasted on her beauty. Even though water droplets covered her shoulders, the perfume she had sprayed on her skin revitalized his mind. The smell lingered in his nostrils. He didn't care whether he could smell her or not. His mind believed it.

Haleton forced his grin to be subdued as Amber lazily walked towards him. He showered his mind in her majestic walk. She seemed to be deliberately taunting his eyes.

He let go of a massive sigh.

Amber's walk slowed. She stopped directly in front of Haleton at arm's length. The light kinks in her hair were gone, replaced by the heaviness of holding onto the rainwater.

Haleton deliberately stepped closer. The gap between them slowly vanished.

Amber looked up into Haleton's eyes. He gazed back. They both smiled at the same time. Their stares were intertwined for what seemed like minutes. Haleton started fidgeting in the silence.

Finally, Amber spoke. "Are you trying to tell me you're a vampire?"

"To put our conversation into intelligent perspective; yes I am a vampire."

"So even though you adore the smell of my blood you resisted the animal in you to bite and feed on me?"

"I'm not sure if I'd label myself an animal, however, it could sum it up." Haleton pushed his body harder against Amber's.

She didn't resist. She closed her eyes, whispering. "Is it possible for you to put me into a love trance?"

"That only happens in the movies."

Haleton's lips brushed Amber's left cheek, hovering above her red lips. The gap looked to be only the width of a hair. He could feel the warmth of her breath when she exhaled.

"I take it you can hear my heart beating?" questioned Amber.

"Yes, I can. It's quickened its pace in the last minute."

"How fast is it beating?" Amber quizzed.

"It's moving at triple the pace."

The rhythm of Haleton's heart matched the speed of Amber's. His breathing matched hers. The place where their bodies were touching warmed at an alarming rate. Both didn't seem to be concerned the rain started to fall again. The indentations in the rooftop quickly refilled. Haleton looked directly into Amber's shiny brown eyes. For the first time, he couldn't think of anything to say. He certainly didn't want to spoil the moment by talking.

Amber pushed him gently to arm's length.

Haleton moved to step closer.

"Stay right where you are," Amber insisted. "I've a few more questions."

"I'll do my best to answer each one honestly."

“It’ll be a good start. The other man, the one whom you fought; he called you weak. Why?”

“Alex Crompton is wrong. I’m not weak.”

“Why did he say you’re weak if it’s not true?”

“I think we’d be more comfortable talking out of the rain.”

“I’m happy to stand in the rain. My health is not troubled over a little water falling from the sky. What about you?”

“Rain has no effect on me.”

“Good. My first question has been answered. I wasn’t sure if rain acted like acid when it touched your skin.”

Sidestepping, Haleton leaned against the wall of the building. “You are a very interesting young lady, Amber G. Cantala.”

“Before you say another word, explain to me how you know the initial of my middle name?”

“Lucky guess,” confessed Haleton after a few seconds of silence.

“That won’t wash. I surmise you somehow know my full middle name?”

“Grace.”

Amber’s shoulders slumped when she exhaled. “I think you’d better start your explanation again. No one knows my middle name. I don’t like it so I’ve never said. Not even Craig knows.”

Haleton gave her a polite gentleman’s nod. “When Alex and I were kids we were the best of friends. I’ve already mentioned he’s my cousin. He started to lead me down the wrong path. We stole wine from the local winery and if someone happened to be walking past he’d rob them of their money. From the onset of his crimes I have tried to stop him. Contrary to what you have seen or heard I am an innocent man. He framed me. I never killed a soul up to the time of the curse. I hate what it has turned me into. The bible quotes, ‘thou shall not kill.’ My parents taught me well. It is Alex Crompton who loves to kill for the sport. Of course having no evidence I was easily convicted. Both of us were caught in a trap and sentenced to roam the centuries with vampire blood flowing through our veins.”

“Are there any more like you?”

“I’m led to believe there are thirteen, including myself.”

Amber’s eyes widened. She looked to be frightened at the information.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have answered the question,” hinted Haleton.

“Probably not; I do thank you for your honesty. I like that in a man.”

“I’m guilty of allowing Crompton to have a hold over me. He ordered if I didn’t help him my parents will be told of what transpired in the robberies.”

“Couldn’t you have informed your parents?”

“If you knew my father you’d understand. I’d receive a whipping just because he had a hard day. The only way I can prove to you what I’m saying is the truth is for you to look into my eyes. They’re windows to my soul.”

Amber casually stepped closer. She did as he requested. For over a minute she stared deep into his green eyes studying his soul and his life. Finally, she grinned and cuddled into the man. Lifting her head, she closed her eyes. Haleton kissed her like a woman should be kissed. He proved to her his heart was full of love and compassion. Their beating hearts created a perfect pitch. Both organs quickly slipped into synchronization to beat in unison. Haleton could feel Amber didn’t want the moment to end. He didn’t either. He tightened his grip. Amber

responded by tightening hers. A friendly warm feeling crept through Haleton's body at the onset of knowing the girl he held in his arms, the one he instantly fell in love with the moment he first saw her, might be falling in love too.

Amber pushed him gently away so she could look him in the eyes. "I believe you. I believe every word you spoke. I witnessed your entire life in your eyes. It's amazing. I feel like I never want us to be apart."

"I feel the same."

"You asked for my help?"

"Yes. If I don't find the answer to my question our love will never be," whispered Haleton.

Amber's gaze dropped to her feet. Tears welled in her eyes. "What's the question?"

"The wretched curse has a few insane rules."

Amber's eyes grew wide. Her brow wrinkled. Her expression changed from friendly to anger red.

"I have to sever the lifeline of one more evil person. After the death of each soul, I am transported to another time. I have to find the ancient scroll."

"How can this ancient scroll help?"

"I need to uncover the truth about the last death. Will I be transported through time or will I be able to stay with you? I'll be free of the curse, but I might never see you again. Both times I have gotten close to the end of the curse the power of love and mortality start to conquer the vampire curse. It must be the reason we've been dragged together."

"I'm happy we met," admitted Amber. "Meeting the love of my life has fulfilled the reason I've stayed away from all the other men who have wandered down the road to find me. I have always known one day the right man will come along."

"Yes, it's a wonderful feeling knowing I've finally met the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. I'm hoping our time together isn't drawing on the curse to torment me one last time. Not seeing you again will be impossible to endure."

"How do you know this ancient scroll can be discovered or if it even exists?"

"I know it does, I just can't prove it."

"Do you have any idea where it might be located?"

"No. Before you panic I do have a clue."

"It's a good start," said Amber. "I think we need to construct a plan."

"Me too," echoed Haleton, glancing at the rising sun. "Before I'm transformed into a shadow, we should retreat to your apartment."

CHAPTER TWELVE

AMBER CLOSED the door to her apartment and walked over to the table where she sat in a chair. Haleton busied himself looking around the two-room apartment. He spied the computer and the broken vase in the rubbish bin.

"Can I offer you something to eat?" asked Amber.

“I haven’t eaten food since being changed into a vampire,” explained Haleton. He walked across the room to sit opposite her.

“What an absolute horrid thought. Never being able to eat would be a nightmare.”

“It is. At first, it was hard. There are so many different styles of food I have longed to try. Everything looks and smells fantastic.”

“What about a drink?”

“No thanks,” he said raising his hands into the air. “It’s the same deal. Though there’s nothing stopping me from fixing you something special to eat.”

Haleton didn’t give Amber a moment to decide before he sprinted into the kitchen to begin preparing breakfast. The meal consisted of bacon and eggs and a mug of hot chocolate. He placed the lot into the microwave, pressed the number fifteen on the front panel and dived out of the window.

For nearly ten seconds Amber sat alone in the dark, watching the numbers on the microwave count off towards zero. She only just turned her head to look out the window when a shadow entered the room. It seemed to float along the wall on its way into the kitchen.

“Alex Crompton, what are you doing here?” Amber snarled angrily.

Haleton materialized and opened the microwave door when the number two changed to one. Taking out the meal he raced the plate to the table. He looked seriously at Amber.

“It’s only me. Crompton isn’t here.” He bowed as he presented the meal and a blood red rose to Amber. “I came through the window after finding the flower in a florist not far from here. Before I came rushing back I did pay for the flower, in case you were wondering.”

Amber’s eyes shone brighter than diamonds in a jeweler’s window. “Thank you. Are you always this fast?”

“I do believe I’m slowing down. I expected to be back before the number seven was highlighted on the microwave. It must be the vampire blood being neutralized.”

“Do you want to explain about the scroll while I dig into this amazing meal?”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Haleton.

Amber swallowed a mouthful of food. “Please, don’t take my opinion the wrong way. Sometimes the words you use are extremely old fashioned. They are well past their use by date.”

“I must confess I’m having trouble remembering the changing dialogue. I’m positive once I am in a time zone to stay I will quickly catch up. I’ll do my best to tone down my vocabulary and bring it into the modern era.”

Amber swallowed another mouthful of food before starting to giggle. “I believe it. Sorry for interrupting your story of the scroll.”

“Not a problem,” replied Haleton. “I welcome it. When I started again in 1749AD after accidentally killing an innocent person I tracked down Rose-a-lee Cantala. To be precise, the country happened to be England.”

“If this all happened overseas how were you able to discover the reason behind why you should come to Australia?”

“It’s easy to explain. Rose-a-lee married a man who stumbled across a considerable amount of wealth. It was legit money, though he wasn’t the honorable man he led everyone to believe. He entertained quite a few women on the side. Rose-a-lee gave birth to one child; a girl. The family tree since 1749AD didn’t alter. A girl was born out of wedlock. In 1946 after the second world war, I overheard the Cantala’s were deciding to relocate to Australia.”

“I know I’m an only child and my mother never married,” added Amber. “Is Rose-a-lee the reason why you love me?”

“No,” said Haleton seriously.

“I reckon you couldn’t marry Rose-a-lee so you deliberately kept tabs on the Cantala’s till you found a girl to fall in love with.”

“It’s not true.”

“I think it is.”

“You have the same facial expressions as Rose-a-lee and the same stubbornness, but no, you are two entirely different ladies.”

“Do you sincerely mean it?”

“Yes.”

“Crompton mentioned my DNA is the same as Rose-a-lee’s.”

“Almost the same,” corrected Haleton.

“Thanks again for your honesty.”

“At this moment in time, I’ll believe every word. If somehow I ever find out I’ve been conned.”

By lifting his hand into the air Haleton stopped Amber from finishing what she wanted to say. “I’ve spoken the truth. I know in time you’ll believe it. There’s nothing I can do to speed up the process. It has to be your choice. I can wait.”

Amber leaned across the table to kiss Haleton on the lips. “I know in my heart you are who you’ve said. My brain is a little slow on the convincing side.”

Haleton walked around the other side of the table. Taking hold of Amber’s hands, he helped her to stand then he slipped his arms around her waist, reeling her in. Their lips welded. To him, her cherry red lips were the most amazing feeling he’d ever known. Haleton wanted to take Amber off to a land yet discovered. An island paradise would do nicely. It’d be a location only enjoyed by them. No one else will be allowed.

Amber broke her hold, whispering. “I don’t mean to be a party’s wet blanket, time marches on. Let’s pick up our conversation on Rose-a-lee and this scroll you talked about. You have intrigued my curiosity. I want to learn more. Did you tell Rose-a-lee about her husband’s extramarital going’s on?” She chuckled. “I think I’ve been around you too long already. Your old fashioned words are rubbing off you, clinging to me.”

Haleton laughed in a gentleman’s way. “Yes. I waited outside the castle where Rose-a-lee lived. I stood in the shadows for hours waiting for her husband to either go out or to fall asleep. The sun had almost gone before he saddled his horse. I watched him ride the beast at speed away from the castle towards the forest.”

“Do you have any idea where he went?”

“At my first thought, I felt happy he left. I dematerialized into a shadow and easily slipped up the wall of the castle. I stood at the open window looking across the undulating hills. I saw Rose-a-lee’s husband rendezvous with a horse and carriage. My vampire blood sent warning sirens through my brain. I tried to shake the emotion off by deciding to slip into the room, but I couldn’t extinguish my burning curiosity. I cut across the land to take a closer look.”

Haleton noticed Amber was giving him her undivided attention. He loved her for it. He loved her intelligence, her will power to succeed in anything she tried to do. To top it all, her beauty surpassed every woman he’d ever known. He sighed heavily, wondering how long it might take before she’d agree to the marriage. He chuckled. How old fashioned was his thought? Maybe the people of the world have changed more than what he knew.

“Please continue,” urged Amber.

“I climbed a tree when the sun turned cold. I watched longer than I should have. Rose-a-lee Cantala’s husband was definitely having an affair. I discovered at a later time she’d been a woman of the night. She got paid extremely well by many men for her services.”

“You haven’t answered my question from before. Did you mention all this to Rose-a-lee?”

“I did tell her I have interesting news. I also made it perfectly clear I’d only reveal my secret after she promised not to go back on her word to help me. I reassured her I’d never be back if everything went to plan.”

“You snuck into her room in the middle of the night. Wasn’t it a radical move for the time?”

“Yes. She squealed the moment she saw me. Before I could protest she ordered me to leave. I refused.”

“Did Rose-a-lee and her husband break up?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. Things weren’t the same then as it is in this time.”

“If I was her I’d kick him out on his proverbial rear.”

“I’m sure you would’ve.”

Amber grinned at the man standing in the middle of the room. She started to enjoy his company. She walked across the floor to a beanbag.

“What about this scroll?” Amber asked making herself comfortable.

“I convinced Rose-a-lee to try to finish the antidote. She did confide in me if she ever actually discovered the correct dosage she’d write the antidote on a scroll, placing it in the coffin of a priest.”

“Why would she do something so morbid?”

“I told her to. For a start, she couldn’t place it in her own coffin. A casket of a priest will be more easily found. An added bonus; the body will be safe from any grave robbers.”

“If it were possible I’d love to meet Rose-a-lee. To me, she sounds like a strong woman.”

“She’s a lot like you in many ways. Unlike her, I believe you’d stand up to the council of four. It’s something she never did.”

Amber’s eyes looked to be full of excitement. “If you know the name of the priest all we need to do is to locate his grave and dig him up.”

“I might be a little bit behind the times. I know you can’t just go into any cemetery to dig up a coffin,” suggested Haleton.

“A good point,” grumbled Amber, slumping deeper into the beanbag. “Do you have any ideas?”

“Before the council of four forced me to drink the vile disgusting vampire blood, Rose-a-lee told me to remember the priest’s name.”

“What fantastic news,” Amber shrieked, excitedly.

“Not so great,” replied Haleton. “I have twenty-four hours to complete this task. If I were to fail I’ll start at the beginning again. Either way, I might never see you again.”

Amber climbed out of the beanbag, walked across the room to place her arms around Haleton’s shoulders. She looked into his sad eyes. “We’d better hurry. I’ll help any way I can. I certainly don’t want to lose you, especially when I’ve waited all my life for us to meet.”

“Thank you for feeling the way you do.”

“It’s no chore. When I’m around you I feel something I’ve never felt before in a man. You seem to have a strength flowing out from your soul. The stream has captured my heart.”

“They are words of a strong woman. It’s a trait I certainly love,” hinted Haleton.

“What’s the first thing we need to do?”

Haleton led Amber to the bathroom. “The first thing that has to be done is for you to have a warm shower and put on dry clothes. Your hair is still heavy from the rain.” He backed out of the small room, closing the door.

Eventually, Amber walked into the living room, toweling her hair dry.

Haleton looked her way.

“When I stood under the shower I thought about the light trick you do. How on earth are you able to blow the overhead lights so you can stay in the dark?”

“The answer is simple. The last time I was in the future I found a small black disc in the trash. It’s called a ‘clicker.’” Haleton pulled the small oval disc from his pocket, clicking the button.

The light in the kitchen instantly blew.

“This small object releases an electronic pulse whenever the button on the side of the disc is pushed. A law was passed sometime in the future making it illegal to own one.” Gathering Amber in close, he swept his lips close to hers.

She didn’t resist the advance.

Haleton could feel her warm breath. He heard her quickening heartbeat. He wanted to take the young woman so he could love her for the remainder of what little time he might have left. Knowing she loved him back will help to fill the void of the endless years ahead until maybe their paths crossed again. By his reckoning, he believed he had about eighty percent control over what year he’d be sent to by totally concentrating on the four numbers which made up the new year at the precise moment of being transported to another time. If he could out-smart the curse maybe there might be an outside chance he’d be able to stay in the year 2010AD. He scrunched his nose. It was indeed a long shot.

Amber craned her neck, waiting for their lips to melt together.

Haleton let her off the hook by stepping away.

“If I need to control my destination when the time comes, maybe if I have to wait to taste your lips again, it might be the best chance I have of staying in this year. I need all the help I can get. It might be the edge I need.”

Amber slowly nodded, walked across the room and stood in front of the electric fire.

“Have you thought of any fresh clues or exactly where the scroll might be hidden?” she asked with a sigh.

“Just before I was forced into drinking the liquid which changed me into a vampire Rose-a-lee whispered in my ear I must remember the name Macularta and the number 777. I’ve no idea what the numbers represent,” confessed Haleton.

“Those numbers have been described as God’s numbers,” suggested Amber.

“There are a lot of god’s in this world.”

“The one I’m talking about is the God who created all things.”

“The only other clue I know is years ago I tracked down a different priest who thought he remembers hearing about a scroll. The only thing he could tell me was a man known as the watcher insisted the scroll must remain in the care of a relative for eternity. The scroll must never be lost, destroyed or sold. I tracked down the last remaining relative of the watcher five hours after he died in a nursing home not far from a church right here in Melbourne Australia. I pieced together the remaining information when the woman in charge of the nursing home told me the relative of the watcher used to be the principal of a school in Queensland. She also

claims the man's ancestor whose name was Macularta loathed being a priest so much he left the church and headed for Melbourne. It is how the watcher was born.

"It sounds like the scroll might have been taken out of the coffin and placed somewhere else."

"If you're right we might never be able to find it," hinted Haleton.

"Do you remember the name of the nursing home?"

"Yes. Its name is Lazy Pastures."

"I'll ring them," said Amber reaching for the phone. She tapped the numbers on the phone pad and sat back in her chair waiting for a response.

"Hello," croaked the voice of a woman.

"Good morning," chirped Amber. "I'm hoping you can help me. I'm looking for the name of an ex-patient of yours who died several years ago."

"Do you know what time it is?"

"6:57 in the morning."

"Unless you're the police or a coroner the information is classified."

The phone line went dead.

"I've another idea," said Amber, looking up at Haleton.

By 7:00am Amber sat in front of the computer, typing. She tried over a dozen times to log into the Lazy Pastures website.

"I think we should go visit the nursing home," suggested Haleton. "We don't have a whole lot of time left. I think it might be quicker to be there in person."

Amber looked up, giggling at his worried expression. "Technology, I don't know how you managed to get along without it."

"How can sitting behind a computer help to uncover the information we need?"

"You've been through time to the future and back, didn't you ever use a computer?"

"No. The moment I witnessed the trouble the little box can give, I ran."

"You have a lot to learn."

Amber's fingers hovered motionless over the keyboard. She looked puzzled.

"What's wrong? Is the box giving trouble?"

"It's a recurring problem, but not this time. I'm wondering what the future is like?"

"It's not much different than what it is today. More people rushing about trying to get where they're going faster than possible; growing more impatient each day. There are fewer trees and more buildings. People expect everything in seconds. No exceptions. To help speed things up they own small two person flying automobiles. They buzz around in the air like flies. When they arrive at a multi-level car park the driver navigates into and lands in his reserved parking bay. The people walk down the stairs to the ground. They sprint across the street only to enter a high-rise building where they sit behind computers all day before going home. The only difference between 2010AD and the future is the people don't use the keyboard. It's only touch screen stuff or they talk to it. The flat screen monitor has been discarded, replaced by an invisible screen."

Hearing about the future Amber looked to be lost in her thoughts. She seemed totally oblivious to the monitor's stark red cursor flashes. She eventually realized the problem.

"I've been trying to search the births and deaths on the website belonging to Lazy Pastures. I've been blocked by a password error."

"Are you sure going to the nursing home isn't quicker?"

“I’m sure. Once we get through the password it’ll only take seconds to find the answer. Come on. I know someone who can help.”

Amber led Haleton to the lift. The moment they stepped onto the roof they marched to the opposite side of the building. A fog settling over the area made visibility poor by swallowing the dull light of the sun. Amber gazed at the street below, gulping down the lump forming in her throat. There were few people walking about. The cars parked in front of the building resembled abandoned toys.

“Tell me something truthfully. Did you really carry me to my apartment from the train carriage?” asked Amber, looking directly into Haleton’s eyes.

“Yes.”

“How did you manage to find access to my room? You should never have made it past the security guard in the lobby. He’s a stickler for paperwork. Everyone who enters or leaves the building must sign his personal ledger book.”

“You don’t weigh much so I easily ran up the outside of the building.”

Amber started to massage her temples. “I had hoped that’s what happened. I’m glad I didn’t know.” She caught Haleton chuckling. Amber shook her head. Smiling, she said. “My friend we need to see lives two buildings from me. We can either both use the lift and run down the street or you can carry me.” She pointed to a window directly across from where they were standing. It looked small, but the light was on.

“I’ll take the shortcut if you don’t mind,” advised Haleton. “It’ll save a lot of time.”

“Are you sure this will work? I’m staking my life on the fact everything is true and you really aren’t a crazed nut who has escaped the mental institution.”

“Search your heart, you’ll find the answer.” He scooped Amber up in his arms. “Don’t let go. Please don’t scream. Ready?”

“No, not really, but I’ll only die once.”

Haleton squatted. He saw Amber close her eyes. He leaped from the rooftop, landing on the next building. Amber suddenly opened her eyes to look about. Her scream drowned in her throat. Haleton landed on the next rooftop and climbed down the wall to the window of her friend. He clung to the narrow window ledge using his fingertips on his free hand.

Amber exhaled, staring at the man holding her by one arm. “Everything you’ve said is the truth,” she stated.

“Yes, one-hundred percent.”

“At this point in time, I have no qualms against you. Every question I’ve thought of up to now has been frozen somewhere deep inside my mind.”

“Good to hear.”

Amber tapped on the partially open glass window. While waiting for a response she looked at Haleton.

“I’ll give a quick run-down on my friend. His name is Craig Benyon. He likes fresh air at all times. Even in the dead of winter the window remains open. He’s probably wearing earphones which are connected to any one of his many music players while he’s sitting at his beloved computer. I swear the man loves the machine more than anything in this world.”

“It sounds like he doesn’t have a girlfriend or anytime for lady visitors,” hinted Haleton.

“You’re right, his days are full. Any leisure time he accrues he devotes to assembling old computers.”

Haleton easily lifted the window frame using the arm he securely held Amber in. He slid her through the gap before joining her.

Amber looked down the short hallway to the study room. She saw no light oozing from under the door.

“From here I can tell Craig’s not perched behind the computer. He must be asleep.” She walked down the hall and stood outside the first doorway on her right. “Craig, are you awake? It’s me, Amber.”

The lump under the blankets moved. She heard a groan. A dark haired twenty-year-old bloke opened his eyes. He hastily placed dark framed glasses on the bridge of his nose.

“What are you doing here? How did you get in?”

“There’s no time to explain. I need your help.”

“Come back in the daylight,” yelled Benyon pulling the blankets over his head.

Amber opened the door and marched in. Reaching out she yanked back the covers. She squealed. “Do you always sleep naked?”

The boy shrieked. He lifted his hands to hide his manhood. “I’m awake. Leave my room. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Haleton hustled Amber out of the room, pulling the door shut.

A couple of minutes ticked off before Benyon walked into the lounge. His face drained of colour at the sight of Haleton.

“Who’s this, your boyfriend? Did you two meet at a masquerade party? Amber, where’s your fairy costume?”

“Craig, don’t start.”

“Why are you here, to gloat; to rub my nose in the mud? You could have at least told me you were seeing someone. The knowledge would’ve saved me from the embarrassment of having downed my knee to ask for your hand in marriage; correction to the statement, my complete humiliation. Amber, how could you?”

“Craig stop being so melodramatic.”

“You took advantage of me when you realized how much I love you.”

“It’s not true.”

Benyon dragged himself into the kitchen. He opened the refrigerator door, swiping an unopened wine bottle off the middle shelf. Rummaging through a cupboard he found a large glass.

“What do you think you’re doing?” jeered Amber.

“What’s it got to do with you?”

“Everything,” she replied.

“I can only take so much. Did you know you only talk to me or come knocking on my door when you can’t get your computer to work?” Craig poured half a glass of wine, swallowing the liquid in one long gulp. “I’ve only seen you once this week. It happened when your old worn out machine stopped working.”

“I didn’t know you were keeping count!” exclaimed Amber going red in the face. She walked over and gently prized the wine bottle out of his hand. “Craig, I don’t know why you grabbed the bottle, you don’t drink.” She watched him start to sob. Focusing on a tear rolling down his cheek, she whispered. “I’m sorry if I’ve offended you.”

“I’ll forgive you. Love always wins.” Craig wiped his eyes. He looked at her widening smile. “If the only reason you talk to me is when your computer breaks down, I’m happy you’re here.” He wrapped his arms around Amber, kissing her on the cheek.

“You’re completely right about the computer deal. I apologize.”

“I have a feeling you didn’t come barging in here at this early hour bringing a gorilla for a bodyguard so you can say sorry.”

“You’re right.”

“I knew it. Your computer is acting up.”

“You’re sort of on the right track.”

Amber followed Craig into the living room. HALETON brought up the rear.

Craig wore an angry expression when he faced Amber. “How did you gain entry? My front door is locked.”

“Through the window,” confessed Amber, lifting both hands into the air. “It’s a long story.”

“I feel it’s going to be a long day.

Glancing at HALETON, Amber giggled. “I’m stuck on something. I need your help,” she said.

Craig lifted his gaze so he could look directly at HALETON. He, in turn, barred his eye teeth, hissing. A growl quickly followed.

“I don’t believe in werewolves.”

“Please, don’t insult me. I’m a vampire.”

“I’m right this is going to be a very long day. Vampires don’t exist either. Amber, you picked him for your boyfriend over me? I am so thoroughly disappointed I don’t know where to begin. What does he have that I don’t?”

“It’s not important.”

“Are you sure?”

Amber tugged at Craig’s arm. “This is my friend William HALETON; Craig BENYON.”

“Take no offense. I don’t usually shake a fake vampire’s hand.”

“Suck it up,” jeered Amber, banging her foot on the floor. “I need you to hack into a website.”

“If he’s looking over my shoulder; I don’t think so. How do I know he’s not a cop?”

“Trust me, he’s no cop,” said Amber.

HALETON took a step closer. “I’m definitely no cop. However I must insist you help.” He turned his attention to Amber. “I’d like to have a minute alone with Craig?”

“Be gentle,” she replied scooting into the kitchen.

Amber started to rummage through the refrigerator as HALETON spoke.

“I’m not interested in what you have to say, or what you think of me or the request. I don’t even care if you believe I’m a crazy insane person who thinks I’m a vampire. The only thing you have to understand is the fact I can wipe your head from your shoulders in a blink of an eye. Nothing can kill me so save your strength. I need you to do what Amber has asked. Do you have any questions?”

Craig gulped down his fear glaring at HALETON. “Okay, I’ll do it for Amber.”

“Thank you for your understanding. I thought the reason for your refusal to help might be due to the fact you aren’t intelligent enough.”

“Do you always get your own way?”

“Yes.”

“What about when you were a kid?”

HALETON barred his long eye teeth again. He commenced a long low growl which seemed to rumble around the room.

“Forget I asked. I don’t want to open an old wound. What’s the name of the website you want me to hack into?”

“You’ve made a wise choice in deciding to help. The website is the Lazy Pastures nursing home,” said Haleton. “I need to locate the name of a dead person.”

“I’m not even going to ask. What’s the name you want me to find?”

“The man’s name was Macularta.”

“I’ve never heard of a name so old-fashioned. I’d be surprised if it is actually a name.”

Haleton grabbed Craig by the collar, lifting him effortlessly off the floor. “Amber asked you to help. You agreed. I take men on their word.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll do it the moment you put me back on terra firma.”

Haleton placed the man in a vertical position, straightening his shirt. “Are you clear on everything?”

“I sure am. Hey, are you really a vampire?”

“Yes.”

“Is there any chance of a demonstration?”

“Yes, after the task you have been given is completed.”

Craig sat at the computer in the corner of the room and started tapping the keyboard. A small flat screen hanging on the wall lit up. Lazy Pastures nursing home website came into focus.

“Password declined,” said the computer’s metallic voice through a speaker.

For the next ten minutes, Craig heard the same result. When he took a quick break he stared at the wall in front of him.

“What are you doing?” asked Amber, walking over.

“I’m thinking.”

“Think faster,” urged Haleton.

“What exactly am I looking for? Don’t tell me the name Macularta. There’s more to all this.”

“I’m searching for a scroll which has the vampire antidote written on it. Once discovered I’ll be free from my curse. The scroll might have been placed in a coffin by a man from Lazy Pasture’s nursing home.”

“Could the antidote have been placed somewhere else?” asked Craig.

“No. I’m positive it will be in the coffin,” said Haleton.

“Forget about the antidote for the moment, concentrate on the task at hand,” said Amber.

Craig lowered his fingers onto the keyboard and started moving them at speed. On the eleventh minute, he successfully opened the website.

“Access granted,” said the speaker.

“Talk about doing it easy,” boasted Craig.

Amber leaned forward to view his handy work. “Well done.”

The tone in her voice sounded soft and luring. She kissed him on the cheek. Craig in turn sat motionless as if frozen in time.

Haleton clicked his fingers under his nose, making him blink.

“Where am I?” mumbled Craig.

Haleton looked sideways at Amber. “Do you have special powers to render a male incapable of moving?”

“No, he thinks he loves me.”

Craig started to scroll down names on a list while Amber and Haleton looked over his shoulder.

“What are those numbers next to the names mean?” asked Haleton.

“I suppose they represent the number of people who have died. We’re up to number three-fifty one,” said Craig.

“Scroll down to the number 777,” suggested Haleton.

“If it goes that far,” said Craig. He scrolled down the page, stopping at the number. “The grim reaper has been busy visiting the Lazy Pastures nursing home these past twenty years.”

“There were too many deaths,” reported Amber.

“Maybe foul play,” suggested Craig.

Haleton leaned closer to the monitor.

Craig looked sideways at the man. “You smell of garlic.”

Haleton growled. “What are you implying?”

“I’m only joking. Amber, can’t your boyfriend take a joke?”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, but not cynical ones.”

“Craig, Macularta was the 777th death at the home,” stated Haleton. “He’d been given explicit instructions his name must never be changed or altered in any way for all eternity.”

“You sound like you know more than what you’ve told me?” growled Craig.

“I have to confess, I do.”

“Why didn’t you say?”

“I don’t know anything about you. For all, I know you might be working for Crompton. I need to be certain my cousin can’t get his hands on the where-a-bouts of the original antidote. If he did nobody will ever be able to stop the man. He mentioned he knows the formula. The problem is he doesn’t know where the original has been placed. I’m also guessing Rose-a-lee told him a formula which wasn’t correct.”

“Who’s Rose-a-lee and this Crompton dude?” asked Craig.

“Rose-a-lee was allegedly my ancestor back in 1749AD,” said Amber.

“Alex Crompton is someone you don’t want to meet,” stated Haleton.

“Is he a vampire too?”

“Yes and he’s rotten to the core.”

Craig sat holding his head in his hands. “I’ve a headache.”

“Quit the act,” Amber grumbled. “Look up the local cemetery ledger. We need to find exactly where Macularta is buried.” The moment she glanced at Haleton’s concerned face her loving grin looked to have melted his anxiety. “It’s okay we’ll find the scroll real soon.”

Haleton bent his head, took hold of her right hand, giving it a kiss. Craig shook his head and set to work. His fingers again moved at speed over the keyboard. Haleton paced the floor. Amber kept a close watch on both men.

Craig ceased tapping on the keys, looking up at the pair. His eyes were ablaze. “We haven’t discussed payment yet.”

At lightning speed, Haleton grabbed the man by the throat. “I can snap your neck like a toothpick in a second. Cough up the information. The clock is ticking.”

“You’ve said those words before. If you carry out your threat you won’t be able to extract the information I’ve uncovered. Try decoding the answer. You might be able to in about fifty years.”

Amber leaned on the desk. “Please, Craig you have to say what you found.”

“What about the gorilla?”

“I’m not into groveling. Craig this is important to me. I thought we were friends?” said Amber.

“We are. You know I wanted something more.”

“We’ve discussed this already. The best I can do is for us to stay friends.”

Craig paused to weigh his options. Eventually, he sighed heavily before speaking.

“Okay. I’m an easy-going bloke. I’ve two conditions.”

“What have you got in mind?” asked Amber.

“You have to kiss me on the lips for ten seconds. Next, I need a successful lesson from the gorilla on how to track down, wine and dine a woman who will want me for the rest of my life.”

“Deal,” blurted Haleton.

“Wait a minute,” yelled Amber. “I’m not too thrilled at the deal.”

“Why not, it sounds good to me?” said Craig, grinning. “You and the gorilla get what you want. I get what I want.”

Haleton released his hold on Craig to take up staring into his eyes. “I’ll agree to the blackmail if Amber accepts.”

“Craig, you’ve finally figured out a way to steal a kiss. I have no option, but to agree.”

“You won’t marry me so the least you can do is give me a kiss.”

Amber folded her arms across her chest. “I’ll consent only if you supply the information first.”

“How can I trust you?”

“Craig, I take what you’ve just said as an insult,” growled Amber. “I have never gone back on my word.”

“I’ve already made it known I live by my words. What I say I expect to do. It’s a good trait you should adopt,” Haleton advised.

“Do you always talk in an ancient fashion?” asked Craig.

“Yes. I can’t help it. I happened to be born in the 1700’s.”

“Naturally; you’re a vampire. You’ll live forever.”

“Hopefully, if everything goes to plan I will die one day.”

Craig Benyon wore a wide grin. He swiveled in his seat to face the computer. He started to push several keys on the keyboard. In a matter of seconds, he stopped to dig his nose out of the monitor. “This might take a while.” He stood and started to walk out of the room.

“Where do you think you’re going?” called Amber.

“I’m thinking about the password and how to get around it. I’ll bypass it soon. I just need to stretch.”

“I thought you already did and it’s encrypted?”

“I used a bluffed hand.”

Haleton was still shaking his head, chuckling, when Craig settled back at the computer. He slouched forward engrossed in tapping the keyboard. He abruptly stopped. His fingers were poised in mid-air ready to strike the next key. His face seemed mummified, staring at the monitor. He looked to be scarcely breathing. When he finally managed to talk his voice sounded shocked, surprised and excited.

“I did it. I actually did it. Amber, this is the first time I have ever been able to bypass a blocked website. I always knew I could do it, but never wanted to test my ability. It’s as though my fingers knew what to do.” Craig stood bracing himself against the table to hold up his wiry frame. He cleared his throat, portraying an all-knowing expression. “The bloke named

Macularta is buried in the cemetery not far from here in the rear south-west corner. It has the number '777' written on the tombstone."

Amber placed her arm over his shoulder. "Craig, you are an amazing man. Thank you for helping." She swept her face close to his. Pushing both hands behind his head she welded their lips. They were locked tight for at least thirty seconds. Haleton watched in disbelief. He threw his hands into the air before marching towards the door.

Amber finally pushed Craig to arm's length. She looked directly at him. His eyes were shut as he swayed from side to side.

"That was some kiss," mumbled Craig. "What did you think of the kiss?"

Amber giggled, running towards the door.

"I don't want to be a party damper. Did you have to kiss the bloke longer than ten seconds?"

"William, do I hear a jealous tone?"

On the other side of the door, Haleton grabbed Amber in both hands. He brought her in close. He stared into her eyes, dipping her gently halfway to the floor, allowing her hair to fall from her shoulders. Without saying a word, he showed the young lady the correct way to kiss. He held her suspended in his arms for well over a minute. Their lips melted into each other for the same amount of time. Haleton watched the girl for a sign of finalizing the moment. She gave no indication. When he finally brought her back to a vertical position, Amber felt breathless.

Haleton didn't speak a word or asked her to compare the difference between the two kisses. He allowed her to churn the two romantic moments over in her mind. He knew when she was ready to choose which of the men's kisses she enjoyed more, he felt confident she'd pick the right answer. Leaving Amber to make up her mind by remaining silent was his trend. In hundreds of years, the style never let him down. Only a long-term relationship blocked the idea he wanted to be a surgeon. Of all the women he'd known none wanted him to be so brutal.

Amber's eyes widened. She swallowed the lump in her throat. Her lips parted slightly, but she couldn't bring herself to talk. When she did Haleton would eat every word of her opening sentence. Eventually, Amber gave up and led the way out of the building.

The drizzle and fresh air revitalized Amber's thoughts. She tugged on Haleton's shoulder. He faced her wearing a mischievous look.

"You didn't ask which kiss I thought might have been the best. All the boys I've ever kissed insist I tell them immediately."

"Like you said, boys want to know. They need to find out the answer so they can build their ego. I have no need to find the answer to the question when I already know the answer."

"You seem sure of yourself," said Amber.

"I never say a word after kissing a girl. Eventually, curiosity gets the better of her. She hesitantly brings up the subject. Small talk starts then the conversation changes to in-depth dialogue. Slowly the wheel turns. When the cogs stop the arrow always points to love."

Amber giggled. She was still shaking her head when Craig came sprinting up behind the pair.

"You forgot to give me a single hint on how to love a woman," exclaimed Craig.

Amber's eyebrows shot up. She gave Haleton an astounded look which said, 'I don't know how you did it. I think the arrow has stopped on the word love.'

Haleton politely excused himself from Amber's side. He escorted Craig across the street to the shadow of a brick wall. For a full two minutes, they were talking in the grey dawn and

the rain. Craig eventually slapped Haleton on the shoulder. They shook hands before parting. Craig ran back towards his apartment. Haleton sprinted across the street to where Amber waited for his return.

“What advice did you give Craig? He looks the happiest I’ve ever seen.”

“I suggested after he kisses a girl he doesn’t say a word. He has to allow the young lady to digest the feeling. The moment the girl mentions the subject she will be yours.”

“Is that right?”

“It works every time.”

Amber resumed giggling while they marched in the direction of the cemetery. The few men they walked past studied her womanly shape. Haleton could hear their whispers. Each comment was of the girl’s magnificence and how majestic she moved. One middle-aged man, a young lady hanging off his arm couldn’t take his gaze off her. His whispered comment echoed in Haleton’s ears.

‘The girl walking next to the man wearing the top hat and tails could easily be awarded the Miss Universe crown.’

Amber looked sideways at Haleton. “To raise the question you already know the answer to,” she started. “You were the best kisser. Craig didn’t kiss me back. It’s the reason why we are only friends. You, on the other hand, William Haleton, are the most amazing kisser and the most interesting person I’ve ever known.”

“I’ve had plenty of time to practice.”

Amber let go of his hand to run ahead. “I guess I’ve fallen in line behind all the others!”

“Now who’s the jealous one?” he called.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AMBER LOOKED over her shoulder wearing an innocent expression which spelled out the words ‘come and chase me.’

The look taunted Haleton.

Amber turned her back, forcing her long hair to trap the dull light from the nearest streetlight. Haleton felt overcome. His knees buckled from his weight. The feeling wasn’t familiar. Fate had definitely thrown a love dart.

Haleton watched the girl start to sprint across the road. A truck’s headlights highlighted her image through the fog. If Haleton didn’t move faster than he’d ever done before, it will be certain death.

In the time, it takes the valves of a human heart to open and close Haleton started to move.

Amber seemed oblivious to the large vehicle bearing down on her.

Haleton threw off the love feeling to focus on what lay ahead. He knew his rescue attempt, either saving Amber, or watch her die by being crushed to death will only take a matter of seconds. Her death would be quick. He took comfort in the fact she’d feel no pain.

Amber stood in the middle of the road smiling at him. The noise from the truck’s powerful engine echoed off the objects on both sides of the road. What Haleton couldn’t understand is why the truck deliberately changed direction. It appeared the driver wanted to deliberately run

her down. He couldn't afford to waste a single second to view the driver, not if he wanted even a slim chance to save her. As it stood he gave Amber only a seventeen percent chance to survive and a zero chance to walk away unscathed.

In between steps, Amber's body weight transferred from her back foot to her front foot. To grab her and race across the road would have been the easiest thing to accomplish, if only the headlights of the truck were turned off.

Haleton spied a rock in easy reach. The thought entered his mind to throw it at the headlight. He knew he could easily smash it, but will the light go out in time and what of the second headlight. There were no more rocks. The second headlight beam from the truck will still have Amber in a spotlight, resembling daylight. Good for the truck driver, no good for him. He'd dematerialize into a shadow in a heartbeat. Again Haleton thought of the driver, deciding it must be deliberate. The image of Alex Crompton entered his thoughts. Yes, it could be a possibility. They hated each other. How quickly life can change. One minute close cousins, the next minute they hated each other.

Haleton focused on Amber. Her face looked slightly strained. She proved to be fast. Her back foot was now ahead of her front foot. Amber looked to be picking up speed in an attempt to avoid the truck. Her entire upper body was highlighted in the net of light. Somehow he needed to succeed in the rescue. At worst case he'd be the only survivor. He wasn't sure if he'd be able to cope if he made a wrong judgment.

Sprinting, Haleton's feet were only lightly skimming the asphalt. Water particles were mushrooming up from a puddle he stepped into. Already he could feel his body starting to tingle as rogue particles of light bombarded and embedded into his exposed flesh. A few more heartbeats and he'd be able to grab Amber. His timing needed to be exact if he wanted to win the dash.

Amber's mouth started opening to emit a high pitched scream. Haleton watched helplessly as she tripped over something which the driver threw from the moving truck. The object hit her left knee. Haleton could tell she was going to fall hard onto the road. He surmised the line of sight with the truck's front wheel. He knew it will roll over her rib cage. By the time he reached Amber and pushed against her torso to save her he'd be a shadow. Her life will be at an end. The Cantala name will be gone. Alex Crompton would win.

Haleton doubled his efforts. Amber's left shoulder dropped to only centimeters off the road. Instead of running through the beams of light Haleton dived flat. His body scraped the road. As Amber crashed to the tarred surface, the truck's headlights passed over them. The large front tyre missed her head by the width of a human hair. Amber's body shielded Haleton from the truck's headlights. His body protected her from the rough road.

Haleton pushed Amber flat on the road and watched the truck's rusty subframe flow harmlessly over them. He jumped to his feet and helped Amber to the other side of the road where he made her sit on the footpath.

Haleton sprinted for the truck. If the driver happened to be Alex Crompton he wasn't going to get away again. He caught up to the truck by the time it reached the first bend in the road. He leaped onto the back roller door, clinging to the handle. Hurling himself up and onto the roof, the truck entered the bend. In two large steps, his feet were firmly planted on the bonnet. Looking through the windscreen, the scene almost made him choke on his own saliva. The male driver appeared to be dead; bitten on the neck. Blood still oozed from two puncture wounds in his jugular vein. The old driver's eyes were open. His body still convulsed as if it tried to tell his brain he wasn't dead.

The truck rammed through a wire fence, heading for a shallow creek. Haleton jumped and watched the truck nose-dive into the stagnant water. He stood in the dark listening to the engine die. His eyes glistened for the first time since the start of the curse. He slowly shook his head at the alarm bells ringing in his mind. Looking back along the road, he caught a whiff of a familiar smell. The scent caused a shiver to shoot down his back. His brain clicked into overdrive. His thoughts mingled and mashed together to form one large alarming inconceivable evil idea. His heart quickened, pounding against his rib cage. Haleton could hear nothing except the heartbeat in his ears. His vampire fangs quickly extended to full length. He made a low rumbling growl. It seemed endless. Sprinting back to where he left Amber sitting he pushed his emotions to the side. He felt annoyed at being tricked and used for bait.

Haleton yelled inside his head at the thought of Crompton being so close to the unguarded Amber Cantala. What of Craig, surely he'd be in the equation. He left the area to walk home. Haleton shook his head, doubling his efforts to retrace his steps. It wasn't in Crompton's character to allow a mortal to live. He needed an innocent victim. Both Amber and Craig might have stuck fast in his murderous web. The plan couldn't have been any more perfect.

Haleton got back to where he left Amber. Twirling in circles, he looked for Crompton or the bodies of his friends on the dead quiet street.

"Crompton, where are you?" yelled Haleton.

The only noise came from a field mouse darting through the branches of a small bush in the search for food.

Haleton again yelled at the top of his voice. "Crompton, let Amber and Craig live their life to the fullest. They mean nothing to you. Let them be."

"William, what a pleasant surprise, it's good to see you again."

Haleton twisted around to face Crompton square on. "Where's Amber?"

"Is that any way to talk to me? I thought after our last encounter you'd have been slightly more hospitable."

Haleton hissed at the man.

"Don't make me laugh," he said casually waving his hand. "You know perfectly well I don't scare easily."

"Are you positive?"

Crompton sighed, pointing a finger at Haleton. "I'm quite sure."

"I wouldn't grow too comfortable in your thinking. Where are they? Tell me or else."

"You'll do what? Try and kill me again. We both know the idea will never work."

"I'll hound you for all eternity if you hurt my friends in any way."

"Eternity is a long time," jeered Crompton. "Before you launch your scathing attack I want to show you something. Cast your gaze on the building across the street." He made a high-pitched whistle.

A face appeared at the top of the four-storey building. Craig's mouth had been taped. His hands bound tight behind his back. His feet were tied together at the ankles.

"If you look across the street at the roof of the opposite building you'll be in for a real treat."

Haleton glanced up at the roof. He spied Amber. She was a mirror image of the tied and gagged Craig. Haleton snarled at Crompton.

"What do you want in return for their safety?"

"I hope you're not begging for their mortal lives to be spared?"

"What do you want?"

“Join my gang.”

“Never,” spat Haleton.

“That’s a shame. I’m concerned the mortals going by the name of Craig Benyon and Amber Cantala won’t live to see the next sunrise let alone midday.”

“You know I can catch both of them.”

“It’s a contingency plan I did consider. The idea kept me deep in thought for nearly a minute. I did, however, find a solution to the problem. I’ve decided to let you in on my idea. Give me a moment to explain the rules. There aren’t many. For you to make a wise decision I need a minute to explain.”

“I’ll give you thirty seconds,” growled Haleton.

“I love the way you think you’re holding the winning cards,” hissed Crompton.

“Make your play.”

The man in the black top hat and tails gave a sharp nod before voicing his idea. “You see it will go exactly like the following. I will signal my men to place Cantala and Benyon on the top edge of both buildings. I will ask you one last time to join my gang. Of course, you’ll refuse. I’ll signal my gang to give Cantala and Benyon a slight push, or if you’d prefer me to call them Amber and Craig, either way, works for me. Both hostages will fall to the ground headfirst. What you have to ask yourself, William Haleton, my dear cousin, which one are you going to try to save? I’ll give you a moment to consider your options. I’m betting the first thing you’ll say is; you will still be able to save them both. Don’t bother to convince me. I tried a small experiment on a copy of what you are about to attempt. Let me tell you I couldn’t run fast enough across the road to save both mannequins which I stole from a dress shop. So you see I know I’ll win. I don’t want you to stop my excitement by telling me which you will save. I don’t really care.” Crompton pushed two fingers into his mouth and made another sharp whistle.

Amber and Craig were placed on the top edge of their building. They both looked at the other. Craig gave Amber a slight nod. She raised an eyebrow.

“By the looks of things I could swear Benyon loves the girl. Too bad it never worked out,” jeered Crompton.

Haleton checked his watch. “It looks like you’ve left me no choice except to join your gang.”

“How sweet it is to hear the words coming from your own mouth. I did want you to try my experiment. My gang and I made a bet you’d save the girl.”

“How do I know one of our cronies won’t push the mortals from the roof?”

“You don’t,” replied Crompton.

“I said I’d join, but on one condition.”

“I don’t care for the mortals, I want you.”

“I care.”

“It’s a weakness I’m prepared to overlook. You’ll get used to it. Soon you won’t care either. Boys, drop the pair over the side. I have what I want. Haleton, kneel so I can make it official.”

Haleton stared at his cousin. “You’re out of time.”

Crompton looked up at his gang members. He watched each one disappear in a cloud of midnight black smoke. They hovered in the air for a moment before each of the plumes vanished.

Crompton checked his pocket watch. His eyes widened. “You deliberately stalled so you could watch my gang disappear.”

“I told you our paths will cross one day to waste time. The council of four succeeded. When we first met I checked my watch. I’m short of time too. However you were here before me.”

Crompton sprinted towards his foe. Before he got halfway he disappeared in a plume of black smoke.

Haleton sprinted up the side of the building to untie Amber. He jumped to the opposite building carrying her safely in his arms. In seconds, he’d set Craig free.

While Amber hugged and kissed her hero, Craig started to walk off towards the center of the building. He reached out and opened the door to the stairwell. Before descending the stairs he turned his head to view the love scene.

“You two should go somewhere private, nut out anything standing between you and get married so you can live a long, happy life.” Craig faked a smile. “I’m going home. I’ve been through too much excitement for any mortal man in any one day. When you need me, you know where I live.”

“Be careful on your way home, Crompton might still be in this time zone hanging from a tree branch for a chance to bite,” called Haleton.

Amber chuckled, waving him away.

“I’ll be fine, thanks for caring.” Craig shut the stairwell door in his wake.

Haleton turned his head to focus on Amber. “It’s not my intention to break up a party. Time is short. Crompton and his gang arrived in this time ten hours before I did. My time here is counting down fast.”

Amber stared at Haleton. She started to take on the look of a girl who was about to panic. “I sure hope Craig will make it home okay.”

“I’m positive he’ll be fine.”

Although Haleton sounded convincing Amber walked next to him, the same concerned expression on her face. She studied each thick bush they walked past.

“I never want to run into Crompton again,” she whispered. “Like Craig, I’ve seen enough of his appearance.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

AMBER LOOKED down the three metre tall wrought iron cemetery wall in both directions, displaying a defeated expression. The main gates had a pattern of flowers welded in the middle which was securely locked. The heavy chain wrapped around the edges of the gates looked strong enough to anchor a large ship in a raging storm. Amber took hold of the padlock, rattling the chain. To her left on the inside of the wall, she saw a large body of water. It looked stagnant. The air felt cool and moist. She rubbed the small bumps on her arms and shivered in the midmorning temperature. She glanced briefly at the billowing mist. The air above the water evaporated and cooled at almost the same time, causing a wet fog. It hovered about two metres above the surface. A whiff of a breeze made the mist span out over the cemetery.

“I don’t like it here,” she whispered. “The fog makes it worse. It’s eerie and cold.”

Haleton caressed her bare arms. “It’s okay. This is the best time to be here. There’s nobody about.”

“Exactly my point,” whispered Amber. “It’s a nightmarish place to visit. Did I mention my dislike of cemeteries? Especially a fog-shrouded one. They all look uninviting outside of business hours.”

“There’s nothing to fear,” explained Haleton. “Everyone in this place is dead.”

“Those words make it worse.”

“Be brave. Amber, there are no ghosts, I promise.”

She looked around the area for the umpteenth time. Squeezing Haleton’s half-shadow of a hand Amber mumbled. “There’s no natural light, no life, no noise.”

“It’s okay. We certainly won’t be disturbed. We’ll be in and out in record time.”

“I hope so. Have you thought a security guard might be walking about?”

“No. Why should there be?”

Amber rolled her eyes. “Some cemeteries have guards to stop vandalism.”

“The word has never been heard of back in 1749AD.”

“If we’re caught trespassing we’ll be in big trouble.”

“Trust me, it’ll be alright.”

They both came through the last several hours unscathed. Haleton resembled a man who didn’t have a care in the world. Amber, on the other hand, looked a mess.

“William, I feel exhausted. I’m positive I look lousy.”

“You look wonderful,” he said, trying to reassure.

“How can I when I don’t feel it?”

“Don’t worry. We have a job to do. Everything will be fine.”

“It’s easy for you to say,” she whispered.

Haleton stepped into the brightening mist, instantly turning into a shadow.

Amber muffled a giggle by clasping her fingers over her mouth. “For a shadow, you feel heavy.”

“Come on, let’s find a way in,” whispered Haleton, chuckling.

Haleton floated through the gates. Amber followed by walking along the outside of the wall. When she came to an opening which looked wide enough, she squeezed through.

The pair walked to the southwest corner, squatting next to a row of thin pine trees. They were planted to hide the old wrought iron fence.

Amber shone a light from a pencil size torch onto the many silent graves. “I’m trying my best not to be scared. I think I’m losing the battle.”

Haleton cradled her in his arms. “I promise the dead people won’t come alive,” he whispered.

“I know,” she replied.

“I believe the sooner we’re out of here the happier you’ll be,” suggested Haleton. “Shine your torch on this row of tombstones to my right. Hopefully, what we’re searching for isn’t far.”

Amber started down the small row at the rear of the cemetery. She stood in front of an old cracked, weather-beaten tombstone. The small pinprick of light being emitted from her torch, she bought from the local shop, zeroed in on the faint inscription. “The only thing I can read is the number 777,” she called.

Haleton silently drifted over, hovering over the grave.

“Seeing you as a shadow is hard to get used to,” she mumbled.

Haleton’s black transparent hand patted the side of her cheek. “I look forward to the time when I’ll see my shadow how it’s supposed to be. When the time comes I’ll be able to hold your hand in the daylight.”

Amber gave the area another cursory glance before cleaning dirt from the engraved letters using her index finger.

“The inscription reads; ‘here lies Macularta he was a good priest to William Haleton.’”

“We’ve hit the jackpot,” announced Haleton.

Amber lowered her voice to a decibel above a whisper. “It looks like we might have to dig into the coffin to find the scroll. Let’s hope it’s still inside and hasn’t been stolen or worse, Rose-a-lee forgot to place it in Macularta’s coffin.”

Haleton looked at her through sad eyes. “I hope the scroll is there. Both Macularta and Rose-a-lee knew a woman by my side and the vampire antidote is the only things I crave. There must be a clue. Macularta would have been told by Rose-a-lee after the death of the one hundredth evil soul I’d be transported into another time. I can’t allow it to happen. I’d never see you again.”

“I’d wait for you.”

Haleton shook his head. “You can’t. Our paths may never cross again. I can’t believe this. We’re so close.” He checked his pocket watch. “I’ve only four hours left.”

“We have to make every second count,” advised Amber. “Come on let’s leave this place. Maybe Craig has dug something out of the computer.”

Haleton watched her start to retrace their steps to the gap in the wall. He glanced at the tombstone one last time.

He took two steps before stopping to look back at the gravesite.

“What’s wrong?” whispered Amber, swiveling on her toes and marching back.

“There’s something bothering me about the inscription.”

“Don’t tell me you want to dig the priest’s bones up?”

“No.”

“Good. If you wanted to, you can do it on your own. I think we have just about outstayed our welcome.” Amber pointed to a small faint light at the front of the cemetery. It looked to be shining their way. “I bet the security guard is wondering why there’s a small light in this back corner.”

“It looks to be moving this way,” added Haleton, sidestepping to the grave. “I won’t be long.”

Amber clicked her torch off. She squatted, watching the dull light bouncing their way.

Haleton stared at the gravestone. “The words themselves might be clues.” He read each word out loud before looking at Amber. “Nothing sounds wrong. Come on let’s go, besides, the light which was coming this way has gone out. Who knows how close the security guard is?”

The sudden cool breeze forced the temperature to drop making the fog thicken. The few lights dotting the paths illuminated the ground at various intervals.

“It’s ghostly quiet,” Amber whispered.

“Yes it is,” he replied studying the letters one last time. “Hold on for a few more seconds.”

“We don’t have too much longer,” whispered Amber. “Whatever you do I think it has to be done now. I thought I heard footsteps crunching the pea stones.”

“Keep a watchful eye on the area. Let me know if you see the guard.”

Amber stared through the fog in the general direction of where she saw the light.

Using his fingertips Haleton reached out to rub the letters etched into the marble tombstone. "My name has a prominent feel to it."

"What are you talking about?" mumbled Amber, glancing at the place Haleton pointed. She shot her hand out, grabbing his shirt. Her eyes were bulging. Her face looked mortified. She nodded at the narrow pea stoned path crisscrossing the many rows of tombstones to the half way point before turning slightly diagonal as it wound its way to the small front office. Eventually, her shoulders slumped. She exhaled in relief. "I thought the guard was here."

"It's okay. We won't be much longer," advised Haleton. "Rub your hand over the letters. You'll feel what I've discovered."

Dragging her fingers across Haleton's name, Amber whispered. "One of the letters feels a bit different."

Haleton leaned in to study the letters more closely. When his fingers touched the letter 'N' in his name the letter moved. He pushed it gently. The letter receded. He gambled and pushed the rest of the letters in his name. When each of the letters looked flush against the marble tombstone, a piece of marble popped up like a slice of toast from a toaster. Haleton tugged at the end of the small piece of marble. It fell into his hand. It was only a splinter no bigger than Amber's small slender finger, but it left a small cavity.

He looked inside. Amber took a gander over his shoulder. Her eyes were ablaze. "There's an old piece of canvas in the slot."

"What we need is a small stick," said Haleton. "I only hope the material is the scroll and the antidote has been written on it."

Amber pulled a hairpin from her hair. "This is smaller than a stick. You should be able to retrieve the cloth without causing damage."

Haleton watched Amber's hair cascading over her shoulders. He raised an eyebrow before taking the pin. For a few seconds, their fingers touched. He looked her in the eyes, sighing.

"What are you thinking?"

"I'm not sure if I should tell you. I'm a gentleman. My thoughts must remain silent."

"You have to stop living in the year 1749AD. This is the modern era. I've heard just about everything."

"Yes. I keep forgetting. I've been thinking how pleasing on the eye you are. The feeling of your skin against mine is more precious than any gem on this planet."

"Are you sure? I think a diamond ring might feel pretty good."

Haleton chuckled. "I was trying to be romantic."

"Keep trying, practice makes perfect, though I have to say, I do love the feeling of your skin touching mine." Amber teased him by shaking her head slightly allowing her hair to catch the faint dawn light.

"Now you're taunting me."

"I know."

Haleton forced his eyes to focus on the piece of canvas. Slowly he extracted the fragile material.

Amber again tugged at his shirt. "I think we have company."

Haleton stared down the weed covered path on his right, listening. He lifted his finger to his lips. Light footsteps in heavy boots were the first noise they heard. The same noise came again and again. Haleton slowly nodded. A man wearing boots was indeed walking their way. Every third step he heard a slight scrape of a boot heel dislodging the surrounding pea stones.

A slight groan overlapped the noise of the boots when the intruder's speed slowed at the top of the rise. Haleton caught a whiff of the stranger's aftershave and when he heard something accidentally scrape the side of a tombstone the noise gave away the intruder's exact whereabouts.

His stealth surprise was too noisy for a vampire. Amber's earlier warning about a security guard roaming around the cemetery seemed correct.

Haleton only just managed to place the small piece of rolled up canvas carefully in his coat pocket before they both heard a shout. A narrow beam of light followed, shining on their work.

"Don't move. I'm arresting you both for the destruction of cemetery property," yelled the security guard.

Haleton quickly replaced the marble fragment. Leading Amber by the hand they sprinted towards the fence. The narrow opening they found on the way in wasn't far from the gravesite. Haleton pushed Amber through the gap before squatting to follow.

The security guard cornered Haleton before he could flee. Haleton faced the man and stood to full height. Using a deep-throated rumble which seemed to last for well over a minute, the guard backed away and ran off. The faint beam of light from his torch bounced wildly.

"Come on," whispered Amber. "We need to find a safe place to view the cloth."

The moment the guard stopped running he lifted his mobile phone to his ear. Haleton and Amber didn't know he was talking into the phone and pointing a short stubby finger in their direction. Running out of the cemetery the guard picked up their trail and pushed his phone deep into his pocket.

An elderly man with a bent back and drooping shoulders extracted advertising material from his letterbox. Clutching the bundle tight he stared through protruding eyes when the guard quietly walked past his property. The old man leaned against the fence, staring down the street. He mimicked a statue the whole time he stood watching the guard. The moment the street returned to its usual peace and quiet the old man shuffled back up his driveway to the front door.

"Mavis, I've just witnessed the most bizarre thing I have ever seen," he mumbled.

"What did you see Stan?"

"I was standing at the letterbox when a young lady walked by. She's a pretty thing I can tell you."

"That's it, your big highlight?"

"No. The young lady in question walked with two shadows."

"Have you been drinking again in secret?"

"Mavis, it's too early in the day."

"I suppose this second shadow talked to you?"

"To tell you the truth, it did."

"Stan I think it's time for you to live in a nursing home."

"Mavis the shadow was very polite. It said good morning just before a security guard walked past, following the young lady and the talking shadow."

"I think you should show me where they went. If there's any trouble I'll call the police," said Mavis shaking her head.

At the letterbox, Stan pointed one of his bony fingers in the direction Amber went. Mavis' mouth fell open. She looked to be trying to talk. Her words were only stuttering whispers.

"Morning to you both, now take my advice; go back inside your home."

“Mr. Shadow who are you?” whispered Stan.

“Yes, yes, who?” mumbled Mavis.

“My name is Crompton. Here’s a warning. One word about the young lady walking ahead or of myself to anyone; I’ll come looking for you. Don’t forget I know where you both live.”

Stan grabbed Mavis by the arm. Together they shuffled off in the direction of their house. No sooner did they enter, Crompton slipped through the open side window. He materialized in the dark corner of the room, glaring at the elderly couple.

“Don’t forget; one word about me and I’ll be standing right here waiting to drain your bodies of blood.”

Stan bravely stepped closer to protect his wife. “I survived being shot down behind enemy lines in the second world war. I’m not afraid of you. Don’t ever come back here again. If you do I’ll give you a good fight.”

Crompton took a step, grabbing the man by the neck. He lifted the man’s featherweight frame off the floor before studying his features. “I could snap your neck like a toothpick. You’d be dead before you realized it. I can hear your heart quicken. It’s telling me you’re scared out of your wits. If you like I’ll let you have the first punch.”

“Please, Sir, put my husband down. He’s old and frail.”

Crompton stared into Mavis’ old brown eyes. He created a haunting laugh. “I must be growing soft.” After dropping the man he watched him crumple to the carpet. “I have to hurry. I need to find an evil soul so I can quench his life flame. On second thoughts, I need someone who is young, full of life. It’ll be more of a sport. I know exactly where to find him.”

Crompton stepped into the faint sunlight breaking through the fog. Immediately he was transformed into a whiff of black smoke. He floated through the window and vanished.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AMBER AND Haleton marched across the road before running down a few more side streets. A single storey building loomed out of the swirling mist three minutes from the cemetery. They jumped the metre high wire fence and surveyed the grounds.

The area seemed whisper quiet.

Holding Amber’s hand, Haleton led the way around to the other side of the building where they discovered two windows. One was open, the other had been smashed.

The first room they looked in resembled a squatter’s paradise. A folded yellowing newspaper lay on the dust covered floorboards in the corner under a stack of four chairs. After slipping into the building Amber struck up a conversation with the security guard.

“I sure hope we were successful in our endeavor to hide our tracks?”

“I think it’s safe to say we made a clean get away.”

“Maybe we should watch the outside world for a few more minutes.”

“If it will put your mind at rest?” said Haleton.

Amber craned her neck to look out the window at the abandoned school grounds. “I can’t see past the thick bush, covering the window. The next room might have been the perfect pick.”

“Let’s move to the next room,” suggested Haleton.

He walked to the door and found it locked. He led Amber over to the window and helped her scramble outside.

The second room looked exactly the same as the first. Amber stuck her nose out of the broken window pane to study the surrounding area.

The white fog started to lift. The first rays of the sun were warming the air making the birds chirp. Amber noticed movement not far from the school, but a medium sized native tree prevented her from seeing past it.

She sighed at an over-zealous dog leaping from behind the tree as it led the female jogger towards the school oval. Amber turned away from the window to look at Haleton.

“All clear on the security guard front,” she reported.

“Good.”

“This room seems to be a derelict,” she said gazing around.

“Yes, it is.”

“You sound over positive.” queried Amber. “How can you be so sure?”

“This is the exact piece of land a ten storey building will be erected in 2012.”

“You know this from your trips into the future?”

“Yes. I asked the locals what was here before the building. They assured me the land had been set aside for a school. The government in their wisdom sold the land due to the drop in enrolments of the area.”

“Why did you need to know the history of the land a building will be built on?”

“The tenth floor belonged to you.”

“Me!”

“Don’t sound so shocked. You are a very successful business woman.”

“Tell me, what sort of business will I be into?”

“Maybe I shouldn’t say.”

Amber stood square to Haleton, pushing her hands onto her hips. “I think I have the right to know.”

Haleton remained deep in thought for several moments before buckling. “The tenth floor is designated for your medical surgery. The office has a great view. There’s an endless queue in the waiting room. Your appointment books to every one of the twelve rooms are full.”

“I actually made it through my studies?”

“Yes. You graduated top of your class.”

Amber started to shake her head. “This is too much to handle all at the same time.”

Haleton stepped to her side, cradling her in his arms. “I know how you feel. It is a hard thing to digest.”

“You’ve certainly got that right.”

“Tomorrow when everything has settled down I’m sure you’ll be able to make sense of it all.”

Haleton took hold of Amber’s hand and walked her over to a bench. “I don’t want to interrupt your analysis of me, but I need your help in reading the cloth. The clock is ticking.”

Amber watched Haleton unfold the material and gently place it on the bench. “The material sure looks old,” she said.

“Yes, old and fragile. At the top left-hand corner of the cloth, an emblem appears to have been stamped into the material.”

“To me it looks like a drawing of a ring the priest’s wore. The letters have been written in black ink. What a shame the letters are almost completely faded,” reported Amber.

“If it weren’t for my vampire senses I’d have difficulty in reading what it says.”

Amber looked sideways at Haleton. Her eyebrows angled to a point. Her voice sounded full of doubt. “You can read them?”

“Yes, I can.”

“What does it say?”

“Haleton, if you are reading this, I’m happy for you. The antidote has been written on a website to help preserve it. To open the website you need to have a password. ‘777.’ I can’t say anything more in case Crompton finds the antidote and changes the formula. You’ll work it out. ‘P.T.M.’”

Amber straightened her back. “What do the three initials stand for?”

“At a guess, I’d say Macularta.”

“How could a priest from 1749AD know about a website? It’s all too coincidental.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“All this business of antidotes to a vampire curse and the like; have you set me up?”

“No. I’d never do such a horrible thing.”

“I’m fighting against those doubt ideas again,” admitted Amber.

Haleton turned from the face of the only woman he ever wanted to love. He knew it would be impossible for her to believe the tale of the blood red rose. How could he blame her? He and Amber were from two completely different times. He’d probably feel the same if the tables were turned. He hated the notion she might never love him back. How he loathed the curse the council of four bestowed upon him. He’ll never understand why they did such a horrific thing.

Haleton placed the scroll on the bench and started to walk out of the room.

Amber grabbed him by the arm. “Don’t you dare to even contemplate walking off on me?”

Haleton growled his warning.

“You can’t scare me off so easily mister.”

“Leave me alone.”

Haleton pulled away and was at the door to the room before Amber could blink. He pushed the door off its hinges and followed the air-borne door into the corridor.

Amber found her hero pacing the corridor on her right. She walked up to him, standing in his path. “William, you didn’t answer my question.”

Shaking his head, Haleton chuckled.

“You think all this is funny?”

“No not in the least.”

“If you’re telling me the truth I think you should let me in on the joke.”

“If I don’t laugh at this horrendous vampire curse it will send me insane.”

Amber shrugged. “I can only imagine.”

“You are indeed a stubborn woman.”

“I’d call it being determined.”

“Are you saying you want to be near me? To be my friend?” asked Haleton.

“I want to be by your side forever. I just need time to understand.”

Both Amber and Haleton stared at the other. Both chuckled at the same time.

“Please, I need to know one thing; is this whole mess you’re in on the level or am I being set up for a movie?”

“I wish it were a setup,” replied Haleton.

“I think you should explain it to me.”

“The vampire antidote has been handed down through the generations by someone other than Macularta. The unknown person obviously put the information on a website.”

“You don’t sound too convincing.”

“I’m at a loss to understand it myself,” confessed Haleton.

“For now, let me say I agree. I’m sure in time the truth will be discovered. I think we should focus on the task at hand.”

The pair walked back to the room side by side. Haleton gave Amber an awkward smile before holding the small piece of square canvas at eye level. “Amber, please be a gem and shine the torchlight on the words.”

The moment the light was shone on the material Haleton stood staring at the words he’d overlooked. He whispered the rest.

“Buried with me is the answer you seek. Find the book called; ‘The Blood Red Rose.’ You must read the last line standing at the altar after you have swallowed the antidote; 777.”

Haleton carefully rolled the canvas up placing it gently into his coat pocket. He checked his watch. “Three hours left. We have to go.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you. I’ve decided I need a straight answer, right now.”

“I can’t give you one. To answer your questions I have to show you.”

“I need something more than to be shown,” said Amber. The tone of her voice didn’t side on attack or defend, it lay somewhere in the middle. “Please, tell me everything about this supposed vampire curse. I’m confused about my feelings for you. I need to settle all this in my heart before we go any further.”

“I don’t think you could cope.”

“Thank you. I’ve heard everything I need to know.”

Haleton watched Amber walk away. He stood at the window long after she left the room. His spirit dropped to its lowest point he’d ever known. He could feel another bout of depression setting in. He opened the material he found at the grave and read the note again. It revealed nothing new. He felt helpless as he came to the realization he had just lost the love of a wonderful young woman. He’d been too wrapped up in himself to be aware she’d thrown herself at his feet and more than willing to wear the entire consequences of the curse. He’d unknowingly fallen to the rules of the curse yet again.

“What an exciting moment.”

Haleton whirled around. “Crompton.”

“You make for a touching scene.”

“What would you know? I thought when you disappeared before you were out of time and gone for good.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” taunted Crompton. “I’ve mastered the art of dematerializing at will. It takes practice. I’m more than willing to teach you. Here, I brought you a present. Call it a make-up gift.” He threw Craig Benyon at Haleton’s feet, growling. “We’ll drink his blood together. It’ll be you and me. I guarantee we’ll be transported to the same year. Together we’ll be unstoppable. William, let the idea sink deep into your brain. Take my advice, forget the girl. Together we can have any woman we want. Picture this, in a matter of a short amount of time our gang will increase. Once we rid the world of every evil soul nothing will stop us. We’ll go from thirteen to three hundred then on to millions of unstoppable vampires. Tell me, who can stop us?”

“I can guess every so often an innocent life will be wasted,” hissed Haleton.

“It’s part of the course.”

“You can have the whole idea to yourself. I refuse to be a part of your evil plans. I’ll have it known I’m devoting my entire life to track and destroy every one of your gang. Once I’ve reached my goal I’ll be looking for you.”

“We can’t be defeated. We are immortal,” Crompton spat.

“I’ll uncover the answer to the antidote, become mortal and change you back into a mortal. I will see to it your lifeline will be severed.”

“I forgive you yet again for your vain outburst. Come, William Haleton, let’s drink of the Benyon mortal.”

Crompton marched over. Lifting Craig off his feet by the collar, he studied the trembling man. “Fear has invaded half his brain already. His jugular vein is protruding nicely. Haleton put him out of his misery.”

“You know nothing about misery.”

“True. The council of four actually did me a favour when they changed me into a vampire.”

Haleton grabbed hold of Craig, throwing him out into the corridor. “Go, you’re free. Run harder than the wind blows in a storm. Run like you’ve never run before. Go find Amber and run home. Whatever you do don’t look back.”

Craig looked at Haleton through half closed eyes, waiting for the insane laugh which should have accompanied the command. He hesitated only long enough to understand the door was his only means of escape. He blinked at the man who stood at the window. In a quick turn, he started a stumbling run down the corridor to the outside.

Crompton’s eyes narrowed, trying to stare Haleton down.

“You’ll pay dearly for mocking me.”

Crompton moved to capture Benyon one more time.

Haleton cut him off at the door, allowing Craig enough time to burst into the sunlight.

“Get out of my way,” growled Crompton. He lifted his arm to sweep the blockage from his path.

“I will not have you harm one of my friends. Remember this cousin, one day our paths will intersect again. When that day comes I will have my revenge. It will be your day of reckoning.”

Crompton hissed and bared his long eyeteeth, flashing Haleton a wild dirty look.

“If I still had plenty of time I’d fight you right now. I must join my gang.” He pointed a long finger at Haleton. “I believe one day we will face off.”

“I look forward to it.”

Crompton disappeared in a puff of black smoke.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

INWARDLY HALETON felt like a defeated man. Standing at the broken doorway his whole body ached at losing Amber. He slowly lifted his eyes to view the outside. He couldn’t

live with the vampire curse any longer. He either needed to end it by his own death or be cured. The way he felt he didn't care which. The only thing he could focus on, whatever came first needed to be right now. He lashed out at the wall using a tight-fisted punch. He glared at his hand. Not a single bone was broken. He felt no emotion at having punched a large hole in the wall.

Slowly Haleton lifted his gaze. A determined look replaced his depressed expression. Sprinting outside his heart doubled in speed. He stopped to study the area. Surely Amber couldn't have gone too far.

Haleton's shadow floated to the top of a large oak tree for a bird's eye view. See no sign of Amber he sprinted to the playground. He came to an abrupt halt, staring at the swing set. The seat on one of the swings looked to be slightly moving. He started to search for the person who set the swing into motion.

Nothing else moved.

Haleton stood motionless, barely breathing listening for the slightest rustle of leaves. Using his sharp vampire skills he knew he could easily locate Amber. If he were discovered by anyone who didn't understand he knew they'd form a posse to hunt him down. He didn't care about the council of four's warning booming through his mind. 'Stay too long in a time and the hunter will become the hunted.'

Then Haleton heard it.

The noise sounded faint, yet distinct. Haleton stood listening to the quickening of the trespasser's heartbeat. The booming sounded like it came from inside the industrial rubbish bin. Haleton noted the large black lid had been propped up.

"It could be a perfect sanctuary," whispered Haleton.

A faint scraping noise inside the bin distracted the hypnotic beat. He soared through the air, landing feet first in the bin. For a moment, both the aggressor and the hunted stared at each other.

"What took you so long? I started to think maybe you don't love me."

Haleton pushed back into the shade of the bin lid to materialize. He put out his arms. Sitting in the shadow of the bin he realized he didn't have anything to fear. He pushed his torment away. Never before had he come across such strong emotions from a woman. He knew she'd be by his side to love him forever.

"I take it you've decided everything is on the level?"

"Seeing you dematerialized into a shadow again and the way you found me so easily I'd have to say yes."

"I've an important question?" said Haleton.

"Do you always have to spoil the moment?"

"It's never my intention."

"Ask away." Amber giggled, battering her black eyelashes at him.

"Does it bother you I'm a vampire?"

"No." Amber undid one of his shirt buttons. Her finger touched his chest. "Is it true vampires can do it all night long?"

"I've heard the rumour."

"Yes or no?" asked Amber.

"I can't wait to find out?" Haleton bent his head to give Amber a long passionate kiss. Love instantly ignited the spark into a raging fire.

A scraping noise close to the side of the bin forced the love pair freeze. Haleton placed his finger to his lips to signal absolute quiet. He listened to the tone of the intruder's heartbeat. He looked puzzled; the beat wasn't Craig's or Alex Crompton's. He glanced at Amber's worried look, kissed her forehead and whispered in her ear.

"It'll be okay, I'll take a look."

Haleton leaned into the sunlight. In a heartbeat, the metamorphosis had been complete. He'd reverted back into a black shadow.

"There you are." The stabbing tone of a snarl echoed off the inside walls of the bin.

Amber burst into sobs.

"Get out," growled the voice. "If you don't start to move your arse out of the hiding place you dug yourself into I'll be forced to drag you out. Now move."

Amber stood. Pushing her fists onto her hips, she glared at the cemetery security guard. "Don't you think you're overstepping the mark, not to mention the boundaries of your job?"

"Little darlin' you haven't a clue."

"I'm an Australian; I know my rights."

"I don't give a flyin' crap. When the cops hear what you've been up to, have a good guess at which side they'll be on."

Looking around Amber wore a hint of a grin.

"Forget about your hero boyfriend he's nowhere to be seen. I've been keeping an eye out waiting for him to show his ugly face."

"He's far from ugly. If you've been watching this bin you'd have seen him."

"I saw him jump into the bin. I never saw him leave."

Amber spoke calmly. "William slipped out the back of the bin."

"Snakes slither away to hide; it's of no consequence to me. The cops will find him soon enough."

"He changed into a shadow."

"You're an excellent storyteller."

Amber jumped from the bin. Handcuffs were placed around both her wrists tethering them securely together.

"What's your name sweet drop?"

"My name is Amber Cantala. What's yours?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"Or won't."

"For your information sweet drop and for security reasons, I never divulge my name. I wouldn't want any offenders I arrest to come visit me unexpectedly in the middle of the night." The guard raised his eyebrows, shoving the girl in the shoulder blades. "Now walk back to the cemetery."

"Are you going to dig a big hole so you can bury me alive?"

"Don't tempt me. The cops will be closing in on the office by the time we arrive."

Amber didn't say a word, walking the short distance back to the cemetery. The gates were wide open when they arrived. She was steered towards a small brick building not much larger than a normal size bedroom. The guard twisted the doorknob, opening the office door.

"Sit on the chair," he growled.

"Can I sit in the dark?" asked Amber, battering her eyelids.

"Suit yourself."

Before walking off the guard slammed and locked the door. Pulling his mobile phone from his pocket he re-dialed for the police.

Haleton materialized. In moments, the handcuffs lay open on the desk. "I've practiced the trick for years," he confessed.

Amber hugged her hero. "I don't need any more convincing you're a vampire," she said dropping a tear.

"You're too beautiful a girl to be crying, please stop."

"Thank you for the kind words."

Haleton easily unlocked the office door. He opened it the width of a splinter to see where the guard was. The sunlight streamed in instantly turning him to semi-transparent. He looked sideways at Amber.

"The guard has his back to the building. Once I've opened the door I want you to run towards the school. If you're quiet you should be able to escape undetected."

Amber set herself to run.

Haleton pulled the door open. He watched her sprint towards the main entrance. Amber reached the main cemetery gate long before the guard knew of the escape.

Back at the school, Haleton looked lovingly at Amber. Her chest was still heaving from the sprint. He waited patiently for her heart to slow before speaking.

"After you ran off to hide in the bin, Crompton stepped into the room dragging Craig by the collar. I stood up to my cousin and freed Craig. At that moment, I knew I must find you. The gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach feels endless. If I were a mortal the love pangs gripping my heart would be a normal emotion. The feeling has eluded me for so long I've forgotten what it feels like. The emotion has flooded my consciousness, exploding to every cell in my body. Amber, I apologize for not explaining the rules of the curse."

"I apologize to you."

"What for, you've nothing to be sorry about?"

"For not allowing you time to explain. It's a big thing to grasp."

"The rules of the curse are hard to swallow. It took months before I actually understood what it meant to have something dictate the way I live and what freedom I'd lost."

"I need to confess a couple of things," whispered Amber, choking back a tear.

"What?"

"Let me say first, I love you. I think I must have been afraid to follow my heart. My mind kept saying wait. Make sure. Be certain. When I hid in the bin I started thinking long and hard about us. There's one remaining thing still puzzling me. You informed me Crompton's time was at an end."

"I thought so too. He confessed he can manipulate his body into smoke whenever the need arises. I'm positive his gang has gone from this time zone. He will soon follow."

"What did Crompton have to gain by bringing Craig to you?"

"He wanted both of us to drink his blood simultaneously."

"Why didn't you?"

"The answer is simple. Whenever I see or think of you I have to fight the vampire urges surging through my body. They alone dictate my fate. The curse wants me to drink your sweet smelling blood. I could never do such a thing. If I keep resisting the urge using all the love I have for you I know when my time in this year has ticked down to zero, love might have conquered and won the day. Everything I've said can be summed up in three words. 'I love you.'"

Amber's grin quickly widened. The wet glisten in her eyes welled. Tears dropped from her eyes, cascading down each cheek. She said in a voice no louder than a whisper.

"Up to the moment when we first met I'd been convinced love, at first sight, belonged in a fairytale. I'm rapt to announce I'm wrong. The second thing I want to confess is I devised a test to finally prove what I felt is true. I don't need you to be tested anymore."

Haleton opened his arms. Amber stepped forward. For a few minutes, they stood locked in a loving embrace.

Eventually, Haleton slipped Amber to arm's length. "What's the test?"

Amber pursed her lips, shrugging. "It's not important. Forget it."

"I'd like to perform the test. Please, tell me what you planned?"

"It's a small effective test. If you passed, my brain will understand there's no way on this earth a mortal man could have completed the task."

Haleton placed his finger to her lips. "I accept the challenge."

"Are you sure? It's really not important."

"It is to me."

"Okay, you asked. While I sat in the dump bin I thought up a way to prove if everything I've witnessed was on the level. Follow me. I'll explain the test."

Haleton needed to run to keep up.

"When we arrived at the school I spied a newspaper in the first room." She looked through the glass door, noting the newspaper hadn't been moved. "I want you to tell me who wrote the article on the second page. If you're correct right down to the full stop I'll know there's no trick."

"How will reading the article prove anything?"

"The second page has been folded so even you couldn't possibly have read it."

"Easy done," Haleton replied. "The only thing I need you to do is shine the torch on my face. When I'm a shadow shine the light on the paper. I'll read the article and bring the paper over so you can see if I'm correct."

Haleton stepped into the light of the torch. The moment he dematerialized into a shadow he floated towards the crack under the door. Before slipping into the room he glanced over his shoulder. What he witnessed would break the wild spirit of any man. Amber's eyes were gleaming in the dull light of the torch beam. He wanted to take her in his arms so he could hold her for eternity. If he actually failed her little test he wondered how she could even start to believe the tale he told. The idea he might have revealed too much information too soon plagued his mind.

'She's an amazing young woman to even put up with the likes of a man who's a vampire.' He thought.

Haleton shook his head. He even thought it was a crazy notion the first time the council of four mentioned the curse. He couldn't believe a human could be so callous.

Haleton scooped the newspaper from off the floor, unfolded it and turned the page. "Vince Stamatopolous wrote the article on politics," he reported, stepping back to the door to show Amber the article.

She checked to see if he'd been correct before looking at him. Tears flowed unrestricted over her cheeks. "Why did you want to be tested?" she sobbed.

Haleton dematerialized, slipping through the crack under the door. In the semi-dark corridor, he materialized to be by her side. "I wanted you to test me. I sensed you needed it."

Amber swayed on her feet. Haleton steadied her.

“I apologize for not believing you,” she croaked.

“It’s okay. It took me a long time to grasp the whole idea too.”

“How long?” questioned Amber.

“Months and it has only taken you hours.”

“I’m not sure what to do,” whispered Amber, checking her watch. “Your time here in 2010AD is fast running out.”

“I agree. Even though my idea might be a long shot, I think there’s still a way I can stay in this time.”

“If there’s a possible solution you should take it.”

Haleton downed his left knee, looking expectantly into the eyes of the only woman he felt certain he could ever love.

Amber let go of a slight giggle. “What are you doing?”

“Amber Cantala, please consider my marriage proposal? I’d be most grateful if you’d accept my hand in marriage.”

Amber’s grin couldn’t have been any wider. “Yes,” she whispered. “Yes. I knew Mr. Right will come along sooner than later. Seven nights ago I dreamt we actually met. I didn’t know I’d fall in love with a vampire.” She knelt and kissed her fiancé.

“Soon to be an ex-vampire, if everything goes to plan.” Haleton yanked Amber from off the floor, holding her in a horizontal position. He kissed her using all the passion he could muster. Eventually, he allowed her to surface. “I can’t ever risk losing you,” he admitted.

“How can we figure this mess out?”

Haleton showed her the canvas and the missing words.

“We have to get to the grave site,” suggested Amber. “It looks like I’ll have to be the one to do the work. Digging I mean. There aren’t many hours left. The sun will definitely slow us up. I only hope the security guard has gone home.”

“It’s okay, I’ve figured everything out,” said Haleton. “Up to now I have avoided explaining the full rules of the curse. Believe me, I’m innocent of the charges bestowed upon me.”

“I believe you. Please, tell me everything.”

Amber walked towards the tram terminus, holding her mobile phone against her ear. The few people listening into the conversation either scrunched their noses or portrayed a bored look at the seemingly one-way conversation. They missed the fact there happened to be a second shadow staying in almost perfect synchronization to hers.

“The curse wants me to take the life of an evil person,” explained Haleton.

“You’ve said those words before.”

“Yes, I have. The part you don’t know is; to rid myself of the curse I need to kill one more person. I detest such a thing, it’s horrendous. After the death of the one-hundredth soul, I’ll be free of the curse.”

“I think only one more death could be regarded to be good news.”

“I guess.”

“Why the doubtful tone?”

“The problem is I don’t know if I will stay in the same year. I’ve had some success in willing myself to stay in the same time, but they are few and far in between.”

Amber’s gaze sank to the ground. She focused on the exact place where Haleton’s eyes were watching her. “I love you,” she said. “If there is even a slight possibility in a couple of

hours I might never see you again, the thought shred's my heart. I want to be a part of your life forever.”

“The end of the curse is the only part I've yet to understand.”

“I think you should tell it to me.”

“You don't know what you're asking.”

“Yes, I do.”

“The note said to finish the curse I have to find my soul mate.”

“I can't see the problem,” said Amber.

“I don't believe there is such a thing. It's probably a rumour or a myth some lonely man or woman cooked up centuries ago to attract a mate.”

Amber hurriedly boarded the tram, sitting in the first available seat. “Didn't you ask for my hand in marriage?”

“Yes.”

“I accepted.”

“The note reads you need to be my soul mate.”

“I'm not sure if I am or not or even if there is such a thing, but I know I'm in love and every part of me craves for you.”

Haleton shook his head. He said bluntly. “Forget all about my idea of us being together, it'll never work.”

“If you don't believe fate has brought us together why did you even bother to kiss me like I've never been kissed before?”

“I was stupid. I should never have talked to you in the first place.”

“So now you hate me?” Amber questioned.

“No, I could never hate you.”

“Mister, you have confused the hell out of me.”

“What we're feeling can never be.”

Amber hovered over Haleton. There were no tears in her eyes. The painful expression on her face made him feel more of a loser than ever.

The tram rattled to a stop. Amber glared at Haleton before power walking to the door. For only half a second she hesitated before stepping down onto the road.

Haleton watched her run off towards a park. Seeing young couples stroll slowly along the pathway holding hands made him feel worse. His thoughts were flowing through his mind faster than the vampire blood being pumped throughout his body. He could've easily stopped Amber, but what gave him the right to force any girl to love him. To even contemplate a woman wanting to be anywhere near him, was an insane idea. If the roles were reversed and he'd fallen in love with a female vampire he'd sprint away from her so fast his feet wouldn't touch the ground.

Looking out the window of the tram Haleton sighed.

‘Maybe somewhere out there just out of sight is the woman I'm destined to meet.’ His sarcastic chuckle sounded like a slow antagonistic gargle of noise. ‘Maybe she's a vampire. Who really knows how many mortals the council of four converted? There could be a multitude of people aimlessly roaming the world looking for their one ray of hope. Once cured I might be able to track down the rest, helping them to be set free,’ he thought.

The tram jerked to a stop at the next safety zone. Haleton stared at the young woman who had jumped on board and started marching down the aisle. She came to an abrupt stop, hovering over him. Haleton saw her raise her finger, beckoning him to follow.

Across the road in the small park packed full of thick medium size trees she sat, waiting for Haleton to materialize.

He sat in silence waiting for the young lady to speak.

In the time, it takes three male joggers to come and go Haleton started to fidget. He started pulling at the grass.

“I’d be nervous too if I were you,” the young lady snarled. “A woman’s scorn is not to be taken lightly.”

Haleton raised his eyebrow waiting for her to speak her mind.

Amber shook her head, wagging her finger at his face. “Listen carefully to every one of my words.”

Haleton slowly nodded.

“Let’s sum up everything since we met. You have saved my life more than once. You have confided in me about being a vampire. You have proven everything about you is on the level. You have downed your knee to ask me to be your wife. I accepted. If that isn’t being a soul mate, there is no such thing. In any case, be brave. Give it a go.”

“Can I say something?”

“No, you may not.” She giggled uncontrollably. “You may say something when you have finished kissing me. Then I don’t want you to kiss me again until after we’re married.”

“I certainly don’t deserve such a warm adorable young lady.”

“Enough chatter. Kiss me. We have to discover the antidote and be married at the church.” She glanced at her watch. “We have exactly two hours, thirty minutes remaining.”

Haleton gave Amber a lasting kiss.

“We should hurry,” she whispered, breathless.

“Can you comprehend what you’re up against? Being married to a vampire might be impossible to endure.”

“Do you think you have the willpower to stay married to a mortal?”

“I sure do.”

“It’s good enough for me.”

Haleton and Amber ran across the road to the shopping mall where people were already arriving by the busloads. Amber and Haleton were quickly swallowed up by the influx of shoppers. The large sporting goods store they walked towards loomed directly ahead at the opposite end of the mall. Together they power walked along the corridor. Amber grinned when a ruckus erupted over the darkening area in front of them.

“The camping section is at the rear of the store to your right,” explained a young girl at the counter. “I’m not sure if I should let you in, the overhead lights must have a fault.”

“We’ll take our chances,” replied Haleton.

Before the girl could complain Amber and Haleton were starting to zigzag their way through the many shoppers who stopped to gossip over the failed lighting.

“A two man tent will do the trick,” suggested Haleton, swiping a large box from off the shelf. “Seeing how the guard confiscated my torch we can buy new ones and a small battery operated drill on the way out.”

Inside five minutes they were queuing at the checkout.

A tall mid to late teen boy scanned the goods. Smiling at Amber he looked her up and down, raising his eyebrows. Haleton leaned on the counter, hissing. The lad started to tremble, placed the money in the till and gave a sharp nod before running off to the tearoom to vomit.

“What on earth did you say?” asked Amber.

“I never said a word. My silent signal relayed a message he should back off.”

Chuckling, Amber shook her head.

Soon they were back on the tram, heading for the cemetery. Scanning the area for the guard the pair made it to Macularta’s grave unnoticed. Amber dropped the large black bag she carried at her feet and quickly erected the small tent directly over the gravesite. She parted the narrow blue fabric and slipped through the gap.

The shadow accompanying her materialized inside the tent, grinning at her surprised look.

“I’ll never get used to it.”

“I hope you never have to,” said Haleton, on a sigh.

“About before when I stormed out of the school building,” said Amber, choking on her words.

“Forget that it happened. I’d have done the same if I were you.”

“There’s the problem, you aren’t me. I’m ashamed at how I reacted.”

“Don’t be. I fully understand.”

Haleton reeled Amber in close. She didn’t resist his advances. He could feel her warm exhaling breath sweep across his cheeks. Their lips touched. A slight hesitation followed before they were glued together.

Finally, they finished the kiss.

“What happened to the idea you don’t want me to kiss you again before we’re married.”

“To hell with what I said,” confessed Amber.

Tightening his grip, Haleton kissed her again.

Eventually, Amber pushed him gently back, whispering. “We have only two hours left and the sun is warming.”

Haleton reluctantly let her go. They set to work cutting a hole in the floor of the tent. Haleton connected the battery pack, placed a drill bit in place and commenced to drill a small hole in the top of the tomb. He drilled a second hole next to the first. Haleton put the drill down then looked confidently at Amber. “I’m through. Where’s the torch?”

Amber extracted three large torches, placing one on the marble top. She clicked the light on. The beam of light from the torch lit up the sides of the hole. The second torch lit the other hole.

Haleton swiped up the third torch, clicking the switch to the on position. He placed the long thin torch face up. He winked at Amber before leaning into the light, instantly dematerializing and slipping through the first hole.

Haleton easily slid into the badly decomposed coffin. He moved about the body looking at the bones of the dead priest. The eye sockets seemed to be watching the proceedings. The skull and eye sockets were picked clean. “Amber, move the light a fraction to your right,” he called.

She tilted the torch slightly.

“A little more of an angle will see the light in the perfect position.”

Haleton focused on what was inscribed on the walls and the lid of the coffin. He studied the entire coffin before doubling his efforts to scour the area again.

He found nothing else.

Sliding silently from underneath the torch Haleton found the end wall of the tent still looked relatively dark. He materialized, staring at Amber.

“Did you find anything useful?” she whispered.

The same security guard who discovered Amber the first time lifted the flap of the small tent. The sunlight streamed in. Haleton instantly dematerialized, slipping out of the tent and into the sun.

“What are you doing?” screamed the guard, lunging for Amber’s arm. “I’ve got you now. You escaped before. I knew if I waited long enough you’d be back to vandalize another tombstone. I love it when I’m right. This time, there will be no escape.”

“It was a dare. A stupid medical dare, I swear.”

“I heard a man’s voice. Where did he go?”

“I’m the only one here.”

The guard didn’t look interested in excuses of any kind. He glared at his prisoner through narrowing slits. “Convince me you’re telling the truth?”

“Take a look around, there’s no one else here.”

“What about the man’s voice.”

Amber cleared her throat, trying to imitate Haleton’s deep voice. She looked at the guard and said seriously.

“The full dare is to sit in a tent, recite a poem, read the first chapter of a paperback novel and quote the Lord’s Prayer in a deep voice.”

The guard doubted the lie she spun. His eyes narrowed further. “Pack this mess up. You have ten seconds to get out of my sight.”

Amber folded the tent, the torches and started walking in five seconds. She’d crossed the road in ten. The tent and the torches were dumped in the trash on her way to a café. Walking to the back stall she sat and buried her head in her hands.

Haleton materialized placing his arm over her shoulder. “I apologize I couldn’t help further.”

“Not a problem. I had him eating out of my hands. Did you discover anything interesting?”

“I found nothing.”

“What are you trying to say? We snuck into a cemetery, drilled a hole in a coffin and we were caught by a security guard for nothing.”

“Yes.”

“I’m beginning to have doubts.”

“Ignore those thoughts,” begged Haleton. “The only things I found were the numbers ‘777.’ They were etched into the walls of the coffin and the lid. The numbers were everywhere.”

“Those numbers have to be a clue,” suggested Amber, sounding hopeful. “We have to get back to Craig, maybe he has an idea.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CRAIG OPENED his front door. Almost immediately the inside light hanging from the middle of the lounge room ceiling went out, plunging the room into darkness. Haleton followed Amber into the room. Craig groped the tall visitor using a strong grip on the arm.

“Do you understand in the vampire brain of yours how irritating it is when all the lights go out and I have to walk about in a darkened room?” growled Craig.

“It’s necessary I remain in the dark.”

“Listen, fella, I’ll put up with you for Amber’s sake, I just don’t have to like you.”

“Craig, enough,” jeered Amber.

The lad raised his hands, walked back to the door, kicking it shut.

“Have you thought of anything which might help us to discover how to obtain the antidote?” asked Amber.

“Not a thing,” replied Craig. “I’ve been having a bit of trouble concentrating since Crompton grabbed me.”

Amber glared at him. “Suck it up, Craig. You have to start thinking. We need all the help we can get.”

“Time’s short,” added Haleton.

Craig walked past him to Amber’s side. “Garlic is the only idea I can think of.”

“Garlic?” echoed Haleton and Amber in unison.

“It makes sense. Vampire movies can’t be wrong!”

“You watch too much TV,” complained Amber, pointing a long thin finger at him. “I sure hope you’re genuine in wanting to help William.”

“I’d do anything to help you find the antidote.”

“Good, start thinking.”

“Okay, I will. Have you discovered any new facts?” asked Craig.

“The only real clue we have are the numbers. ‘777’,” admitted Amber.

“We only have ninety minutes left to discover the password and the antidote,” said Haleton.

Craig walked out of the room towards his bedroom.

“Where do you think you’re going?” yelled Amber. She started to follow when Haleton placed his hand her shoulder.

“Allow me to talk to Craig.”

Not waiting for Amber’s permission, he marched up to Craig, tapping him on the shoulder.

“Leave me be.”

“I think you and I need to have a lightning talk.”

“Okay Vamps, spill your guts.”

“If the antidote isn’t found in ninety minutes you and Amber will never see me again. Do you want your actions on your conscience for the rest of your life? Bear in mind if you don’t try to help, Amber will probably never speak to you again.”

“I guess you’re right. I apologize. It’s just that I’m jealous.”

“Don’t be. Somewhere out there in this big world is the exact person for you.”

Craig let a slight chuckle slip. “Amber said the same thing.”

“They are wise words from a young lady.”

“Do you love her?”

“Yes, my whole heart loves her.”

“Can I ask if she’ll always be in safe hands?”

“Yes.”

Craig stood to full height and said abruptly. “I relinquish my love for Amber which has built up in my heart to allow you to move in and sweep her off her feet.”

“If Amber heard your statement what do you think she’d say?” quizzed Haleton.

“She doesn’t love me enough.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. She loves you. It’s time for me to graciously bow out of her life.”

“Take my advice. Don’t go too far. One of these days she might come looking for you.”

“I’m not sure if you mean it or you’re just humoring me, but thank you. There is one thing. Let me warn you, if you even hurt a single hair on her head I’ll hunt you down and smash your nose.”

“Are you sure it’s possible?”

“I know what you are. If the only thing I do is scare you into thinking I might be watching you from a distance, I go to my grave knowing I did my best. At my funeral maybe Amber will shed a tear for me.”

“I’ll take your warning onboard. I don’t want you to be my enemy. If I don’t find the antidote in time and I’m sucked into another year, I want you to look after Amber for me.”

“Thank you. It will be my pleasure,” announced Craig.

Haleton gave the man a friendly slap on the shoulder. He walked back up the hall and into the lounge where he found Amber sitting on a dark blue beanbag, sobbing. Haleton knelt at her feet. He studied her closed eyelids.

“It is okay, Craig will find the answer.”

Amber lifted her head to stare at Haleton. “I love you so much I don’t want to lose you.”

“It’ll be okay. We have to put our trust in Craig.”

“I’ll start going through what we know again. There has to be an answer. I feel it’s staring me in the face,” advised Craig.

Amber felt a fresh round of hope devouring her. She wrapped her arms around Haleton’s neck. He slid his lips across her wet cheek and found her lips.

Craig watched the pair kissing before pacing the floor deep in thought. He suddenly stopped. Snapping his fingers, he shouted. The two love birds jumped.

“I think I know how to find the password so we can retrieve the formula for the vampire antidote.”

“Tell us,” insisted Amber.

“The numbers ‘777’ are the key. You said those numbers were inscribed everywhere in the coffin.”

“Maybe they mean nothing more than an ex-priest wanting God’s number to be buried alongside him when he died,” interrupted Amber.

“It’s a good theory however I have another. Come on, we’ve no time to lose. We need to get to the church across the street.”

“How will we find the answer to the curse in a church?” asked Amber.

“It’s all about the numbers ‘777.’” Craig switched his attention to Haleton. “Entering a church won’t affect you in any way?”

“Of course not; it only happens in the movies.”

“So holy ground will do nothing to you?”

Haleton snorted. “Craig, you do watch too much TV.”

“We just can’t open the front door of a church and waltz down the carpet to the altar unannounced,” warned Amber. “We need a valid reason to enter the church in the first place.”

“I believe if we look up the seventh book of the bible we’ll know the password,” explained Craig.

Haleton and Amber were both wearing a blank look.

“You said the password must be something which never changes.”

Amber started nodding and looking excited. “I believe you might onto something solid.”

“What else has come through the centuries; particularly from 1749AD to the year 2010AD which can’t be stolen, destroyed or tampered with? I have to add, how can anyone be expected to guard something which is priceless to no one, except Haleton? If someone who knew nothing of the curse discovered the password they might accidentally get rid of the antidote or change it.”

“It makes a lot of sense,” said Haleton. “No one would suspect the antidote is in the seventh book of the bible. The only thing I’m not sure of is we won’t know if the antidote works until the last second.”

“If we discover it in time we will know,” explained Craig.

“How can we be sure it will be permanent?” asked Amber. “Another horrid thought I’m thinking of is what if Crompton is lurking about watching our every move hoping we’ll lead him to the antidote? He could steal the formula before we have a chance to stop him.”

“It’ll be a total disaster,” blurted Haleton. “If we don’t find the password in time we’ll never have to worry about Crompton or his plans to steal it or even if the antidote works or not.”

Amber checked her watch. She flashed Haleton a look of dread. “We only have eighty-minutes left.”

Amber and Craig sprinted out into the sunshine while Haleton blended in with their shadows as they ran across the road towards the church on the corner. Haleton arrived first, easily slipping through the crack underneath the main doors, materializing on the inside. He turned the large brass key in the lock, swinging the door open wide enough to allow Amber and Craig to slip through the gap.

The marble floor and high ceiling made the entrance feel cool. A large candle had been lit on a side table. The flame danced wildly in the sudden disturbance. The small group marched across the threshold and entered the main room. Amber led the way by walking briskly down the red carpet towards the altar. The noise from the key turning in the lock brought the priest into the chapel carrying a baseball bat. He didn’t look happy.

“Sir, violence won’t be necessary. We’re here to ask for your urgent help,” called Haleton, holding his hand up.

The priest glanced at Amber before raising the baseball bat to shoulder height. “If the girl’s hurt she needs to go to the hospital. As for you two blokes, if you take one more step, I’ll be forced to start swinging. Believe me, when I tell you I coach a junior league team. I know how to hit.”

“Sir, please, put the bat down,” urged Craig. “We’ve come in search of answers.” He raised his hands as if surrendering his soul.

“I’m not injured,” mentioned Amber. Walking up to the priest she painted a warm friendly smile on her face.

“You’re not here to steal anything?”

“Never,” insisted Haleton. He strolled along the red carpet to stand next to Amber. Outstretching his hand, he stated. “I’m William Haleton. The young lady is Amber Cantala. The other young man is Craig Benyon.”

Each of the group shook the hand of the priest. They breathed a sigh of relief when he leaned the baseball bat against the sidewall.

Craig blurted excitedly. "I need to read a bible."

"Surely it's not the reason you broke into the church?" asked the priest. "We have mass here every Sunday, 10:00am sharp."

"We don't have that much time," hinted Haleton. "I'll explain it later when we have more time."

"Would you mind if I open the bible on the altar?" asked Craig, pointing.

The priest wore a doubtful look.

"Please, Sir, this is extremely important."

"This isn't a prank?"

"No," said Amber.

"Please be careful turning the pages."

"I will," replied Craig. He stepped onto the altar and opened the large bible.

"Could I make a suggestion?" confessed the priest.

Craig looked up. He'd already flipped over at least a dozen pages.

"Allow me to find what you're looking for. I don't want the pages damaged."

Haleton signaled for Craig to step away.

The priest positioned himself behind the bible. "What do you want to read?"

"The seventh book of the bible," suggested Craig.

"The book of Judges?" asked the priest. Turning to the page, he started to read.

"We need to know the seventh verse of the seventh chapter of the seventh book," interrupted Craig.

"It's the strangest thing I've ever heard anyone say. It sounds like you want to make a mockery of the church."

Haleton leaned towards the priest. "Good Sir, what is your name?"

The priest swiped his reading glasses from the bridge of his nose. "I'm Father Tuxen."

"You are indeed a kind man. On behalf of my friends, I'd like to thank-you for helping us. We mean no disrespect in any way."

Tuxen fell silent, deep in thought. "You can call me Peter. If you don't mind me saying, I'm on edge because of the way you're dressed. Do you need to find a word or sentence from the bible to enter a masquerade ball?"

"It's a long story," interrupted Amber.

"A very long story," added Craig.

"Sir, I can assure you our presence here is on the level. Everything will be explained in due time. Speaking of which; I now have exactly sixty-seven minutes left," groaned Haleton.

"What will happen after sixty-eight minutes?"

"Sir, I have no time to explain. Please, the words to the verse. I need you to find them," urged Haleton.

Peter Tuxen shook his head as his finger scrolled down the page. It came to rest on the seventh verse. He cleared his throat. His voice changed to an official tone. He sounded like he was about to read to the congregation.

"The lord said to Gideon, by the three hundred men who drank at the water using their hands I will save you."

Craig yelled at the top of his voice. "The verse is exactly what we came for."

"God will save you?" exclaimed Tuxen. "I don't understand what's transpiring here. I think the three of you should leave. You have outstayed your welcome."

Amber stared at Craig. “Don’t tell me Crompton has a gang of three hundred?” she whipped.

“He could have,” said Haleton.

Craig resembled someone who looked to be bursting at the seams to open a birthday present. “Gideon is the password.”

Tuxen lifted his hand to begin massaging his right temple. “Please tell me what’s going on?”

“Thank you for your patience. On behalf of my friends, I have to ask for you to wait a little longer for the explanation. Trust me the answer is worth the wait. Do you have a computer we could use for a minute?” asked Amber.

“I kind of hoped you might suggest you were going to leave my church.”

“Soon,” admitted Haleton.

“I have a computer in my ready room. It’s on a go-slow strike at the moment. I can never get the thing working properly,” moaned Tuxen.

Craig looked the priest in the eye. “If I could borrow the machine for what I need maybe I might be able to fix it for you.”

“Sounds like a fair exchange. Son, if you could fix it and I was given the authority I’d make you a saint. Be my guest. The computer is in the room on your left.”

The group quickly entered the residence of Peter Tuxen.

Craig switched off the overhead light, spied the computer at a side table and got to work. He stabbed several keys before reaching into his top pocket.

“I never go anywhere without my home grown anti-virus. It won’t completely fix the problems. When I’ve more time I’m positive I’ll have her working more effectively than when she was new.”

He plugged the USB into one of the two front ports. Almost instantly the first of many viruses were being eliminated from the machine.

Inside two minutes the computer doubled its speed. Craig used the name ‘Macularta’ to find the website and typed the word ‘Gideon’ to open it. He sat waiting for confirmation the password might have been successful.

Clapping his hands together, Tuxen boasted a huge grin. He looked ready to kiss the computer.

“This machine has never worked this fast. A lovely young woman donated it to the church after she bought a new one six months ago. I thought it might have been a blessing until I tried to use it.”

Craig shook his head as he went back to staring at the monitor.

Haleton checked his watch. “Forty-five minutes.”

“You young people do sound like you’re in a hurry,” said Tuxen.

“We are,” replied Amber.

“Before you go could you explain why you wanted the lights off in the church and in this room?” asked Tuxen.

“It is part of the explanation,” said Haleton. “If Craig is successful, I beg you to have an open mind.”

Tuxen’s brow wrinkled. A few beads of sweat formed on his balding head. “I’m not sure I like where this is heading!”

Craig made a cat leap from behind the computer monitor up ending his chair. Excitement plastered over his face. "I did it," he screamed. "I knew I was on the correct path, but I needed to control myself just in case I happened to be wrong."

Amber and Haleton rushed to his side, viewing his findings from over his shoulder. The only evidence the computer actually started to do anything; the cursor suddenly changed into an egg timer.

Amber raised her eyebrows, glancing at Craig. "Are you sure you broke into the website? Looking at the monitor I have my doubts."

"Wait for it," hinted Craig. He picked the chair up off the floor and sat staring at the monitor. "Come on, come on," he whispered at the computer. "Enlighten me."

Haleton checked his watch. "If the information doesn't come through the blank screen soon it'll be too late."

"How many minutes are left?" Amber asked.

"Not enough," he replied. "We have exactly forty minutes."

"We're out of time," said Amber. "Craig, you gave it a good try."

"The game is not finished until the final siren sounds," hissed Craig.

He wore a look Amber had never seen before. She kissed the top of his head. "You have the determination to be anything you want. I'm proud to have you as a friend."

Craig's face flushed crimson. He bent over the computer to hide his apparent embarrassment.

The monitor lit. A second later the website opened. Craig immediately started to read the words.

"This message has been passed down through generations from the year 1749AD and is for William Haleton from your friend Macularta. I live in hope it is you Haleton who is reading this letter and not Crompton or a single member of his gang which totals at least three-hundred. Allow me to be the first to say congratulations in discovering the password. Rose-a-lee Cantala believes the following recipe is correct.

One-cup measure of each of the following:

Holy water, lemon juice, vinegar, garlic clove, one drop of blood from your soul mate.

After mixing the potion you have to be standing at the church altar holding the hands of your wife-to-be. You have to recite the last line of the book titled. "The Blood Red Rose."

Craig grinned at Amber before switching his attention to Haleton. His smile was wider than his ego. "I told you garlic has to be used to get rid of a vampire."

Tuxen back stepped away from the group. "Are you all vampires?" he asked in a trembling voice.

"No," Amber stated in a matter-of-fact tone. "Only William Haleton is. Peter, we don't want any trouble. We're not here to give you any grief."

"Girl, you've succeeded in doing the opposite. Besides, there is no such thing as vampires."

"Sorry to correct the theory," blurted Amber.

Haleton stared into the priest's eyes, saying. "You have to keep whatever happens in this church a secret. No one must ever find out about any of this. Please, you must agree."

"I need to sit," moaned Tuxen.

Amber escorted him to a chair and attempted to relay in a short detailed story about what was going on. Haleton walked over to help fill in some of the details.

“I’ll do what you ask of me. I’ll keep your secret inside my head. I’ll never utter a word of this to any living person. I vow to take it to my grave. Besides, who’d believe me?”

“Thank you,” whispered Amber.

“Time is short we need to go shopping,” Haleton said. “We have exactly forty minutes remaining.”

“Let me help,” suggested Tuxen, standing. “I have everything you need in the cupboard above my kitchen bench, except the book.”

“We should be able to find the book across the street in the library,” squealed Amber.

“You have saved us over an hour’s delay,” hinted Haleton.

“Go, go,” said the priest, waving his hands at the group. “By the time you return, everything will be ready for the marriage ceremony. Craig can mix the formula while I find my marriage robe. Don’t forget you have to bring back a witness to sign the marriage certificate.”

Amber looked puzzled. “Why?” she asked.

“It’s only in case there is a lawful snag at a later date. If I’m asked, I can say it wasn’t a forced wedding.”

Haleton grinned at Amber. She smiled back.

“Will you two get going?” urged Craig. “You keep mentioning the number of minutes left and there you stand wasting what precious little time you have left.”

“You have a valid point,” said Haleton.

Amber and Haleton sprinted for the main door of the church. Haleton stopped in his tracks as the door opened.

“Sunlight, my demise,” he whispered.

Amber put her hand on his shoulder. “Stay here. When I return I’ll have the book in my hand. Even if I have to drag a person across the street using my teeth, I’ll have a witness.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE LIBRARY looked modern and sat adjacent to the church. Unseen Amber made it to the main door.

“I sure hope they stock the book,” Amber mumbled, stepping through the self-opening door.

Standing inside the entrance she scanned the large room. She counted at least ten rows of shelves stacked to the brim. The automatic doors were half shut before she spied a woman sitting at a desk at the far side of the massive room.

Amber ran across the room, hovering over the elderly woman who looked busy placing stickers on the back of books. After she applied each sticker she placed the book, spine up, on a waist high trolley.

“May I help you?” asked the woman looking up over her frameless glasses.

“I sure hope so. I need to borrow a book titled ‘The Blood Red Rose.’ Do you have it in stock?”

“I’ll take a look on the computer. I don’t suppose you know the name of the author?”

Amber shrugged, scrunching her nose. “Sorry, I don’t.”

“No matter, if the book exists and we don’t have it I can order it in for you.”

“If I can’t obtain a copy in the next five minutes it won’t matter.”

“Pardon?” questioned the woman, pulling her glasses off her nose.

“I assure you I mean no disrespect.” Amber shook her head, mumbling. “I sound exactly like William. The sooner he loses the old fashioned words the happier we’ll both be.”

“Young lady I didn’t quite catch the last sentence you said?”

“It’s not important.”

The woman replaced her glasses on her nose, focusing on the computer screen. She punched in the title of the book, pursing her lips. She grunted a few times before looking up. “If you will follow me, I’ll show you where it is.”

“So you have the book in stock?” squealed Amber.

“Yes, we have several. You do realize if you knew the name of the author you could have found it yourself.”

“I’m sure I’d have no trouble.”

The woman led the way down the middle of the room, her salt and pepper hair bouncing slightly. Her stiletto heels hardly left a dent in the new grey fiber carpet. The librarian stopped at the shelf marked with the letter ‘M’ in big bold lettering. Changing direction she faced the books at the start of the ‘S’ section. “The author’s name is Mark Stewart. The book you seek is under ‘STE.’ The woman squatted to take a book off the shelf.

“That’s the one,” squealed Amber. “‘The Blood Red Rose.’ May I borrow it?”

“Certainly, do you have a library card?”

Amber’s gaze fell onto a small dirt patch on the carpet at her feet. She sighed heavily before lifting her gaze to look the woman directly in her eyes. Wearing a confident expression she said.

“No, I don’t. I think I’d like to join this fine establishment. The service so far has been first class.”

“I’ll be more than willing to complete the paperwork. I can make a library card while you wait. It’ll only take five minutes.”

“Can it be done any quicker?”

“Five minutes isn’t long.”

“At this moment in time, it is. What if I buy the book?” suggested Amber.

“I guess it could be arranged. The library can always buy more books. It would also save me from making a laminated a card. Only, problem is I’m not sure of the price.”

“Do you think forty dollars might cover the cost?”

“I’d say so.”

Amber handed over the money, swiping the book from the woman.

“It will only take a moment to write you a receipt.”

“It’s okay I don’t want one, but there is one more thing I’d like to ask.”

“You want me to search for a second book?”

“Nothing so difficult; I have a huge favour to ask you.”

“Ask away,” said the woman. “I’m more than curious.”

“I’d love for you to be a witness to a wedding.”

“Where and when is the wedding to take place?”

“At the church across the road; right now.”

The woman started to shake her head from side to side. I think you came into the library to butter me up by asking for a book you really don't want. I feel a headache starting. I think you should leave."

"This is entirely legitimate," said Amber.

"I don't have the time, come back tomorrow."

"No is not an option."

"Who'd be getting married at this hour?"

"Me. It will take exactly five minutes of your time. I'm sure you can spare five minutes."

"I certainly don't like the tone in your voice. My answer is a definite no."

"I'm Amber Cantala. Please, this is extremely important to me." She glanced down at the rock on the woman's finger. "Do you remember your wedding day?"

"Yes of course. It had been an exciting day. I didn't even know it was raining."

Amber read the woman's name tag pinned to her shirt. "Miriam, it's not raining, but the excitement you felt on your day is how I'm feeling right now. You wouldn't be so insensitive as to leave me without a witness to my wedding or to deny me the happiest moment of my life?"

The woman dropped her reading glasses into a side pocket of her long skirt, smiling at Amber. "Very well, five minutes you said?"

"Yes," replied Amber.

"I don't know what it is about you young people today you want everything yesterday? What about your wedding dress?"

"I don't have anything traditional. It's an extremely different set of circumstances. Please, we have to hurry. We only have thirty minutes."

Amber escorted the woman across the road. They trotted up the stairs to the church, opened the door and marched along the red carpet to the altar.

"We're cutting it close," said Haleton, joining Amber and Miriam. "We only have twenty-eight minutes left."

Amber handed the book over to Craig, introducing the librarian, before stepping next to Haleton to take up her position. "I'm ready."

Haleton watched Craig pondering over the fine print.

"Macularta was a clever priest," mentioned Craig, digging his nose from the last page of the book. "It says here. Haleton, if you drink the antidote and concurrently marrying a woman, at the exact second of your departure you will stay in that particular time. You will by all reckoning have changed back into a mortal."

"I don't understand," interrupted Miriam. "If this is a ritual of some kind, I'm leaving."

"Nobody is going to leave this church," boomed a deep threatening voice.

The main door to the church slammed shut. The lock was slid home making an audible bang.

Peter Tuxen looked up. He stood staring through bulging eyes.

Miriam's mouth fell wide open. She tried to scream.

Amber sidestepped off the altar platform, diving for the front pew.

Craig crumbled to the floor, trembling.

Haleton turned, hissing at the man.

"Dear cousin William, I am displeased you didn't invite me to attend such a formal gathering. You know how much I love weddings."

"Crompton, the only thing about a wedding you love is how quick you can gate-crash."

“How true are your words? The only thing I love more than the free wine and food is seeing how many women come my way.” Crompton slid his knife from the sheath inside his boot. He raised it slowly so the blade could catch the light from the sunlight shining through the stained leadlight glass window.

Haleton jumped from the altar. He extracted his knife from his boot, pointing it at his cousin. “I have no qualms in fighting you Alex. First, answer this one question.”

“Ask away. I have all the time in the world. I’ve certainly many more hours than you.”

“How is it possible? I witnessed your leaving in a puff of black smoke.”

“If I were a mortal like you want to be, I’d have to consider myself the best magician in the world.”

“Answer me or I’ll see my knife entering your heart.”

Crompton waved his hand, dismissing the threat. “Before you turn huffy, I did leave this time in a puff of smoke. Unlike you, I have perfected my re-entry into the exact time. Practice makes perfect, cousin. I have been back in this time for only one hour. I tracked you here. I’ve been waiting in the wings for the right moment.”

“The right time for what?” yelled Amber.

“Come now Miss Cantala, you don’t expect me to believe you don’t know what I’m doing here?”

“Young man you’ve gate-crashed a very important date between Amber and William. I suggest you leave post haste,” yelled Miriam.

“Old woman you are indeed an annoying creature,” hissed Crompton.

“Forget about harming the innocent woman and everyone else in this church. This is between you and me,” yelled Haleton. “Cousin, let me warn you, the antidote you seek will never fall into your hands.”

“I can wait. The moment your time here is exhausted I’ll simply walk to the front of this magnificent looking church and take it. Who will stop me, Cantala? I don’t think so. What about the old woman or the priest, or Craig Benyon?”

Amber checked her watch. Her spirit sank knowing the fight would be over before it began.

Haleton thought the opposite.

“William there’s only ten minutes remaining,” Amber called, walking up to and standing next to her future husband.

Haleton leaned over, whispering in her ear, pointing to the darkest corner of the church.

Amber stared at the pinprick of light. “What is it?”

“That is the orb of light. It’s the one vital component which makes up the curse. It’s the one Crompton has forgotten about. By the time the fight is over, time will be gone. I need you, the priest, Miriam and Craig standing in front of the altar. One of you must be holding the vampire antidote.”

“Okay,” whispered Amber. “I’ll go console the librarian. She’s standing over at the side wall looking like she’s half out of her mind in fear.” Directing her gaze at Haleton she added a warning. “Whatever you’re about to do, there’s only nine minutes left.”

Haleton swiveled on his toes, shouting at Crompton. “This is where I make my stand against you.” He pointed his finger and hissed. The noise seemed to bounce from wall to wall.

Crompton’s chuckle sounded dry. Stone faced he stared at his opponent. “So you think you can defeat me in seven minutes and still drink the antidote. My dear, William, I’d love to see it. You’ll need a miracle.”

“Maybe my miracle has arrived. Look across to the left-hand side of the church to witness your demise.”

Crompton jeered. “I don’t take orders, I give them.”

Even though the tall wide front doors to the church were bolted shut and the twenty windows were tightly closed, the group inside the church could feel a draft. The wind started to ruffle the ends of Amber’s long hair. She started patting the hand of Miriam who looked to be on the verge of fainting.

The small pinprick of light started growing rapidly.

Crompton glared at Haleton. “The orb of light has come for you.”

Haleton shook his head. “I won’t allow it to suck me back to 1749AD where this entire nightmare began. It will consume you.”

The light hovered in the corner of the church and quickly grew to the size of Haleton’s hand. He could feel his body starting to tingle. To win against the orb he needed to gamble everything on split second timing. Haleton watched Crompton closely, blocking out every heartbeat pounding inside the church.

Everyone’s except Crompton’s.

Haleton’s heart quickened. His eye teeth grew long. He hissed and sprinted at Crompton. For a few seconds, his cousin stared directly at the orb of light which looked to be the size of a human head. Short sparks shot out from the surface of the orb. The wind quickly strengthened inside the church, slowing Haleton’s speed. He glanced at the clock on the wall. The hands were warning him only six minutes remained.

By the time Crompton faced Haleton, it was too late, a double-fisted punch hit him, square in the chest. Crompton’s torso smashed into the main doors. The old style wood creaked but withstood the violent pounding.

Crompton quickly recovered, landing a lightning fast jab to Haleton’s chin. He overbalanced for no longer than a second; more than enough time for Crompton to plan an attack. He dived through the air. Both men rolled underneath the orb and came out on the other side. They pushed each other away, glaring at the other.

The orb was now the size of a man.

It slowly moved towards them. Thin fingers of light arced out from the orb’s center. One spark hit Crompton. The shock sent his entire body into convulsions. Haleton could feel his living soul starting to be sucked from his body. Crompton staggered a little while he came out of the convulsive state, straightened and dived through the air. Haleton jumped, clinging to the main roof beam.

Crompton survived two more lightning sparks from the orb then it was Haleton’s turn to dodge the series of sparks heading directly at him. He somersaulted, landing in striking distance of his foe.

The wind in the room felt equal to a category two storm.

Amber used her hands to shield her eyes from the wind. She squealed when the large lit candle with the year 2010 engraved on the side, toppled over sending a small flame onto the carpet. The wind quickly blew it out. She leaned into the wind in an attempt to walk across the floor to stand at the altar.

The orb of light now measured the size of a small car and rapidly closing in on Haleton. He groaned at the tingling sensation eating into his flesh. He knew it was now or never. His mouth felt dry. Around the edges of his eyes, his vision started to blur.

The ball of light hovered in silence a full metre from the ground taunting its victim.

Haleton squared himself to Crompton. He used all his will power to fight to stay conscious. He needed to stay focused on his plan. Crompton looked to be slightly taken-a-back at the orb. He focused one eye on it, the other on his cousin.

Haleton saw his one desperate chance. The throbbing in his ears boomed louder. He knew in a few minutes he'd be gone.

"Three minutes," yelled Amber at Peter Tuxen. "We have to be standing at the altar when William gets there."

The priest nodded. Slowly he started to claw his way to his feet. He took hold of Miriam's hand. Craig stood on his left and with Amber on his right the group pushed their way to the altar.

"Surely this wind is capable of blowing the walls out," yelled Craig through a cupped hand.

"I hope not," called Amber.

Haleton noted the noise in the room began to die. He glared at Crompton. The orb of light started to brighten, its pulsating doubling. Haleton could feel his internal temperature rising. He sprinted at Crompton at full tilt and dived at the man, managing to tumble roll end over end towards him. When he came out of the second roll feet first Haleton twisted his body so he could be face down and kicked out at Crompton's rib cage. He heard a loud crack. Crompton reeled backward. Before he could manage to straighten and attack, Haleton saw him fall through the orb of light and disappear.

Haleton didn't waste any more time. He jumped to his feet. He viewed the group cheering him at the altar. He sprinted across the room. The wind managed to blow apart several hymn books. The papers littered the carpet.

Haleton took hold of Amber's hands. "Are you sure you want this?"

"I've never been more positive in my life," she answered. "We haven't much time. There is only ninety seconds left."

The orb of light slowly rose above head height, centering itself over Haleton. Light particles from the orb were starting to fall on his head.

Amber screamed at Tuxen. "Please, hurry, conduct the marriage ceremony."

The walls of the church creaked. The few remaining pictures hanging on the walls were knocked clean off and blown effortlessly across the room.

"Where's the antidote?" asked Haleton.

"It's been poured into the gold chalice and is waiting to be consumed," instructed Craig. He slid the chalice from under his arm, handing it to Haleton.

"Is the formula correct?" questioned Amber.

"Trust me, I mixed the antidote myself," said Craig.

Amber looked sideways at him. "I want to see you for a moment in private."

"We don't have the time," blurted Craig, checking his watch. "We only have sixty seconds left."

Amber glared at Craig. "I'd like to believe you about having mixed the antidote correctly. My fiancé told me what you said."

"I relinquish my love for you?"

"Yes."

"It's the truth."

"How can I believe you?" Amber growled. "You downed your knee, asking me to marry you. I can't understand how you could love me then let me love another man?"

“I can due to the fact I do love you and I always will.”

“You’d let me off the hook?”

“So to speak,” admitted Craig.

“You do realize if the antidote isn’t exact I won’t ever talk to you again.”

“I’ve thought it through. It boils down to the fact, you, Amber Cantala, have no choice except to trust me.” Craig raised his eyebrows, cementing his words.

“I’ll make another batch of antidote,” yelled Amber.

“You don’t have the time, there’s only thirty seconds left,” he spat. “Please, for once, trust me. I’ll never steer you wrong.”

“Amber, if there’s something between you and Craig I’ll understand?” said Haleton. “If you’ve changed your mind it’s okay. I’ll never hold you personally responsible for anything that goes wrong.”

Amber shot both men a furious look. “Craig I will marry William whether you like it or not.”

“He’s all yours.”

“So what’s the holdup?” questioned Haleton.

“Amber thinks I deliberately stuffed up the antidote so when your time is up in this year you’ll be gone so I’ll be free to marry her.”

“Did you?”

“No. I’d never betray either of you. I’m a man of my word.”

“It’s good enough for me,” said Haleton.

“How can you be so sure?” asked Amber. “If something were to go wrong I’d miss you being near me.”

“I’d miss you too. I believe the possibility of never seeing you again will be too much to bear.”

Amber and Haleton cuddled each other. Already he felt the pangs of the endless years of loneliness. He shuddered at the thought.

“If we don’t hurry, drinking the antidote or not won’t matter,” urged Craig tapping both lovebirds on the shoulder.

Amber said, breaking free of the cuddle. “Craig, it looks like I’ll have to trust you.”

Haleton checked his watch. “We have to be married in twenty seconds.”

“It will be done,” announced Peter Tuxen.

The wind whipped up by the orb of light suddenly ceased. The group watched it settle itself directly over Haleton’s head. Several sheets of A4 size papers slowly floated back to the carpet.

“There’s no time left,” whispered Haleton. “This is the last part. When it descends, I’ll be gone.” His words started to sound distorted. He quickly squatted to help prolong the time.

Tuxen completed a sign of the cross over Amber and Haleton. “You two are standing before God in a show of complete love towards one another. In the sight of our two dear witnesses, Amber and you William Haleton are now joined in marriage. I now pronounce you husband and wife.” Tuxen handed Haleton the gold chalice.

“Craig, hand over the book, the orb is flattening out!” shrieked Amber.

Haleton raised the cup full of the antidote to his lips. The liquid felt like hot acid, sliding down his throat. His heart pumped the antidote in surges throughout his body. He felt nauseated.

Amber raised her hands to her mouth, screaming. Nobody heard the noise. She reached out to grab Haleton's arm.

Haleton knew he needed to concentrate on keeping the liquid down. He focused on trying to work out how long it had been since he'd drank or eaten anything, but as the liquid swirled through his veins he gave up. He tried in desperation to focus on the year 2010. It seemed an impossible task.

"The brew is doing its job," he coughed. "I feel my strength returning. I feel clean for the first time in hundreds of years."

"I can hear you," squealed Amber.

"Look, the orb is rising," yelled Craig.

Miriam rushed to Amber's side. Together they helped Haleton to his feet.

Amber leaned in for her first wedded kiss. Haleton backed off.

"What's this? You're not scared?"

"Before the first kiss, I have to say the last line of the book."

"I don't understand any of this," screamed Miriam, rubbing the sides of her head. "The antidote thing, wind inside a church or the orb of light which has moved off to a short distance?"

Amber grinned. "You will."

Craig thrust the book titled 'The Blood Red Rose' under Haleton's nose. Focusing on the last line he read the words in an exact voice.

"William Haleton, have a long happy life and enjoy the love of your new bride.

Congratulations signed Priest Macularta."

A woman's voice echoed outward from the center of the orb of light. "William Haleton I know you can't see me. This recorded message has been sent to you from me, 'Rose-a-lee Cantala.' If you're hearing the message I'm glad the antidote worked. For how long I have no idea. My prayer is for you to look after your new bride with all the love inside of you which has been sitting dormant in your heart for all those years. Have an extra long happy life. You deserve it."

Haleton placed the book on the table and kissed the woman he longed for.

The group watched the orb of light rise into the air. It hovered for a few seconds before it started to shrink back to nothing.

Then it vanished.

Haleton smiled at his new bride knowing his old life had been finally swept away. His new life was just beginning.

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Dear reader,

Thank you for reading my novel 'The Blood Red Rose.' I do hope you enjoyed it. Any feedback is gratefully accepted. The information you, the reader give, helps me to become a more professional author.

If you liked this book the next two in the series continues the story of William Haleton and Amber Cantala.

My novels are based on the Australian culture. Some of the spelling is Australian. Thanks for your understanding.

Again thank you for your support, for without you, the reader, I wouldn't have anyone to read my work.

Mark Stewart

Email: mark_stewart777@hotmail.com

Other novels I have written in the way of romance are:

Kiss on the bridge.

Kiss on the bridge two.

Kiss on the bridge three.

The perfect gift:

Legendary Blue Diamond.

Legendary Blue Diamond Two

Legendary Blue Diamond Three.

A vampire adventure:

The Blood Red Rose

Blood Red Rose Two

Blood red Rose three

Crime novels: Fire Games

Heart of a spider.

I know your secret.

Children: A Troglan knows and Luke's cubby house. Malcolm's cubby house

Planet X91 series.

Smashwords has various short stories.

Below is the opening page of my novels in order I have listed them:

Synopsis: [Kiss on the bridge](#). Adventure romance. Available free from obooko.com.

How would you react if a tall handsome stranger came up to you on new-years-eve and asked for a kiss?

Kiss on the bridge is set in the year 1974. Cyclone Tracy made land fall in Darwin on 25th December 1974 at 9:55am desecrating Darwin. After Tracy had swept the state there was nothing left except this story? Out of the ruins love sparked and mushroomed between Anneli and Wade. They were destined to meet and tell their story for decades to come.

Kiss on the bridge two: Set in Australia in 1977. Meredith wakes in a coffin. She has no idea her hero is on the way. They meet and fall in love, but will the emotion be strong enough to keep them together?

Synopsis: [The Perfect Gift](#). Adventure romance. Available free from obooko.com.

Naomi is twenty-six and doesn't like the way all men mistreat her. She decides a change is needed and applies to be a jillaroo on a cattle station named the Oasis. Its location is in outback Australia. She meets a cowboy, Trent, who is a rodeo champion. They agree on a bet. Eventually both want out, but neither wants to be first.

Through a series of adventures which stretch from the city, to a fast flowing river in the outback where Trent must save Naomi from drowning, love germinates in the middle of a storm.

In her heart, Naomi is a woman who adores the city's nightlife, but as the sun sets on each day, the Australian outback is enticing and the excitement of the city fades. Then she inadvertently saves the Oasis.

Love is growing, then Brandt; Naomi's obsessive ex-boyfriend tracks her down. Can Trent save her one last time?

Synopsis: [Legendary Blue Diamond](#). Adventure romance.

HISTORIANS AND researchers say the birth of the legendary blue diamond originated when the earth was being born. Some say the legend commenced at the union between a man who had skin, the colour of the night sky and a woman who had skin the colour of the sun. Rumour has it that the diamond was no larger than a single carrot. Lately there have been whispers that the deep blue coloured diamond was reported to be in excess of nine carrots possibly even ten or higher. What I believe isn't important, though I assume it lays somewhere in between. There's been bush talk from the Australian Kimberley's to Melbourne; whosoever touches the blue stone will die, for it is cursed by God. I believe it is due to man's greed and the blood that drips from his hands is the truth behind the cursed stone.

I have extensively researched a great number of books on the subject looking for a start date to the authenticity of the legend. I think I may have uncovered the actual events, but I have no way of proving if the facts are correct. I have been able to ascertain the legend was born around the mid 1800's AD when the State bank of Victoria was in its infancy. A gold prospector unearthed the diamond. In days he had sold it. The buyer was a man in charge of the bank. The diamond was indeed dark blue in colour, but definitely a one off, stroke of luck find. One cold dark night a bushranger, his brother and a third man came into a small town searching for the blue diamond. They never found it. The banker was tortured for the information of the stone's where-a-bouts. He took the knowledge of its existence to his grave.

Of late a possible theory has been circulating that the man's wife has it in her possession. How she escaped from being murdered was any one's guess.

If you ask me, do I believe in the story, I'll answer you truthfully. I know it only to be a legend.

Synopsis: *Fire Games*. Crime. First book in the series. Available only from publish America.

Detective Alan Kendal puts his life on the line to outplay the psychotic arsonist known as Patrick.

Detective Kendal is ordered to team up with Detective Claire Ambroso, whom he's known since school, but she carries a secret and he has a grey past. Which one will come forward to haunt first? Kendal grows suspicious of his new partner when she aims her gun directly at him and pulls the trigger. What's her motive? Is she Patrick's accomplice? If not, who is?

How can Patrick always be one step ahead? Does Kendal have enough time to rescue his kidnapped twelve-year-old daughter, Tegan, before Patrick's fiery finale?

Synopsis: [Heart of a spider](#). Crime. Second book in the series. Available free from obooko.com.

Detective Kendal is on the trail of a patient who has escaped the mental institution and wants to sever Kendal's life line. The chase is complicated by the visitation of a ghost and the appearance of a supposed vigilante.

Kendal doesn't believe in ghosts, but finds himself having a conversation as he stares at one. His partner, Claire Ambroso has to fight for her life when Kendal is told to meet GP at the wharf when the moon is at the highest point in the night sky.

Confusion sets in at a local supermarket when a robbery goes wrong and someone in Kendal's family is shot.

The trap is set for the person who masterminded the escape and a final shoot out at the hospital reveals amazing results that astounds even Kendal.

Synopsis: [I know your secret](#). Crime. Third book in the series. Available free from obooko.com.

Everyone has a secret. Some people take theirs to the grave. Some hold their desires inside for a lifetime. Some stew on their secret all their life, and then they get revenge.

I know your secret is a suspenseful crime novel. Melbourne homicide detective Alan James Kendal and his partner Detective Claire Ambroso have to locate a missing teenage girl. The case hots up when he is introduced to a medium. She seems to hold all the knowledge of the case except a few minor details, like, why did Kendal find an empty bullet shell that had a note inside that read, 'I was paid to miss.'



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