



THE ANTI-VAMPIRE TALE BOOK 2

# BLOODLINES



# LEWIS ALEMAN

THE  
ANTI-VAMPIRE  
TALE  
BOOK II

LEWIS ALEMAN

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ALSO BY LEWIS ALEMAN

THE ANTI-VAMPIRE TALE  
BOOK I

*FACES IN TIME*

*COLD STREAK*

THE  
ANTI-VAMPIRE  
TALE  
BOOK II

LEWIS ALEMAN



MEGALODON  
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Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds,  
which I should first break through,  
and pour a torrent of light into our dark world.

-MARY SHELLEY, *FRANKENSTEIN*, 1818

# CHAPTER I



## INTO THE FOREST OF LEGENDS

**H**alfway around the world, my journey looks like it will end in death.

I've lugged this unholy eleven pounds over my shoulder out of a burning building, across the Atlantic, and into Styria, a little town full of myths and legends and overflowing with superstition.

I've lied, seduced, and murdered to find just one person in the town who could bring me to the only place that none of them wanted to go. It took me three days before I could find a single man or woman brave enough to just say her name out loud. Even after all my dealings with the townspeople, I was only able to *persuade* one of them to take me as far as the woods.

Five minutes ago, I left my terrified guide at the edge of the forest. With a kiss, he swore he'd wait there until I returned, but the shaking that was in his voice makes me now think he's already lost his nerve, along with his crush on me, and is sprinting back to town.

If I were a person who scares easily, I might be chasing right behind him, running away from the terrible things ahead of

me. These woods are dense and dark, and men do not travel through them. It's hard enough to weave between branches and thickets in the pitch black, but it's much worse when there is no trail to follow. And, what's even harder than that is to keep going further into the darkness when you hear strange sounds and see little nothings everywhere you look, all the while knowing no one has dared to venture in here, even in the daylight, for a hundred years. The townspeople have sworn that no one has come out alive as long as they can recall, going back generations. Whether their stories are true or not, the woods are creepy enough to make me believe.

Now, the trees ahead of me begin to grow thin. There is an opening beyond them. I can't see anything except for darkness and the sky beyond the branches of the remaining few trees.

Holding my hand against the trunk of the last tree, I lean forward slowly, and a rush of wings and bright red eyes flash before my face. The myriad flapping wings push air against my head, and high-pitched squealing pierces my ears. Bats race past me to get over the tops of the trees. One hovers before me, and I can see its snarling teeth below its glowing eyes. It flaps and treads air for a moment—staring at me and taking me in without any care for what I could do to it. Its hideous, little body seems to stay still at the center of its wide, beating wings. When it's had its fill of me, it pumps its wings downward, raising itself over the treetops after the rest of its colony.

I take a second to catch my breath as I listen to their squealing grow fainter and fainter.

Leaning forward with my hand still on the last tree trunk, I see an enormous, steep drop ahead of me. I stand at the edge of a forested mountainside that abruptly gives way to a valley. The trees dwindle away to bare rock and a steeply-sloping, barren, jagged circle.

Down in the center of the circular valley stands a tall, imposing brick building—a castle. It's nearly a giant rectangular block except for two pointed towers at the front corners that just barely peek above the trees behind me.

I had imagined that I'd be climbing up to a terrifying building atop a rocky, jagged mountain. I thought for sure that the castle would be the highest point, looking down on the little

village, threatening it from high above. I may have pictured the roughness of the terrain correctly, but I never imagined that the mysterious home would be nestled in a small, deep valley and that I'd be climbing *down* to get to it. Now that I see the building at the bottom of a steep, rocky basin—surrounded by mountains and a towering overgrown forest, hidden from the view of all who have not climbed upward and far out of their way through the harsh, scary terrain, and very far from their good senses—I couldn't imagine this infamous castle existing in any other place. It is fitting that I should have to descend to enter hell.

The two towers are pointed sharply, and their long, slender windows are arched to narrow tips at their highest peaks. Even the large wooden doors at the front of the castle come to a sharp point where they meet. Everything about this building makes me feel like it's waiting to tear its sharp bits into me—right through my racing heart.

I start climbing down the steep incline to the castle below, leaving the trees behind for the rocks before me. My black boots struggle to hold their grip, sending little pebbles rolling down ahead of me, stirring up dust, and creating a quiet rumble declaring that I'm coming. I wish I could smash each one of the falling pebbles to dust, but I'd also beg them to be silent if they could possibly hear me. If *she* notices me on my way down, I'm as good as dead.

With a drop this steep, it's no wonder the bats were flying so fast to get up it and over the treetops, all the while scanning for little night creatures to devour.

The sharp rocks, the stillness of the night, the clouds passing over the moon, the dark forest surrounding the pit-like valley I'm descending into, and the foreboding castle waiting for me at its center: all of these things make me feel like someone has pulled me down deeper into my darkest fantasy than I ever dared to wander myself. I see things around me that are like bits of my imagination brought to life, but so many of these are things that I've never dared to look at so closely, never seen their edges, their sharp points—they are nightmarish things that have never before escaped the cellar of my mind. It's more *me* than I've ever felt comfortable bringing into the light, and it must be the reason why my body trembles.

This castle is something that I'd dream of living in if I ever let myself indulge this far into the fearful thoughts that terrify and excite me at the same time. I've always played with the darkness and with the things that most people run from. It's all about the rush it gives me; the life I get to taste that others are too afraid to try. You step into the horrific very slowly, a little at a time. Like numbing yourself to a poison, you take tiny tastes of morbid things and build your tolerance slowly. I've been constantly wandering into it a little deeper and a little further for years. But through all of that, I've never gone this far. I've never brought this much of my twisted imagination into reality. Whatever is inside that castle has brought all of this darkness to life, and it's more than I can handle. I know the legends, and looking down at what waits for me, I don't doubt them anymore.

All of this is so bizarre, leaving me certain of only two things: I'm in over my head, and I'm scared that I may lose it at any second.

If this were a movie, strong winds would be swirling around me, whipping my hair and the edges of my clothes wildly in the air as if I were standing in the very apex of a storm. But, this is real, and it's chillingly cold—everything is as still and motionless as the frozen and the dead. It's as if the entire landscape is hiding and holding its breath—desperately trying to avoid being found by the nearby beast.

The quiet town several miles behind me and the silent landscape have survived for centuries in the shadow of a legendary predator, hiding quietly from her. I'm out here in the middle of the night, searching for the one monster that they so skillfully hide from. Since I'm doing the opposite of the survivors, *I wonder how long I'll last.*

The cloth-wrapped object slung over my shoulder bounces against my back, sending chills through my skin and reminding me that my time is running out.

A flash of light suddenly draws my eyes to the castle. A window has been lit up. As quickly as the light has appeared, it vanishes. I tell myself that it must have been the clouds opening above and releasing more moonlight onto the window, but my body clearly does not believe it as my breathing grows fast and choppy while my arms tense and tremble.

With my eyes focused on the castle, waiting to see if the light will return, my feet stumble on the uneven ground, and I begin sliding down the slope, struggling to stand on my slipping feet, sending rocks and dust into the air and down the incline. My knee smacks a rock, and I fall forward, instantly crashing to the ground. On my stomach, my entire body slides fast down the steep slope, rocks poking and scratching my sides and legs. I shove the palms of my hands hard into the ground until I grind to a halt.

A dust cloud settles around me, returning to the earth after being briefly stirred up by my fall.

As I get to my feet, I see that my right palm is scratched and beginning to bleed. The sight reminds me of the feast I had earlier this evening, and that memory makes me smile. It reminds me of the power that I do possess—the power I had over my most recent victim, and I continue my climb down to the castle.

I am a vampire myself. I've overpowered many people before, and I've been faster than the few who've overpowered me. Well, nearly all of them. *Damn Maxine*. Anyway, none of them have put me down for more than a minute or two, and I've been pretty indestructible so far. So, it makes no sense for me to fear another of my kind just because she's older. I remind myself of these things to get past the fearful dread that's come over me since entering the woods. It's been growing stronger with every step closer to the castle.

A metallic thud echoes in the rocky valley, stealing away all the confidence that I was just able to muster. I stop, too frozen in panic to move another step. The sound shakes inside my mind even after its echo has left the valley. Trying to push my loud breathing and pounding heart out of my thoughts, I focus on the sound. It may have been terrifying, but it was also familiar.

A lock. It sounded like a metal lock being unlatched—a heavy one. My eyes focus on the pointed door.

I take each step carefully now, scanning the ground before me, trying to brace my hands on any rocks tall enough to reach, and then I look to the door before daring another step. All of my efforts might be a waste anyway. I've stirred up a colony of bats, or at least made them squeal louder than normal. I've accidentally sent rocks and dust tumbling down the slope ahead

of me, and then there was my fall down the mountainside that exuded not only *tremendous* grace but a lot of noise into the still night. Especially after seeing the light inside the castle and hearing the metal latch unlock, it's a bit foolish of me to pretend that maybe she isn't aware I'm coming. For all I know, this very second, a weapon could be aimed at my heart—another right between my eyes. Whatever lives there now could also be creeping up on me in the night, just an arm's reach away from me as I tiptoe in vain toward the castle.

A stench fills my nostrils. It has been building for awhile, but being so distracted with climbing down here, I haven't paid it much mind. It seems to be getting stronger as I reach the castle.

The sky before me gets smaller and smaller, more of it being blocked out by the immense castle. I steady my breathing, trying not to feel trapped and eclipsed by the old, brick building.

I see a trench dug around the castle; it looks to be at least twenty feet deep. It seems to be a dried up moat with the tiniest, snake-like strip of water at its bottom. The only clue I have that the water is there is the moonlight reflecting on it, giving a hint of its slender shape. This stagnant water must be the source of the smell.

Styria is a land that has had to hold off hostile invaders for centuries. Maybe this trench was once a full moat, although there is no drawbridge. There is only a skinny strip of land left intact, and it is directly in front of the pointed, wooden doors. It would seem that this would work well in warfare if the moat was full of water. Any enemy would have to come to the front door, leaving you with only one narrow area to defend.

That makes me wonder why it's been left unattended now. Someone could carefully climb into the moat and step over the tiny bit of water left at its bottom and then attack the castle from any side they chose, maybe even sneaking in unnoticed. So, why has it been left to dry up? Maybe the moat was there for a more dangerous time and is no longer needed. Or, maybe it's been so long since anyone has dared to step foot here that whoever still waits inside the castle has grown bored and would welcome a foolish trespasser.

For a moment, I stay still, just a few feet from the moat and the narrow path leading to the front doors. Holding my nose,

I ponder the advantages of trying to remain unnoticed versus the acute stink of the surrounding pit. I could scale the trench and avoid walking right up the front door, but I'd have to face the stench up close. Entering through the front door could get me killed fast, before I've had a chance to search for what I've come all this way to find. As much as I'd love to pretend that I could still sneak in there unnoticed, I can't kid myself anymore. I saw the light; I heard the noise. Someone inside has been awakened and must know that I'm here.

Looking up at the high castle walls, I know there's no way I could scale them, not even with my nails—there's just nothing to dig them into—nothing to grip. If there were just one strip of wood, a single beam, or anything besides stone and mortar, I could get myself onto the roof and look for another way inside.

All the lower windows are ancient and permanently mounted—they don't open. There's no getting in through them without a loud crash, and destroying *her* home is no way to plead for mercy if I get caught. The windows near the tops of the towers look like they may open, but there's no way to get up there from here.

Considering whose house this is, the front door may be the safest approach. I can't imagine a trespasser lasting long inside those walls. Maybe, I'll have better luck at the front door as a visitor than through a window as an intruder.

I've never been the kind of girl to think very far ahead or to prepare in advance, but I wish Roderick were here to tell me what to do. If there's a way inside this place that doesn't lead to death, he'd see it.

Feeling the weight in the cloth slung over my shoulder, I know it's now or never. I force my shaky feet to step onto the thin path over the trench; I'm going to the front doors.

I let go of my nose, and my upper lip slides back, letting my fangs poke out, as if they were enough to save me.

A creaking sound jolts through my ears, shocks down my neck, and rattles my heart.

It's the wooden doors—they're opening before me. The deep creaking sound comes from their immense weight bearing down on the old hinges.

The space between the two doors grows, and a light pours out of the hole. The space gets bigger, and I can see a woman's form, illuminated by the candlelight behind her.

I fling my nails out. My hands are ready for an attack, and I hold them before me even as they shake and tremble. My face tightens as I pull my lips further back, sticking my fangs out as far as I can. I dig my boot heels firmly in the hard ground.

Ready as I can be, I stare at the woman standing in the bright light that rips out the opened doors into the dark night, and despite my best efforts, I know my life is no longer in my hands.

# CHAPTER II



AT THE EDGE OF THE OCEAN

**M**y eyes are fixated on what nature never intended them to see. His pale, shirtless body looks so magnificent in the setting sun. The warm, retreating rays cascade over the muscle lines in his biceps, chest, and the tight cuts of his stomach. The shadows that his muscles cast are black highlights, emphasizing the rigidity of his frame, each line inviting me to slide my hand over his taut body.

I imagine he'd be beautiful anywhere, but he looks even more magnificent as my pale vampire exposed in the brightness of a beach sunset. I don't know if it's the forbidden, taboo nature of a vampire in the daylight or if it's the beauty of a creature found in an environment that it rarely visits, but whatever it is, it's kept me on fire since we first stepped onto the sand together.

We've been here for weeks; and still, every day in the late afternoon, he takes me by the hand, and we walk in ankle-deep water along the shore.

Dusk has become my morning, and twilight my sunrise. In two months' time, he's not only turned my world completely inside out, but he's made me marvel that anyone could live any other way.

The whoosh of a big wave rushes toward us. It's high enough to crash at my knees and wet my white shorts. The waves here can creep up on you from out of nowhere and drench you before you even notice them. In a flash, Simon scoops me into his arms and lifts me as high as his chest, one arm tucked beneath my knees and the other across my shoulders.

I didn't even try to get out of the way on my own. He's done this every time a wave has threatened to wet my clothes during our evening walks, and I've become accustomed to trusting him to elevate me above the crashing surf.

I kiss him on his sly, sexy lips, as I have every time he's done so, and he smiles at me as he has every time I've kissed him that way.

It's been wonderful. There's really no reason for me to be sad, but I am. I've had two amazing months with Simon in paradise. Few beaches on earth can compare to Florida's white sand beaches, and at this time of year, the weather's still warm with little-to-no vacationers, especially after the sun sets. We've practically been here all alone. What more could a girl ask for?

I should just be happy that it's been this great for this long, but something inside of me is terrified. I should be burning up with passion and enjoying our last night on the beach together, but I can't get my mind off worrying about going home—worrying that things will change—worrying that reality is going to be too much for me when we get there.

Fiddler crabs scurry across the sand all around us—dozens of them. They seem like they glide over the sand, as if an unseen wind is carrying them wherever they want to go. They scared me a little the first night we were here, with their fast movements and with each one's large claw held out in front of it. Now, they look like a symphony of little string players holding their claws up like violins to create a melody over the rhythm of the surf.

I watch the umbrella rental guy pack up his giant blue umbrellas. Each one covers two wooden recliners, and there must be thirty of them all in a row. I see the one that Simon and I sat in the first day we were here. Simon came out to the beach with me, but stayed under the umbrella's shade. It took him a little while to get used to the brightness of the beach sun, but he braved it for

me, never complaining.

Now, the rental guy folds up our umbrella, and even though I know it's melodramatic, I'm scared a part of my life is wrapping up too.

Simon squeezes my hand as we walk along, his eyes staring out at the ocean, and I wonder if he's thinking the same thing. I wonder if he's worried that things will change when we get back to New Orleans. There are so many things we have to figure out. When we left town, I had enough money to pay my apartment's rent for three more months, so I only have one more month paid when we go back—and then I'm out of money with no job. Simon had enough cash to pay for us to be here this long, and that's just about gone too. In fact, I told him fast food would be fine tonight, but he said, "Ruby, my angel, this is our last night together in our little paradise. I'm taking you to our place to eat even if I have to cook the food and wash the dishes myself."

*God, I love it when he calls me angel.*

"Our place," as he called it, is a beachfront restaurant with a big, wooden balcony overlooking the ocean. We went there our first night here just because we were walking along the beach and happened to discover it while we were hungry. We've been there a lot since then, and no matter what I order, I always want to taste what's on his plate. One time, when my salmon tasted funny, he let me pick all the shrimp out of his pasta. It's called The Shipwreck Inn, and he's right: it will always be our place to me.

Speaking of things that are *wrecked*, and back to reality, I also have no school to go back to. I had to drop out to be on this trip for so long. That ruined my scholarship, which is necessary because tuition at New Orleans colleges on St. Charles Avenue is about as expensive as buying a brand new car every year you're there.

And then, there's my parents. We're not the closest family on earth; Mom and Dad have always been a little too busy to ever be the kind of parents who are like friends. Dad would sign me up for softball, but he never had the time to practice with me or to watch any of my games. And, Mom would talk with me about actors she thought were cute but not about boys I liked at school.

But, they've always taken care of me, and they were

paying my bills that my scholarship didn't cover while I was in school—my apartment, my phone, groceries—those kind of things. I'm a pretty affordable girl as far as the clothes and stuff like that goes; I have simple tastes. But, even the basic expenses add up fast, and I really appreciate what they were doing for me. It made school a thousand times easier to be able to focus on studying without having to work, and it was paying off. I have a 4.0, and I was way ahead in my student teaching and closer to graduating because I tested out of a few classes and I took courses during the summer sessions too. I guess that's why they were cool with helping me out financially while I was in school.

When I called them to tell them I was in Florida with a guy I had just met, they thought I was joking. Even when I called them back the next day, they still didn't believe it. I had to send them a pic of me on the beach with Simon for them to believe it. I certainly can understand their doubt—I was never a social butterfly. I only had a few real boyfriends, and they never lasted that long anyway. I always really felt like a freak or some kind of alien until I met Simon. It's not that I didn't want it all along—it's not that I didn't want a serious boyfriend—I did, and I ached for one all alone for the longest time. But, I wasn't going to compromise with the wrong guy, and now I'm glad that I didn't. But, I can definitely see why my parents had their doubts about their honor roll, scholarship daughter skipping school and traipsing off with some mysterious guy across three state lines. That really wasn't my M.O. for the first nineteen years of my life.

Well, they still weren't too happy when I sent the pic and proved that I was telling the truth. They were expecting me to be on my own and teaching English at a high school after two more semesters of college. Now, I've lost my scholarship, and they said they'd never support me again, which is really fine—I'm nineteen, I'm a big girl, and maybe it's time I supported myself anyway. That's really okay. It's just a little scary to have no idea how I'm going to do it when I'm still living in a fantasy on a beach in Florida. And to make things more stressful, I'll have to get a job fast to make enough money to pay the rent by the end of the month. If a job were lined up for me when I got back, I wouldn't be so worried. It's not that I'm scared of the work; I'm scared of not getting any.

Simon's promised he'll take care of everything. He said, "Ruby, you lost all of this because you came away with me. I promise you I'll give it all back to you—I will."

I guess I don't mind him helping me because I did give those things up so we could go off together, but that doesn't mean I want him to take care of everything forever. Maybe he could just help me while I get a job and save money to go back to school. I only need enough cash for two semesters, and then I can graduate and get a job teaching. That is, if I can find someone to hire a 20-year-old, first-year teacher.

Also, I don't know if my parents still feel the same way; my phone battery went dead five days ago, and we left my charger at home. I had to keep my few conversations extremely short just to make the battery last as long as it did, and after the second call, I called my parents from the hotel room. I know that Simon and I could have just gone out and bought another phone charger, but I think it was a relief to be cut off from all the trouble back home.

Even though I haven't talked to my parents in days, I can't imagine anything has changed. The one I'm worried about is Ambrosia. She was fine the last time I talked to her, but that was five days ago. Five days is plenty of time for Ambrosia to get herself into a whole new world of trouble. I'd call her from our hotel room, but I never memorized her number—it's just programmed into my phone. I know my parents' number—so I could call them from the hotel phone, but I also know in my heart that nothing's changed.

Simon puts his arm around my shoulders, pulls me to him, and kisses the top of my head. He must have noticed the tension building in me. I don't want to ruin our last night here in this beautiful place, so I look up at him and smile.

I stare at his blue eyes. They're still the most gorgeous eyes I've ever seen, but I could swear they're a little less bright than they used to be. Comparing his eyes to normal eyes is like putting the deepest, bluest ocean next to your murky bathwater—there's just no comparison. His eyes are still like tropical waters—exotic and stunning, but I think something's made them the slightest bit dimmer. I'm worried that his eyes are just the symptom and not the problem. I think they've faded because he's

stopped feeding. He hasn't fed once, at least not on blood, since his fangs left my neck on the burning balcony outside Roderick's house, when we both thought we might die.

Our first week here was hard on him. I've never been close to someone going through drug withdrawals, but I bet Simon went through something similar. There were times I saw his hands shaking. Other times I'd see his brow furrowed as if he were in tremendous pain, but as soon as he'd see that I was watching him, he'd smile and brush the expression away. Sometimes he'd look exhausted and drained like he had been awake for days, but as soon as he noticed that he wasn't keeping up with what I wanted to do that day, he'd grab my hand and find the energy somewhere. He didn't complain once—not one whimper, not one sigh.

I know he must have been going through hell that first week, but he never let me see it. I could've tried to help him, but he wouldn't let me. I could've tried to make him more comfortable; he could even have fed on me. But, he didn't say a word, because he wanted to give me paradise and bear all the hell himself.

The withdrawal symptoms seem to be gone now—no more shaking hands or random expressions of pain on his face, but I've noticed he's sleeping a little longer than before...and then there's his eyes looking dimmer. Maybe I'm just going crazy. Maybe his eyes are fine, and maybe he's just sleeping in and enjoying the end of our beach vacation. That all makes perfect sense, but I'm still worried about him.

I just remember how weak he got in the middle of the whole Roderick mess. He looked so pale, even for a vampire, and his lips had lost their color. But back then, not only had it been days since he fed last, but he had been drugged several times with Roderick's poison, he had been awake for days, and his body had a lot of healing to do with all the fighting going on.

Suddenly, Simon lets go of my hand and runs knee deep into the surf.

"What? What is it?" I ask.

"Ruby, stay there! I'll be back in a minute."

He swats his hand into the water like he's trying to grab something, but an incoming wave makes him miss whatever he's

aiming at. His knees bend, and he sends himself jumping into the air and then diving deeper into the waves that are growing darker as the sun slowly takes its rays away. I see his feet slip beneath the surface, and I watch the unclear outline of his body move, kicking and pushing further into the ocean.

I know he's fine. He's so strong. I try to keep words like undertow and great white shark out of my mind. I know they're ridiculous, so I hold them off, but I won't be completely rid of them until he's back on the beach with his hand in mine.

About a week ago, we did see a sand shark swimming along close to the shore. It was just as the sun was setting, and we followed its long, finned body moving through the water. I know they eat small fish and aren't really any threat to Simon, but the thought of them being out there with him still scares the hell out of me right now.

*By now, he must be down there for about a minute.*

I can't see him anymore. My mind goes back to him not feeding. God, I hope it hasn't really weakened him. I hope it's just my mind worrying about him, just me being too neurotic and bracing myself for something to go wrong. I hope none of it is real, and everything's fine beneath the darkening surface of the waves that I can no longer see through. I've never had anything good last this long, especially nothing this amazing. I hope all of my worrying is just some defense mechanism, preparing myself to handle it if things all fall apart.

*It must be almost two and a half minutes already.*

The ocean is turning black with just a thinning strip of sunlight reflected on its surface, shimmering on the tips of the waves. I hear my own breathing getting heavier and louder.

*He must be under the water for nearly three minutes now.*

My ears don't help me any. With its forever-whispering waves, the beach is one of the only places on earth that sounds like bitter sobbing and sweet sighing at the same time. As if I need anything else to muddle up what's going on inside of me, all of the sounds around me scream tragedy.

*Oh, God, how long has he been down there? It must be like three and a half or four minutes already.* How long can people hold their breath for anyway?

I start walking into the water, frantically looking for any

sign of where he might be. As I step, the water rises halfway up my calves, then past my knees, and almost to my shorts.

*It's got to be four or five minutes now.*

Something thin and white cuts the surface of the water ahead of me. I hold my breath. The object rises higher above the water with his fingers wrapped around the bottom of it. His wrist, his elbow, and then the top of his head break through the surface. Little streams of water run from his hair, down his face, sliding around his neck, and onto his shoulders. The white object still remains in his hand, but he lowers it from over his head and holds it out toward me.

I take the object from him with one hand, but I don't look at it. I slide my other hand over his neck and up to his cheek. He knows what I want, and he leans down so I can reach him. I slide my fingers through his wet hair, and holding the back of his head tightly, I kiss him.

I release him and look at the object that he's brought me and left in my hand. It's a sand dollar—nearly a perfect circle.

He says, "You never see these at night—especially not unbroken, and I was thinking today that you needed something to bring home from our trip."

Smiling, I say, "I got news for you, Simon. I'm taking *you* back home with me, and I'll never forget this trip. Ever."

"Yeah, but I'm not a part of the beach. I've lived my whole life in New Orleans. You need something tropical to come back with you."

"It's beautiful, Simon. Thank you."

"You really like it?"

"Of course I do. I like it all the more because you got it for me."

"Good," he says softly as he takes it from my hand.

He looks around like he's making sure that no one is watching us. Bringing the sand dollar up to his mouth, he holds it beneath his right fang and quickly bites a small hole into it.

With quick, smooth movements, he unhooks the thin chain from around my neck and lifts it off me. He slides it through the hole in the sand dollar. His hands feel so good as they return to my neck, and he latches the chain closed.

I look at the sand dollar resting on top of my chest, and I

do love it.

I have no idea what will happen when we get back to New Orleans. But, one thing is for sure. Whatever I decide to do, I want Simon with me.



# CHAPTER III



THROUGH THE DOORS & INTO THE FIRE

“We know what you’ve come for. If you have the courage, come inside from out of the night and into the greater darkness within. Step through these doors to discover what you seek.”

Her voice is calm, and the steadiness in her tone while she says such cryptic words is more chilling than anything one could conjure through screaming. I feel completely in over my head by her lack of alarm for any danger I could bring to her and by the total confidence that she knows what I’ve come for. I pose no threat to her, and she knows it.

My eyes begin to adjust to the bright light she’s released through the opened doors. Despite her intimidating speech and demeanor, she’s not at all what I expected.

Her head is cloaked beneath a body-length, brown, hooded coat. It has a fuzzy texture, maybe raw leather.

She says, “Make up your mind quickly. We have little tolerance for callers in the middle of the night, and it will bode badly for you if a bat sneaks its way inside the castle while you stand there deciding if you dare enter or cower back from where you came.”

Her speech is so formal—so stiff, like it’s from another

era. I wonder how long she's been here in this castle; I wonder how long it's been since she's even spoken to another person. And, how did she know to speak to me in English? I haven't said a word yet. How could she possibly know?

In a groan, she shakes her head and raises her hands to the edges of both doors. As she begins to close them, she says, "You had better leave here this instant. This is no place for indecision or for those who have less than strong minds. Forget that you've come here, pretend it was a dream, and never return to this valley again. If you are foolish enough to return, you will never leave. Trust me...you will...*never...leave.*"

I focus on the words she's just said to me as the heavy doors squeal on their hinges. The light grows thin as the opening gets narrower and narrower.

*Damn it, you haven't come all this way for nothing. Speak. Say something.*

"Wait!" I shout.

She raises her hooded head in my direction, but she continues to pull the heavy doors closed.

Louder, I call out again, "Wait! Why did you speak to me in English? How did you know?"

The squealing comes to a halt as she stops pulling the doors shut.

I call out again, "How? How did you know I speak English?"

"People who speak German, Croatian, or Bavarian are all smart enough to stay away from here. Over the years, the foolish few who have tracked this castle down have nearly all spoken English."

"Who? Who else has found you?"

"All the other answers are inside, and these doors will not stop again once I begin closing them."

A squeal starts once again, but this time it's not from the hinges but somewhere deep inside my throat.

She reaches her hands back to the edges of the doors, and I force my body to stumble toward the narrow space that still remains. I swear I hear her chuckling softly as I draw near.

She steps to the side to let me enter. I turn sideways to fit through the narrow space that remains, grazing my chest on one

door and my backside on the other. The former is still sore from my unplanned slide down the mountain.

As I enter, the many candelabra are the first things that I see. There are at least fifteen of them in the foyer—maybe twenty, each holding a dozen candles, and they look to be made of silver that has tarnished a long time ago. With so many burning, little flames, it's no wonder that their light was very bright compared to the night outside. Apparently single matches aren't lit here, but torches. Maybe it's done that way to be prepared to combat mobs of townspeople with burning chunks of wood in their hands, fire against fire. Although, the townspeople I've met would rather wrestle the devil himself than knock on these castle doors, but perhaps their ancestors possessed more foolish bravery.

Behind me, the doors slam with such an echoing finality that I immediately wish I was back on the other side. I don't know if my body jumped, but I know my heart did.

Turning to see the woman I've come so far to talk to, I watch her grab a candelabrum, point a long finger in my direction, and walk directly at me as if she means to knock me over.

Trying to step out of her way, I feel the heat of a dozen blazing candles pass my face. Her shoulder bumps me as she passes. It hits me with very little force, but I still jump back.

She raises the same bony finger in the air over her shoulder, beckoning me to follow her, without even glancing in my direction.

Something is bothering me about when her shoulder just bumped into me. It was steady and firm but with no more strength than a middle-aged woman. I would have expected *her* to either knock me completely though this brick wall or at least smack into me so hard that I'd crash to the ground. She didn't hit me any harder than an old, gray-haired bitty pushing her way down Bourbon Street to get to her Sunday brunch. Could it be that *she* is nothing more than a legend? Have I come all this way and lost all this blood for nothing?

I could thrash my nails into the back of her neck, pounce on her body, and cause her extreme pain before she even knows I'm attacking her, but she has no fear. Despite all of the pain I

could inflict, she has total faith that there's nothing I can do to harm her, even with her back to me. In the least, even if she thinks I could harm her, she doesn't seem concerned with the pain.

Her demeanor certainly matches the old tales—creepy and imposing, and she's intimidating enough for me to keep my nails and fangs to myself until she gives me some sign that she's not as dangerous as people have whispered for centuries.

The townspeople have told their children for generations that they better do their chores, respect their elders, stay out of the forest, and be home before sunset lest they find themselves in *her* horrible hands, being carried off to her castle where they'd be tortured and bled to death. Fairy tales have long kept children doing what their parents wish, but here I am, a leather-clad, countercultural, modern, murdering, fornicating, female vampire, who is just as scared as a child standing at the edge of a forbidden wood, too afraid to accept the dare of her friends and take just one step into the nefarious forest. With just one swipe, I could learn if the rumors are true. I could strike blood once, watch her fall, and the legends would die here in an instant. But, I look at my nails—the same nails that have torn into flesh countless times, and I feel as though they would be as brittle as ash if I attacked her, even with her back to me. I feel like my sharp weapons would be completely useless, breaking and cracking into little flakes and floating away. I know I don't have the courage. Not yet.

The solid brick of the foyer gives way to a large room with wooden beams that meet a high, wooden ceiling, and the far wall has a giant fireplace—one that is wide enough to fit a sprawled-out adult inside.

A wide staircase starts at the left of the fireplace and curves beautifully up to the second floor. Its curve is so smooth that it calls you immediately to traverse it. If I weren't so intent on keeping my spine straight and intact, at this very moment, I might be taking its winding steps to where they lead, exploring the dark places that the candlelight does not touch. The staircase leads to a balcony that wraps around all the walls of the room except for the wall with the fireplace. Stemming from this balcony, way up high, are the open hallways of the second floor

that lead to a plethora of closed, wooden doors and even more passageways.

Rising on her tiptoes, the woman grabs a small glass jar off the mantelpiece, and she pours a thick, liquid layer over the wood in the fireplace. With a swing of her candelabrum, fire runs over the wood, cracking, popping, and destroying.

She turns her back to the fire, its pulsing tongues reflecting on her long coat and making it seem alive in its flickering movement. Bending down, she places the candelabrum on the floor, and as she stands up, she brings both hands to her hood, flipping it off her head when she's at full height.

Her hair is brown, long, and tucked into the back of her coat except for a few untamed tendrils that dangle beside her cheeks. The youth of her face is cracking with wrinkles that have branches growing from them, each one a tale of anguish and time spent unhappily.

I look closely and see waves of gray coursing through her brown hair. The legends all tell of her flaming red locks, so deep, so rich that fire itself envies her. How could such remarkable hair have faded and turned into a natural brown? Perhaps her fiery hair has been extinguished during years of freezing solitude. Or maybe, no one who's actually seen it has ever lived to describe it.

Even in the shadowy firelight in this imposing, brick room, nothing about her looks right. There's nothing wrong with her; she just looks so ordinary, so amazingly not impressive. Her eyes—they're brown, just like the townspeople's. I step toward her, suddenly less afraid than before, and she stares at me but doesn't move—beneath her thick coat I can't even see if she's breathing.

The fire cracks loudly, sending an ember shooting out into the air flying past my cheek. I watch it as it burns its path into the dark room, and I think about my earlier vision of my nails deteriorating into ash against the beast I've come to face. I watch its orange glow disappear, consumed by the darkness in the room.

I turn my head back toward the fireplace, and inches before me, I see blazing blue eyes fixated on my own. She moves closer, her nose almost touching mine, her blood-red hair highlighted by the firelight. Her fangs gleam in a wicked smile—glistening—yearning to taste my flesh.

I gasp and stumble backward.

She stays close to me, still nearly touching. Stalking me, she follows each of my movements, her smile growing with my fear. The blue of her eyes and the red of her lips appear to grow deeper and richer as if something supernatural were gathering inside them, filling them with an otherworldly vibrancy.

As her mouth opens, my breathing stops, and my body feels numb. Turning her head slightly over her shoulder while keeping her eyes on me, she says, "Gretchen, our guest needs a wrap and some hot tea. Bring them to us near the fire."

The woman with gray and brown hair, who is wearing the long coat and has opened the doors and led me through the foyer into this room, nods her head in silent obedience and disappears through an archway into a dark room that I cannot see into.

Soft fingers grasp my chin, turning my eyes away from the unlit archway through which the servant has just disappeared, and they bring my vision back to the crimson-haired legend standing inches away from me. Her eyes have the energy of a moving tide, and I'm pulled to them—I know I cannot look away.

"Come and sit on the hearth," she commands, and grasping my hand, she leads me to the floor in front of the fireplace.

She stares at me with the flames reflecting in her eyes, while I sit as speechless as if I were watching my first sunrise. Looking at her now, it's hard to imagine I could've ever mistaken her servant for her.

Raising her hand to my cheek and caressing my jaw line softly, she says, "Surely, dear, you haven't come all this way just to have a look at me," pausing to hold a flattered smile before continuing, "Now, tell me what you've come for."

As she speaks something in her breath has the sweetness of autumn, reminding me of orange-red leaves, pumpkins, and the crispness of cool weather that comes on seductively but will soon grow into the death of winter.

"Say the words, my dear. Tell me why you're here, or I'll have to take the secret from your lips," she says holding her tongue to the tip of her right fang. Her words sound beautiful but have an edgy overtone hiding in the sweetness that makes my

nerves jump. Soft and hellish at the same time, her voice sounds like a choir singing from inside the mouth of a demon.

She begins to move her head closer to mine, and I blurt out, “We’re all in danger.”

Her seductive smile crumbles to bellowing laughter.

I continue, “It’s true. All of our kind are in serious trouble.”

She still laughs, but as she slows it down, she says, “It’s been a hundred years since I’ve laughed like that. For that alone, I’ll grant you whatever you wish. But, I was born in 1566, dear stranger. What new terror could you possibly have found that I have not faced a dozen times before? What are you talking about?”

“I’ve come all the way from New Orleans just for your help. One of us back home plans to expose us all.”

“*Expose* us all? He must have a long reach in New Orleans to untie my corset all the way across the Atlantic.”

She smiles, but does not laugh at her own joke. Fear runs through me—fear that she’s growing tired of this conversation already. I don’t think I’ll fare well if she becomes bored with me.

I know I better speak quickly, “Madame, excuse me for not having much of a sense of humor. I promise you that I wouldn’t have come this far if it were only for a joke.”

Sounding much more serious, she speaks, “You disappoint me, dear, and do not take that lightly. Why do you call me ‘madame?’ Are you one of the petrified townspeople who would drink poison before saying my name aloud, or do you simply not know who you’re speaking to?” Her face turns hard in anger as she continues, “Either way, you insult me, and I do not tolerate that, regardless of the time of night, who is speaking, or how far they’ve traveled.”

“Forgive me, *Carmilla*.”

Her hostile expression stays the same as she stares at me, watching my response very carefully.

I continue, “I know that you are the first of our kind. I’ve heard you called by several names, but I didn’t know which one you preferred. I didn’t want to assume.”

Her eyebrows relax, and I finally feel that I can breathe again as her tone softens as she speaks, “I’ve been called

Carmilla, Marcilla, Mircalla, and Millarca. The letters and meaning are the same every way; what's more important to me is the intention of the one who says them. Many things that I've done have even been attributed to Elizabeth Bathory. She was a companion of mine and a participant in my...*endeavors*. She was certainly involved; but, I was her muse, and she was my pupil. Still, when people speak of her deeds, they are really calling me by another name, because without me, my dear 'Lizbeth would have been *far less colorful*."

"So, it's fine to call you Carmilla?"

She smiles a pointed smile and says, "Yes. Yes, it is fine to hear you speak my name, dear. And, what is yours? Being that you are from the States, is it Jane? Perhaps Mary?"

"My name is Desirée."

"And what a fitting name it is for a beauty from New Orleans."

"May I ask for my wish that you granted me for making you laugh?"

"It depends on if you will grant me mine, dear Desirée."

Her lips push together—deep red and as lush as a ripened strawberry. She moves closer. I don't want her to touch me in my mind, but it doesn't feel repulsive to my body. In fact, my body doesn't feel like it can move at all, as if something were holding me in place, completely frozen. Closer. She's almost touching me now.

Something moves toward us, coming between our distracted heads. It's a mug; I can smell the herbs in the hot tea.

With an annoyed tone, Carmilla says, "Thank you, Gretchen, for your superbly-timed service."

With an equally annoyed voice, Gretchen responds, "Your tea as requested, mistress. I hope the timing is right as it's as fast I could prepare."

Taking the second mug from Gretchen, Carmilla's face becomes as angry as it was with me when I called her madame a minute ago, but her voice is a little softer than her façade, "Leave us. *If* I have use for you, I will call."

"As you wish," Gretchen says as she turns quickly and storms away.

Calling after her, Carmilla says, "It would be in your best

interest to preserve your *usefulness* to me. And...forget the wrap, our guest looks altogether smoldering before the fire.”

“Yes, mistress,” she says without looking back at us, and then she disappears into the hallway again.

Carmilla turns her face back toward me and the fire. Still furious with Gretchen, she looks like a statue of an evil princess—young, angry, and beautiful, with a regal, streamlined neck and high, taut cheekbones.

As she opens her mouth to speak, her expression abruptly returns to an alluring smile, “Now, what were we saying when we were interrupted?”

I’ve been holding my tea cup to my lips since it has arrived, and I’m glad to have it covering my mouth now that her attention has returned to me. The smell of the tea is wonderful, but I’m too scared of what may be in it to let it pass my lips.

Looking down, I see her cup is near the fire, and she is not interested in it.

“Oh, I remember where we were,” Carmilla says leaning closer to me.

I say, “I was going to ask you for my wish.”

“Yes, and what do you desire, Desirée?”

“I want to know where you came from. How can you be the first? Did you have parents? How were you born?”

“That’s a bold question, dear. Not many have been that frank with me, even in my long life.”

“I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“There is a hairline difference between rude and bold, like there is a hairline between whole and fractured—and fractured and broken—and broken and paralyzed...or dreaming and dead.”

I gasp, and it only makes her smile stronger.

She says, “You just be careful how you tread that thin, tricky line, and I’ll answer your audacious question after you give me a little taste.”

“Excuse me?”

“Pardon?” she asks.

“What?” I ask, completely lost in this conversation.

“Dear, it is rude to ask ‘Excuse me?’ in this part of the world. We say ‘Pardon?’ instead.”

“I’m sorry, ‘Pardon?’”

“A taste; I would like a taste of something you’ve brought for me before I answer your question.”

“All I’ve brought is myself,” I say, pushing the only object I’ve carried in with me further behind my back, hoping she hasn’t noticed it.

“And, I’m sure a taste of you would be quite exquisite... but I was referring to this urgent news of us all being in danger.”

“Oh, oh, okay. There is a vampire in New Orleans—Edgar. He was a friend—well, not really a friend, but sometimes we did things together.”

“Hmmm, what kind of things?”

“Mostly chemical things.”

“Well, I prefer to do biological things, but to each his own. Continue.”

“Well, he’s kind of the top guy now. He’s gotten himself clean, and replaced his old drug addiction with power. He’s not only telling every vampire in the city what to do, but he’s just taking anything he wants. That’s where we disagreed: he wanted me to be *one* of his girlfriends, and I had other ideas that he thought were crazy.”

“He sounds boring and dreadful. But, where is the danger?”

“He’s not satisfied with telling all of us what to do. He wants to be bigger than that now. He wants to be known; he’s going to expose us all.”

“How is exposing himself and his companions going to do anything but get them all killed? That has nothing to do with anyone but them if they want to be that stupid. It sounds like he needs to be snuffed out anyway.”

“You don’t understand: things have changed in the last hundred years. There will be evidence; the whole world will know we’re real, and they’ll all come looking for us, trying to hunt us down.”

“What do you mean ‘hunt *us* down?’ What makes you think we have anything in common? What makes *us* the same?”

“Why don’t you answer my question? You offered me a request.”

“Everything comes full circle if you are patient. Your question and mine are the same, and you just can’t see it because

you're too young to understand."

"What could where you came from and Edgar exposing us in New Orleans possibly have in common with each other?"

"Do you want to speculate and discuss how it's impossible, or do you want to know the truth?"

"The truth."

"Remember that knowledge enters through the ears and not the mouth. Now, let me explain. There is no *us*, and that is the answer to your question. You and I are so far removed that we could marry; there's nearly as much of a long, polluted bloodline between you and me as there is between any two humans—far enough back they're all the same bloodline too. I don't remember my birth any more than you remember yours. My first memories are with the wolves. I have images in my mind of sleeping huddled with them in the caves. I wasn't found until I was about five years old. No one knew how old I was, but they guessed as best they could based on my size. Years later, I became a woman at about the right age, so they must have gotten it very close."

"Wait? You were raised by wolves?"

"All I remember is what I told you. I only have a few images in my mind of that time—sleeping in a den—walking with them—eating with them—the mountains. After I was found, I remember people scolding my behavior for years—trying to civilize me, trying to prod the bad habits out of my body. I used to growl when I was angry and howl when I was scared; society had no use for little girls who behaved like animals. That is, no doubt, how the wolves somehow became entangled in our vampire myths. It was all because of me; it was because of the way I was found and what I became. The wolves raised me as one of their pups, and because of me they were branded as evil children of the night—hated and hunted by man. I suppose the lesson is to never take in the child of another kind; it will only bring you misery."

"And what about your parents? The people who found you—the people in the town—none of them had any clue who your parents might have been?"

"Depending on what tale you believe, I have no parents."

"What do you mean?"

"Some stories say that I am the first. I have no parents

because none came before me. There are no tales of vampires in Styria before I was born.”

“Then, how did you come to be?”

“Some say that I came from wolf as they say man came from ape.”

“What do the others say?”

“Some say I’m the devil’s daughter with poisoned blood, hypnotizing eyes, and evil magic, and some stories are much more vile,” she says with her face wrinkling in disgust at the end. “Some would swear on their children’s lives that I’m the unholy offspring of a human and a wolf. They only waiver on whether it was my mother who was the whore with a beast or my wicked father who was so hated that his only companions were wolves.”

“That’s terrible.”

Raising an eyebrow—slender, red, and pointed, she asks forcefully, “Is it?”

“I, I, uhh.”

“I can’t say that they’re wrong. I am the first, and I don’t remember my birth any more than you can remember your own. I may not believe their nasty stories, but I can’t disprove them either. So, be careful what you say is terrible before you cause irreparable hurt.”

“Carmilla, I’m sorry—I didn’t me—”

She cuts me off, her face suddenly full of rage again, “Yes, you are sorry—with a sorry lack of manners, brains, and culture!” As the last syllable echoes through the tall, stone room, giving way to the fire snapping and crackling, her eyes are wild, and her fangs are exposed. Her appearance and the breaking sound from the fire make my heart tremble.

I hear the noise of something being dragged above us, followed by wailing. It sounds like a woman in pain, but muffled as if it’s coming from somewhere far off in the dark parts of this castle.

Exhaling loudly, Carmilla turns her face to a warm expression, and she calms her voice, “But, you meant no harm, dear Desirée, so I forgive you—and it is gone. I know what I am, and finding out where I came from can never change what I’ve become. If I was supposed to be or could’ve been something different, I’ve rejected that path centuries ago. I am me,

independent of what my body was before it became me. None of it matters anyway. Too much stock in ancestry or pride in ancient roots leads to racism and hatred. If all ancestry is equal, then there is nothing to be proud of in any of them. Pride belongs to something extraordinary in some way. One can't be proud of one's heritage without assuming it's better than someone else's. Pride in ancestry is racism. Let man live for his own actions and seek his satisfaction in them, not those of the dead. Besides, I prefer to hate people for much more personal and individual reasons."

She looks to the unlit hallway where Gretchen disappeared a short while ago. I wonder how long they've lived here. Gretchen is definitely a human—brown eyes, average strength, wrinkles, and aging, graying hair. I wonder if Gretchen's been trapped here since she was a smooth-faced teenager.

"Now, it's your turn, Desirée."

"Excuse m—I mean, pardon?"

Carmilla smiles at my correction and says, "Tell me what's so dangerous about how this fool Edgar is going to expose us all."

"He's been talking to people about a television show—something about filming a show that follows him and the others around. It's supposed to be about people in New Orleans who think they're vampires; he thinks he's found a loophole where he can expose himself and still be safe by pretending to be a human who thinks he's a vampire. Edgar's very smart when he can control his addictions."

"I saw a television in the town years ago. Has it caught on now?"

"You haven't been out in a long time I take it."

"No, I haven't wanted to. My entertainment is...brought to me."

"Gretchen brings it to you?"

"That's best not discussed. Some secrets will never leave this castle, so pray that you don't stumble upon them. Now, how many people see this television?"

"The whole world."

She laughs. I swear I can hear someone crying out and

wailing again from somewhere above us, but I can't pay it any attention now.

"No, Carmilla, I am serious. Between television, the internet, satellite, and wireless connections, not only will nearly the entire planet see it when it airs, but it'll be saved and watched over and over again."

Her eyes grow wide, "Gretchen has told me of these things many times, but I've never been interested in an artificial, glowing world. I prefer my interactions to be very close and very personal. I never thought of someone being stupid enough to use television and these other things like what you're saying Edgar has planned. But, it won't matter. It won't be the first time."

"When else has this happened? What are you talking about?"

"I told Mary Shelley a vampire love story centuries ago. I told her about young, handsome Victor and how I loved him. I told her about his passion and his obsession, about how his work eventually devoured him."

"Frankenstein? You told her the story of Frankenstein?"

"No!" she snaps, her face tense and angry again, "I did not tell her that story. I told her about a part of *my life*." Her voice and expression soften, "I told her about the tenderest part of my life that I had ever known. And, his name was pronounced Victor FrankenSTEEN, not STINE as you Americans and Brits love to say. My wonderful Victor was a man you only meet once in a century, if it is a remarkable century."

The firelight complements her features, highlighting her cheekbones, her rosy lips, her long red hair, and her big, blue eyes. She looks like a rose bathed in candlelight, her danger hidden away inside the thorns below the beautiful petals.

After letting her statement about Victor settle, she continues, "I gave Mary the story, and look what it did to her life. Just internalizing my tale and imagining it to write it in her book cost her a great deal. But, make no mistake, Victor Frankenstein did live and was my love. In fact, I never felt anything but lust for anyone else until I met Bram many, many years later. Bram was only three years old when Mary died, and I last kissed my Victor over two hundred years before I told Mary our sad tale.

"Although, what she wrote wasn't quite my story. She

changed my name to Elizabeth for some reason, and she had Victor's family rescue me not from wolves, but first as an orphan and second as a poor peasant girl. Worse, she decided to kill me off. Imagine that! Mary's story was of a man and his monster. The real story was one of a man whose brilliance destroyed him and the woman who loved him...who loved him completely and would be achingly broken without him for all eternity. Eternity trumps all, even for those cursed to live it. That was the story, but she twisted it into something else, her Modern Prometheus. Well, she should have followed her own moral in not letting one's work, one's vaulting ambition, ruin one's life. She paid the price for mangling my most treasured memory. She paid dearly. I made sure of that."

"And, with her loose lips during her summer of depravity with her Percy, and Byron, and Claire, she told that doctor Polidori about me, leading to his little ghost story, *Vampyre*. I gave Mary truth and heart, and she twisted it into vain entertainment, giving it away like it was something cheap. For all that, she earned what she was given. She deserved the last truth that I brought her. Don't mark me wrong; I loved Mary. She had an imagination and a spirit that were remarkable. But, the boring and the colorful need all be judged the same, and my last *gift* to her was just."

We're getting close to what I need to know now. I can't ask her; she's too smart and too cunning to give me any information she doesn't want to. I need to make her tell me as part of a story.

I ask, "How much did she make up?"

"I told you; she made the story about the monster when it was all about love."

"No, I meant about the monster. How much of that was true? Did Victor reanimate a corpse?"

"It was his work; yes."

"But, did he do it? Did he really do it?"

She closes her lips tightly and narrows her eyes at me. I can almost feel my body growing cold with fear. Quickly, she grabs my chin again, but this time her grip is much harder than before.

As she holds my face, pointing it directly at her, she asks,

“Is that why you’re here? Pretending to ask me about some fool planning a TV show when you really wanted to ask me about reanimation?”

I can’t move my head a millimeter in her grasp, but I dart my eyes away from her face. She still watches me, absorbing my every expression.

In a quiet, but grave voice, she says, “Answer my question now, Desirée. If you were trying to trick me, I’ll kill you so slowly that you’ll pray for hell.”

“Yes and no,” I say.

She yanks my head toward her, pulling my entire body along with it. Her fangs are out, her face is animalistic, and she glares at me with the disdain of a king holding a peasant who has dared make a pass at the queen.

“Choose your words carefully, and remember to whom you speak.”

“Carmilla, I’m sorry to have upset you. But...they are both the same question.”

“You had better explain quickly how a lowlife, vampire imbecile in New Orleans has anything to do with my Victor’s genius experiments.”

“Edgar is trying to reanimate a vampire who was recently killed. The vampire’s name was Roderick, and he was very mean. He was the only one who could really handle Edgar and keep him in line. Roderick would keep Edgar drugged up so he could manipulate him. Edgar wants Roderick alive so Roderick can see he’s taken over now—that he’s clean and in charge. He wants Roderick alive to make a servant out of his former master, or in the least, to have the honor of killing him. It’s revenge either way.”

“Roderick? Why is that name so familiar to me?” Carmilla looks puzzled and takes her gaze away from me to the fire, releasing my chin as she focuses on her thoughts.

I say, “Roderick is centuries old. He’s a blonde—a tall one. He’s mean and loves violence and sex. They say he’s killed every one of his own children that he’s discovered. He loves to torture.”

“Oh, I remember Roderick.”

“What?”

“Yes, I remember him. He came to visit me just before he accidentally got himself all caught up in the Inquisition.”

“He came to see you? What did he want?”

“What do all men want?”

“What! You and Roderick were a thing?”

She laughs, “A thing? You might think so, but no, no, we weren’t at all. He came asking for me to teach him things—he wanted to be a sort of a pupil, but that’s not what he really wanted. He called on me during one of my rare spells of morality. I was trying to be a better person, seeking religion—thought I might be happier. It had nothing to do with me feeling bad about hurting others; it was a selfish, intellectual pursuit. I was more playing church than seeking any redemption, and it didn’t suit me. But, that is the time he came to see me, and that is the *me* he saw back then. He was here to seduce the oldest of his kind in some sick Oedipal perversion, plain and simple, but instead he was given an earful on dignity and moderation. Little did he know that if he had come just a few months later, he may have gotten what he came for.” She pauses, puts her face very close to mine, and asks, “So, you are sure that this Edgar wants to bring Roderick back to life?”

“Yes, he told me so himself.”

“You must stop this. Roderick was not just a danger to the mortals, but to all of us. He is a much more serious threat than the silly TV show you mentioned.”

“Well, I wanted to know if it was even possible before I risked my life trying to stop it.”

“Yes, it is possible. How long has Roderick been dead, and how did he die?”

“Decapitated—about two months ago.”

“Oh, he is long dead, *Desirée*. He’ll never come back.”

“So, it’s impossible; there’s no way at all that you know of for Roderick to come back after two months?”

“No, his head and his body will never heal on their own after this much time, but there is another way—Victor’s way. His creation was made from various body parts; most of the individual pieces had been dead for more than two months by the time he harvested them, and they were never alive as one body before he assembled them. He found a way to take that mangled,

hodgepodge of body parts and make it into a living thing, and that was his secret. But, he was careful to take his dangerous discoveries to the grave with him. The world has never produced a mind of equal brilliance and so far ahead of his time as Victor. The secret is lost and will never be found, buried deeper than his body in the Arctic ice.”

Her eyes become glossy and full of adoration and loss. She stares at the flames, but I’m sure she only sees a memory replaying in her mind.

I ask as carefully as if I were stepping barefoot onto the edge of a sword, “And Victor never shared his work with you? He kept secrets from you?”

Slowly her eyes narrow again, and she turns her head from the fire to me. A thin, red eyebrow raises pointedly, and she says, “If I did know the secret and told it to you, I’d have to kill you before the sun rises. Some things are meant to never see the daylight again—things that are too dangerous to be seen should be kept hidden in the night, and things that are too curious to be silent should be dead so their tongues cannot wander.”

I look down to the bricks of the hearth, not knowing if I’ve already guaranteed my death with my question.

A drop falls past my face, reflecting the glowing light from the fireplace, and it splatters on the hearth between us. Carmilla looks up to the ceiling. I wonder if it’s started to rain and the roof is leaking. The ceiling in this room must be thirty feet high, but it’s still not high enough to reach the roof of this castle. There must be another room on top of this one.

Another drop soars from the ceiling down toward us. In a fast movement, Carmilla flings her hand out to catch it. The drop hits her thumb and first finger, and it starts to run over her knuckles as she brings it closer to her face. It’s deep red, and she slides her tongue over her hand, licking it up. In another sudden movement, she sticks her hand into the fire. She has a thin smile on her face as I hear the flames singing the remnants of the blood on her fingers and her skin along with it.

Slowly, she pulls her hand out of the fire, and she asks, “Is that why you’ve come all this way? Are you really just an errand girl for this Edgar—have you come completely across the ocean and through the woods—all the way to the hidden

Karnstein Castle—have you done all of this to pry an old secret from my lips with your tight leather clothing and your face painted like a rose? After all these years, has beauty left my quiver to become an arrow for my enemies? Have I finally grown old enough for beauty to be used *against* me?”

I see the hurt in her eyes, and for a moment she looks like a schoolgirl rejected by a crush. The conversation has gone from Victor, her lost love, to her being tricked by beauty. If her mood swings like it has all night, she'll turn from hurt to angry at any moment. She'll be looking for someone to blame for what she's feeling, and I'm the young beauty who's asking her the troubling questions. I know I better say something smart and fast, before a new emotion rushes over her and my life rushes out of me.

“Carmilla, you look as young as spring flowers, a girl no older than seventeen. You can still hide your power in the fairness of a young flower. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings or make you think I'm trying to trick you with my beauty, which pales to your long hair and full lips, both as richly crimson as blood.”

Her raised eyebrow lowers slightly, but her lips are still pushed tightly together. I better say something else, get her onto another topic.

“You mentioned Bram earlier. Was he someone you loved too?”

Her tightly shut mouth relaxes and asks, “Are you intent on bringing all of my heartaches out in one evening, and on the evening that you've first met me at that?”

“The way you mentioned his name earlier made me think there's a story there.”

“Oh, yes, Desirée, there is not one but two stories there—one that the world knows, and the other that will die with me. Bram is what the world called him, but to me, he was always Abraham—my sweet Abraham.”

Carmilla sighs for a moment, and once again she seems to see things happening before her that I can't see.

Her voice sounds young and airy as she speaks, “Abraham was the last—I haven't truly cared for anyone since him.”

A clamor can be heard from the darkened hallway into

which Gretchen vanished a little while ago. I think she may have dropped something.

Carmilla continues, “Abraham came to me for the sake of history. He was a student of the truth, and I loved that about him. He was a man of literature and the theatre, and when he first appeared at my door, he came bearing a satchel of beautiful, old books that still remain in my library to this night. Flowers would have gotten him nowhere, but he was smarter than that. He brought me something that would last, something that had history—something that told stories that had been long forgotten. They were a perfect gift—one that initially saved his life and eventually stole my heart. He knew the inner-workings of my soul before he ever met me. His imagination of what it would have felt like to be me was uncannily accurate. Of all the humans, he understood what it was like to be a vampire, and even more so to be *me*, better than anyone else.

“It’s no doubt that he found me based on the works of Le Fanu. Sheridan Le Fanu came to me years before for a story, and that was all. He was an intelligent, respectful man, and the tale he wrote based on his conversations with me was one that focused on love and vulnerability. I liked Le Fanu as I enjoy intelligence and culture, but there is nothing more of *interest* to tell. I thought he might come visit me again at Karnstein Castle without the distraction of his wife, but even after I removed her, he stayed in Dublin.

“Anyway, Abraham worked for Le Fanu, writing theatre reviews in his publication, so Le Fanu must have been the one to tell Abraham where to find me.

“About the title, Abraham found the name Dracula in a history book that I loaned him discussing Vlad III Dracula. In Transylvania, Dracula is still a national hero for valiantly fending off invaders who were crueler than he was. He may have been ruthless in warfare, but Vlad was no vampire.

“Most of the more gruesome traits that Abraham gave to his Dracula character were really things done by Elizabeth Bathory and inspired by my own imagination and influence. Abraham’s Dracula is much more me than Vlad or even Elizabeth. People think that Abraham borrowed heavily from Le Fanu’s novella named after me, but that is not true. Abraham

wrote his own story; they just both used me as their source.

“The first time I ever truly wished I was dead was when I lost Victor. The second came centuries later when I got word that Abraham had wooed and married the famously beautiful love of Oscar Wilde. Oh, what was her name? Florence...Florence Balcombe. I wanted to kill her more than anyone else who’s ever breathed while I’ve been alive, but for my love of Abraham, I let her live.

“Between running his theatre, his wife, and his writing, Abraham had little time to return to the dark woods of Styria to see me, and I never saw him again.

“But, regarding your friend and his television show, we’ve been revealed many times before, and people always find a way to dismiss us as simply fiction, nothing more than a scary story created to frighten children. The only challenge that awaits you is to make sure nothing is captured on film that cannot be rationalized as a production—anything that simply cannot be explained. If there is danger of that, you cannot reason or plead with Edgar; you must kill him.”

“I will, and I must be heading back now to do so.”

“No, there have been too many tales told tonight for you to run off and make another one. You will stay the remainder of the night. I want to think over what I’ve already told you. Besides, the wolves are very dangerous this time of night. If you stop to kill one, seven more will take you down.”

“No, I rea—”

Her voice is quiet, but firm as she interrupts me, “You *will* stay.” Without looking away from me or raising her voice, she says, “Gretchen.”

The sound of footsteps comes from the dark hallway. Gretchen’s face is already pained as she steps into the range of the firelight.

Gretchen asks, “Is she—will she be staying the night, mistress?” Her voice is a wreck of emotion with hints of jealousy, hope, and fear mashed together.

With her eyes still on me, Carmilla answers her servant, “Yes, she *will* be staying the night. And Gretchen, I can’t tell if you’re relieved or envious by it. Are you giddy that you might be replaced, or are you jealous that we have company? Just

remember that neither attitude will bring you good things in the *end*.”

Gretchen snuffles and asks, “To what room shall I bring her?”

Carmilla smiles and says, “The tower.”

“Your room?” Gretchen asks trembling.

“No, the guest tower. She shall have her own room to rest and dream; she seems far too tired from her journey for anything too demanding tonight.”

I slip my hand behind my back, grasping the edge of the damp sackcloth tightly. As I stand, I hope the object I’ve brought with me doesn’t attract any attention, or I’m sure I won’t make it to my room in the tower or anywhere else.

Following Gretchen up the stairs, I keep my cloth package on the opposite side of my body as Carmilla, who still sits in front of the fire, watching us as we ascend the steps.

Carmilla’s voice calls out from the hearth near the bottom of the stairs, but it sounds like she’s leaning over my shoulder and whispering in my ear, “If there is a knock at your door, be sure and open it.”



**LEWIS ALEMAN** is the author of the vampire saga, *The Anti-Vampire Tale*; the dark literary thriller, *Cold Streak*; and the time travel thriller, *Faces in Time*. Aleman's books have been Amazon Bestsellers, Kindle Bestsellers, and #1 in Myspace Books.

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Look for:

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