

L. SHANNON & MOIRA REID

STEEL CITY  
VAMPIRES

*Welcome*  
L. Shannon  
& Moira Reid *Home*

## **Steel City Vampires**

**Welcome Home by L. Shannon & Moira Reid**

**Vampire Oracle: Love by L. Shannon**

**Vampire Oracle: Sunlight by Moira Reid**

**One Wild Night by Summer Alan**

**Bound and Determined by L. Shannon**

**Dangerous Company by L. Shannon**

**Blitzed by L. Shannon**

**Reviews for Moira Reid**

*"Seduction 101 started out funny and then rapidly changed to raging hot, reading how Eric taught Julia the fine art of seduction."* --Fallen Angels Reviews, 5 Angels

*"What a hoot! I love the fact that in Pay Dirt what is possibly the worse day of Elle's life might turn out to be the best."* --Joyfully Reviewed

*"Dealing with emotions of a myriad of different levels and dimensions, the plot is simple yet effective and enjoyable. Ms. Reid's charm works well here, giving us a fast-paced entertaining story laced with humor."* --Literary Nymphs, 4 Nymphs

*"Are you looking for an entertaining romantic suspense with strong characters, a murderous bad guy, and lots of chemistry? Then you'll like Pay Dirt."* --The Romance Studio, 4 Hearts

*"Suspense and danger go hand in hand in this great story of the paranormal. I really enjoyed Ally and Hawkes, their story was different and unique, using their minds to survive what could have been a tragedy. Moira Reid has been able to make Hawkes Abandon a believable delight."* --Ecataromance

WELCOME HOME

**Books by Moira Reid**

Seduction 101

Pay Dirt

Hawkes Abandon

Paid in Full-Valentine Monologues

Run to Love

Break Even: A Story of Overcoming

Sunlight-The Vampire Oracle  
coming 9/08, Cobblestone Press

## Reviews for L. Shannon

*"This author has a real gift in writing stories that are not only entertaining, but exciting and captivating. This reviewer always looks forward to the next story from this talented author."* Valerie - Love Romances & More

*"Ms. Shannon gives her readers value for money and a story that will stay with the reader. Her stories are definitely keeper-shelf material Ms. Shannon has a number of shapeshifter stories that this reviewer urges every die-hard fan to pick up, sit back and enjoy."*

Valerie - Love Romances and More

*"The best erotic shower scene known to man has been unveiled in L. Shannon's latest novel, Walking in Memories."* Aya29 - Euro-Reviews

*"All I can say is Ms. Shannon you rock baby!!"*

Robin - My Book Craving

*"This (Walking with Synn) was just a small taste of the demons that L. Shannon has brought to life and it is simply amazing. It is cuts right to the chase, no shortcuts allowed."* Liadan - Coffee Time Romance

*Eagle Clan Series: Destiny: "This world that L. Shannon has brought to life is one that I'd love to live in...who could turn down a sexy werewolf or a gorgeous demon?"* Summer - In the Library Reviews

**Books by L. Shannon**

Acacia 1: Abducting Aeron

Anom'tan 1: Walking with Synn  
Anom'tan 2: Walking in Memories  
Anom'tan 3: Walking at Sundown  
Anom'tan 4: Walking Death's Edge

Chances: A Snowball's Chance

Eagle Clan 1: Father of the Wolf  
Eagle Clan 2: Destiny

Lynx Clan 1: Forgiven

Origins: Vali's Curse  
Origins: A Spirit United  
Origins: My Immortal

Tascryn Royals 1: Of Blood and Blessings  
Tascryn Royals 2: Blood Reign

Tascryn: Surviving Synn  
Tascryn: Season of Blood

Valåfrn: Forever Eden

Welcome Home

The Vampire Oracle: Love -Coming 8/01/08 with Cobblestone Press

L. SHANNON & MOIRA REID

# **Welcome Home**

**by**

**L. Shannon  
&  
Moira Reid**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the authors' imaginations or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

**Welcome Home**

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**Dedication**

For our readers and lovers of vampires everywhere...

## Chapter One

The house was beautiful and the view in all directions was exactly what he'd been looking for, including a cityscape to the one side of the hillside home and spacious land to the other. Fox Chapel was everything the lovely realtor had promised.

"Welcome home, Mr. Fontana." The tall slender beauty stood in his newly bought doorway and for just a moment the illusion was complete.

*A house is only a cage with an open door if there is no love within.* His mother's favorite saying. For just a heart beat, this house felt like home. After two hundred years of searching, could he finally find peace here?

"Mr. Fontana?" The girl glided down the steps toward him.

"Please, call me Kalib." He closed the car door with a quiet click and met her halfway. "The house is lovely." But it was nothing compared to her. With gorgeous dark green eyes and creamy mocha skin, her mixed heritage had created a jewel. Her long black hair was French braided to the base of her head and then it tumbled out in a wave of tight curls.

"Kalib, then. I hope you didn't have any trouble finding the place."

"Your directions were perfect." He'd been to enough new cities that her specific instructions had proven more than adequate. "I apologize again for my late arrival. Truly, you couldn't be expected to wait until," he glanced at his watch, "until almost ten."

"A welcome is what makes a house a home. I couldn't very well let you arrive without one." She reached his side and held out her hand to shake his.

Instead he captured the hand and lifted it to his lips, pleased when her heart raced in response to the old world gallantry. "Your extra effort is appreciated, Miss Hemingway."

"Shasta, please. I won't keep you, but will see you to the door." She tucked one arm through his and led the way. Her smooth stride matched his, letting them brush together in the way of lovers.

When the door opened, he was in awe. Not only had she waited to welcome him, she'd also created a special welcome inside. The house was lit with a warm glow, brighter in the dining room to the right of the foyer. Through there waited a meal laid out with candle light and the very picture of elegance.

"Shasta..."

Her fingers tightened over his forearm. "I hope this is all right, Mr. Fontana. I didn't mean to overstep myself."

"Thank you, Shasta. You did a beautiful thing." He slid his palm over her hand. "There is only one problem."

"What's wrong? Say the word and I'll make it right."

"Will you stay and enjoy this wonderful meal with me?" When her gaze jumped away, he forged on. "I can't bear the thought of sitting here alone on my first night."

Shasta couldn't imagine the young man had spent too many nights alone. He couldn't be over thirty-five, although something in his eyes suggested someone much older. Had something terrible driven him out here to this mountaintop to hide those eyes from seeing more of a naked, horrible world?

As usual, she was letting her imagination run away with her. She should have listened to her professors in college instead of her mother and become a novelist instead of a real estate agent. They'd all had unfailing belief in her ability to become a celebrated writer. Instead, she'd taken the safe road, the steady income road--she'd taken the test and become a real estate agent.

*The most successful real estate agent in Pittsburgh*, she reminded herself. Eh, she never had time to write a book anyway. She had to steal time to read them, although her shelves were full of literature she'd accumulated over the years. After many attempts to do so, she found out that writing a novel wasn't only coming up with good ideas, but translating them to paper in a compelling way. Somehow, no idea she'd ever come up with had ever quite done that.

*Just as well.*

Part of her success in real estate lay in her ability to read people, even if sometimes her imagination did get the better of her. She could plainly see that this man wasn't just looking for a date on a Saturday night. Curiosity beckoned her to accept the invitation although caution also reared its ugly, killjoy head. He was a client, and although she knew plenty about his financial statements and credit score, she knew nothing about him personally.

*Really, Shasta. Get a grip. It's dinner, and you had it prepared. What's he going to do, poison you?*

"Earth calling Miss Shasta Hemingway? Are you still with me?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "Sometimes I go off in my own little world. Please forgive me. If you're sure about dinner, I'd love to join you. But, don't feel obligated. I really don't want to intrude, Mr. Fontana."

"Please intrude, and I thought we'd gone past mister and misses."

"Okay, then Kalib." She patted his hand.

"Would you like me to open the wine?"

"That's the housewarming gift from the realty company; you don't have to use your housewarming gift on me. Save that for a special occasion." She walked back into the house and he followed her, leaving the front door open. A cool breeze blew through the room fluttering the candlelight and scenting the air with the sweetness of fall leaves.

"Who better to celebrate a housewarming gift than with the real estate agent who made it possible? Have a seat in the den, and I'll bring some glasses."

Shasta walked through the living room into the room he'd called the "den." It was his house, and he could certainly do whatever he liked with it, but she could imagine this room only as a library. Floor to ceiling shelves lined two walls, shiny dark oak just begging to be populated by best sellers, classics, dictionaries... The possibilities were endless.

Kalib smiled to himself. It'd been a while since he'd met a woman who had so much happening beneath the surface. Each time Shasta's gaze went all soft made him wonder what the girl was thinking. Of course, he could have read her mind, but that was just rude. Besides, he liked the idea of discovering the mystery behind those big, beautiful eyes.

"The pictures of the house don't do it justice. There's an older elegance to the place that I hadn't expected."

"I'm just glad you liked it. Pennington Estates has been looking for a new family for a while. I thought of it first but thought the price might scare you off like so many others."

"I don't scare easily."

"Good to know." She settled onto the leather chair across from him. "The purchase was rather sudden. What brought you to Pittsburgh...if you don't mind me asking?"

"I don't mind." But then he wouldn't be telling her the whole ugly truth either. "I recently ended a long relationship and needed a fresh start." That was true enough. Only his relationship had been with his vampire fledgling, David. After nearly two hundred years together they'd finally parted and not on good terms. Sadness and happiness combined and would have ruined his first night home with the cruelty of their memories if she hadn't agreed to remain.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry." Her eyes filled with sympathy.

"No, please. I'm beginning to go into my own little world, like you." He sipped at his wine. Inviting her to stay might have been an unexplainable impulse, but not a regrettable one. His only regret so far was her choice to sit across from him instead of at his side.

What was it about the girl that drew him? It could be appearance. She was lovely and elegant. Not to mention sexy in her stylish pants suit. Perhaps she dressed in the ideal of professionalism, but every line and angle awoke a quiet ache within him.

"Here I offered to share your meal and all I'm doing is keeping you from it." She stood suddenly. "I really should be going. I didn't mean to bring up any painful memories."

He wanted to argue, to convince her to stay longer, maybe even use more than just charm to keep her with him. He couldn't. He wouldn't, no matter how badly he wanted to. He caught her hand as she fled. "Please, Shasta. You didn't say anything wrong. I appreciate your time and willingness to stay."

Her lips parted and then closed. She gave a soft nod. "I was happy to be here."  
The doorbell rang.

## Chapter Two

“Are you expecting someone?” He tugged her body behind him. No one knew he was here. He’d fled France quietly. His trail should have been hard to trace, all but impossible, but what if he was wrong?

“No, no one. Maybe it’s a neighbor...”

“At eleven o'clock at night?” The ice forming in his gut knew exactly who was at the door. How had David found him? Or perhaps he should say, how had he found him so soon? When the bell rang again, Kalib turned back to Shasta. “Stay here. I’ll take care of it.”

He strode out to the entrance. The bell rang again as he opened the door.

“About time, Kalib. Thought you’d leave me out here all night.”

“You are not welcome here.”

“Where you go, I will follow.” David pushed in closer, trying to bully his way into the house.

“No, David. Not here. Not now. Not ever again.”

David grinned. “You have someone here? I’ll just come back later, or better yet--we can share the snack.”

Kalib pushed him over the threshold and pulled the door firmly closed behind them. How could he get David to understand? He’d tried talking and David never got it. This was the third time he’d put space between them and still here he was trying to... He didn’t even know what David expected. But he couldn’t, wouldn’t deal with the monster David had become.

“So you don’t want to share. No problem.”

“Why are you here, David?”

David's eyes opened wide, his elegant features feigning surprise. “You’re my sire. Where you go, I follow. We’re too old to change our ways now.”

“But you did change. What you did, even once is unforgivable.” And David had killed more than once. “I can’t accept it. I won’t.”

“You will.” His face darkened. “If I’m not good enough for you, remember this, you made me what I am. Take responsibility for what you’ve created.”

No, he was wrong. He hadn’t made David into a killer. Yes, he’d turned him into a vampire, but killing was something they’d never done. Until recently. “It’s not my fault. Just go.”

“Oh I’ll go, but soon enough you’ll beg for me to come back. You can’t run

from me. You remember France? This will be so much worse and only you can stop it." With his last ugly words, David spun and stormed off into the night.

Kalib watched until he disappeared down the driveway. *David*. He'd made a mistake with him centuries ago, a mistake he seemed bound to relive for centuries to come. No matter where he ran, David managed to find him. Somehow, someday, he would have to stop trying to simply leave David in the hope he would move on. Someday, he would have to make a stand, and David would have to make a choice.

Either leave him alone and make a life for himself, or... Perhaps Pittsburgh would hold the answer, offer the solution he didn't have the strength to find for himself.

Kalib opened the door to find Shasta standing on the other side, obviously trying to pretend she hadn't heard what had happened on the porch. And failing miserably.

"I should be going." She grabbed her purse from the floor and slung it over her shoulder. "It has been very nice meeting you, Mr. Fontana. I hope you enjoy your new home."

She started toward the door, but he stepped in front of her and closed it behind him. He couldn't let her leave yet. David was too unpredictable. He'd killed before for lesser reasons, and his jealousy was now legendary.

"I'm sorry you had to hear that. We were having a lovely time, and well, David is an old friend."

"Who did something unforgivable that you can't accept?"

Her head tipped to the side, and he saw the truth: *she didn't miss a word*.

"What did he mean 'we can share the snack'?"

Kalib trained his features. "He likes to drop by unannounced and uninvited for dinner. It's rude, but that's David."

She nodded slowly. "I'm a little bit nosey, and I apologize. But what did he mean by 'you're my sire. Where you go I follow. If I'm not good enough for you, remember this, you made me what I am. Take responsibility for what you've made me'?"

He stared at her, then realizing his mouth had opened, closed it.

"I have a photographic memory, and I kind of lied. I'm horribly nosey."

Time to choose. Did he tell a woman he liked but barely knew the truth, or erase her memory of the last few minutes? And he did like her, nosey and all. Damn David anyway.

It seemed just plain rude to erase her memory, but the truth would be worse.

He took a step toward her and brushed his fingertips across her forehead. "The wine was delicious, don't you think? I've checked, and I have another bottle. Thank you for helping me look for it. Shall we return to the den?"

She blinked rapidly then stumbled back a step. "Oh, wow. Maybe I'd better not. I'm a little dizzy already. To tell the truth, I'm not much of a drinker."

He placed his hand under her elbow to steady her. "*In vino veritas*. Let's sit down and talk some more. I've bored you long enough with my own past. I'd love to hear about you."

"I'm not bored at all."

“You are too kind.” He led her back into the den. “How about I light the fire to take the chill out of the air?”

“That would be nice.”

He settled her onto the sofa, letting his fingers caress her arm in a long glide before turning to the fireplace. Perhaps when the time came for her to leave, he should escort her home. *Maybe she should stay.* Guilt chewed at him, but he had to admit the truth. He wanted her to stay for reasons other than keeping her safe. He wanted to spend more time with Shasta. There was so much to learn still hidden behind her exotic eyes.

Even now she watched his every movement. Her eyelids at half mast hiding whatever thought swirled there.

He was tempted once more to read her mind, but to do so would take all the pleasure from unwrapping her secrets.

Once the fire caught into a small but steady blaze he returned to her side. He refilled their glasses and settled in next to her. “Feeling better?”

“What did you do to me?”

Surely she hadn’t sensed his intrusion. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that I remember your unwanted guest and I remember you leading me back here...but it’s all cloudy, like something I read instead of experienced. *What did you do?*”

She’d sensed him. Her strong mind wouldn’t let him hide the truth. But now what should he do? He didn’t want to lie to her, nor could he let her leave just yet. He ran a hand through his hair. Shit, he wanted her to stay with him and he wanted her to do it knowing all the facts. It just couldn’t happen.

“I’m waiting.”

He reached out and stroked her jaw. She didn’t pull away from his touch. “I’m sorry. I thought you might have been frightened and just wanted to keep you safe.” It was mostly the truth. “Will you forgive me?” He leaned in closer, mesmerized by the glittering jewels of her eyes.

They were close, so close that her breath blew out over his cheek. He slid his other arm behind her and gently pulled her tight against his side. Then he claimed her mouth, kissing her in sweet exploration. The contact was heady. She tasted of fresh mint and something altogether unique, something that was just Shasta.

Slowly they parted and her impossibly thick lashes fluttered open. Her lips quirked upward. “I think I forgive you.”

He couldn’t hold back a matching grin. “I think I want to kiss you again.”

“I think you’d better do it quick, before I kiss you first.”

Both options worked for him. He dipped forward and claimed her lips again. This time he took the kiss deeper, and hotter. She met him with equal passion. The heat built and his body reacted.

“Wait.” She pulled herself from his arms and leaned against the back of the sofa, her breath coming quickly. “Kalib, please wait.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to get carried away. I...”

She stood and weaved back and forth as she crossed the room. Turning, she leaned against the empty bookshelves for support. Her eyes were wide. “No, it’s not you, it’s...something is wrong.”

He rose from the sofa. "What?"

She placed her fingertips at her temples and blinked rapidly. "My head, a loud screaming sound inside my head. It's hurting. Oh *God*..."

Moving through the space between them in a fraction of a second, he caught her in his arms before she could crumple to the floor.



### Chapter Three

Kalib flinched away from the horrible truth. It was happening again. "*David!*"  
"You called?"

Kalib spun around to face him. "What the hell are you doing?"

David gazed at his fingernails. "Exactly what I said I would do if you tried to run from me again. I told you to remember France. This is me *helping* you remember it."

"She has nothing to do with us. Release her, David."

"You will beg, or she will die. Those are your options." He smiled, the evil beauty of his face horrifying to behold. "Don't wait too long. The subsonic will kick in soon, and the precious little mind I sense you so blindingly admire in her will melt like vanilla ice cream in July."

David was many things: a selfish, self-absorbed vampire and a murderer, but he was not a liar. She would be dead within minutes if he did nothing to stop him.

"Beg for what, David?"

"You know what," he said. "Don't waste precious time with stupid questions. You always did think you could barter for more time. This is all the time we have for her tonight. Beg me to live here with you, and I will not kill her. Waste any more of my time, and well, I hope the ground is soft outside. I hate manual labor, and digging graves is hard work."

There was no other choice. David would kill her. Even if he had a stake for David's heart, he couldn't use it in time to save her. He hung his head. No matter what else David was, he was still his progeny, and he could not destroy him even with all the time in the world. He hung his head and pulled her body tighter into his arms.

"That's right, Kalib. We will be together forever. You know it, and I know it. One day you will understand and know the truth: no one will ever love you as I. None other than I. *Now.*" He closed the distance between them instantly. "Beg me."

"David." He choked out the words between clenched teeth. "Live here with me, and release her."

"Done." He flipped his hand in the air.

Her low moan startled Kalib, and he sank to the floor holding her in his arms.

"Darling, are you all right?"

"I'll be in my room, if anyone needs me." David smiled down at them both.  
"Good night."

Shasta inhaled deeply and found the howling pain inside her head, excruciating a moment ago, had turned off like a faucet. She opened her eyes and found herself exactly where she'd been, in Kalib's den. Only now she was on the floor leaning into Kalib's strength. The red hot bursts of light and heat were gone, but the memory of them remained as a tall, handsome man strolled from the room.

Fury and fear mingled inside her belly. "You want to explain that, Kalib?"

"No." Kalib helped her back to her feet, shoved her purse into her arms and more than half carried her out of the room toward the front door. "But I will...at least some."

"Good."

"David is very possessive--"

"Yeah, I got that. From what I've seen he's also a real prick. He did that to me, didn't he?"

Kalib stopped at the front door and turned toward her, his eyes full of the same aching sadness she'd seen earlier tonight. "Yes. I'm sorry. I won't ever let him hurt you again."

She tried to control her anger. "How did he do that?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't have time to explain. Someday, but not now. You have to get out of here."

She'd seen abusive relationships before but wouldn't have dreamed Kalib was the kind of man to tolerate it. "You don't have to put up with him, you know. Just because you're both men, doesn't mean it's okay for him to abuse you, and he *especially* can't abuse me. Being gay or bisexual doesn't change your rights."

"What?"

"I said--"

"I heard what you said. I'm not gay or bisexual--David isn't my lover. He never was, and that is his problem."

"He was certainly behaving as if you were."

His countenance became one of a much older man, the happy, charming person she'd drunk wine with earlier gone. "I'm sorry you had to see any of this. Please believe me when I tell you I didn't want him here. He is a sad remnant of my past, and I will never let him hurt you again."

She saw the pain like years marring his handsome young features. Whatever had happened between them, it still haunted him.

Much to her astonishment and usually her detriment, this kind of human pain and misery brought out her most protective urges.

"Look, I don't know what happened, and I don't mind telling you it scared me. Please don't feel guilty for what someone else has done. I like you--I like what was happening between us. Maybe we could get together another time--I'm a good listener if you want to talk."

"My concern right now is getting you out of here and safe. He is dangerous and will hurt you to get to me. He won't hurt me directly."

"What about France? I got the impression he hurt you pretty badly there. I

believe the word was 'unforgivable'."

"He didn't hurt me. He killed someone I cared about. When I refused to be more than friends with him he thought he could eliminate the competition so I would have only him to turn to. He'll do that again here, or anywhere I go. You have to stay away. In fact you should take some time off and don't go out at night. Promise me you'll do this."

"He *killed* someone?" She shook her head. "Why isn't he in jail? I'm not giving up my life because of some asshole."

"You don't know me, but you've got to trust me when I tell you this: there is no other way. You have to, but just for a few days."

"Then what? Change my name? Dye my hair?"

"One way or another I will make him stop."

He was asking a lot. Not that she minded taking some time off. Her commission on the sale of his house alone would keep her in funds for a long while. But what about Kalib? Could she walk away knowing what he was dealing with? She wanted to help him. Cripes, she wanted to date him! That certainly wasn't going to happen while his life was under siege.

"Please, Shasta."

"Okay, I'll keep my head down for a few days. But he knows what I look like. Will he be coming after me? He was inside my head somehow already. Won't he be able to find me if he wants to?"

"When it comes to mind games I'm better at them than David. I can strip away your name from his memory." He cupped her cheek and leaned in for a tender kiss. "Trust me. I'll find a way to keep you safe."

She wanted to trust him, but the truth was she barely knew Kalib. What she did know was that there was nothing normal about him or his situation. Psychic attacks? What could she do to stop a man who could crawl inside her head and give her the mother of all migraines?

"I don't have much choice, do I?"

## **Chapter Four**

Kalib watched until the tail lights of Shasta's Mini Cooper faded from sight. At least she was safe. Her life took priority over everything else, including his happiness.

Now that she was safely away, it was time to face David and eliminate at least this one threat. He walked back through the house, moving steadily toward the quiet throb of jazz music filtering through the door to the largest bedroom. He opened his senses and reached out mentally, feeling for his presence within the room.

David was in there. Waiting.

Would he have the strength to do what needed to be done? He'd known the truth for a long while. David had become a monster. He couldn't be allowed to continue to kill. He had to be stopped.

But how could he do it, when every time he looked at David, he saw the young man he'd been so long ago? They'd been young together. They'd grown to adulthood on neighboring estates. And when he'd been turned, David had been there helping him through the first terrible month when he hadn't even known who he was or how to survive. David had known. He'd even helped him to find people to feed from.

And then when David had grown ill with consumption, the decision had been easy. He'd turned David without hesitation. Here they were almost two hundred years later, still together.

He leaned forward, resting his forehead against the cool oak of the door. David had gone too far. Their time together had come and gone. It had to change. David couldn't go on killing. He had to be stopped.

But he knew, deep in his heart, he'd never be able to do it himself.

That was why he'd moved to Pittsburgh, to the territory of vampires known for their ruthless rejection of killers. His logic was sound. David had to be stopped and the responsibility was now out of his hands.

Why couldn't David have given up? Why did he have to be stubborn and walk right into the perfect trap? But he was here now and the plan was in motion.

What he hadn't expected was Shasta or the quickly flaring attraction between them. It was exactly the kind of relationship that would and did send David into a rampage. His violence would get the attention of the local vamps, and it would be

his final downfall. Shasta had not been part of his plan to stop David, and although it rung his, he had to follow through until the end. No matter how much what he had set into motion wrenched his soul, he could not allow another innocent human being to die at David's hands.

But what would he do if Shasta was a casualty of the plan?

*No.* He could *not* let that happen.

He'd do as he'd said. He'd strip away her identity from David's mind leaving only enough to set off his jealousy but not enough for him to find her. He'd keep to his plan but make sure she was safe.

He reached out and captured David's mind and began the stripping process. If he was smooth enough, David would never even notice the tampering. He removed memories of her name and her car and even her profession, all of the information David had stolen from her. He left her beauty, but blurred her image enough, just enough to keep her safe.

Almost done. All that remained were her green eyes. They were too distinctive. But before he could change that detail, David was gone.

*Just gone.* One second he sensed him clearly on the other side of the door and the next—nothing.

Kalib slammed open the door and found the room empty, the window open with a fluttering curtain.

Had he removed enough? Yes, he was sure. There was no way David could track Shasta. She was safe.

## Chapter Five

Shasta drove through the cool night air toward her little house in Swissvale. What had begun as just another excellent home sale and subsequent fantastic paycheck had turned into something she couldn't even find enough words to describe--something both terrifying and bizarre.

And *wonderful*. Yes, Kalib was wonderful. Seeing his horrible past literally walk into the room was shocking, and whatever that physical representation of his past had done to her mind... She shivered and tried to forget, but the dark red and black images, the screams, the pain--oh God, the excruciating pain surged through her memory. The overwhelming fear and pain had permeated her thoughts until she'd blissfully lost consciousness.

David was evil--he was evil incarnate.

But Kalib. He'd been anything but evil. Kind and accommodating, sweet and funny, simply lovely. And his kiss. She'd believed she'd been kissed before, but nothing could have prepared her for this, this joining. Once again, she could not find the words. She rummaged through her mind to push away the horror and relive that beautiful moment when he'd pulled her body to his. He'd touched not only her lips but something deeper, scattered and far away, and brought it back home again. Yes, *home*. His kiss was like coming home.

She'd wanted something tangible to hold onto as his kiss sent her reeling, and that something had been Kalib.

His eyes--the way he looked at her, spoke to her...

"Oh damn!" She forced herself to pay attention. She'd missed the turn at the bridge and would have to drive another five or six miles to reach Hulton Bridge unless she turned around and did a bit of backtracking.

"Good grief, girl, get a grip on yourself."

She turned on the radio. Maybe the noise would keep her from losing herself in the night's events. Something normal, something everyday like weather reports and top 20 hits.

How had Kalib ever gotten involved with David? They weren't lovers as she'd wrongly assumed, but could they be related somehow? That would explain why David had never gone to jail for the murder Kalib said he committed. Kalib would never allow someone as close as a brother to suffer, even if that brother were the very devil himself.

*But they couldn't be brothers.* She had seen him before the pain had caused her

to black out, and his face was now a permanent three-dimensional image in her mind. They looked nothing alike, and they certainly weren't alike in any other way that she could discern either.

What would Kalib do to stop David? Kalib had run from him before, but David had obviously always found him. He'd said he could make David forget her. *When it comes to mind games I'm better at them than David. I can strip away your name from his memory.*

What did that mean? And how? She drove onward past another turnaround but no longer cared. She needed some fresh air tonight, but when she did finally get around to going home, she was going to write some of this down in her notebook. Perhaps on the page, some of this would finally begin to make sense.

Never mind getting home. She had to write this down before she forgot it. She turned into RIDC Industrial Park and stopped beneath one of the bright flood lights over the empty parking lot. After locking the car doors she dug out a notepad and began writing it all down, every unbelievable word.

\* \* \*

Kalib was exhausted. He'd spent the night hunting for David and never caught sight of him even once. It was nearly dawn. He pulled up to the old house in the predawn gloom. Soon the sun would break over the horizon and when it did he wanted to be safely inside with the blinds drawn.

He got out and started for the door. After two steps he stumbled in shock.

There on the top step, lay a body. A long elegant body with dark curls tumbling down across the stairs and one slender arm hanging out over the edge.

His undead heart thudded with pain as he ran forward. "Shasta?" *Oh God. Please, no,*

He fell to his knees beside her. Her throat was torn. Blood smeared her face and stained the front of her cotton blouse. He pressed his fingers to her neck in blind hope, but there was nothing, no movement of blood, no life. Her skin was cool, her body stiff with rigamortis. Pushing aside the girl's hair, he turned her face toward him.

"Oh, no." He leaned back and crushed his fists into his eyes, blocking the truth from his vision. David had killed again--his horrible jealousy driving him to eliminate another human life. His plan had begun to fall into place in the most horrific yet absolutely foreseeable way.

Emotion choked him as his sob twisted to a guilty wash of sick relief. Some poor girl, younger but eerily similar to Shasta had been murdered in her stead. Who was she? What kind of life had she lost? How horrible of him to be happy--the poor girl hadn't deserved to die, and yet, if his horrendous plan were to come to fruition, he could no longer hide the truth from himself.

He'd known at least one would die. He closed his eyes and thanked a God that no longer loved him. Shasta was still alive.

The door swung open.

"Good morning, Kalib. You coming in, or planning on getting a tan?"

"You bastard." He choked on the words, condemning David, condemning himself.

"Sticks and stones, ol' boy." David leaned against the doorframe lazily, his smugness like sandpaper rubbing against the grain of his sanity. "Seconds to sunrise."

Kalib glanced toward the east, a cool golden glow moments away from breaking over the orange lines of the horizon. "We can't leave her here."

"We don't have a choice." He laughed and tossed an apple core onto the porch next to her body. "Besides, she's not going anywhere."

"What happened to you? How can you..."

David lurched, grabbing Kalib's rumpled shirt and dragging him into the house just as the sunlight broke the horizon and shafted light over the grizzly scene. He slammed the door and hoisted Kalib's limp body against it. "You made me the monster I am. Anything I do is your fault. You might as easily--hell, you could even say that *you* killed that girl."

No... he hadn't. Yes, he had set the pieces in motion, had always suspected in the secrets of his mind that this would happen. But it was not a foregone conclusion. David was in control of himself. He could walk away.

But he hadn't.

"I will not take the blame for your behavior, David. You have to stop this. I won't cover up for you again."

"You won't?" David laughed. "No matter what I have done, you still love me. You try to hide it, you run, but we are two halves of the same whole. This is what we do--you protect me when I'm bad, I love you when you try not to love me. It's what we are."

His irrational words turned Kalib's already weakened stomach. David had taken a friendship begun in earnest and turned it into something ugly, dangerous and deadly. Not for Kalib--but for innocent others.

"That body is on your steps, in plain view of the mailman's route. You are standing here with blood on your hands and slacks. Hell, to any untrained eye, looks like you killed her."

Damn him to hell. He was right.

Pain flashed across David's face. "Don't think like that. I would never set you up. I might remove the women from your life, but I'd never risk your getting caught. You should know that by now."

He was right. Every terrible action had been private between them.

"I'll take care of this--" He waved his hand toward the closed doorway and the dead woman hidden by the thick oak. "--little problem."

Kalib sputtered, "Little problem? David, you killed a girl leaving her family to grieve. When will you understand how wrong that is?" He shook with anger. Red haze rose up, blurring his vision. He shoved David back, relishing the surprise in his former friend's eyes. In that moment their friendship was forgotten. All that remained was the simple truth. David was never going to regain his morals. This killer was all that remained.

"Don't push me, Kalib. You don't want me really angry at you." He brushed his hands over Kalib's chest, straightening the rumpled shirt. "I know you didn't mean



anything with that female. We are together now. Everything will be fine, you'll see. I'll take care of this. You look so tired, my friend. Why don't you lie down? Everything will be better after a good daysleep and a nice hot shower, you'll see. It's been a long two hundred years, ya know?"

Kalib could no longer bear to see David's handsome yet completely tormented face for another moment. This was a mockery of the kind David he'd known so many years ago, the friend he'd valued and trusted. He stepped around him to leave, blocking out the vision of what they both had done here, what they had been once long ago, wishing he could block David's words.

"I'll make us something to eat when you're ready to rise. Maybe we'll watch some *History Channel*, huh?"

As Kalib entered his room and fell onto the bed, he laid his forearm over his eyes.

Tonight, he would try to contact the men he'd heard of, vampires who hunted killers like David. Before he lost his conviction, he would initiate the next step in his revolting plan and depend on others to do what he could not--destroy one to save many.

## Chapter Six

When Kalib awoke, the room was completely dark. He smiled remembering the dream. Shasta in his arms... holding her naked body as they lay together near a large, glittering ocean. Her skin glistened with the moisture of the sea, her hair luminescent in the moonlight as she stroked his chest with her fingertips. He sighed peacefully until he felt it.

David was here.

"You look much better."

And then he remembered. His stomach groaned with the empty pain of acid and grief. "What did you do with her?"

Fabric rustled as David stood from the chair he'd positioned next to the bed. "Please don't concern yourself over that. I took care of it, just like I told you I would."

"What did you *do* with her?"

"I had the mailman bury her in the little patch of woods out back. Some people will probably get their mail a little late today. That old man's digging was damn slow, but he did get the job done. Come rain or sleet, I guess."

Kalib sat up and rubbed his eyes, clearing away the image with effort.

"Do you really care what I did with the dead body? Or do you have a better question, a more important bit of information that you'd like to know?"

What was he talking about? The mocking twist of David's lips pushed him to ask something, but what? Night had fallen but not by more than a few minutes. Had David gone out again? Had he brought back another trophy?

"Oh fine. You never were good at guessing. The question you should have asked was...how many others did I kill last night while you were out looking for me?"

Horror filled his mind. He leapt the rest of the way from the bed and began pulling on clothes. Why hadn't he thought to ask? He should have. Perhaps some selfish part of his heart didn't want to know. But now he had to know--just how many more lives had he ended by leading David here?

"How many? How many did you kill?"

Thrill glowed over David's face. "Not many. Only three others. Perhaps one of them was your lady, or perhaps I'll have better luck finding her tonight."

"God damn you, David."

“It was you, not God that damned me. You damned me and then after making me need you, you tried to leave me,” David snarled, his fangs flashing. “I won’t let you, not here, not ever again. You made me and now you have to deal with me.”

He wanted to scream with shame at the truth of David's words. It was all true, but he swallowed back the self loathing. Recriminations would have to wait. First he had to find out if Shasta was safe. Only then could he be sure to finish off his plan. He'd been reticent before, but now he could hardly wait for the hunters to find David. He'd make sure they found him tonight.

By tomorrow it would all be over.

He gathered his jacket and keys without another word.

“Where are you going?”

Straight past David, he strode through the house gaining momentum as he went. Everything he had to do could be done better away from here, away from David.

“You can’t leave. I asked you a question. Where are you going?”

“Out.”

David grabbed his arm. “I don’t think so. You’re staying here with me tonight.”

Yanking his arm free, Kalib continued to the door.

“If you go out that door, you’ll be sorry. You’ll be responsible for whatever happens, not me. If you go out, more girls will die. How many can your conscience survive?”

*None, my conscience is already lost.* Kalib slammed the door behind him shutting out the rant. David would almost certainly do just as he threatened, but this time there would be repercussions. This time David would be held responsible for his actions. This time he’d pay with his life for all the lives he’d taken.

He floored the Lexus, recklessly tearing down the driveway and out on to the streets. He knew vaguely where Shasta lived. He headed toward Swissvale. Once he hit Route 28 he flipped open his phone and dialed Shasta’s number, all the while praying she was there and answered, praying she wasn’t dead.

One ring...two...three...The click of an answering machine led to Shasta’s throaty voice instructing him to leave his name and message after the beep. He clicked the phone off. All it meant was she hadn’t answered. For all he knew she might screen her calls. He’d call her cell and if she didn’t answer, he’d call the house again and leave a message.

And if she still didn’t answer?

He’d go insane. Could he face the knowledge that his own actions had led to her death?

That he couldn’t handle. He’d kill David himself, just like he should have years ago.

He tried to dial the number for Shasta’s cell phone but his shaking fingers misdialed three times. Finally, he got the numbers entered.

"Hello?"

He hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath until she spoke. His exhale was

audible and raspy in his ears. "Shasta, thank God, you're all right."

"Kalib? What's wrong? Why wouldn't I be all right?"

He checked his rear-view mirror for the hundredth time. David's Porche Cayman was nowhere in sight. He had to see her, but after his work erasing David's mind, he could not risk carelessly putting her in the crosshairs of David's vengeance.

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Don't answer the door for anyone else until I get there. I'll knock seven times, okay? You got that? Seven times in succession."

A long pause made him think the connection had been lost, until she finally responded. The sound of fear in her voice cut through him like a blade.

"Kalib, are you all right?"

"I will be, but I have to see you for myself."

She gave him the directions, but there was a tenseness to her words that worried him.

"Wait for me?"

The hesitation stretched out. Then finally she answered. "I'll wait. Please, be *careful*."

He closed the phone before he choked on his emotions. Relief mixed with anger and desperation were not the greatest things to unload on a woman he hardly knew. Of course, they'd barely done more than meet and already she'd come face to face with the horror that was his life. For some inexplicable reason she had not run like a sprinter the other way.

He pressed his foot down harder on the accelerator. When he held her in his arms again, all of this would be a bad dream, or at least he would pretend it was for a little while.

Hardly braking before he reached her house, he tore into the driveway like a man possessed. Running to the front door, he rapped on the stained oak seven times. The door opened before he could lower his hand.

"Kalib!"

Unexpectedly, blessedly, she threw her body into his arms. He picked her up, crossed the threshold and slammed the world away from them both.

Clutching her arms around his neck, she shook her head as she spoke. "What happened? What is going on?"

Where to begin. Damn. He held her body tight to his for another long, wonderful moment then loosened his grasp. "I'll try to explain everything, but first, I need to make a phone..."

"Is this him?" The male voice jarred Kalib from his short-lived peace.

## Chapter Seven

He shoved Shasta behind his body and faced the enormous man in front of him. *Check that.* Enormous vampire in front of him. "Who the hell are you?"

"No, Kalib! I called him." Shasta's arms came around his waist, though he wasn't sure if it was affection or an attempt to restrain him.

Either way Kalib was staying between her and the vamp until he got more information. At least the unknown vampire wasn't attacking. In fact he looked damn relaxed lounging against the back of her sofa.

"I should have warned you, but after everything being so strange... I called Uncle Sampson to come over just to be on the safe side."

"Uncle Sampson?"

"Makes me sound old, doesn't it?" The man ran a giant hand over his smooth black head. "I'm a little surprised by you, though. I think perhaps we should have a talk, private like. You don't mind do you, little Shasta?"

"Well... yeah I do mind."

"It's all right." Kalib unfolded her arms from around his waist and took a step toward the door. "I'm assuming your Uncle Sampson would like to assure himself my intentions are honorable." He couldn't keep a touch of the sardonic from his tone. This tall figure in black leather pants and long duster coat might look a year or two older than he, but Kalib had at least a hundred-fifty years on him.

Shasta grasped his hand, hers cool and a little shaky. "You don't need to go outside. I'll leave you two to talk while I get some coffee. I have a feeling it's going to be a long night."

Both men watched the beautiful young woman until she left the room and was out of earshot.

Sampson didn't waste any time. "She doesn't know, and if you're not serious about this thing between you, I want it to stay that way."

"I see." Two hundred years of living had taught him one thing: there was never enough time to waste on bullshit. This guy was "no bullshit" personified.

"Good. Now what I want to know is if you're responsible for the three dead girls we found last night? Because if you are, this is going to be one hell of a short reunion." His posture was no longer relaxed. In the blink of an eye he was coiled and lethal. "Don't bother lying--you know I'll know. If you did what Pagan and I saw early this morning, one of us won't be walking away with all of his body

parts.”

Kalib liked the guy’s honesty even if the bravado was misplaced. He could easily sense that the vampire wasn’t very old by undead standards. He might have amazing strength and still not reach what an older vampire could do without raising a hand. “It was four.”

“For what?”

“Four women.” Kalib kept his gaze steady. “And no, I did not kill them, but I know the vampire who did.”

He paused only a moment. “Spit it out then.”

“I made a fledgling when I was young. He’s gone mad and is determined to follow me and rain destruction wherever I go. I did not kill the girls, but I did lead the killer here and for that I am sorry.”

“If this guy is such a prick, why don’t you save yourself the headache and just off him. Or do you enjoy his attention?”

“No, I don’t enjoy any part of this nightmare. But I…” Even knowing the truth didn’t make it any more palatable. “I have been unable to do what needs done.”

“So you brought your undead psycho to our door. Thanks.”

“I heard rumors that dangerous vampires who came here were not given a chance to leave alive. When I ran out of other options, I came here knowing he would follow. David is digging his own grave.”

“I’m one of those vampires, which leaves us digging graves for four others--or did you take care of that one?” Sampson nodded slowly as he spoke, his eyes seeing more than Kalib wanted to reveal--his wretched disgust with his own inadequacy.

“Okay then. You got proof this guy offed these women? ‘Cause man, I don’t know you. You could be lying to my face, and I don’t take the word of another vamp just because my naive and well-meaning little niece took in a stray to care for.”

Kalib straightened. “Your niece is a grown woman of worth. She has befriended me and taken me into her confidence, that’s all. She sold me a house. We were having a glass of wine to celebrate when my fledgling entered the house and bombarded her mind with painful images until she fell to unconsciousness. I stopped him because one, she deserved none of it, and two, of all the humans I’ve met on the planet over the years, she is one I’d like to remain on it.”

A flicker of something that could be respect flashed in the big man’s eyes, and Kalib took it as an invitation to continue. “I’m willing to help in any way you deem necessary to stop him. You should know that he doesn’t remember Shasta specifically. Unfortunately, I was unable to erase all memory of her before he began his rampage. Thus, the women you found…”

“Look like her.” Sampson nodded, the flash turning quickly to scorn. “If my niece is hurt in any way by you or your fledgling, if she breaks a single fingernail, I’ll make it my mission in life to see you bleed.”

“Don’t trouble yourself. If he hurts her, it’ll mean I don’t have any blood left.”

Sampson nodded again. “Just so we understand each other. You love my niece?”

Kalib smiled for the first time since last night. “She’s a woman any man could

love, but to answer your question, no, not yet. I barely know her, but what I do know I like."

"But you'd like to get to know her." It was not a question, and Kalib realized the big man's eyes saw more than he'd originally given him credit for. He wasn't sure if he liked what he saw, however.

"She doesn't know about you. Why haven't you told her?"

"That's none of your damn business, there buddy. And it stays that way, you get me?"

"Your choice." Kalib gestured to the kitchen. "Are all the trees pissed on now? Think we can join her for some coffee?"

Sampson laughed, the initial stages of mistrust beginning to fade. "I'm going to need a name and description of this fledgling of yours so I can call the boys. How old is he?"

"I turned him two hundred years ago."

"Strong." Sampson paused only a moment. "Better we take care of this tonight, then, before he does find who he's looking for."

"Agreed."

## Chapter Eight

Shasta leaned into the room. “You two brilliant vampires do realize I have ears and was only in the other room, not on the moon, right?”

She would have laughed at the slack jawed surprise that both men wore if the conversation she'd just eavesdropped on hadn't freaked her out more than a little. She cleared her throat. “I'm guessing you can both do that mind thing. Maybe you should have tried telepathy if you wanted to keep your secret.”

“Shasta...? Uncle Sam started.

She charged at him, swatting his thick arm. “Don't you ‘Shasta’ me. Why would you even try to keep something like this from me? I'm your only family. Don't I deserve your honesty? And really, how stupid do you think I am? How could I have not noticed that you still look thirty five after twenty years?”

“Don't be too hard on him. He was trying to protect--”

She spun on Kalib. “And don't get me started on you! I really like you too by the way, but before we spend another minute together you'd better get honest with me or we're done. I don't expect a lot, but I won't be lied to.” She turned on Uncle Sampson again. “That goes for any other secrets you have, too. Kalib is right--I'm a 'grown woman, of *worth*.' Don't either of you ever again treat me like a child. We understand each other?”

Uncle Sampson caught her cheek, forcing her to meet his dark gaze. “I'm sorry. You're my only family, and I should have told you.”

“Damn right you should have.”

“I suppose you'll never let me forget it either, will you?”

She heaved in a deep breath. “Of course not. That's what family is good for. Someone needs to keep reminding you of your mistakes so you don't repeat them.” She hugged him before going back for her coffee. She'd spilled the first cup when she'd overheard the word 'vampire' and now she needed one more than ever--strong and black.

It had taken her a little time to get caught up and understand what exactly the men, err vampires were talking about. As bizarre as it sounded when she'd heard the word, everything odd about her uncle finally clicked into place. So now the only question was—could she treat them the same as any humans, or would knowing this truth make a difference?

“Can I help with the coffee, Shasta?” Uncle Sam followed her into the kitchen.



He didn't give her time to answer, just closed in and cornered her. "You all right? It's a lot to take in--to all of a sudden find out you're related to a dead dude walking."

She looked into his eyes, saw the fear that this changed everything written plainly on his face. But how could anything change between them? No matter what, he was still the same man--strong, funny, and always there for her when she needed him. This night was only one example. She'd called and he'd come to her without question.

"Uncle Sampson, dead or not, you're still the coolest guy I know."

He hugged her to him, his crushing embrace warm and as relieved as it was reassuring. When he finally released her, he took a deep breath and picked up an empty coffee cup. "Now that my deep, dark secret is finally out on the table, let's talk about your problem--the one standing in the foyer."

"He's not the problem. It's David who's the problem."

"His name is David, huh? What else do you know about him besides he's a vampire and Pittsburgh's newest and soon to be *gonest* citizen?"

Kalib pushed the door to the kitchen open and leaned into the room. "Coffee beckons, I just follow."

"Come on in. We were just discussing David."

Kalib glanced at Sampson, and a flicker in his quickly averted eyes set her skin tingling. Something was going on here. What hadn't she heard when she was eavesdropping?

"Why don't you come home with me tonight, Shasta?" Sampson asked. "We can watch some of those tearjerker movies you love forcing me to sit through."

"Good idea." Kalib patted her on the shoulder. "I should be going anyway."

"Good. I'll get my coat."

Shasta grabbed both of the arms. "Hang on a second! What's going on? You both just got here. I made dinner, for crying out loud."

The two men exchanged another glance. The edges of Kalib's lips turned up in a smile she could tell was forced. "Thank you, but no. I really should be going. I wanted to be sure you were all right, and I can see you're in good hands. Please remember what I said about staying in for a few nights. It'll be safer for you that way."

"Kalib." Sampson held his hand out. "Nice meeting you. I've got to make a phone call, and then I'll be ready to go."

He practically ran from the room. Shasta turned on Kalib. "Will you please tell me what is going on? He won't, and I'm just going to end up asking him all the way through *Pride and Prejudice* and miss the whole thing"

This time, Kalib's smile was real. "*Pride and Prejudice*, huh? Okay. Remember when Mr. Darcy takes Elizabeth's hand and helps her into the carriage?"

"Of course. She knows something is going on with him but can't figure out what it is."

"It's the same thing here."

She shook her head. "You've lost me."

"She suspects something but does not let herself believe it." He took her hand

in his and squeezed it gently. "David must be destroyed, and you suspect we will have something to do with that. You won't let yourself believe it, but you know in your heart that it is true. I won't hide the truth from you ever again, Shasta. And he will never hurt you again."

Shasta shook her head. "But what will you do?"

"The credits haven't rolled yet, so I can't tell you. Please trust me. There will be a happy ending here, one way or another."

"I like happy endings."

"Does that mean you're willing to wait for a chance at ours?"

"Yes... No! I *won't* just sit here twiddling my thumbs waiting. I get that you're going out after David and I am happy to leave that to you since I already know I'm no match for him, but I'm not willing to do nothing."

Sampson returned and caught her shoulder. "Little Shasta, the best thing you can do for us is stay here. Not one of us will be able to think straight if you're out there and possibly in danger. If you're here, safe, you can be the one to keep tabs on where everyone is patrolling."

"How do you mean? With a map?"

"You do have one of the city, don't you?"

"I am in real estate. I have plenty of maps, even topographical ones, if they'd be useful."

"Perfect. You can use your maps and keep us from covering the same ground twice. We should be able to find him much faster with your help."

"Not to mention I'll be here and safe. Gotcha."

"You're too smart for me." Sampson chuckled.

She pulled her best set of detailed maps from her desk and began sorting through them. "So how will this work? Will you and your vampy friends call in? Will calling in every hour work, or should it be more often?"

A knock sounded at the door.

"I'll get it," Sampson left to answer the door.

Kalib tugged her into his arms the moment Sampson was out of sight. "You are an amazing woman. I wish I had your strength."

"What are you talking about? You're a two hundred year old vampire. I'm sure you have plenty of strength."

"A man can collect a lot of weakness in that much time, too." He buried his face in her thick curls, letting the scent that was all her soothe his fears. "If I ever needed strength it will be tonight."

"What do you mean?"

He sighed. "David will easily overcome any of these younger vampires if he catches them alone. Our only hope to stop him will be for them to combine their efforts."

"But it sounded like they intend to split up to look for him."

"Yes."

"He could kill them couldn't he? Even my Uncle Sampson?"

"Yes, but I'll do everything I can to keep that from happening." The moment the words left his mouth he wondered if they were a lie. Would he truly do what it took? Would he be able to stand up to David, to fight him, to kill him? Or would

he fail again, fail Shasta?

"I know you will. Just don't let yourself get hurt either." She pressed her lips to his in a sweet almost chaste kiss. "If you don't come back, I'll miss out on our happily ever after."

"We can't have that." He kissed her and this time he let the heat rise between them, deepening the kiss to a languid exploration, a promise of things to come.

Someone cleared their throat from the doorway.

Kalib met Sampson's frown, but was encouraged by the grinning vampires surrounding him. They were a wall of muscle wrapped in leather. One of them was as big as Sampson with the others being not much less impressive.

"I'm Dillon," the biggest said. "The plan is we split up to cover the most ground. Each of us will call in to Sampson's niece every hour or when we change location. If your bad boy is seen, we all converge on the area and together we handle it. You ready to hit the streets?"

"Let the guy say good-bye to his woman first, Dillon. Sheesh," another of the vampires said. "You never take time to stop and smell the flowers anymore, dude."

"Johnathan." Dillon snapped back. "Shut up, man. Wash, you bring your Glock? Pagan, got your flaming hell ready?"

"Shit, bro, tell me again why you need us all for this thang? This is just another vampire we're after, not the Spanish inquisition," Johnathan retorted. "I swear, brother, you are getting grouchier every damn day. You seriously need to get laid."

"Yeah, keep it up, J. Dillon's gonna kick your ass before we kick this David's," Pagan said. "And you might wanta take your own advice. Ever get giggy with that neighbor of yours?"

It was Johnathan's turn to scowl. "Shut up, man."

"Enough of this." The huge vampire, Dillon, who must be the leader of the group spun on his heel, and left the kitchen, not turning to see if they would follow him. "Let's go."

Johnathan smiled at Shasta. "Don't worry. He always gets like this when he's taking care of business. Everything will be okay."

The group of vampires filed out as they continued their banter. Sampson remained. "Don't worry about them. They are an odd bunch, but also the deadliest and most efficient vampire killing force this town has ever seen. Shasta, you know what to do, right honey?"

"Yes, I know. Be careful out there, Uncle Sampson." She turned in Kalib's arms and kissed him again, her mouth hard and trembling. "You come back to me, you hear? I want the happily ever after you promised."

Four hours later when Kalib had driven past every dark alley and back road he could find, he'd still seen no sign of David. He'd checked in hourly with Shasta. She'd been amazingly calm and professional on the phone, keeping him abreast of the movements of all five of the other vampires. No one had seen David, but on the bright side, no one had found any dead women either.

He checked his watch. Flipping open his cell, he punched in the speed dial for her cell phone. As frayed as his nerves were, the only thread holding him together

at the moment was the sound of her voice.

This time, the thread snapped.

"Hello there, Kalib. I've been wondering when you'd call."

David. His heart hammered in his chest and his vision narrowed to a mean red-rimmed view of the road ahead.

"Where is Shasta? If you've done anything--"

"Not to worry, dearest Kalib. I've had some time to rethink my methods. Shasta is here with me and perfectly fine." He paused as two centuries evaporated between them. David's voice sounded so much like the young man he'd known before any of the ugliness had come between them.

"Where are you?"

"We're at home--our home, Kalib. You can call off your dogs. I'm not going to hurt anyone else. Hasn't there been enough bad blood between us? Let's call a truce. Come home, and we'll talk."

"Let me speak to her." Dare he believe that any of this was true? Or was it a trap?

"Sure, hang on. Shasta, Kalib would like to speak with you."

"Kalib. Hi."

"What the hell is going on? Are you all right?"

"We're fine. David made dinner. We were just sitting down to eat. Later we're going to watch an action movie."

"What?"

"I--" her voice trailed off for a moment, then returned strong. "I'm tired of those old romance movies. Time for something a little more energetic, don't you think?" Her voice, chipper and calm, sent a cold chill through his blood.

"I'm coming home right now."

"He's coming home, David. We'll see you when you get here, Kalib."

## Chapter Nine

Shasta wanted to scream. She wanted to fight back. The urge to tear out David's eyes, or better yet rip out his throat was new and terrifying, but very much present. The asshole might have her body under his complete control but he wasn't controlling her mind.

If she'd been able to gag, she would have as he forced the words from her lips, luring Kalib back here to whatever trap he had planned. Instead all she could do was scream mentally in frustration and indignation.

After hanging up the phone, David rushed back to the kitchen bringing out the elegantly designed, perfectly pictured plates of food. The portions were small but the effort he'd put into each presentation couldn't be missed. "Tell me it's perfect."

Her lips immediately responded. "It's perfect, David. I'm sure Kalib will agree."

"I'm sure you're right. He'll finally understand. He'll see that we need each other, that he can't leave me, not now, not ever. This time he'll forgive me and we'll be able to be a family again."

Mentally she snorted. *Not if Kalib has half the smarts I think he does.*

"Knock that off." He sent a burst of pain flooding her mind. "We can't have any negativity. This time it will work. We can compromise. David can have you, so long as I can have him. He'll agree. I know he will and if he doesn't... You'll be the one to regret it."

*Hell, I already regret it.* As vividly as she could, she imagined killing David. If he could read her mind, she intended to give him something to think about.

He grinned at her. "I do love your spirit." Then he went back to fussing with the tablecloth and candles along with the exact placement of each plate and glass.

She sent another image of the table being overturned and every piece of china shattering, ruining the perfection he was striving for. This time she was happy to see his grin fade and one hand shake enough to rattle the saucer and soup bowl.

*Ha!* She sent another image and another and another, each one ending with the door slamming open and Kalib seeing the house in ruins.

"Stop it!"

*Never.* If this was the only way she could fight back then this was the way she would.

“I said stop it, now!” He snarled and his fangs flashed dangerously. “I don’t need you. I can kill you this second and never have a regret.”

*Not true. You need me to appease Kalib.*

The truth was damning. David struck out, kicking the chair next to her so hard the heavy oak shattered against the wall.

She flinched from the brutality. She *flinched*? Her hand had pulled back and it wasn’t David’s doing. *Distracting him gave her more options. Won’t that look nice for Kalib’s welcome home?*

He growled.

Her body stood and moved to clean up the broken splinters. The wood tore at her hands but she kept moving, picking up the pieces and putting them into the bin that David held for them. The debris was cleared in minutes. So much for having the mess still there for Kalib to see.

## Chapter Ten

Kalib pulled his car up to the house. It was brightly lit, like a painting, the very image of hearth and home. The warm glow filtered outward, summoning him inside, welcoming him home. He made his way cautiously to the door.

Would David be violent? Or needy? Or would he now see some unpredictable side of him? There was no way to judge. He'd have to walk into this and deal with whatever he found inside. Shasta's life depended on it.

After their talk, he'd called Sampson and got no answer. Checking in with Dillon had explained that away. Sampson had returned to check on Shasta in person. No one had heard from him since. Dillon would check on him and then they would prepare to take David down here. All Kalib had to do was protect Shasta until the other vampires arrived...if she was still alive.

He couldn't think about that. Of course she was alive. He would go in, keep David calm until the rest of them arrived, and they would dispose of him once and for all.

Kalib strode to the front door full of conviction--David was evil. He had to be destroyed. No matter what had happened in their past, no matter how close they'd been at one time centuries ago, none of it mattered when David had become a walking, breathing, murdering servant of the devil.

He turned the door knob on the large front door and pushed it in slowly, not sure what he would find inside. Whatever he had expected, it hadn't been this.

The house was beautiful, everything exactly as Shasta had promised when she'd sold him the house yesterday. A strange sense of *deja vu* smothered him like a thick wool blanket. The house was lit with a warm glow, brighter in the dining room to the right of the foyer. There once again waited a meal laid out with long narrow tapers lit and flickering as they had last night, the entire scene the very picture of elegance--again.

Only this time, instead of Shasta's sweet face smiling at him, there were two smiles to welcome him.

"Kalib, you made it home."

David wore a Joseph Abboud tuxedo, his dark hair slicked back in a sleek style reminiscent of the first years they'd spent together visiting the Paris *beaux et célèbres endroits*. He held a tall flute of champagne toward him. "Come, have a drink with us. Tonight, we'll put it all behind us."

"Yes, welcome home, honey."

Her full-length Jovani gown was white porcelain, strapless and the sexiest thing Kalib had ever seen in his life. What in the hell was going on here?

"David and I have talked, Kalib, and we think it's high time to put the past away and live in the now."

*A house is only a cage with an open door if there is no love within.* His mother's words came to him again, only this time as taunt, not reassurance. Everything looked normal, peaceful even, but the look of things and the smell were not the same. Something here stank to high heaven, and it wasn't the dinner.

"You must be hungry." David pulled out a chair at the head of the table. "Come sit, and we'll talk during dinner about the rest of our lives together."

*The rest of their lives?* Kalib noticed Shasta's right hand twitching. Her facial features were composed, her long body erect and relaxed. What was going on with that hand?

He began to probe David's mind for answers, but his thoughts were jumbled and fleeting as if he were thinking so many things at once he couldn't focus properly. This realization sent his senses on high alert. David was anything but unfocused.

Kalib stood still. He'd be damned if he'd sit in that chair and behave as if something weren't happening here. Not knowing what it was didn't change the facts.

"Go ahead and be seated, Kalib." Shasta walked to a chair beside the one allocated for him and dropped gracefully into it. "David, the table looks lovely."

Her hand rested next to the wine glass and continued twitching intermittently. She might not like what he was about to do, but it was time to get to the bottom of this. He probed her mind for an explanation.

Nothing. He could pick up *nothing* from her thoughts. That was impossible.

"David, what have you done?"

"Kalib, please. Your lack of trust here is trying my patience." He stepped behind Shasta's chair and placed his hands on her shoulders, much too close to her slender neck. "Let's have some of this delicious dinner I've prepared. You always liked my cooking, remember?"

Why wasn't David probing his thoughts? He'd focused on not allowing visions of the approaching vampires to enter his mind, but he could see now that was a waste of energy. David was otherwise preoccupied--*he was controlling Shasta or at least trying to*. The twitching hand proved one thing--she was fighting him every step of the way.

His cell phone vibrated silently in his pocket. That would be Sampson's fellows.

"You'd better get that, Kalib. Don't worry. We'll wait for you." David stroked his hand up Shasta's slender neck.

He didn't have a choice. If he didn't take the call they'd burst in and endanger Shasta. He turned away, walking back toward the doorway to give himself a little privacy. It wouldn't do to have David hear any of it. Flipping the phone open he answered. "Kalib here."

"We're in position."



“Hold, please. I need more time.”

“Has she been hurt?”

“No, but there is risk.” One he wasn’t willing to take. “Hold for my signal.”

“What signal?”

“Psychic.” He could and would send out a psychic call when it was time for them to move. Until then he’d try to get Shasta more safely situated. He clicked the phone shut.

Now how could he get David away from Shasta while distracting David enough that she couldn’t be harmed mentally? He returned to the dining room.

One step into the room, and all his plans went to hell.

“I did it for you Kalib.” David’s voice was a whispering entreaty.

Shasta’s eyes begged him, blamed him. Blood streamed down from the shredded flesh at her throat, the bright red stain marring and then covering the pristine white of her gown. David held her body upright so that, still seated at the table, she resembled a store mannequin, a horrible vacant smile on her lips.

“Come, Kalib, you can save her. She can stay with us forever.” David slid one finger over the formerly sexy front of her dress. Then he lifted the red painted finger to his lips.

Fear coursed through Kalib’s veins. It was too late. He’d failed her. Already the blood was reducing its flight. He could hear her heartbeat, slow, laboring.

She was dying.

*KALIB!*

Her mental scream awoke him from his pain. She *wasn’t* dead--yet. Her hands were fisted to either side of her untouched plate. She was weak, oh so weak, but fighting for life.

He tore his gaze away, facing David. David was the threat. David was his responsibility. David was no longer his friend of old. He was nothing more than a monster set on controlling their relationship. But that time was over.

“Come to me, David.” He opened his arms, offering the embrace that David would not be able to resist. “You’ve always tried to make me happy. Come to me, now.”

Hope glimmered in David’s eyes. He released Shasta and her torso fell forward onto the table. He crossed the room almost in a run. With a sigh of pleasure he fell into Kalib’s arms. Once again they were comrades who could confide anything, rely on each other for support and loyalty. Once again they were as close as brothers.

"Kalib, I'm so happy. Now we can be together forever. Shasta will be a part of us. I'd thought you and I together was right, but now I realize that our home is incomplete for you without her. She'll do exactly what we say; she will serve us both, Kalib."

With all the honor that the history of their friendship deserved, Kalib turned into David’s hold, burying his face against David’s exposed throat.

"I know you did this for us, David, but the cage door is open, and what you're offering is not love." Before David realized what he'd planned, Kalib let his fangs extend and sank them to the hilt through David’s neck. Keeping his fangs deep within the flesh and arteries, he pulled away. The long, slashing motion ravaged

David's neck, severing so much... cutting David from them, from his life.

"Why--" David's anguished whisper echoed in Kalib's chest.

"Love cannot be caged, my friend. And some crimes cannot be forgiven." He held David's stunned gaze while lowering his dying body to the floor.

## Chapter Eleven

Soon he'd grieve for David, for the man he had been. But first, he must save Shasta. He turned to her where she slumped over the table, her steady breath a quiet memory. With resignation, he sent out the psychic call as he pulled her lifeless body into his arms.

*Sampson, your guys can come in now.*

The sound of five large men bursting into his home resembled a bomb dropping on the place, but he paid it no heed. Grabbing a steak knife off the dining table, he sliced through his carotid without another thought, and pressed her lips to his throat.

"Drink my blood, Shasta. Drink for me. Live for me."

Her mouth remained motionless. Had David spilled too much of her blood? Had he killed her?

Kalib closed his eyes and squeezed her heart with his mind, willing it to beat once more. *Dammit, love! I cannot live without you. Drink from me!*

Her heart began to beat on its own, and her lips moved, accepting his blood, drawing it into her body. He pressed his hand against the wound at her throat willing the skin to heal. "Yes! Drink!"

Shasta sucked in a shallow breath and coughed. The first short swallow was followed quickly by another and another. Her lips suctioned to his throat and she began to take long drinks from his life-giving blood.

"What in *hell*?"

Sampson's pain-wracked voice shook the room with the tramping feet of the vampire soldiers. All five men stopped short, staring at Shasta's blood-soaked body, her lips at his neck.

"He's turning her," Washington whispered.

"That son of a--" Sampson lurched forward, but his anguished rush was brought to a sudden halt by a wall of vampire muscle.

Dillon and Johnathan grabbed Sampson looping his arms behind his back. "Wait. Take a fucking look man--he saved her."

A large pile of ashes amidst the remains of a blood-soaked tuxedo lay in the floor beside them.

"I think David, uh, took a powder." Johnathan said.

"So to speak," Wash muttered.

"What happened here?" Pagan asked. "We were right outside... why didn't you

call us in sooner?"

"Look at her neck." Johnathan pointed then took Sampson's arm. "He's healing it--he had no choice but to turn her, man."

"How do we know he didn't do that?" Sampson asked, yanking his arms out of Johnathan's grasp.

"Don't be a fool." Johnathan took a deep breath. "We're staring at the evidence. That was David, wasn't it?"

Kalib nodded. Shasta wrapped her arms around him and continued to drink from his neck. Finally, he felt the wound close as her tongue smoothly stroked his flesh.

His body began to sway. Sampson stepped around Dillon, grabbed a chair and pushed it behind his knees.

"Guess we should be going now, huh boys?" Johnathan patted Sampson on the back. "Fellas, our work here is done."

"You sure we can't burn the house?" Pagan asked, but they all ignored him and turned to leave.

"Go, I'll catch up in a minute." After they'd all gone, Sampson placed his hand on Kalib's shoulder. "I can take her with me."

Kalib held her more tightly. Sampson might be family, but henceforth, so was he. It was his blood running through her body. It was her heart that beat for him.

"No, you can't take her."

Sampson nodded. "I'd thought as much. You'd better be good to her, or you'll regret ever meeting me. You want any help before I leave?"

Kalib was too weak to respond verbally, so he simply shook his head. Once Sampson left, he forced his body up, carrying Shasta back to his bedroom, no, not his--theirs. He settled her in and crawled in beside her.

So much had changed. His emotions swirled chaotically. David was dead. This friend might have died a long time ago, but now the hope he might be saved was gone. Had there been any other choice? No, David had forced the issue. But now David was dead, no longer a threat to him or Shasta.

Shasta... Would she ever forgive him for not reaching her sooner? Their strength would return, and he would beg her forgiveness for what he'd brought on her. Not only had he led David here and endangered her, but now he'd turned her vampire. He would never have done so without her desire and permission had David left him another choice. Would she understand why he'd turned her, that she still had a good life ahead?

He'd make sure she did. He'd find a way to make her happy. And surely Sampson would help her adjust. Unlike most new vampires, she wouldn't have to give up her family.

Yes, it would work. They'd find a way to make it work.

## Epilogue

Shasta awoke slowly. Her body tingled with life and hunger. She snuggled against Kalib's warm body. Her nose against his broad chest, she was tempted by his masculine scent as well as by the strength built up in his two hundred year old body.

*You make me sound old.*

*You are old--and you eavesdrop.*

*How can I not when your body awakes with needs that your mind visualizes?*

She pressed her lips against his skin. *Those were your visions, not mine. All I wanted was to bite you. I'm hungry.* Even after a year, she still fed from him instead of from any humans. His blood was so sweet, so erotic and inevitably feeding led to so much more than just drinking.

*Mmm... I'm hungry too. I'll feed your hungers if you'll feed mine.*

She chuckled. *Don't I always?*

*Always.* His hands stroked her back drawing her closer, cradling her gently in his arms.

She slid one leg over his hip and, pushing his shoulder, she slowly mounted his warm thighs. His hard erection was framed against her heat. She rolled her hips sliding over the length, teasing him over and over until he groaned with need.

Still he let her keep control.

She continued her torment, stroking over his skin with light brushes of her fingertips, scattering kisses and licks over his chest until she could take no more.

Then she shifted her weight, lifting his straining erection and sinking onto him, taking him deep within her body. For one perfect moment they shared every sensation. Then the need rose and demanded more.

He gripped her hips in his hands and the ride turned wild. His bucking body rose and fell beneath her. She matched the rhythm bringing them together and spiraling them both out of control.

And then as always the raging roaring climax hovered just out of reach.

"Take from me, my love. Take what you need." Kalib's voice shook with urgency.

She fell forward, simultaneously taking him deeper into her body and sinking her fangs into his throat. Completion--utter liquid satisfaction--hit her senses, drowning her in pleasure. His taste filled her while her body shattered over him in orgasm.

She came back to the world with a sigh.

Kalib cradled her in his arms or she might have slid back to the mattress and succumbed to the languid draw of sleep. As it was she was hard pressed to remain alert enough to see to his needs.

*Be still, darling. I'm here with you--I was there with you.*

He'd bitten his own lip, tasted his own blood so he could join her in climax. *You are too good for me.* She shimmied up his body, kissing him full on his already healed lips. "I love you."

"I know."

She slapped his chest playfully. "'You know' is not the correct response."

He caught her chin and drew her back for another kiss. "I love you more than I ever thought possible. You have healed my heart and brought happiness to my home. You are my world and always will be so."

"Ohhh... much better." She snuggled into his arms. "I've got to remember that for my next book."

He smiled, pressing her hair away from her soft features. "Does that mean I'll be able to read your first one soon?"

"You don't have to read it. We lived it." She reached across to the nightstand on her side of the bed and retrieved her laptop. After a moment of the machine whirling to life she turned the screen so he could read the dedication she'd put at the beginning of the story.

*For David: By bringing us together you've offered us both love and for that we will always remember the best of who you were.*

Kalib's eyes glistened with emotion. "You are a forgiving woman."

"It is only the truth." She set the laptop aside and leaned close enough to kiss him again. A breath away from contact she hesitated. "I believe it's time for you to forgive him, too, for his mistakes. Time for you to forgive yourself," she whispered.

Though he was more than halfway there already, it was time for him to let go of the rest of his misplaced guilt.

He nodded and she rewarded him with the promised kiss.

When they parted she rested her head on his chest and sighed. "What did Sampson want last night, demanding you meet him alone? It was all very cloak and dagger."

Kalib's lips spread in a comic grin. "You won't believe it. He demanded I make you an honest woman. Claimed that if we weren't vampires I'd have already proposed."

Her heart stumbled. "Is that so?"

"You know what else?"

"What?"

"He's right. I've been in love with you from the start, though it took almost a week before I had the courage to admit it even to myself. I'd have proposed then, but I thought you needed more time to adjust to being a vampire."

"It's been a year..."

"Yes, it has." His hands closed around her upper arms, holding her back while he slipped from the bed. Then he sank to his knees beside the bed, his naked body

so chiseled and beautiful that she had trouble focusing on what she was certain he was about to ask. He caught her hands within his own and stared up into her eyes. “Shasta Hemingway, I love you. I will love you for all my days, which if fortune is with us will be a very long time. Everything I have is yours. I will do anything and everything to make you happy. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife for all eternity?”

He turned her hands, opening them to reveal a marquis-cut ruby set in an elaborate gold band.

“Please say you will.”

She leapt into his arms, knocking him backwards to sprawl across the floor. “I will. I love you. I’ll marry you. I’ll drive you nuts everyday and twice on Sunday.” She pressed kisses to his laughing lips between each promise.

“You’d better put that in the book too.”

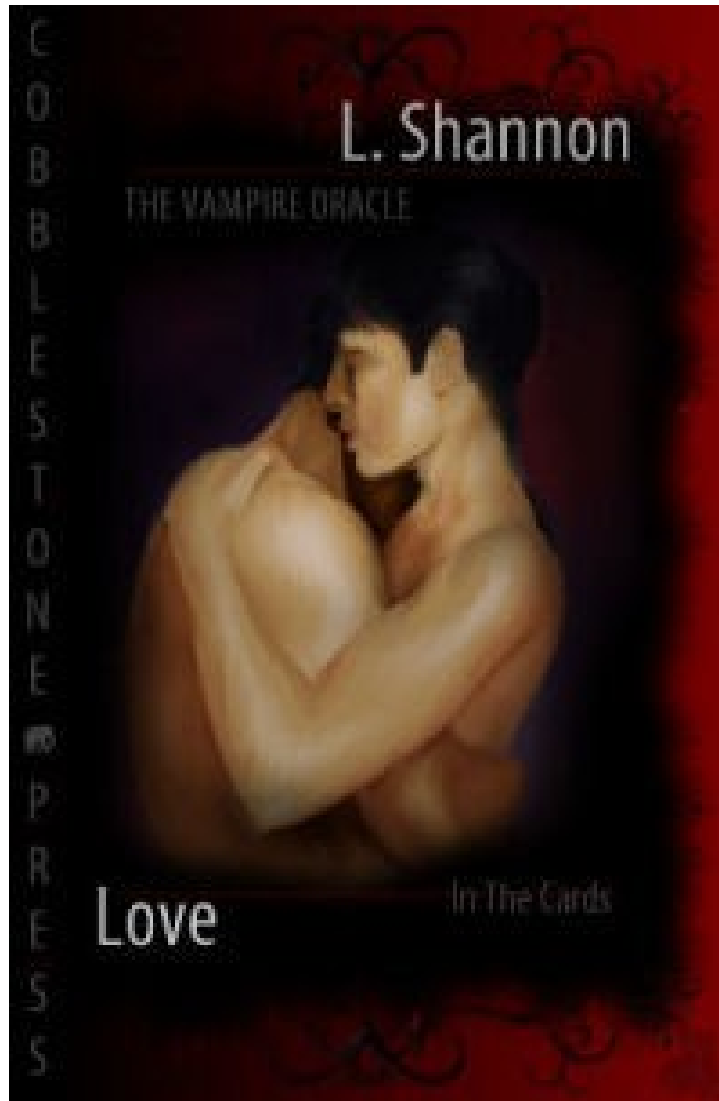
And she did--every single word.

**The End**

TURN THE PAGE FOR A  
SNEAK PEEK AT OTHER STEEL  
CITY VAMPIRE STORIES  
COMING SOON.



Read Dillon and Johnathan's stories in the upcoming companion books, *Love* by L. Shannon and *Sunlight* by Moira Reid, part of the Vampire Oracle series at Cobblestone Press.



***Love - The Vampire Oracles, Cobblestone Press***  
**by L. Shannon**  
**RELEASE DATE: August 1, 2008**

*The Vampire Oracle Card: Love*

*Key Words: Finding peace, inner contentment*

*Meaning: Love is divided into only two parts: loving one's self and loving others. True peace from war, both internal and external can only be achieved through love.*

**Vampire Oracle: Love**  
**excerpt © 2008**

Jason Sawyer was about to die...*and it was about damn time.*

The Mistress's fangs tore at his throat, sucking his blood down in long, lusty swallows. Thrilling euphoria flooded his mind. The emotional barrage was a complete lie, nothing more than a lure the damn vampires used to tempt and subdue their victims. His mistress didn't love him or even desire him. He knew it, but after twenty years in her ruthless care, the truth didn't matter. He simply had to have it. He hated her and was addicted to the high as badly as any heroin addict ever could be.

And just like that street junky, risking it all for the next fix, he was about to pay for it.

He struggled, clawing at her arms. He didn't want to escape, but a little struggle was quickly rewarded with another burst of sensation. The Mistress liked him to play prey.

Pleasure spiked through his body, pulsing through his veins and lifting his cock into a throbbing erection. *Must have some blood left after all.* His heart raced and he let his eyes fall closed, accepting the coming end, praying she allowed him one final release.

The Mistress pushed him back against the foyer wall. Her petite body writhed over his in a mimic of sexual frenzy.

Even as he felt the weakness seeping from his fingertips up his arms, he couldn't help rolling his hips, rubbing his jeans-covered cock into her side. The friction was harsh, almost too much, so good he repeated it again and again.

And then the doorbell rang.

The Mistress dropped him, letting him fall to his knees behind her like unwanted trash. She left him there, in a boneless heap, to answer the door. When they were alone again, would she finish him, take his last drop? Lord help him, he'd let her. He'd give anything just so long as she filled him with the Blood Kiss while she killed him.

He blinked hard to clear his blurry vision. There was a man standing at the open door, arguing and pointing at him. Rain poured down behind the stranger like a gray curtain, broken only by the occasional flash of lightning.

The Mistress was unruffled as always. "If the desire to save him is so great then take him. He is nothing to me, a shell emptied of all value. Take him and consider him a tribute."

The strange man stepped forward, in an effort to intimidate the Mistress. Most misjudged her because of her size and this stranger was no different. Though, in truth, the dark haired giant was huge compared to the Mistress. He looked well over six feet tall and built like an ox with thick shoulders. Had he been less muscular, he could be a model with his perfect face and stylish black hair.

But his eyes... the blue depths were like flint, cold and hard, eyes of a killer.

That frozen gaze turned on him. "He's nearly dead already. What good is he to me?"

That was when he knew...the man was a vampire. He'd missed it at first, maybe because of his recent draining, or maybe because the stranger hid it so well. There were no flashing fangs, no glowing eyes, and no waves of hunger or need. He looked human, if perhaps a bit pale for any mortal. Then again, his own

tan was probably more than a little wilted at this point.

What if the Mistress did send him away? Would this other vamp take him in, offer him what he needed?

“Take him or leave him to die. He’s become weak and clingy. I don’t need a toy who gives in so easily.” There was a leashed anger to the Mistress’s tone, a violence barely hidden beneath the surface.

The man gave him another assessing look, as if he was judging a horse before buying him. The comparison pricked Jason’s pride, driving him to his feet in a slow awkward lurch. He wouldn’t kneel before these two while they haggled over which would be forced to “keep” him.

One dark eyebrow rose incrementally at his effort. “Does he have any other skills?”

The Mistress spoke in a quiet, deadly purr. “He has many skills and is also quite well formed. Shall I have him strip for you to judge?”

“No, I can see well enough. Is he more than a bed and blood slave?”

“He is.” The Mistress flashed him a demanding look. “This one has tended my household affairs for many years now.”

Jason took the hint in the angry depths of the Mistress’s eyes. He was to prove himself worthy or be killed on the spot. Obviously, since she was done with him, he was going to be passed on to this male in some diplomatic move. *Damn vampires loved their politics*. He looked around for some way to do as she demanded and his gaze settled on an envelope lying on the floor beside the door.

He forced his body to move, carrying him the five feet to the white envelope with slow careful steps. His vision gained a black frame as a wave of nauseous dizziness hit him. The blood loss was by far the worst he’d ever faced.

She’d meant to drain him.

He settled to the floor, kneeling at the Mistress’s feet before he fell. After a couple deep breaths, he picked up the envelope and cradled the elegant stationery to his chest while his vision came back.

“...always drain your people like this?” the male vampire asked.

Jason focused on the words as best he could. The man had just challenged his Mistress by offering insult. Shit, what else had he missed?

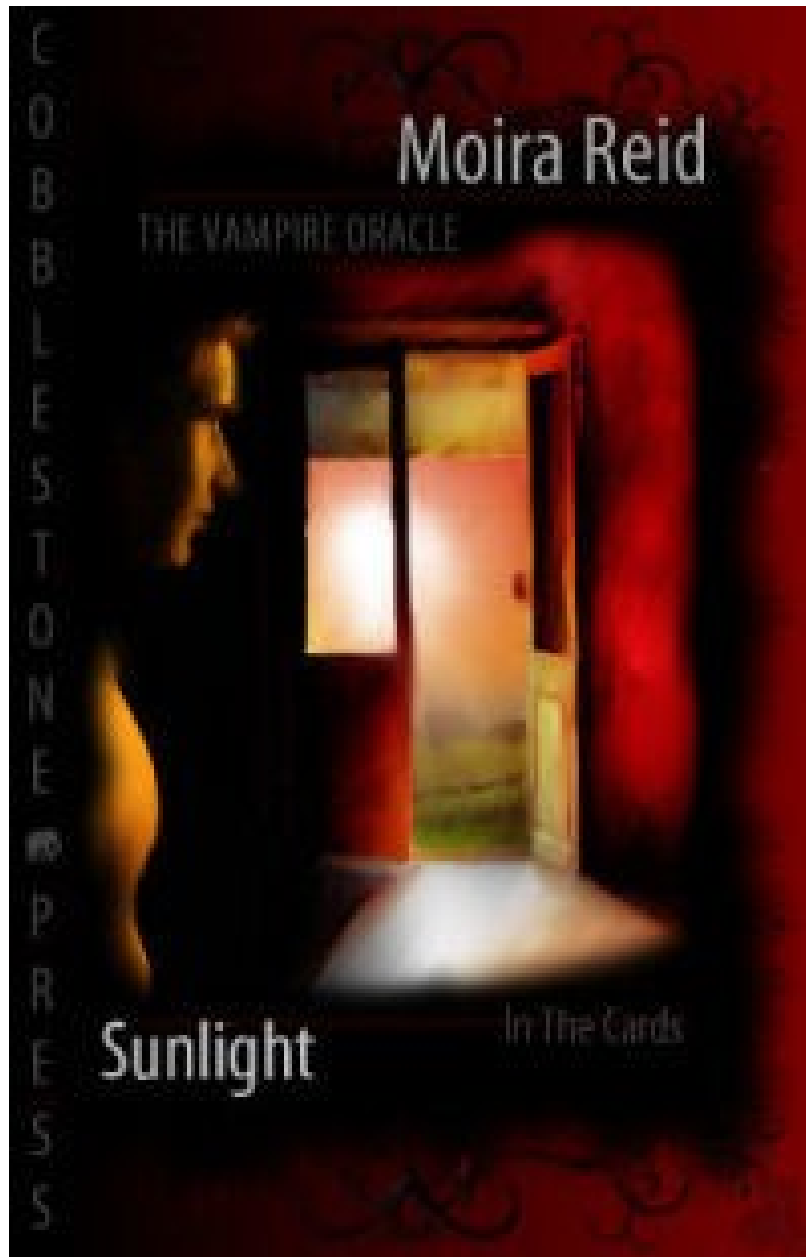
The Mistress drew in a gasp of air. The soft sound was harsh in the otherwise silent foyer. Even the thundering storm outside stilled, as if holding its breath for her response. Her fingers brushed over his thick hair, petting him like a dog. “Do not try my patience, little one. I have done my duty and offered my tribute to you as is proper from a visiting guest.” The petting shifted. Her fingers sank into his hair, gripping it painfully. “Take him or not, but do not offer insults which you haven’t the age or strength to defend.”

A long moment passed between the vampires, during which Jason didn’t dare move or even breathe. His sentencing would come from a stranger’s lips. Would he live with some new Master or be killed by his current Mistress?

“If he can get to his feet, he goes with me.” The words were ended with a crash of deafening thunder.

WELCOME HOME

[www.lshannon.net](http://www.lshannon.net)



***Sunlight - The Vampire Oracles, Cobblestone Press***  
**by Moira Reid**  
**RELEASE DATE: September 5, 2008**

*The Vampire Oracle Card: Sunlight*

*Key Words: Pain, sorrow, internal conflict*

*Meaning: This is a time of ruin of the old life. All that was known is now lost.*

*Painful Memories and the future must collide to find resolution.*

**Vampire Oracle: Sunlight  
excerpt © 2008**

Just over ten minutes later, Johnathan pulled into Giant Eagles' parking lot. Driving around toward a row of shadowy trees, he headed straight toward the back of the parking lot. A six-foot mountain of a man wearing black leather stood camouflaged against a black Porsche Boxster S.

Johnathan climbed out of his silver Honda Accord and shut the door behind him. "When are you going to stop looking like a thug?"

Dillon pushed himself off the car and walked toward Johnathan. "The same day you stop looking like such a pansy."

Dillon's slow smile mirrored his own. Johnathan grabbed his big brother in a crushing bear hug. "Good to see you, man."

"What the hell is going on?" Dillon did not release his vice-like hold.

"Lenora got the card."

Dillon released his hold and took a step backward. "What?"

"Yeah, she got it." Johnathan's blood pounded at his temples. "I can't believe you remembered me talking about Lenora."

Dillon scoffed. "Uh, yeah. What other woman have you ever talked about? I'm not as smart as you, but I ain't that fucking stupid. What card?"

Johnathan couldn't contain his happiness. "The Sunlight card, moron."

Dillon shook his head. "Your girl got a tarot card? Sunlight, huh? Yeah, I can see it. Somebody's telling you to 'get out of the house and get laid, you fucker'."

Johnathan punched his brother in the shoulder then clenched his fist. The pain racing up his arm reminded him of the misguided punch he'd delivered to a brick wall outside the Pittsburgh library a week ago. "Asshole."

"Lover Boy." Dillon tousled his hair, and Johnathan shoved off his brother's hand. "I sure as hell hope you didn't drag me all the way down here to talk about your love life."

Johnathan shook his head. "Not entirely, no. I need your help tonight. I found out where another of Ramos' pushers is selling. He's the target tonight."

Dillon shook his head. “Since when did you need help bringing down one of those guys on your own?”

“I don’t think he’s going to be on his own,” Johnathan said. “Been watching him for a couple of nights, and the guy is never alone. Got two or three big monkeys with him all the time. They are carrying some heavy firepower, and I can’t afford to have to explain a bunch of bullet holes to Lenora.”

“What kind of firepower?” Dillon fished a key out of his pocket and walked around to his trunk.

“Automatic weapons. Two have AK-47’s; one other is carrying something I don’t even recognize. Looked like a friggin’ Howitzer.”

Dillon laughed as he opened the trunk. “It wasn’t a Howitzer. Did it look like one of these?”

The shiny black and silver steel glimmered in the moonlight filtering through the blowing trees. Johnathan’s eyes flicked over each of a dozen weapons. “None of these, no. Bigger. Uglier.”

“Weapons aren’t ugly, J.” Dillon pulled one of the AK-47’s out of the trunk and closed it, still chuckling. “The Avtomat Kalashnikova 1947 should do it. I’ll take out the Howitzer guy first, then cover you on the others. Any chance they’ve got silver?”

Johnathan shook his head. “They aren’t hunting vampires. They’re just street scum selling drugs.”

“We’ll take my car. Lock that piece of shit Honda, and get into a real vehicle.”

Johnathan pressed the button on his key fob, climbed into the passenger seat and closed the door. “East End, Highland Park.”

--Moirra Reid  
[www.readmoore.com](http://www.readmoore.com)

### **Author Bios**

**L. Shannon** has always been a reader and lover of books but never considered writing until one night when she ran out of books to read. She began writing that very night as the first line of defense in a battle against insomnia. Her writing has steadily grown into a full-out war against reality. Her friends kindly say reality never stood a chance.

The L. Shannon novels have expanded to fill an entire world with paranormal wonders including Valäfrn werewolves, Tascryn demons, blood-sucking

vampires, sexy selkies and many, many more. Be careful if you choose to enter her hunk-filled world. You may never wish to leave...

In the time Shannon doesn't spend writing, she's kept busy by bothering her husband, showing dogs, gardening and watching over her four Butterfly Koi ponds. You can learn more about her writing and her life at [www.lshannon.net](http://www.lshannon.net).

**Moira Reid** writes erotic and romantic suspense (among other things that take her fancy at any given moment). She loves long walks in the park, the outdoors, and ... no wait, that's somebody else. Moira sits in front of her computer day and night making up stuff. Yeah, that's Moira. She's the obsessive-compulsive one that gets an idea one day and is typing furiously the next while housework, bill-paying, cooking, and all other chores go undone around her. She has a husband who brings food to her on occasion and keeps her supplied with coffee hoping that once in a while she'll take a break for some "research." He's been waiting off and on for over twelve years now—patient fellow.

Moira started out writing a long, long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. Her 9-year old daughter often asks why Moira laughs at her own jokes—alone. Her friends say when she commits to laughter, she commits. What any of this has to do with her writing is beyond me, but you'd have to meet her to appreciate why it seems important. Her outlook on life is pretty simple—be nice, smile a lot, give something back. (Especially if you weren't really supposed to borrow it in the first place.)

Visit her at her website: [www.readmoore.com](http://www.readmoore.com)

**Other Vampire Books:**

**Walking at Sundown, Cobblestone Press by L. Shannon**  
*Will his submission be the ultimate pleasure or his downfall?*

**Links to Websites, Blogs, and Everything Vampire Oracle.**

**The Vampire Oracle Series:**

**<http://cobblestone-press.com/catalog/line/vampireoracle.htm>**

**Vampire Oracle blog on-line:**

**<http://vampireoracle.blogspot.com/>**

**Cobblestone Press**

**<http://www.cobblestone-press.com/>**



**Vampire Oracle Trailer movie**

**<http://vampireoracle.blogspot.com/2007/09/vampire-oracle-video-trailer.html>**

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WELCOME HOME

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10/3/2008	Vampire Oracle: New Life	Cassandra Moore
10/3/2008	Vampire Oracle: Wisdom	Sable Grey
10/3/2008	Vampire Oracle: Circle of Life	Deanna Lee

And now for some once in a lifetime interviews! To celebrate the release of the first book chronicling the lives of the Steel City Vampires, they, the vampires themselves, came en masse to the studios of *The Point from the Point*. Of course it was well after hours so the only person able to do the interviews was the Assistant to Kelly Curik, Miss Jane Daniels.

HERO: Kalib

Novel: Welcome Home by L. Shannon & Moira Reid

Series: Steel City Vampires

*JANE: Hello Kalib. Thank you for agreeing to do this interview.*

KALIB: It's no problem. Shasta said I should and when I mentioned it to the others they rather loved the idea of coming out of the closet.

*JANE: Can you tell us a little about Shasta?*

KALIB : Shasta Hemingway is my life. Once I met her she changed my world. She's been a real estate agent for years and now is trying her hand at being a novelist. The most perfect day of my life was when she agreed to marry me.

(laughter offstage)

JOHNATHAN: Tell her how you bared your naked ass to give her that rock!

SAMPSON: Oh, I do not want to hear about his naked ass!

*JANE: This was all Shasta's idea. Why is that?*

KALIB : (Kalib blushed at this question.) Well, Shasta expects me to promote her new book which is about a vampire and a real estate broker who fall in love. I can't imagine where she got the idea.

*JANE : (laugh) I guess that is quite a stretch. Speaking of which, can you tell us a little about how you came to be a resident of the Steel City (Pittsburgh)?*

KALIB : If you've read this book, you already know the answer. I came here to get free of a psychotic vampire that I'd created and now couldn't find the strength to destroy.

*JANE : If he was so terrible, why did you turn him in the first place?*

KALIB : He wasn't terrible in the beginning. He was a good friend who stood by my worst times and needed me to do the same.

*JANE : What did he do that was so awful? It had to be bad for you to turn your back on him.*

KALIB : We'd been close for decades, but he thought there was more than friendship between us and when I made certain he understood it could never be more, something in him snapped. From then on he did terrible things to get my

attention or to keep me from being with anyone else. He killed at first to control our relationship and then he killed just for the sheer joy of taking the last drop of blood.

*JANE : I'm sorry. I didn't mean to pry...*

KALIB : Yes, you did. But I forgive you for being just as nosy as you must for your job as a reporter. But I am through talking about David and all my mistakes with him.

*JANE : Shasta knows about him, doesn't she?*

KALIB : Yes, she met David and he almost killed her. That is how I came to turning her vampire. If I hadn't she would have died.

*JANE : Now to find out what our readers really want to know. What do you and Shasta have planned next?*

KALIB : We have a beautiful home and have found good friends among her uncle's young friends. I see us staying here and making a home together. Or did you mean more immediately? I believe her uncle Sampson has invited all those rowdy vampires to our home tonight for an evening of watching vampire movies. They thrive on making Shasta squirm and me growl. In fact, I'd better go be sure the bean dip is ready so I guess the interview is over. Oh, don't forget, buy Shasta's book.

~ \* ~ \* ~

HERO: Dillon

Novel: The Vampire Oracle: Love by L. Shannon

Series: Steel City Vampires

*JANE: Hello Dillon. Thank you for agreeing to do this interview.*

DILLON: Yeah, whatever. Let's just do this thing.

*JANE: Okay... Can you tell us a little about yourself and how you came to be a resident of the Steel City (Pittsburgh)?*

DILLON: I was born here. My brother and I both. The 'burg is home. It's where we'll stay unless someone comes along bad enough to send us running or sinking us six feet down.

*JANE: And of course, how did you become a vampire?*

DILLON: Eh, my idiot of a brother thought we could live forever so he could tinker with his science stuff. Since I'm the one who generally keeps him remembering he's still part of the world he decided to get me turned too. For a long while I hated him for it, but really, how long could I hold a grudge for something that he thought was good for us both?

*JANE: Do you hold down a job. If so can you tell what you do and how you got*

*involved in it?*

DILLON: I'm not so much for the daily grind. I did for a while, worked as a bouncer for some bars back in the day. Not many dudes dared to push my buttons and the ones that did only did it once. Then I let bro invest some of our money and it's done good enough to live off of. So I spend my nights keeping this city of ours clear of unsavory types. Mostly I just make it obvious that we don't want the murdering kind of vamps here and now and then I lend my services out to help in other cities.

*JANE: What do you like to do for fun?*

DILLON: Depends on my mood. Sometimes I like nothing better than kicking a bad ass around. Others, I hang with my boys, watch action flicks or Steelers games.

*JANE: Obviously since you star in a book, you have an interesting life. Tell us about any special people or events in your life? We'd especially love to hear about what happens in your book.*

DILLON: Oh... I didn't know you wanted the new me. Well, okay. There's Jason. He keeps me in line and gives me what I need whether I want it or not. Yeah, he's the best thing that ever happened to me. But to get to this place, we both had to take our share of hell. Still face it now and then, but together, yeah we got to a good place.

*JANE: Now to find out what our readers really want to know. What really turns you on?*

DILLON: Blood. Willing blood and a lot of sex. Jason. Anything Jason. Sometimes a little violence. Sometimes a quiet moment. Always Jason.

~ \* ~ \* ~

HERO: Johnathan

Novel: The Vampire Oracle: Sunlight by Moira Reid

Series: Steel City Vampires

*JANE: Hello Johnathan. Can you tell us a little about yourself and how you came to be a resident of the Steel City (Pittsburgh)?*

JOHNATHAN: Hello, and thanks for having me, Jane. You got any coffee around here? (sound from someone talking off-stage) Oh, stow it, Dillon. I'm sorry, Jane, what did you ask me? Oh yeah, how I got to Pittsburgh. Well, I was born here, then moved south for a while—had a great job at a university down there. Screwed that up royally when I asked Sam to make me a vamp. I had the stupid idea it would allow me more time for my work—not having to worry about dying and all. Yeah. Not aging sort of got noticed after a while. So, I had to leave the one thing I loved doing. Came back home feeling like shit...oh man, can I say shit on here? Anyway, caught up with my brother, Dillon. Got a new groove.

*JANE: You have a new groove? A new job you mean?*

JOHNATHAN: Yeah, I kind of created my own job. To put it simply, at the university, I was doing chemical studies on how to help people live longer, healthier lives. Once I got here, I realized a lot of people were dying, not from illness or disease. They were being killed by the drug trade. I took it on myself to fix that. Now, I work for myself, and with Dillon and the guys on occasion—we clean up the streets. It's not really what you could call a regular job, but I've got plenty of money to live on. It's important work.

*JANE: Where did you get the money you live on?*

JOHNATHAN: I really can't say specifically—generally, I got some of the “items” I produced in the lab patented. Lots of money in that.

(Shout from off-camera): “His geek side paid off.”

Johnathan: Shut up, man. You had your turn.

*JANE: What do you like to do for fun?*

JOHNATHAN: The sort of thing I'm *certain* I can't say here.

*JANE: You have an interesting life. Tell us about any special people or events in your life?*

JOHNATHAN: My brother is a special person in my life.

DILLON: Oh man. Shut up.

JOHNATHAN: (laughs) Okay, yeah. That's bullshit. He's my brother. The only thing special about him is his weapon collection. Oh, and his car. He loves his car.

DILLON: Better than that piece of...

*JANE: I'm sorry, let me interrupt for a second, gentlemen and bring you back around to the topic.*

JOHNATHAN: Sorry about that. Okay, special person. I've got buddies—Wash, Dillon, Pagan is a hoot, Sampson...Kalib is a heck of a guy. But the only really special person is Lenora.

DILLON: Don't get him started on that. You really don't have that kind of time.

*JANE: Okay, then let me find out what our readers really want to know. What really turns you on?*

JOHNATHAN: Same answer...Lenora.

~ \* ~ \* ~

HERO: Pagan

Novel: One Wild Night by Summer Alan

Series: Steel City Vampires

*JANE: Hello Pagan. Thank you for agreeing to do this interview.*

PAGAN: No worries. Glad to be here.

*JANE: How did you meet up with all these other fellas?*

PAGAN: (looks at the group of men standing off screen) Dillon broke up a fight between me and a guy one night at this bar on the south side. I was two flicks of my Bic from lighting the asshole's hair on fire. He convinced me I could put flames to better use.

*JANE: Put flames to better use? In what way? Are you an arsonist?*

PAGAN: Arsonist? Oh hell no. That's a crime, gal. I'm what you would call a 'Conflagration, Combustion and Inferno Enthusiast.' It's kind of a hobby that got out of control and became a lifelong ambition.

*JANE: So, you are part of the team that hunts down rogue vampires? With flames?*

PAGAN: Yeah, now you got it. I'm the man they call when they need a nice, warm blaze.

*JANE: What do you like to do for fun?*

PAGAN: Have sex on my bike.

(Men offstage laugh)

PAGAN: Hey, she asked. Damn. Don't ask if you don't wanna know.

*JANE (nonplussed): You have a bicycle designed for alternate uses?*

(Men laugh uproariously)

PAGAN: Uh, not a bicycle. I've got an FXDF Harley Davidson Fat Bob. Specially designed for plenty of alternate uses...lots of seat space, if you catch my drift.

*JANE: Obviously you have an interesting life. Tell us about any special people or events in your life? We'd especially love to hear about what happens in your book.*

PAGAN: I don't know about interesting. I'm always falling into what looks like a flash fire and ends up being exactly what I needed. I'm lucky that way. One night I was riding my bike to a Halloween party in this BP rainstorm.

*JANE: BP?*

PAGAN: Sorry...rainstorm of Biblical Proportions.

*JANE: Ah.*

PAGAN: And I find this woman on the side of the road with a flat tire. That flat tire was the flash fire. She was the inferno. Life changed again...with pleasure, I might add.

*JANE: Finally, what turns you on?*

PAGAN: The inferno, my dear. The inferno.

~ \* ~ \* ~

HERO: Nathaniel "Wash" Washington  
Novella: Bound and Determined by L. Shannon  
Novel: Dangerous Company by L. Shannon  
Series: Steel City Vampires

*JANE: Hello Mr. Washington. Thank you for agreeing to do this interview. I'm sure you're a very busy man.*

WASH: I am, but I'm always happy to speak with the press.

*JANE: Can you tell us a little about yourself and how you came to be a resident of the Steel City (Pittsburgh)?*

WASH: That is a bit of a complicated story, but I am willing to share some of it. Back in nineteen forty-four I was among those incarcerated by Hitler and his followers. So were my wife and son. When the Allies broke through and liberated the death camp, it was already too late for my family and I guess you could say me too. They were dead and thanks to a madman, I was undead and only wanting to join them. An American soldier hauled my ass out of there. He forced me to live and brought me back to his home here in Pittsburgh. I owed him everything. I've done my best to repay that debt by helping him in business and watching over his children and grandchildren.

*JANE: After being turned against your will, how have you survived as a vampire?*

WASH: Surviving isn't all that hard. I keep myself from the public eye as much as possible and purchase my meals from willing donors.

*JANE: Do you hold down a job. If so can you tell what you do and how you got involved in it?*

WASH: I do. I am the silent partner in the second largest steel company in our fair city. My long gone friend John Milton and I bought it and built it up until now I help his grandson run it.

*JANE: What do you like to do for fun?*

WASH: I enjoy my work. It is a pleasure to see something we built thrive so well. I also spend a great deal of time with the Miltons. They are the closest thing I have to family and being among them is always a joy.

*JANE: Is it true you help Dillon hunt down rogue vampires? I find it hard to*



*believe that a man as distinguished as yourself would be out hitting the streets with the likes of Dillon. If it is true how did it come about?*

WASH: Don't take this suit or gray hair as indication that I'm incapable of violence. I am every bit as dangerous as the next undead. Even Dillon in all his leather would never mind having me watch his back. But I do understand how you could be misled. I don't "hit the street" so much as have myself on call for any time he needs an extra set of fangs. I do leave the street hitting to him and Dillon and his brother, but I will never turn down a request from him either. Because once more than a few years back, he backed me when I needed it, and I'm not the kind to forget a good deed.

*JANE: Now to find out what our readers really want to know. What really turns you on?*

WASH: Read Bound and Determined and you will know. Other than that, I'm not one to kiss and tell.

~ \* ~ \* ~

HERO: Sampson  
Novel: Blitzed by L. Shannon  
Series: Steel City Vampires

*JANE: Hello Sampson. How are you this evening?*

SAMPSON: Doing very well, thank you. And you're holding up quite well, too, considering these guys are a bunch of boneheads.

(Grumbling from offstage)

*JANE: I'm all right. I've dealt with some very interesting characters over the years. I can certainly cope with a group of vampires.*

SAMPSON: You're a better man than I am, then Jane. They can wear on you. Be glad you don't get stuck with them on movie night. Kalib's right; they thrive on making women squirm, especially Shasta.

*JANE: Shasta is your niece?*

SAMPSON: Yes, my niece.

*JANE: Give me an example of how they'd make her squirm.*

SAMPSON: (Laughs) Ever see *Die Hard*, the Bruce Willis picture? Remember that scene where he blows up the elevator? Yeah--Pagan set a small explosion behind her on the sofa one night and timed it to go off at the same moment. She jumped about a foot, spilled the popcorn. Bean dip flew all over the big screen. They are always doing crap like that. You should see the place when they leave. What a mess.

*JANE: So, tell me about you.*

SAMPSON: What do you want to know? I'm a vampire, obviously. Changed over twenty years ago when Shasta was little. Her parents were killed not long after, and I took care of her. Worked in steel for a while, where I met Wash. The rest is history, as they say.

*JANE: What do you like to do for fun?*

SAMPSON: I do a little knitting on occasion.

(Men laugh loudly.)

SAMPSON: Shut the hell up! It keeps my fingers nimble and not a one of you complained at getting Steelers scarves for Christmas.

(Men fall silent.)

*JANE: Anything else you'd like to tell us about you?*

SAMPSON: I'm going to kick some asses when we get done here. You mean something like that?

*JANE: Well, I guess that just about wraps it up, then. I'm Jane Daniels and I'd like to thank you all for joining us. Be sure to get your copies of all these wonderful men's stories—*

PAGAN (mumbling): Except for the story of Betsy Ross over there, that is.

SAMPSON: (rises from chair) Oh yeah, buy my niece's book. It rocks. (runs off stage to the sound of crashing doors and chairs)

*JANE: --uh that about wraps it up. Be sure to check out the Steel City Vampire stories, two of which are part of The Vampire Oracle available soon at Cobblestone Press.*

