

CHAPTER 1 AN UNUSUAL PROJECT

It was the end of April, and the second term for the year was just beginning. The very last 'second term' that Rosie would ever experience...Thank God! That was the good news; the bad news was that there were still seven full months to go, but then after that, school was out for ever. No more mocking, no more conforming, no more hiding, no more dumb-ass kids. Bring it on!

Rosie took a deep breath as she crossed the road and headed for the school, she couldn't quite figure out whether she was excited or reluctant to be going through the gates. This didn't really surprise her; understanding her own thoughts and feelings was a slippery slope she'd long since stopped trying to navigate. She knew whichever route she took she'd always end up back at the bottom, covered in whatever happened to be down there at the time. She supposed she was excited because the sooner she got to school the sooner it would all be over, and a little reluctant because, well...because it was school.

As she walked across the school yard she tried to ignore the giggles from a small group of girls dressed in the latest Australian fashion—fast tracked from America of course. Rosie knew she should be used to the mockery by now, her mode of goth dress; layers of black on black did nothing to win her friends, but despite her best efforts she could not ignore them today. Turning quickly, her wild red curls whipped around her face. Rosie stared at her antagonists, her green eyes showing displeasure as her mouth morphed into a snarl. Then she gave them the finger for good measure, it didn't shut them up but it did make her feel a little better.

She began the trek up the stairs to the main entrance, one heavy black boot after the other. When she saw Cooper sitting on the top step she paused a second to look

at him, now here was a nice piece of eye candy. Cooper had a smile that would melt your heart, and although he wasn't exactly "buff" he sure looked good enough to eat.

Cooper looked up from his laptop, caught sight of Rosie and raised his hand in greeting. Rosie frowned in reply; it was what she did. He smiled at the expected response then stared back down at his screen. Behind her she heard a high pitched giggle as the school's token slut tried to hit on one of the younger boys.

'That's what I like about the Catholic School system,' Rosie muttered to herself. 'Good moral standing.'

She continued to walk up the stairs, past Cooper and through the main doors.

The school began to come awake; its halls filling with kids who displayed varying degrees of excitement, or lethargy, depending on their current stage of development.

All of them had one thing in common, they were stuck here, in school, whether they wanted to be or not, and in that they were brothers and sisters in arms.

Continuing down the corridor Rosie caught sight of Vanda. Now here was a kid who was weird on a whole other level. She looked normal but she didn't seem to fit into any of the known levels of evolution, and she was an introvert to the point of being rude.

Rosie couldn't even remember when Vanda had enrolled in the school, it wasn't that long ago, a year, maybe two—whatever. Anyway, she didn't know a thing about Vanda and doubted that any of the other students did. Yet despite her strange behaviour no one ever thought to push Vanda for information, friendship or even enmity for that matter. It was like she had some kind of invisible barrier that kept people away.

Eventually the bell announced that it was time to learn and the students made their way to their designated rooms, and that was how the first day, of the very last second term, began.

Five and a half hours later the day was nearly over, and even Rosie had to agree, though she would never admit it, that as far as school days went, this one wasn't too bad. Then the assignment was handed out.

The Social Sciences class was generally a breeze, but this latest assignment was the mother of all group projects. As far as Rosie was concerned, group assignments were her own personal hell, so she asked her usual questions:

'Mr Flynn, do we really have to work in groups?'

'Yes you do Rosie, that's why it's called a *group* assignment.'

'Well, can we at least choose our own groups?'

'Nope, already chosen and you'll all find out who you're working with at the end of the day.'

As Rosie slumped even lower into her chair she caught sight of Vanda sitting across the room, she looked as unhappy at the thought of a long-term group assignment as Rosie felt. This sparked a pang of pity from Rosie, not only for Vanda, but also for the group that Vanda would be working with.

Rosie drew her attention back to Mr Flynn. '...come the end of this year, you are all going to be leaving St John Baptist. Some of you will be going to Uni and some will be looking for jobs. Either way you're all going to be pushed outside your comfort zones.

'Your routines will change, you will not have the safety net of your friends or familiar surroundings, and you may find yourselves working with people who you

don't like, or who don't like you. This assignment will challenge you in a similar way by putting you with people you don't normally mix with.' He took a deep breath.

'Questions?' Several hands shot up but Mr Flynn ignored them. 'Good. So for the last time, this is what you are to do...'

Each group was to choose a topic, any topic real or myth, then research that topic to prove it, right or wrong; true or false. Neither the topic nor the outcome mattered.

'I do *not* care whether your subject is proved or disproved; that being the case, you can go and look for the yeti, or aliens, or try to find out if young Leo here...' Mr Flynn indicated one of his students. '...is a natural red head.'

Rosie and the rest of the class looked at Leo and laughed out loud. His vivid ginger hair, pale complexion and freckles left no one in doubt.

'All I am interested in is your ability to work together, your understanding of group dynamics, and your research and methodology skills. You will also hav...'

Rosie zoned out until Mr Flynn said, 'All right that's it for today. Now there's a bundle of papers on my desk there,' he pointed. 'Make sure each of you takes one on your way out, it lists your groups and it *is* final. See you next week,' he said as he walked out of the door.

His departure was followed by the sound of scraping chairs, grunting and running feet, as the students rushed to grab a list, all that is except Rosie and Vanda who stayed in their seats. The negative comments and expletives from their classmates, told them all they needed to know.

Unable to put it off any longer Rosie stood and walked over to Mr Flynn's desk. She picked up a list, read it in silence and thought, *Karma's a bitch*. She walked over and gave Vanda a list. 'You're with me.'

Vanda took the list and asked, 'Who else?'

'Well, we've got eye candy...' Rosie waited for a response but did not get any, so she clarified, 'Cooper,' still no response. *Okay.*

'And we've got Jessica. Jessica Hamilton, not Jessica Banyo.' Still nothing. *Great,* thought Rosie. *Here's a team player in the making.* 'And to top it all off we have Eli Walters. What do you think?'

'I don't know. You know them better than me, are they alright?'

'Yeah I suppose so. Jessica's hooked on sport and she can be a bit of a bitch sometimes, but she's alright. Cooper's a genius so he'll be handy to have around, and he's cute.' Rosie looked at Vanda's expressionless face. 'Ahh c'mon...I know you don't talk to people but you have to look.'

Vanda blushed.

'Thought so,' Rosie smiled before going on. 'Who else? Oh yeah, Eli. We probably could have done better than him but he's ok, a bit of a dumb-ass but harmless enough. And that's it, that's our group. I don't know anything about you though. I mean this is the longest conversation I've had with you in over a year... So talk. What's your story?'

'I don't have a story.'

'Everyone has a story,' said Rosie. 'Listen, I know you don't like to mix, but you're going to have to make the effort for Flynn's project, if you don't, you'll get voted off the team. I don't want to know your dark secrets, God knows I'm not going to tell you mine, but give me something. Where'd you move from?'

'Perth.'

'Do you live with your parents?'

'No.'

'Do you think this assignment sucks?'

‘Yes.’

‘Do you like school?’

‘No.’

‘Do you like sports?’

‘No.’

‘Do you think Cooper’s eye candy?’

A slight pause then, ‘Yes.’

‘Okay then. Thanks for sharing and I’ll see you tomorrow.’

With that Rosie gathered her bags and left, leaving Vanda still sitting, with a bemused look on her face.

As Vanda walked home she smiled and thought about Rosie, she thought about having someone to talk to, or to go and see a movie with—she thought about having a friend. Her smile, as slight as it was, slipped off her lips as she remembered her last attempt at friendship—it hadn’t ended well.

She was in a melancholy mood as she turned and walked through the gate of the little cottage that she had called home for the past eighteen months. Granny C was there as usual with a nice cup of tea and a couple of biscuits waiting on the table. Vanda’s smile reappeared, much bigger, and much warmer, this smile was the real deal.

‘Hi Granny C.’

After a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek, Vanda sat down at the kitchen table. This was her favourite room in the cottage, the kitchen was small and old, and had

never been renovated even though it was built in the late 1930s. It still had all of the original fittings, and sitting with pride on the outer wall was a beautiful black cast iron, wood-fired oven. Granny C could cook up a storm in this oven and the warmth and aromas would permeate through the entire cottage, tempting the taste buds and warming the heart.

Vanda still couldn't believe how lucky she was to find herself here. As she sipped her tea, her thoughts drifted back to their first meeting.

Vanda had had no friends or family, but ample money, so she had lived a comfortable, if lonely, life. Unfortunately a young teenager living alone in hotels drew too much unwanted attention, so she had moved out to live in an abandoned house in the suburbs. It was safe and warm and she had called it home, even though it stank of cat pee.

Walking home one evening, her dinner in a brown paper bag, she turned a corner and stopped dead in her tracks. A few metres in front of her, an old lady lay bleeding on the ground, a skinny pock-marked man stood over her as he tried to wrestle a tan coloured handbag from her grasp.

Vanda heard the man speak incoherently.

'Juzled go y'old cow.'

Dropping her dinner, Vanda rushed to the old woman's aid, yelling, 'Get off her!' Seconds later she slammed into the man, knocking him off his feet. As Vanda regained her balance she saw the needle tracks on the man's arm.

'Go get your drug money somewhere else,' she said.

'Oo the 'ell ja think y' are?' he slurred.

'Just get up and go before I call the cops.'

She turned to help the old woman and didn't see the man grab a broken bottle from the gutter, as he scrambled to his feet.

The old lady yelled out a warning, 'Look out!'

Vanda spun around to see the man coming at her, broken bottle held high, she raised her arm up to protect her face and felt the glass slice through the flesh on her arm.

Adrenaline pulsed through her veins as she faced the junky; in the distance a police siren wailed. The junky looked up at the sound trying to judge where it was coming from; his addled brain couldn't pinpoint the direction so he dropped the bottle and ran.

Vanda took a moment to calm herself before turning her attention back to the old woman who was struggling to stand up. 'Are you alright? Here grab my hand.'

'Well, I'm alive dear,' she grunted as Vanda pulled her to her feet. 'Thanks to you.'

'I should get you to a hospital,' said Vanda.

'What, and sit there for eight hours just to be sent home with a couple of aspirin? No, I don't think so, I'll be fine dear, if you could just help me home I...'. The old lady grabbed Vanda's injured arm. 'Oh my goodness, I should get *you* to the hospital.'

'What? No...this is just a scratch, he only just caught me...thanks to you.' She smiled.

'I don't know dear, it looks pretty bad.'

'Tell you what, why don't I take you home and we can get cleaned up? Then if it looks bad for either of us we'll go to the hospital together.'

At Mrs Connelly's house they soon realised that neither of their injuries warranted a hospital visit, and Mrs Connelly put the kettle on. Vanda was soon to discover that in Mrs Connelly's book a good cup of tea could cure anything.

As tough as she was, Mrs Connelly was still shaken after the attack and she asked if Vanda would stay with her overnight, if it was alright with her parents.

Vanda sighed, 'I'm happy to stay with you, but there's no need to call my parents.'

'Yes of course there is! They'll be worried.'

'No they won't.' Vanda hesitated. 'I don't have any parents.'

'Oh my word, so who do you live with...your grandparents?'

'No, it's just me.' Vanda hoped Mrs Connelly wasn't planning on reporting her to the authorities.

'But where do you live? Are you in foster care?'

'No. I tend to move around a bit but at the moment I'm squatting in a house a few blocks from here.' *Get ready to run again*, she thought.

'Well that won't do at all. You'll stay with me for a few nights until we can get you sorted.'

Now, eighteen months later Vanda still wasn't "sorted," and for that they were both very thankful.

Later that week Rosie went looking for Vanda. She found her sitting under the old fig tree in the school yard. Cooper, who had been homing in on Rosie, made it to the tree seconds later.

'I spoke to Jess this morning,' he said by way of a greeting. 'She's got to see Mrs Fleming but as soon as she's done she'll come find us. She's going to bring Eli along if she can find him.'

He sat down next to the girls, leaning back against the huge trunk, and all three were immediately engulfed in an uncomfortable silence. Vanda slapped her leg; the others looked at her.

‘Ant,’ was all she said.

Cooper rifled in his bag and pulled out a bar of chocolate, he held it up to the girls in offer but there were no takers, he put the untouched chocolate back in his bag.

Rosie coughed and Vanda squashed another ant. As the silence continued, Rosie pulled her bag open, before she had a chance to find what she was looking for, she quickly pulled her hand out to slap an ant on her arm, then all eyes once more turned to Vanda as she slapped her leg, dispatching yet another ant.

‘Well this sucks!’

‘Well this sucks!’

‘Well this sucks!’ all three announced at the same time, and as stupid as it was, it made them laugh.

‘Well Eli, looks like the fun group has started without us,’ Jessica said, as she and Eli sat down on the grass opposite the others. Getting comfortable against the park bench, which was positioned in the shade of the tree, they waited to be filled in on the joke.

Vanda was the first to stop laughing, and realising it was too stupid to explain, simply said, ‘Ant,’ setting the others off again and offending Eli’s delicate ego in the process.

‘If you don’t want to tell us just say so, there’s no need to be bitchy.’ Eli lay back against the bench, pouted, and using both hands, pushed his unkempt brown hair back off his chubby face. Happy that his hair was in place, he lowered his arms; an

act which encouraged his stomach to bulge slightly over his un-pressed and not too clean trousers.

He looked at Jessica to see if she was annoyed at being excluded from the joke—she wasn't; his brown eyes drifted to a blade of grass, and he continued to pout.

Cooper chuckled. 'Get over it Eli; it was just a stupid joke,' then quickly changed the subject.

'So...does anyone know what to do about this project?'

Rosie said, 'I guess we just have to pick a topic and run with it.' She looked at the others then asked, 'Does anyone have any ideas?' No one replied. 'Anyone at all?' Still silence. 'Well that's just great, 'cause neither do I! So where does that leave us?'

Rosie's final question was met by a selection of shrugs and grunts and *dunno*'s. 'Well, we've got to come up with a topic by next Monday, so, Vanda...' she looked at Vanda to make sure she had her attention. '...pull out some paper and a pen and we'll do a bit of brainstorming.'

'Hey, Goth Girl, who made you the boss?'

'You did Eli.'

'How'd you figure that?'

'Because *you* didn't put your hand up for the job.'

'No one asked me.'

'You didn't volunteer though did you?'

Cooper interrupted before they got out of control. 'Get over yourselves would you! No one is in charge; we're supposed to be a team, so let's act like one. Listen we don't need a leader. We'll just vote if a decision needs to be made, and because there are five of us we'll never have a tie, and majority rules apply, okay?'

A chorus of 'yesses' encouraged Cooper to go on. 'Okay, so let's dish out some tasks.'

'Such as?' Rosie asked.

'Well, first off you were right; we need someone to take notes.'

'Of course I'm right.' Rosie gave a rare smile to Cooper.

'Yeah, it's a good idea,' Eli said. 'Who's going to do it? I mean my writing sucks.'

'So you're not volunteering...again?' Jessica was baiting him, and enjoying it.

'What a surprise.'

Ignoring Jessica and Eli, Rosie asked Vanda, 'Would you like to do it?'

'Yeah, okay.'

'Great. Now down the track we're going to need some researchers, and someone to write the final report and do the presentation, but what we have to decide on now is the topic, so let's see what we can come up with.' Rosie was on a roll. 'We still have twenty minutes. Vanda, grab a notepad and let's get started.'

After a hesitant start, the ideas began to flow, mostly weird and wonderful, and none worth taking seriously, though they all thought long and hard on the suggestion of trying to prove that Mrs Abernathy was an alien. But it was a start, and amongst the weird and wonderful ideas there was laughter and friendly, (well mostly friendly) teasing. In short, it was the beginning of a working team.

Friday afternoon came and the newly formed team was still no closer to finding a topic. Rosie suggested a meeting in the school's cafeteria before they headed home. When they were all seated around the old timber table she asked Vanda to go over the minutes of the last meeting. Vanda thumbed through the notes she had taken, took a deep breath and summarised.

'Well, as of our last meeting we have planned nothing, we have decided nothing, and we have achieved...let me see, oh yes...nothing.'

'What do you mean nothing, we've met every day since Monday; how can there be nothing?' Eli asked.

Vanda shrugged. 'We haven't been able to decide on anything.'

'Whoa. We've got to have a topic by Monday, what're we going to do, I mean we can't show up to class with nothing?'

'Slow down Eli, you're going to burst something. Anyway, I don't remember you contributing all that much.'

'Yeah, well neither did you Jess.'

Rosie jumped in.

'Look, none of us have come up with anything. Vanda, did you write down any of the ideas we came up with?'

'Yes, but there weren't any we could decide on.'

'Well let's take another look at the list and see if we can't narrow it down a bit. Go on Vanda, read them out.'

'Okay. On the top of the list we have, UFOs, do they exist? Then we have the global warming, is it real? Next is Mrs Abernathy: human or alien? Followed by...' she shuffled uncomfortably before continuing. 'Is the Easter bunny real...?'

Cooper cut her off.

'You're kidding? Is that the best we can come up with? Come on guys we can do better than this.'

'I've got an idea.'

Everyone stopped and looked at Eli. Jessica muttered under her breath. 'That'll be a first.'

Eli threw her a look as he explained, 'Well, why don't we each come up with an idea, just one. We write it on a piece of paper and drop it in a bag or something, then do a lucky dip. Whatever topic we pull out is what we use for the project.'

'I think you're on to something.' Jessica surprised everyone with her statement, especially Eli, she continued. 'Nah. Just kidding, your idea sucks. God Eli, what do you think we've been doing for the past week? Listen, I think we've been going about this the wrong way.'

'What do you mean?' Eli felt dejected and insulted and was hoping that her idea would be as lame as his.

'Well, we're trying to pull a rabbit from a hat and so far all we've managed to find are a few dust bunnies. What we need to do is find something that one of us has an interest in, that way we have a head start, a resident expert if you like. Not only that, but the subject has to be interesting, topical, maybe even controversial. More importantly, it has to be juicy enough for us to do some good research so we can put together a detailed report, you with me so far?'

Nods all around, Eli mumbled.

'And I suppose you want to research one of your interests.'

Jessica shot him a wicked look before saying, 'As a matter of fact, no. We all know my interests, sport, sport and more sport. Cooper's out too, he's a computer nerd and a genius but no one wants to hear about that. Vanda; well we don't know anything about Vanda so I think we'll just agree she's way too boring to be into anything of interest.'

'I'm here you know?'

'Oh are you? Sorry. Where was I? Ah yes, Eli; what can I say about him? Err...No. And that leaves Rosie, our Goth Girl. I have to ask, what sort of goth name is Rosie

anyway? Never mind. Any guesses as to what Rosie's speciality is...No?' Jessica didn't pause for breath. 'Well I'll give you a few hints. Everyone is talking about them or at least knows about them, they are controversial and juicy, so I reckon we disprove the existence of vampires!'

With more emotion than anyone had seen from her before, Vanda voiced an emphatic, '*No!*' Just to make sure everyone understood where she was coming from; she continued with, 'Are you guys serious? Look I don't want anything to do with this, it's...it's stupid. Vampires, for God's sake what are you thinking?'

'It's no more stupid than aliens, or bunyips,' Cooper was surprised at Vanda's obvious distaste of the topic. 'Jess is right, it's a good topic. What do you guys think?'

'Yeah I like it,' said Eli. 'But why not try to prove they *do* exist.'

'Yeah, let's do that.' The contempt in Jessica's voice stung Eli to the core.

'What about you Rosie?' Vanda almost pleaded. 'Surely you aren't okay with this.'

Rosie thought for a moment, she didn't like being typecast as a vampire loving goth and vampires were definitely not her speciality. On the other hand, over the past few months her dreams had been haunted by these dark beautiful creatures; creatures whose sole purpose seemed to be to chase her down and, she could only presume—kill her.

She didn't know what had triggered these nightmares, but she couldn't help think that if she could talk about them, in a logical and factual manner, then she might be able to banish them from her dreams, and she could finally get a good night's sleep.

Her eyes widened as she embraced the idea and turned to face Vanda. 'Take a chill pill. Jess is right, it's a good topic.'

Rosie wasn't sure whether Vanda was going to run screaming or punch someone, it was obvious that she wasn't happy but Rosie didn't care. She voted 'for' and it was done, they would disprove the existence of vampires.

CHAPTER 2 A DANGEROUS CHOICE

Jessica wasn't exaggerating when she had said she was "into sports." She had a gruelling regime which included kickboxing, taekwondo, track and her favourite...swimming.

All of that exercise meant that she had a striking body and she'd be lying if she said she wasn't proud of it. Jessica never felt vain when she admired herself; God knew she had worked hard for it. She stood poolside and slowly tucked her short blond hair into her swim cap, accentuating her delicate features before hiding her large dark eyes behind her goggles. She was well aware of the admiring glances—from both sexes—in and around the pool, and she was lapping it up.

She dived gracefully into the welcoming water and swam for the better part of an hour before climbing out and walking slowly back to the change rooms. She took her time getting changed, chatting with a couple of her swimming buddies before reluctantly heading home at about quarter past seven.

Jessica's home was only a block away from the Albert Park sports complex and she arrived sooner than she would have liked—she always did. She opened the back door and walked into the kitchen, groaning inwardly when she noticed the empty beer cans scattered over the dirty bench top. The TV was blaring in the living room and she could hear her dad yelling at his footy team—they were losing. Moving quickly Jessica walked past the living room, hoping to make it to the sanctuary of her bedroom. She didn't.

'S'that you Jessie?'

'Yeah Dad.'

'Where you been?'

'It's Sunday Dad; I've been to the pool,' she answered quietly.

'I know what freakin' day it is girl!' He belched loudly. 'What're you doing sneaking in? You been smoking shit?'

'NO Dad, you know I don't do that.'

'That's what your brother said before he OD'd, come 'ere, let me smell you.'

'Dad please, I don't smoke. I'm just going to my room alright?'

'I said come here!'

Jessica's dad was a drunk not to be ignored. Slowly she walked into the room, stopping next to his beer stained armchair.

'Bend over, I can't smell you from up there, you're a bloody bean stalk. C'mon, bend over, breathe on me.'

'Dad, don't make me do this, it's embarrassing,' she pleaded.

Jessica's dad was a big man, but could move very fast when he wanted; he reached up quickly, grabbed her by her shirt front and pulled her down towards him. Instinctively she reached out a hand to steady herself and knocked over his half empty can. He released her quickly in an attempt to save his beer; sadly he wasn't quick enough for that. He got out of his chair, bellowing. 'Look what you did you *stupid* bitch,' and swung a big meaty fist at her. It connected high on her cheek, sending her reeling into the wall.

Jessica knew from experience that if she cried or yelled at him he would come at her again. One day she would find out what would happen if she fought back, but for now she knew how to calm him.

'Let me clean it up Dad and I'll bring you a fresh one.'

Jessica could see her Dad visibly relax as he said: 'That's my girl,' and sat back down to watch the game.

Monday morning Jessica received the usual pitying glances from her fellow students, but they knew better than to ask any questions, she had inherited her dad's quick temper. She had also, as usual, been called into the Headmaster's office where she was asked the usual questions and had given the standard answers, 'I slipped in the shower. Nothing to worry about, nope, it's all good. Is that all, I'm late for class?'

Rosie wasn't as subtle as the Headmaster and when she saw the angry bruise on Jessica's cheek she walked straight over to her, took Jessica's chin in her hand and turned her face to get a better look. 'You should report him you know.'

'Back off Rosie.'

'You could leave.'

'And go where, foster care? That's my only choice. No, I don't think so; in this case I'm a true believer of the devil you know. Besides, nine more months and I'll be eighteen and gone for good.'

'You know you can always come to my place if you need some space from him.'

'Yeah I know...thanks.' She grinned, 'Hey Rosie, I didn't realise you thought of me that way.'

'Don't flatter yourself, you're far too pale and skinny for my taste, not to mention the fact that you're missing a few parts.'

The girls walked into the classroom side-by-side, polar opposites, yet drawn together by trauma, and their less than pleasant home lives.

The end of the day brought them back to Mr Flynn's Social Sciences class which was abuzz with anticipation. The individual groups had kept their chosen topics secret, and now was the time to reveal all.

One by one, a representative for each group stood up and announced their topic. The subjects ranged from the truly informative to the truly bizarre, and to everyone's amusement, one group was going to prove once and for all, that Mrs Abernathy was actually an alien.

'I knew we should have gone with that one.' Cooper whispered to the others as he stood up to announce their topic. 'Well, we seriously considered many interesting topics...'

Rosie coughed to hide a laugh.

'...but after careful consideration of each topic, the potential for research, investigation, and...'

Rosie leaned over and whispered to Vanda, 'I told you he's good.'

Many minutes later Cooper closed with, '...so our chosen topic is vampires, and we intend to prove beyond a doubt, that they do *not* exist.'

Mr Flynn smiled.

'Thank you Mr Miller and I must say if your written report is as verbose as your *brief* intro, I'd better put aside a month to read it.'

The class laughed as Cooper sat and Jessica said. 'At least we know who's going to do our presentation.'

Rosie, Cooper, Vanda, Jessica and Eli had been staring at each other over the table for what seemed like hours, Rosie broke the silence.

‘Okay Jess, this was your bright idea. Where do we start?’

‘I guess we’d better start gathering information.’

‘And where do you suggest we go to research vampires?’

‘I was kinda relying on you for that one.’ Jessica looked at Rosie. ‘I mean, you are our resident expert.’

‘You know just because I’m goth it doesn’t mean I know jack shit about vampires.’

‘I know, but you do know where we can look, right? You can point us to the best websites, blogs and mags; you can can’t you?’

Rosie hesitated before answering, ‘Yeah, that I can do.’

‘So where do we begin?’

Half an hour, and another argumentative discussion later, Rosie and her friends had their starting point. She, Jessica and Cooper would hit the internet, Vanda volunteered to check out the library, *anything to be alone* thought Rosie, and Eli opted to search the tabloids, hoping to find stories of “real vampire sightings”.

Rosie didn’t miss the fact that he had the smallest work load but let it slide, they were off and running and feeling confident.

Three weeks later, and apart from being blown away by the vast amount of information, including the large number of nut jobs out there who actually believed in vampires, they were no farther forward.

'All we've got so far is hearsay. We need proof. Guys, we need to go deeper...'

Rosie was really sinking her teeth into the topic, '...and I know where we can go.

There's just one thing.'

'What's that?' Cooper asked.

'If we agree to do this we'll need fake ID's.'

'Why? Where do you want to go?'

Rosie could sense Jessica's interest as easily as she could sense everyone else's reserve.

'There's this night club that I've heard of and its, well... it's where the vampires hang out.'

'You've got to be kidding me!' Eli couldn't believe what he was hearing.

'Yes of course I am. But listen, I've heard that there are a lot of goths who go there who believe in, and even want to become, vampires. If we can talk to some of them...'

Jessica cut her off.

'Then we can prove that they don't exist. That vampires are only a bunch of crazy goth wannabes,' she looked apologetically at Rosie. 'No offence.'

Eli was confused. 'Wanna-whats?'

Rosie said, 'You know Jess, not all goths believe in vampires,' then turned to Eli. 'Haven't you done *any* research? A wannabe is someone who wants to be a vampire.' She took a breath. 'But getting back on track, I know it sounds crazy but we could get a lot of info. We can talk to the crazies and build the project around their delusions and desires to become immortal and feed off humanity.'

Eli asked. 'So you *really* don't believe in vampires then?'

Rosie hesitated; she didn't believe in vampires, but her ever increasing nightmares were hauntingly real.

Jessica jumped into the silence. 'Of course she doesn't believe numb-nuts and don't worry, you don't have to go to the club if you're scared. I don't think you'd get in anyway, not with that baby face of yours.'

'Don't call me numb-nuts, and I'm not scared. I'll go.'

'This has to be the stupidest idea I've heard so far,' Vanda said. 'I mean, have you thought about what will happen when you get caught? The police will be called, and your parents. Oh, and there is one more thing, I don't know about you guys but I don't have a fake ID and I don't have a clue where to go to get one.'

'If, Vanda; if we get caught. Look, I know it's a bit risky, so how about this?' Rosie looked at the others one by one. 'If you don't want to come that's okay, don't come. But if any of you really want to sink your teeth into some really gritty research, let's do it. Who's in?'

'Haven't you forgotten something?'

'What Vanda?' Rosie was getting annoyed at Vanda's stone-walling.

'Fake ID's.'

Rosie looked at Cooper. 'What do you say Coop, can you set us up with some ID's?'

'Yeah I can do it.'

'Good, then it's settled. Now, who wants to come?'

Vanda was adamant; displaying what could only be described as disgust at the thought of going to the club. Eli also chose not to go, voicing some lame excuse.

That left Rosie, Jessica and Cooper who were keen to do some undercover work that coming Friday.

Rosie had to convince Jessica and Cooper to turn goth for the night, but it turned out to be easier than she thought. With one simple argument she had won them over.

‘Look at it this way guys, the heavy make-up will hide your true age and your identity so there’s less chance of you being caught, and you can’t wear the make-up without the clothes right? I mean, you don’t want to look stupid do you?’

Come Friday evening they all had their cover stories set, they were having a sleep-over at Jessica’s, and would have free rein on their activities until late the following morning.

‘What have you told your dad?’ Rosie asked Jessica.

‘Nothing; he’ll be off with his mates on a bender till late. He’ll crawl home around one, pass out and won’t move until lunchtime.’

‘You sure?’

‘Yeah, if nothing else the old man’s predictable. Now, did you clear everything with your oldies?’

The others nodded, it was time to begin.

Rosie went to work on Cooper and Jessica, skilfully changing their appearances. When she was done she stood back and declared. ‘You two...are my greatest works

of art.' Then with a flourish equal to any assistant of the great Houdini, she removed the sheet from the full length mirror and was rewarded with horrified gasps from her victims.

Cooper and Jessica looked at the images staring back at them from the mirror, not only did they not recognise their own reflections; they felt a strong urge to run away from them.

'Oh My God! I'm the sort of person that I'd cross the road to avoid.' Jessica could not believe what she was seeing.

Cooper remained speechless while Jessica continued to examine her reflection. Her dark eyes were almost invisible among the mass of black eye make-up, her blackened lips seemed to jump from her pale face in shock, and her normally textured, short blond hair had been oiled and combed back from her face. Then there were the clothes.

She was wearing a tight fitting, black, square necked bodice with long sleeves widening at the wrists, and had been squeezed into a pair of black trousers, made out of a material that resembled a black plastic rubbish bag. The ensemble was completed by a pair of knee-high stiletto-heeled, black boots and a heavy crucifix around her neck.

Cooper still hadn't said a word but was staring intently at his reflection. He usually wore his shoulder-length brown hair just as it fell; it always had that *I've just gotten out of bed* look. Now however, it had been plastered with product and was spiking out in several directions like some kind of malformed octopus in rigor. He had heavy dark eye shadow on his lids and thick liner under his grey eyes. Much to Rosie's delight he had even agreed to wear lipstick. She'd chosen a nice shade of deep purple for him. He wore a tight fitting black T-shirt with the word *death* scrawled

across his chest in blood red. Combined with his black jeans, a studded belt and heavy black boots; there was no mistaking him as a goth. His outfit was finished off with a wide studded collar around his neck and matching studded bands for his wrists.

As they waited for Rosie to get ready, Jessica leaned over to Cooper and whispered, 'You know, you do look kinda cute like this,' and blew him a kiss.

'Yeah, well you look like...the Wicked Witch of the West.'

'Ouch!' Jessica hammed up a hurt look which would have earned her an Emmy on any TV soap, then added, 'But really Coop... is that the best you can do?'

'Matter of fact it is. I think I'm in shock.'

As they laughed away their discomfort they began to come to terms with their new looks, turning this way and that in front of the mirror in a mixture of horror and admiration. Whatever they thought about their new goth personas, there was no doubt that Rosie had done an excellent job.

Rosie wore a knee-length black dress fitted at the waist with a full-bodied skirt and a blood red crucifix stitched into the fabric on the front. This stretched from the bodice to three quarters of the way down the skirt. Black tights led down to a pair of chunky lace-up boots which awarded her an extra twelve and a half centimetres in height. She had teased her hair until her curls resembled an explosion of flames surrounding her heavily made-up face.

Jessica noticed Cooper staring at Rosie's chest and she nudged him in the ribs, but it was too late, Rosie had seen his gaze too.

'See anything you like?' she asked.

'What? No. I wasn't looking at your..., I mean, I was, but not your... Bollocks. Look, I was just admiring your ink Rosie, honest.'

‘Yeah I know Coop; I’m just messing with you. It’s pretty cool huh? This is the first one I got and still my favourite.’

She smiled at Cooper as he continued to admire her tattoo; a long-stemmed, blood-red rose, the bud just opening. It was a beautiful and delicate work of art. When Cooper had finished admiring it Rosie asked, ‘So fellow goths, you ready for a good time?’

Apparently they were.

They left Jessica’s place on schedule, and by quarter to twelve they were standing in a queue of eager party-goers waiting to get into Club Tepes. Cooper turned to Rosie and asked. ‘What kind of a name is Club *Tepes*, anyway? Sounds like some kind of American Indian tent.’

‘Tseh-pesh,’ Rosie pronounced it correctly for Cooper’s benefit.

‘What?’

‘It’s pronounced Tseh-pesh. Give Cooper a brief history lesson Jess.’

‘No worries. A lot of my research has been focused on the origin of vampires; now we all know who the original vamp was, right Coop...?’

‘Yeah of course, *Count Dracula Ha Ha Ha.*’

‘Okay, and lose the accent would you, you’re no Vincent Price.’

‘Who?’

‘You’re kidding me right?’ She let it slide. ‘So, some people believe Dracula was actually based on a real person. A really nasty dude called Vlad Tepes, also known as Vlad Dracul, Vlad the Dragon or my personal favourite, Vlad the Imapler. Vlad

was born in Transylvania in 1431 and fought to become the Crown Prince of Wallachia, somewhere in Southern Romania. After he succeeded, he spent most of his life fighting to either keep or regain his throne.

‘Now, in between all of this fighting he had a really bizarre hobby. He liked to impale people. The rich, the poor; men, women, children; it didn’t matter; it seems he was an equal opportunities kind of guy.

‘I won’t go into the details, but he was a bit inventive with his wooden stakes, and his victims were alive for the impaling, for a while anyhow.

‘Then in 1462 he was captured by the Turks and imprisoned for about 12 years, and to entertain himself, he impaled mice.’

‘What happened to him, I mean, did he get out or die inside?’ Cooper was intrigued.

‘He got out in about 1474 and joined forces with the Transylvanians to get Wallachia back...again. He was killed in battle a couple of years later, some say by one of his own men.

‘So when Bram Stoker wrote his novel, Dracula in 1897, some historians couldn’t ignore the similarities to our mate Vlad. Hold in mind the bloodshed, the wooden stakes, the similarity of the name and then add a bit of artistic licence, and that led them to believe that Count Dracula was based on Vlad Dracul.

‘All I can say is, that if that is correct, then good old Bram immortalised one sick SOB.’

Jessica paused for breath feeling quite proud of her effort; she normally sucked at history.

Then Cooper spoiled her moment. ‘You know, I only wanted to know about the name of the club.’

Jessica punched him on the arm and Rosie laughed. 'You did go on a bit you know.'

'Yeah I know, but it sure killed time, and look, we're next in line to go in.'

They walked through a short, dark hallway towards a heavy timber door. It was engraved with what looked like ancient hieroglyphs of some kind. As they got closer, the door opened automatically and they stopped dead in their tracks. The noise and flashing laser lights attacked their senses, leaving them standing like stunned rabbits fixated on the headlights in front of them. Rosie placed a hand on her friends' backs and pushed firmly.

It took them several minutes to come to terms with the bombardment to their senses enough that they could hear themselves think. Hearing what was being said to them was another matter entirely.

'My God! Would you just look at this place, it's right out of one of those vampire movies.'

The girls couldn't hear what Cooper had said but followed his gaze upwards. As the laser lights flashed around above them they caught glimpses of cages which were hanging from the ceiling. Metres and metres of black and red translucent material hung in tatters around and between the suspended cages in a bizarre mimicry of torn flesh and blood.

Inside the cages they could see people, some dressed in flowing black gowns or tightly fitted clothes. Others were barely dressed at all, and like some macabre parody of the 1960s Go-Go dancers, they were all swaying to the music.

On the ground it wasn't much better; they were surrounded by a mass of goth, emo and vampire wannabes. A few were wearing relatively normal clothing, while most, like themselves, were fully goth, and then there were *those* guys.

Standing to the left of another big engraved timber door were three young men, and two women. All were elegant in their posture and immaculate in their dress.

They must be the Club's owners, thought Rosie before yelling to the others. 'This isn't going to work.'

'What?' Cooper asked.

'What'd she say?' asked Jessica.

'I said; this isn't going to work,' Rosie continued to yell. 'We won't be able to talk to anyone.'

Jessica nodded. 'So what do we do now?'

'Just keep an eye out for a crazy goth pretending to be a vampire, then see if you can get their mobile number so we can call later.'

Jessica laughed as she looked around at the masses of black and purple bodies surrounding them.

'You're messing with me, right?' she yelled. 'They all look crazy to me; and you want us to hit on a few to get their phone numbers? Have you lost your freaking mind?'

'What did she say?' Cooper asked Rosie.

'I think she said this is going to be fun.'

Cooper didn't look convinced but shrugged and said. 'Okay, let's go get a drink first.'

The girls moved towards the bar looking back to make sure that Cooper was following, they needn't have worried, he was close on their heels. He didn't like the way some of the goth girls were ogling him.

When they got to the bar Jessica ordered three glasses of red wine and handed over the money. They spied a small opening away from the bar and managed to squeeze into it with some relief.

Jessica caught Rosie's attention. 'Hey Rosie.'

'What?'

'You been here before?'

'No, always wanted to but couldn't find anyone dumb enough to come with me.'

'What?'

Rosie smiled sweetly but didn't repeat what she had said, instead she asked.

'How's the wine Coop?'

'It sucks, pardon the pun.' Getting closer to the girls so they could hear, he yelled, 'You guys got any idea why Vanda was so against us coming here?'

'No. When I asked her about it she got all weird with me; to keep a long story short, she said she'd have to be dead before she came to a place like this and even then she'd think twice about it.'

Rosie took a sip of her wine, all this shouting was making her thirsty.

Cooper said. 'Maybe she's a vampire and she's scared she'd be discovered in her natural habitat.'

Rosie choked on her wine then said. 'Did I say you were smart Coop? Jeeze, how could I have been so wrong?'

They had been in the club for a couple of hours and even though they were not getting what they came for, they were definitely having fun. With a couple of red wines under their belts these unseasoned drinkers were really getting into the mood.

Rosie and Jessica had been on the dance floor with a variety of partners, while Cooper found himself the centre of attention from his own goth fan club.

Ready for a rest, Rosie left Jessica on the dance floor and headed back to the bar, this time to buy some bottled water. Over the noise Rosie heard a silken voice behind her.

‘Hello.’

She turned around and found herself looking into the most beautiful indigo eyes she had ever seen. Usually shy with strangers, Rosie was surprised to feel an instant connection with the boy, no, the man, standing in front of her.

‘Hi,’ Rosie returned the greeting.

‘I see you’re on the hard stuff.’

‘What?’

‘Your drink, you’re on the hard stuff.’ The stranger pointed to the bottle of water that the bar tender had put down in front of her.

‘Oh yeah, I’m just hot and thirsty.’

‘I can tell.’ He reached out to gently wipe away a bead of sweat from her cheek.

Rosie felt herself blush, and a shiver ran through her body at his touch. She looked for Jessica and saw her being pulled back onto the dance floor. A soft voice close to her ear made her jump.

‘What’s your name?’ he asked. ‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.’

‘You didn’t,’ she lied. ‘My name’s Rosie.’

He laughed, then seeing her hurt look he explained, ‘Rosie isn’t a typical goth name.’

‘Yeah, I get that a lot.’

‘Who are you here with?’

'I'm here with some friends. What about you?'

'I'm here with you.'

Totally out of character, Rosie blushed again.

'I couldn't help but overhear that you're here to do some sort of research.' Rosie found it hard to believe he could overhear anything in this place, and before she could stop herself she said, 'Yeah it's just some dumb school project,' she shook her head. 'Ahh bollocks.'

'*School* project? You've either had to redo you last year a few times or you are here under false pretences. Which is it?'

'You're not a cop are you?'

Again the silken laugh. 'No, I'm not a cop, and don't worry your secret's safe with me. What about your friends, are they underage too?'

She nodded.

'So how how'd you get in?'

'Fake ID's.' She held it out for him to see, he laughed out loud as he read it.

'Medea Black, aged 23. Occupation, blood nurse!'

'Yeah well, a girl's gotta fit in you know.'

'Right, listen Rosie, do you want to go somewhere quiet and talk?'

She knew she should say no.

The stranger continued, 'I'll be on my best behaviour, I promise.'

She knew she shouldn't go with him, but she really, really wanted to. He said nothing more to convince her, but his eyes were reeling her in. Rosie could feel her resolve weaken; he seemed to sense this and went in for the kill.

'You *know* you can trust me Rosie, and we'll just talk...I give you my word.'

‘Do I know you?’ Rosie searched his face for a clue. ‘I mean, I feel as though we’ve met before.’

He just smiled at her and said, ‘Are you coming?’ before turning to walk away.

Rosie looked for Jessica but she was lost among the crowd, and before Rosie realised what she was doing, she began to follow the man as though pulled by an invisible cord. By the time she reached the club doors she had convinced herself that she could trust him; but just in case she thought, *I’ll stay close to the doors, in sight of the bouncers. They’ll come if I scream.*

Cooper was starting to revel in the attention he was getting from the girls; they were plying him with drinks, and just as he could feel his inhibitions melt, he could also feel his mental capacity leaking away. Part of him knew that this was not a good thing, but the other part didn’t care.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned his drunken smile towards the woman who owned it.

‘Wow,’ he slurred. ‘Heaven must be missing an angel tonight.’ He cringed inside. *I really didn’t say that out loud did I?*

The woman simply smiled. ‘Come with me, and I’ll show you something better than heaven.’

His fan club wasn’t going to let him go that easily, after all, they’d been buying his drinks all night. ‘Back off bitch, we saw him first.’

The woman looked at Cooper’s little fan club one by one with an intensity that Cooper missed but the others did not.

They mumbled. 'No, no that's ok, we're going now anyway.' They all scurried away except one stubborn young man.

'C'mon Sean, let's go,' his friends urged.

Sean shook his head and took a step away from his friends toward the woman and declared, 'I want to come too.'

She looked at the drunken youth for a second, shrugged and answered, 'If you insist.'

Cooper didn't resist as he was spun around and led across the crowded dance floor, seemingly unaware of the dancers, who parted like the Red Sea as they passed. Sean on the other hand had to hurry to keep up, so as not to be swallowed by the crowd as it closed behind Cooper and the woman.

Jessica was having a great time, she was dancing with everyone and anyone; male, female, not quite sure—it didn't matter. All she knew was that she was having fun and getting a great work out at the same time.

She didn't like the music, but if she listened hard enough she could discern a beat and use that to dance to. Not that any form of dancing skill seemed necessary, you could fling yourself around, or stand still and sway, it didn't really matter.

She caught sight of Cooper as he followed a ghostly woman across the dance floor, past the club owners and through the door they had been standing next to.

Now where's that fool going?

She knew his "fan club" had been keeping him topped up with drinks, and she had watched him getting drunker as the night went on. She kept telling herself that she

was not his keeper and that he knew what he was doing. But the protective streak that ran through her was beginning to wish she had played the part of a nagging friend and tried to stop him drinking so much. *That boy is crazy drunk*; she finished her thought with a resigned sigh. *I'd better go get him.*

Jessica started to make her way towards the door Cooper had been led through when she caught sight of Rosie heading towards the main door. *Where the hell's she going?* Jessica didn't think Rosie was the kind of girl to go off for a good time with anyone, but she had had a couple of wines too, so God knew what she was capable of. *Well at least Cooper's still inside; surely he can't get into too much trouble.* Jessica made her decision. *I'll find Rosie and bring her back in, then go and get Coop.*

As Cooper and Sean passed through the door, it swung closed behind them, blocking out all of the sound they had become accustomed to. They were led down a dark hallway and short flight of stairs, then through another door where they were ushered into the centre of a dimly lit room.

The alcohol and the sudden silence left them disoriented and confused, and Cooper felt as though the room was slowly turning, struggling to keep his balance he swore off alcohol for the rest of his life. Cooper couldn't see much in the dimly lit room but he could sense other people in the shadows.

'Where are we? I can't see much,' Sean mumbled.

'You don't need to see much; perhaps it's better if you don't.' The female voice was both comforting and terrifying.

‘No,’ said Sean. ‘I want to see where I am, turn the lights up.’

‘Again, if you insist.’

The tone of her voice made Cooper wish that she wouldn’t, it would be harder to slip away if the room was better lit, and even in his drunken state he was getting the feeling that they might want to slip away quite soon.

As the room became more illuminated Cooper and Sean could see that it was circular, very gothic in its décor, and they were indeed moving. They were standing on a circular dais in the centre of the room which was rotating slowly. On the walls were paintings of horrific ancient war scenes and as they turned, a new scene, each more gruesome than the last, came into view.

Placed around the perimeter of the room were four beautifully engraved doors, including the one they had just walked through, though which one that was, Cooper could only guess. Positioned between each pair of doors were three heavy antique armchairs, twelve in total. More than half of these chairs had occupants, and they all looked very pleased to see the boys.

Rosie and the stranger had made themselves comfortable in a well-lit bus shelter opposite the club, and had been chatting away for about five minutes. At least, she had been. Talking about her friends, their project, and how they came to be in the club, but he had hardly said a word. Well, that was going to change.

‘Okay I’ve talked enough,’ said Rosie. ‘It’s your turn now. You brought me out here to talk but you’ve said nothing, I don’t even know your name.’

‘Actually you do, you just don’t remember.’

‘But we haven’t met before...have we?’

‘We have, but it was a long time ago.’

‘I’m sorry, I really don’t remember.’

‘That’s okay, you will. In the meantime let me reintroduce myself...’ he stood up, straightened his coat and threw his scarf over his shoulder with a flourish. ‘My name is Sorin, and it is my pleasure to see you again.’ He reached out and took her hand in his, lifting it up to his lips.

Rosie’s heart fluttered in her chest but the mood was quickly broken when two drunks, who were helped out of the club by a couple of bouncers, began screaming obscenities at each other, keen to take their fight to the next level.

‘Keep it clean boys or it’s over,’ one of the bouncers told them.

The two men lunged at each other, fists flailing and feet kicking. It was a messy and uncoordinated fight of the drunken kind, but it only took a couple of minutes for one of the men to gain the upper hand and it looked as though it was going to be over soon.

In the safety of the bus shelter Rosie and Sorin watched the fight unfold until one of the men pulled a knife from his boot. Rosie continued to watch as the bouncers moved in to break it up, but Sorin had been distracted by a blur of motion through the club's doors.

It couldn't be, he thought. No...I must have imagined it.

‘Well this is all very nice, but I think we should be going now, right Sean?’

‘Why? This is awesome.’

As Cooper looked at the people sitting in anticipation around the room, he couldn’t help but wonder at Sean’s stupidity. Cooper didn’t know what was going on but his instincts were screaming at him to get out, and as adrenaline pumped through his body, he began to feel more clarity of mind than he had had over the past couple of hours. ‘Look, I don’t know what’s going on here and, well, thanks for the little tour, but I’m going to go back to the club to find my friends. Okay?’

‘Oh, I like him.’ The voice came from one of the occupants of the chairs; it was clear, cold and carefully enunciated and it filled Cooper with terror.

‘Yes, I thought that we could keep him. The other one, Sean,’ she said his name with distaste. ‘You can have now.’

Cooper recognised that as the voice of the woman they had followed. ‘What do you mean, keep? Listen nobody is *keeping* or *having* anyone. Sean come on, we’re leaving.’

‘No way man, I want to see what’s going on.’

‘Well you’re on your own; I’m out of here.’ Cooper had no idea which door would lead him back into the club but he was going to find out. He stepped off the dais and headed for the closest door, four of the chairs’ occupants stood as if to stop him, but another held out a hand to stay them.

‘Let him go.’

Cooper didn’t look back to see if Sean was following so he was unaware that Sean was being led through another door by an eager couple, all three were smiling...for now.

Cooper reached the door, pulled it open and froze; body and soul. He felt the cold hand of terror caress his heart while his mind struggled to comprehend what he was seeing. Mere metres away were two people who appeared to be biting and sucking the blood from a motionless body. They looked up at Cooper, their bloodied fangs visible as they hissed their anger at the disturbance, then one of them smiled and said, 'Look Hugo—dessert!'

'Cooper!'

The sound of his name knocked him out of his stupor; he turned and tried to run towards the familiar voice only to find his way blocked. Then, in a a blur of motion she leaped over the vampires blocking his path, to land next to him.

'Run Coop,' was all she said.

'Vanda?'

'RUN!'

The vampires had backed off a little at Vanda's entrance and this created an opening, Cooper ran for all he was worth.

Vanda looked around the room almost casually before announcing, 'Nice little rat nest you have here!'

The vampires hissed, exposing their fangs as they began to close in on her. *Hurry Cooper, please!* She looked over her shoulder and saw that he had made it to the hallway. *Time to go.* She prepared to run but was stopped by one of the males, who had moved to block her exit.

'What are *you* doing here bitch? You're a little out of your territory aren't you?'

'Well, I'm just passing by, so I'll be on my way now.'

'Oh, I don't think so. Now that you're here why don't we have a little fun?'

'The only fun I have with your kind is when I watch one of you die.'

‘Well considering the odds here tonight, I really don’t think that you are going to be having any fun tonight. We, on the other hand...now we could really have some fun.’

The vampires closed in from every side, like a noose tightening around her neck. Vanda knew that there were too many of them, she turned like a cornered animal looking for a way out. There was none. She could feel her hair bristle on the nape of her neck and her lips turned up in a snarl as the vampires continued to close the distance.

For a moment she hung in the balance, at least she knew that she wouldn’t go down without a fight. Then from out of the haze she heard a familiar voice, pulling her back from the edge.

‘Come on everyone, they’re in here!’

Vanda turned toward Cooper's voice in time to see him come barrelling back into the room, followed by a crowd of excited goths, yelling, ‘Where are they?’ And,

‘I knew there were vampires here.’ And,

‘I want to see them feed.’

The room was suddenly filled with drunken goths all hoping to catch a glimpse of a real vampire. In the confusion that followed, Vanda and Cooper bolted down the hallway and out of the club.

Cooper was the first outside; he quickly saw the others at the bus shelter and headed straight to them. Vanda followed soon after, unseen by her friends who were focussed on Cooper. Quickly, before she was noticed, she turned left and continued to run, hoping to lead the vampires away from her friends.

Sorin, already on his feet, took a defensive stance in front of Rosie when he saw two vampires exit the club; they stared briefly over at him and the teenagers, before turning to run down the street. He had no idea what was going on, but he had a

feeling that it would only be a matter of minutes before the streets were crawling with vampires. Sorin had to get the kids, and himself for that matter, to safety.

‘Rosie. Rosie!’

‘What?’

‘I think you and your friends should come with me.’

‘What? Why?’ Rosie was confused, and worried about Cooper who looked traumatised.

‘Your friend looks as though he’s seen some kind of fight, if he has then the bouncers will bring it out onto the street, and that’s going to bring the police.’

‘That’s a good thing though.’

‘Yes it is, except you are all under age.’

Sorin was desperate to get the kids away from the club but they were reluctant to go with him. He took a couple of steps over to Cooper and whispered in his ear.

‘What happened in there?’

Cooper hesitated for a moment then answered so that only Sorin could hear. ‘I was taken to a room. Vampires, I...I saw vampires. I’m not crazy I k...’

‘I know you’re not,’ Sorin cut him off mid-sentence. ‘I know that vampires are real. I also know that if you and your friends want to keep on living then I need *you* to convince *them* to come with me. Do it quickly.’

Cooper turned to the girls. ‘We’re going with him.’ His tone of voice made it clear that it wasn’t a request.

Sorin saw the looks of disbelief on Rosie and Jessica’s faces. He willed Cooper to go on; Cooper didn’t disappoint.

‘I saw something in there that I wish I hadn’t. He believes me.’ He looked at Sorin. ‘I *need* to talk to him about it and *we* need to leave with him now.’

'But we don...'

'I'm not asking. We're going with him now!'

Sorin quickly made his way to his car, followed by three subdued and wary teenagers.

CHAPTER 3 A TOUCH OF VENGEANCE

Sorin studied the teenagers as they sat close together on his sofa. They displayed varied emotions, Cooper was shaken, but clearly needed answers, and who could blame him? Jessica on the other hand was in “fight” not “flight” mode, ready to attack at the slightest hint of trouble.

Then there was Rosie, she seemed conflicted; confused about their forced departure from the club, and fearful for her safety and that of her friends.

As Sorin handed cups of hot chocolate around he felt the tension ease a little and he prompted Cooper to tell his story. The girls would be more likely to believe it if they heard it from him. After a few false starts, Cooper was able to tell them what he had seen in the club, though he failed to mention Vanda’s unconventional entrance.

Sorin watched the reaction from the girls, and their faces made it clear that they thought Cooper had lost his mind or was still drunk...or both.

‘Yes, I know it sounds crazy, but you asked me what I saw, and that *is* what I saw, and *he*...Sorin, believes me.’ He kept talking to fill the awkward silence that had engulfed the room. ‘Look, I could be wrong, they might not have been real vampires, but they *were* sucking blood out of some poor bugger who looked pretty dead to me, so if you have any other ideas...I’d love to hear them.’

‘And you’re sure it was Vanda who...’ Rosie seemed to have difficulty getting the words out, ‘...who saved you?’

‘What, you think I’m too dumb to recognise her?’ Cooper snapped. ‘And don’t sound so bloody sceptical. Or do you think I’m lying?’

‘No it’s not that Coop, it’s just that...’

Cooper held up his hand. ‘Yeah I know. Sorry about that, I’m just a little spooked is all.’

'I'm not surprised,' Rosie paused then said, 'Well, Vanda must have decided to come to the club, saw you go into that room and followed you.'

'Yeah, that sounds about right,' Cooper seemed reluctant to go into any detail regarding Vanda. 'I'm just pleased she did, and I'm pleased I was able to get her out.'

'I can just imagine the chaos in that room,' said Sorin, grinning.

'Yeah, it was crazy in there.' Cooper sobered up again as he asked, 'What do you think happened to Sean?'

'Nothing good I'm sure. If he's lucky, he'll be dead now.'

'What!'

'If he's not, then he'll have been turned.' Sorin paused and waited for the flood of questions. They never came, instead Cooper said quietly:

'No...he's dead. They said that I was a "keeper" and that Sean was "for now." I guess now I know what that means.' He looked at Sorin. 'They were going to turn me into a vampire weren't they?'

'From what you've told me, I'd have to say yes.'

'God,' unconsciously Cooper looked towards the door. 'You don't think they'll come looking for me do you?'

'I'm sure they won't.' Sorin winked at Cooper, 'You're not *that* tasty.'

Cooper missed Sorin's attempt to lighten the mood. Still deadly serious he replied, 'Good, that's good.'

'Whoa, hold on boys. Do you hear yourselves? Rosie, aren't you going to say anything?' Jessica looked at Rosie in growing disbelief as it became obvious she was getting caught up in this ridiculously unbelievable story. 'Oh come on, vampires... *really?*'

‘I’m sorry Jess, but I believe Coop, I really don’t think this is something he’d lie about. Do you?’

‘Well no, but he might be mistaken. I mean he was pretty drunk.’

‘What about Sorin then? He believes Coop.’

‘Are you for real?’ Jessica was incredulous. ‘He’s just trying to make us look like fools—telling us scary stories. Anyway, you only just met this guy an hour ago, what on earth makes you think you can trust him?’

‘Honestly, I don’t know, but I do.’

Jessica looked at Sorin and demanded, ‘Who are you anyway; some kind of vampire slayer out to protect the innocent? Have you got your silver bullets and garlic hidden in your sock drawer, or do you keep a super sharp sword under your mattress?’

‘Jess calm down.’

‘I won’t calm down Coop; I’m in a room with a vampire slayer and a main meal.’

‘Dessert.’

‘What?’

‘I was almost dessert. They’d already had their main meal.’

Jessica took a deep breath then looked at Cooper. ‘You’re taking this ‘eye candy’ thing a bit far, don’t you think?’ before turning back to Sorin. ‘Seriously though, who are you?’

‘Well, I’m not a vampire slayer, if that helps.’

Jessica shook her head and said, ‘No...strangely enough, it doesn’t.’

‘What I can tell you is this: I’ve been aware that vampires exist for a long time, and during that time I’ve learnt a lot about them. Where they live, how they move around and where they like to feed, amongst other things.’

'But if you don't hunt them, what do you do with all of that info?' Jessica was still sceptical.

'Mostly I use it to stay out of their way,' he looked at Rosie as he said. 'Unless I have a good reason to interact with them, I don't.'

'That's not very heroic,' Jessica said.

'No it's not. It is however, very smart; and it's precisely what you should do.' Sorin looked out of the heavily tinted window. It was still dark. 'Come on, let me drive you home, you lot need some sleep; we can talk about this later.'

Once out of the club, Vanda ran for all she was worth through the dimly lit back streets. She was quick, but the vampires were keeping pace and she was having trouble losing them. Unfortunately, the next turn she took led her and her pursuers to a dead end. She stopped and turned, back against the wall.

'No place to hide, no place to run, what are you going to do?' The vampires taunted Vanda while keeping a safe distance.

'What makes you think I want to run, huh?' Vanda tilted her head to one side and smiled.

Hissing their response, the vampires exposed their fangs and moved towards Vanda. She was ready for them.

One by one her bones began to elongate, break apart and then reform underneath her undulating skin, a skin which seemed to be fighting to contain the bones within. As her bones mutated, she rapidly developed a thick black coat which covered her sleek muscular frame.

The vampires had foolishly waited for the change to begin, hoping to attack when she was most vulnerable, but vulnerable was not a word one would use to describe Vanda, or her wolf, whatever the stage of her transformation. To the vampires it seemed that the Lycan in front of them was struggling within her still transforming skin, stretching and writhing in apparent agony, the perfect opportunity to attack—they were wrong.

Vanda did not transform into a particularly big wolf, she didn't need to; she had speed, agility and intelligence on her side. One of the vampires, a male, leapt high attacking Vanda from above, she lunged up from the ground in a single fluid motion to meet him mid-air, and with the full force of her body behind her, collided with him. He was caught off guard and Vanda easily ripped his throat out. She took a second to savour the taste of fresh blood in her mouth then dropped him—dead at her feet.

She turned to the second vampire, a female whose scream turned from anguish to fury as she rushed at Vanda.

Vanda knew from experience that the vampire would take her small stature as a sign of weakness; they all did—so she played on it. Backing off slightly, as if in fear, she let the vampire make her first mistake; underestimating her opponent. The vampire's second mistake came naturally; she let her emotion take control.

Vanda was calm and precise, every lunge planned and perfectly executed. Bite, slash, back-off, and bite again, until the vampire fell, severely injured, unable to continue the fight.

She lay on the ground waiting for the death blow. It didn't come. The lycan stood dominantly over her, and the vampire found herself looking up into fierce amber eyes filled with hate. Pushing away her fear, she let her own eyes mirror the same emotions and demanded.

‘Finish it.’

Vanda’s body tensed as she crouched lower over the prostrate body of the vampire, one paw planted firmly on her chest. She lowered her muzzle to within centimetres of the vampire’s face, tilted her head to one side and growled deep in her throat, her lips pulled back to expose her blood covered fangs. She opened her jaws wide to finish it, then stopped. Prompted by an onslaught of stench, Vanda looked back down the alleyway and watched as it filled with vampires. She pulled back and howled her fury, then bounded away into the night, scaling the wall behind her as though it was level ground.

Using the darkened streets Vanda quickly made her way undetected back home. Silently she crept in through her bedroom window and once inside, changed back to her human form.

After a long hot shower she curled up in bed, pulled the covers tightly around her and hugged them close for warmth. She felt nauseous after being so close to the vampires, she would never get used to their stench, but it was always a pleasure to taste their dark blood.

Vanda had hunted vampires in the past, and they in turn had hunted her, as a result she was well aware of what they were capable of, and over the last couple of centuries she had consciously made the decision to avoid them whenever possible. It seemed that now her time of peace was over.

In the alley-way the injured vampire dragged herself towards the pile of grey dust that had once been Hugo. They had been together for over 800 years, he was her

blood-mate and they were destined to be together forever. Anika reached over and gently caressed the dust, only to watch in dismay as it began to blow away on the gentle breeze. As she let his remains fall through her fingers she let her hatred and anger possess her soul. *That bitch is going to pay.*

She could hear the others coming and knew that soon they would be back in their safe house, all evidence of the fight, and Hugo, gone for ever.

Anika had been severely injured during the fight; she had multiple bites, and deep wounds covering most of her body, and it took her several hours to fully regenerate. She didn't care; she had all the time in the world and she was using that time creatively. She had visualised many ways to dispose of the lycan; all she had to do was to hunt that mangy bitch down and have her revenge for Hugo.

Vigor Tiranul, one of the few remaining Elders, was discussing the appearance of the lycan with one of his most trusted, when Anika entered the room.

'Anika! It is good to see you whole again, how are you feeling?' 'I'm well Grandfather, thank you for your concern.' She nodded a brief acknowledgement to the man sitting to the right of her grandfather. Nathaniel was a tall and sombre vampire, with long dark hair tied at the nape of his neck, and brooding dark eyes. Anika hated him.

She had turned Nathaniel herself nearly 300 years ago, and it was a decision she regretted daily. During his time with her family, Nathaniel had ingratiated himself with her grandfather and had earned his trust by doing all the dirty jobs that Vigor threw at him.

‘Come, sit with us,’ Vigor indicated the chair opposite his own. ‘I am sure you will enjoy our conversation.’

‘Thank you, what are you talking about?’

‘Your lycan.’

‘Yes. That does merit discussion. Has anyone been able to locate her yet?’

‘No. But then, no one has been looking.’

‘What?’ Anika was on her feet in disbelief. ‘Why has no one been looking? She killed Hugo, she nearly killed me!’

‘Calm down Anika and sit down. It is likely that the lycan has already fled.’

‘She could be part of a pack; if she is, she wouldn’t leave the area.’

‘True, but you know better than I that if there were more than one of them in our territory, we would have known before now. There may be nothing we can do about her.’

‘No! I have her scent,’ Anika’s thirst for revenge was strong. ‘I can hunt her down and kill her.’

‘Anika. Sit. Let us find out if she is still in our territory and if she is, then we will decide what to do about her.’

‘What’s to decide? We find her, I kill her. It doesn’t get much simpler than that.’

‘She may be of more use to us alive.’ Vigor’s patience, never in abundance, was disappearing fast. ‘Why must you be so short-sighted?’

‘But...she killed Hugo.’

‘Yes, and if we find her, you will have your revenge—eventually.’

‘What do you mean, eventually?’

Ignoring her question Vigor asked, ‘How many female lycans have you seen during your life?’

'I'm not sure, three or four, not many, they are very rare.'

'Precisely!' Vigor slammed his hand on to the arm of the chair. 'So you see the need to keep her alive?' He didn't wait for a reply. 'We know that the females are highly intelligent, and have greater self-awareness, to the point of being able to reason when they are in their wolf form.'

'Then we will organise a group hunt, if that's what's needed. We have no shortage of hunters who would enjoy the challenge.'

'Do not be ridiculous. Imagine what would happen if you declared a free-for-all hunt for this lycan. Do you seriously think you can keep that hidden from the humans? Our vampires would love to be given leave to hunt freely, but once the bloodlust took hold of them, there would be bodies everywhere. We need to keep their feeding calm and orderly if we are to remain hidden.'

'But you disagree with this way of life; you tell me often we should be out there, masters of the world.'

'My personal feelings are not in question here, and I will not go against the decree of the Elders. Our time will come again, but I will not have our existence, such as it is, exposed over a lost love,' he paused to make sure he still had her attention. He did.

'On the other hand, a hunt for this female lycan would be exhilarating.'

Anika was confused. 'But you just said that a hunt is out of the question.'

'A free-for-all... yes, but what about a hunt comprising pure-bloods, a select few from the other Houses. We can control our instincts, more so than the changelings, and what a test of our hunting skills that would be; to track, then capture, a lycan without exposing ourselves to the humans.'

Anika looked at her grandfather and wondered at his sanity. She had known for decades that he had a tendency to let his ego rule his brain; he truly believed that his House, openly known as one of the lesser Houses, should be ranked higher. Was this just another one of his attempts to elevate his standing, or simply a game meant to spice up what he thought of as a mundane life of hiding and secrecy?

She spoke softly, 'Grandfather, why not keep this within our House? We can easily hunt and kill the lycan, we do not need any help from the other houses; besides; she is mine.'

'Anika, I am well aware of your talents and am confident that you and your team are more than capable of killing her, but I say we should turn this situation into an opportunity that would improve the standing of our House.'

Here we go, Anika thought.

'Did you not hear me say track and capture?' Vigor was wearing a maniacal smile. 'I want the lycan alive.'

Anika noted a hint of madness in his eyes.

'Imagine Granddaughter, the power of holding such a creature as our pet; providing of course that our hunting skills prove to be the better. The other Houses would have to concede that our House, the House of Tiranul, is more powerful than that of cel Rau or even Voda.'

'Surely you can't be serious,' Anika had heard enough. 'Lycans are our only true predator and as few as they are, they are still the main cause of our deaths. With respect Grandfather, you of all people should know that. Besides, the other Houses will never let you keep a live lycan; we must hunt her down and kill her.'

‘Do not lecture me girl. I was on this earth long before the first lycan drew its stinking breath, and I am well aware of the destruction they have brought upon us; my son, *your* father was taken from us by lycans.’

Anika remained silent, but let her pain and grief show in her pale blue eyes, hoping this and her apparent submissiveness would be enough to sway him. It was.

Vigor offered her a compromise. ‘I will allow you to have your hunt Anika, but you *will* bring the lycan to me alive. When I am finished with her you can have your revenge. However, if you should fail, I will put my proposal before the Elders, the hunt will be declared and her death will be awarded to the hunter who brings her to me.’

He began to pace the floor talking to himself. ‘Yes, we can use this situation to our advantage, as soon as I have the lycan, I’ll give her to Rema and she will extract all the information we need...’

Anika listened as Vigor rambled on, but she knew that once he had the lycan in his possession, his ego would never allow him to have her killed, she would be much more valuable as a trophy. This was not acceptable.

‘NO! Are you out of your mind? She has to die.’

Snapping back to reality Vigor roared, ‘Enough! Do not forget to whom you are speaking. You cannot put your selfish revenge before the good of our species Anika, and do not think that our relationship will protect you from any stupidity you may be planning.’

Nathanial, who had sat quietly throughout the conversation, placed a calming hand on Vigor’s arm. It was pulled quickly from his grasp but had done its job.

Vigor took a deep breath and looked at his granddaughter, his last living blood relative. ‘Do not think that I do not care for you or your pain. The lycan will die, that I

promise you...but she will die when I have got what I want, what we need. She will die only when I say so. Do you understand?’

Anika hesitated too long before answering.

‘I said DO YOU UNDERSTAND!’

‘Yes. I don’t like it but I understand. It won’t be a problem Grandfather.’

‘I hope not Anika, for your sake.’

Anika tried to defuse his anger. ‘May I make a suggestion?’

‘What is it?’

‘We could use the human to try to locate the lycan.’

‘What human?’

‘Rema brought two males to our feeding rooms in Club Tepes,’

‘Go on.’

‘Well, Hugo and I were about to have a little fun with one of them, when the lycan burst into the room and created an opening for him to escape. *He* then came back for her, I know their names.’

‘Yes, that could be helpful especially if they have bonded. Do you have his scent?’

Reluctantly she shook her head.

‘You know where he lives?’

‘No Grandfather.’ Anika immediately regretted mentioning the boy.

‘So how do you propose to find him? Did my son raise an imbecile?’ Vigor struggled to calm himself.

‘Let us concentrate on the lycan. Nathaniel, I trust that you are up to the task of tracking Anika’s little pet?’

‘If she is still within our territory Vigor, I will find her.’

'Good,' Vigor said. 'At least, in you I can trust. Now, Anika, you look tired, Nathaniel will escort you back to your rooms.'

Anika was incensed at this latest slight from Vigor. Nathaniel pulled the door closed behind them, and placed his hand in the small of Anika's back to guide her. She pulled away from his touch as though stung.

'Anika, I only want to help.'

'I don't need your help.'

'You're not completely healed yet, and you're still upset about Hugo...'

'Upset! He was my blood-mate, upset doesn't come anywhere close to what I'm feeling.'

Foolishly he reached out to her again.

'Don't touch me. Don't ever touch me again.'

'Look Anika, I really am sorry about Hugo, I...'

'Don't you dare speak his name, you slime-covered leech.'

'Don't call me that.'

'Why not, that's all you are. I found you lying in a pool of your own vomit; took pity on you and made you what you are today. But let me tell you, many times have I regretted my decision to do so, and given the chance again, I would drain you to your last drop and leave you for dead,' she drew herself up to her full height. 'You will never be our equal; you will never be more than the filthy leech that I made you!'

The slap across her face rang loud in the hallway. She looked at Nathaniel in shock as she raised her hand to her reddening cheek.

'How dare you?' She pitched her voice low and menacing and was gratified to see Nathaniel blanch. She knew he would expect her to go running to Vigor, to tell him

that Nathaniel had struck her. Instead Anika gathered herself calmly and said, 'If you ever touch me again, I will kill you.'

