

~ The Price I Paid ~

by Mavis Applewater

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A special thank you goes out to my beta reader Mountain Girl.

As always this is for Heather.

October 21st, 2003

I am standing in my studio apartment in New Orleans looking down at a pile of ashes illuminated by the bright sunlight that is flooding in through the French doors that lead out to a tiny balcony. I look down at my hand and find a delicate gold ring engraved with the most intricate carvings and a large ruby. I am puzzled by the events. I know that this is my apartment, I know where I work, and I even know my name. Yet, what is truly bizarre is the only clear memory I have possessed for the past year was a night almost one year ago when I was one of the nameless, faceless masses that lived on the streets of New York City.

I clutch the ring tightly as if it can bring me some answers. I glance at the clock knowing that I need to get ready for work. I find an old shoestring and slip the ring onto it before placing it around my neck. Strange that I know I need to keep it close to me, stranger that I know I should keep it hidden. Yet, not as strange as knowing where I worked and how to get there, and not having any memory of how I went from being homeless to employed and living in a nice little studio in New Orleans.

As I spend my day doing my job, which is simple data entry, I am plagued by the fact that I know how to do my job and the names of my co-workers, but no clear recollection of just how I came to live in this city. My last clear memory was Halloween night one year ago. It was cold in the city that night. When you don't know where you are going to be sleeping the city can turn even colder.

I had been on the streets since I was a teenager. I had run away from home. The dangers I faced on the streets paled in comparison to the hell that was my family. The city streets were harsh and I paid a price for my freedom. That Halloween night I had already endured the back alleys and learned what to do to keep safe. I found an abandoned building that was about to be torn down.

I knew that it would be infested with rats and other vermin, but it was the two-legged vermin that

troubled me the most. I was careful not to make my presence known. A woman out alone at night under the best of circumstances wasn't safe; a lost soul such as myself was a walking billboard for trouble.

I avoided the floors that were already inhabited by the junkies and other lost souls such as myself. The stairwell reeked of urine and despair. I made my way up to the top floor. I was careful as I stepped into an empty room. The floorboards creaked beneath my feet. I held my breath knowing that rats and rapists weren't the only dangers to be found when sleeping in a condemned building.

The air escaped my lungs as the floor crumbled beneath me. I could feel my limbs being torn as I crashed through the old wood and fell into the darkness. The pain was immeasurable, as I smelled my own blood. I looked down only to discover that one of the floorboards had impaled me. My blood seeped from my small body and I knew at that moment I was going to die. I felt a strange sense of relief that my torment was finally over and I could stop fighting the good fight and finally find peace.

I didn't fear death, in truth I had prayed for it many times. The sound of flapping wings hovered above me. The flapping wasn't like a bird, it sounded more leathery almost like a large bat. I chuckled at the absurd notion of a very large bat hovering above me as the shadow of wings covered me. I was still laughing at my thoughts as the wings became a cloak with a pair of piercing blue eyes then darkness encompassed me.

That was my last tangible memory before this morning. Perhaps something traumatic had happened? But what could have been more traumatic than my childhood? My co-workers stop by and tell me I'm looking much better and I finally have some color back in my cheeks. Perhaps I've been sick? Would that explain my loss of memory?

That night I swept up the ashes from my carpet, and stored them in an old coffee tin. I don't know why I've chosen to save them. After I complete the task I begin searching my tiny apartment for some clue as to how my new life came about. I discover that I have a limited number of belongings. Not a surprising discovery since up until a year ago I was reduced to diving into a dumpster just to find something to eat.

Among my belongings are a few simple outfits, a drivers license, my birth certificate, a social security card, a copy of my GED, a business card from my present boss marked with a date and time for an interview, a leather travel bag and a note. I don't know how I came in possession of a Louisiana driver's license, or a copy of my birth certificate much less my social security card. I don't recall buying any of the clothing or the travel bag. I had hoped that the note, which was written on very elegant paper that crinkled when I touched it, would hold some clue.

Samantha,

I've given you what you've asked for. You have your freedom. The gifts I have left should prove helpful. You paid the price and now the rest is up to you.



"What price have I paid?" I wonder out loud as I run my fingers along the elegant script. My fingers burn as I slowly trace the ink. I am more confused than ever. Who was this mysterious K and what did I do to earn a new life?

Over the next few days I continue with my simple life. This new life is truly a gift. My small home might be considered shabby by some, but after literally living in a cardboard box the studio seems like a palace to me. I just wish I could remember who K was and how I got here? The only thing I know for certain is that I must have been sick, since my co-workers keep telling me that I am glowing unlike the anemic look I had possessed a few weeks ago. I wonder if it has anything to do with the strange scar I discovered on the nape my neck? After first I thought the scar might have been from the accident back in New York, but now after examining it carefully I notice that it closely resembles the crest on the ring that I keep around my neck.

"Samantha?" Betty who works in the cubicle behind me breaks me out of my thoughts.

"Yes Betty?" I calmly respond as I quickly tuck the ring back into my shirt.

"I was just going to catch lunch at that new sandwich place down the street want to join me?" She asks in a cheerful manner.

"Okay," I answer quickly thinking that lunch with a friend might help me fill in the gaps of my life. I am eager for another reason, this would be the first time I have ever participated in what most people would consider a mundane activity. I may have shared a meal with a friend during the past year, but since I have no memory of it this is a new experience for me. Betty seems surprised at my response; perhaps I wasn't a very social person.

"Betty you seem surprised that I accepted your lunch invitation?" I begin carefully as we dig into the large sandwiches.

"You never have before," Betty explains with a shrug and a warm smile. "I knew if I kept trying you'd come out of your shell."

"I was afraid of that," I mutter as I tug on my shirt collar in an effort to hide the unusual scar on my neck.

"Don't be afraid kiddo," She laughs misunderstanding my statement. "I can't help myself. My kids are all grown up and I have to butt into someone's life."

"I wish you had gotten through to me earlier," I sigh heavily. "This is going to sound odd but I can't remember the past year of my life. I know my name, where I work, where I live, hell I even know what Jell-O is but I can't remember how I got to New Orleans."

"You're kidding?" She gasps loudly as her large body shakes.

"No," I confess sadly. "How long have I been with the company?"

"Almost four months," Betty readily supplies. "Maybe you should see a doctor. A few weeks ago you weren't looking very good. You were tired, drawn out and pale as a ghost."

"I think you might be right," I agree as we gather up our belongings. I groan as I knock over my cup. As I bend over to pick it up the ring slips from the safe confines of my shirt. A dark haired woman passes by us as I am tucking it back in. She halts her movements when she spies the ring and the mark on my neck. Her mesmerizing hazel eyes widen with fear as she looks at me and then she blinks with surprise as she looks up at the sun.

"It couldn't be," She mutters as she shakes her head in disbelief and goes on her way.

"What was that all about?" I blow out in exasperation.

"Oh don't mind her," Betty dismisses the quirky dark haired woman's actions. "That's just Carlotta."

"Huh?" I say with confusion as we start to walk back towards the office.

"You know Madame Carlotta," Betty informs me. "She has a shop just around the corner from the office."

"Don't tell me tarot cards and voodoo dolls," I snicker at the idea.

"Don't be knocking the mojo ladies," Betty cautions me. "The tourists love that kind of crap. Plus I wouldn't mess with Carlotta she's one of those that are the real deal."

"Don't tell me you buy into that stuff," I scoff at the notion.

"Hey I'm a real Cajun honey and I've seen some stuff that would scare the pants off of Dracula himself," Betty chastises me. "Maybe you should have her do a reading? You never know it might help. But I'd see a doctor first. I'll give you my son's number."

"Your son is a doctor?" I ask as she smiles proudly.

"My oldest," She beams. "The other one, Randy, well let's just say we spent twenty-six thousand dollars a year on tuition so he could drink heavily and chase girls. Now he lives in our basement and makes ink for a living."

"At least he has a job and a loving family," I point out as I feel a pang of remorse for the years I had lost.

"Amen to that," She agrees with me. "Now I want you to promise me that you are going to take

care of yourself."

"I promise," I vow feeling slightly overwhelmed by Betty's generous nature. "Betty could you not mention this to anyone?"

"Don't you worry about a thing child," Betty reassures me and for the first time in years I find myself actually trusting someone.

The following night I went to see Betty's son Fred. After a long series of tests, blood work and x-rays he informed me that I was in very good health. "Your memory loss does concern me," He informs me. "And I'm worried about the fact that you've obviously suffered from malnutrition in recent years."

"I was homeless for a long time," I confess in embarrassment.

"That would explain it," He responds in a gentle tone. "You seem to be fine now, but these things do have a lingering effect. I'm going to prescribe some vitamin supplements."

"What about my memory?" I ask feeling at ease with the young doctor.

"From what I can see it is purely psychological," He gently concludes. "Maybe something happened, like you were mugged? Your memory could come back at anytime or if you want I can refer you to good psychiatrist?"

"That might be a good idea," I agree. "A lot saner than what your mother suggested."

"Why what did she suggest?" He chuckles.

"A trip to Madame Carlotta's parlor," my response earns me a hearty laugh from the young man.

"Off the record," He begins in a hushed tone. "I dated one of her daughters when I was in High School and that old lady really knows what she is doing."

"I bet she kept you from messing with her little girl," I laugh.

"You have no idea," His face pales as he answers. "I'd rather face a shot gun toting dad than that old priestess again."

"Yeah like you'd have to be a mystic to know some teenaged boy wants to get into your daughter's pants," I tease him.

"True," He agrees. "In the meantime keep getting plenty of rest, exercise and keep eating right. Maybe your memory loss has to do with your time on the streets?" He suggests hopefully.

"Thank you Dr. Fuller," I offer as I take the prescription and make my leave. I smile as I leave his office. His advice warms my heart. The things he has instructed me to do seem so basic. A

year ago I wouldn't have been able to follow his instructions. I had no where to sleep, I never knew from one day to the next if I would find anything to eat and the only exercise I got was running from the police or worse.

That night I am standing on my balcony drinking in the sweet scent of magnolia as I twirl the ruby ring that is dangling from my neck between my fingers. I think about everything Dr. Fuller and Betty said to me. My memory loss could be posttraumatic stress syndrome although it is a bit late for it to creep up now. But perhaps finally leading a normal life set it off. Living with my parents for seventeen years was a nightmare. The beatings and verbal abuse were nothing compared to the wretched treatment I received after they discovered that I was gay.

"Do I really want to know what I've forgotten?" I ask the almost full moon as the distant sound of wings flapping in the breeze echo in my memory. When the moon fails to respond I decide to just let go and enjoy my new life.

My resolve lasts only until Saturday night when I once again tear through my meager belongings in search of some answers. I am frustrated when I fail to discover anything new. I clutch the travel bag tightly as my irritation grows and suddenly I feel something. I grope the bag furiously and feel it again. It is the slim out line of something. I open the bag and feel along the inside. I tug at the bottom and smile when it gives way. Sewn inside the bottom is a thin notebook. I open it and discover, much to my surprise, a journal written by my own hand.

I sit down on my bed and begin reading my own story. Nothing could have prepared me for the saga that was about to unfold before me. The story began shortly after my accident.

My name is Samantha Timmons. I am writing down these events to help me understand them. It all started on Halloween night. I fell through the floor of an abandoned building. One of the floorboards had pierced through my body and I knew I was going to die. I welcomed the end of my miserable existence. The idea of no longer having to endure the cold, the hunger and hostile glares from people gave me a strange sense of peace. Then I heard the sound of wings flapping. It was a strange sound, not like a bird, more like the leathery clapping of bat's wings.

The wings unfolded into a cloak and a pair of piercing blue eyes looking into my soul captured me. I was encompassed in darkness. At the time I thought it was death finally come to claim me. I was wrong.

When I awoke it was still evening. I was in an elegant room lying completely naked on a feathery bedspread. There was a fire burning in the fireplace and the windows were completely covered by long red velvet drapes that blocked out the slightest hint of light. I was only aware that it was nighttime because of the sounds of crickets chirping off in the distance. I looked down startled by my nakedness and the lack of a wound on my body. I quickly scanned the room for some clothing and a way to make my escape. The only exit was a large mahogany door and there was no clothing to be found.

"Try this," a sultry voice called out to me. I spun around to find a tall raven haired woman clad from her boots to her top in black leather holding out a black silk robe.

Her lips curled into a smile as her electric blue eyes drifted down to my breasts. I tried to cover my body with my hands. I was embarrassed by the way she was looking at me. Her gaze drifted up to my eyes and my knees buckled as her smoky gaze captivated me. "You don't have to get dressed if you don't wish to," she toyed with me in a rich tone that sent a shiver down my spine.

I snatched the robe from her long fingers and quickly wrapped it around my body. I tore my eyes from her gaze. "How did you get in here?" I stammered as I realized that I was looking at the door and never saw her enter the room. "And for that matter where is here?" I demanded suddenly angered by the situation.

"This is my home," she explained in a casual manner as she lowered herself down onto the bed. She stretched out and leaned up on one elbow watching my every move as I nervously paced about the room. "Samantha?" She beckoned me.

I felt the air escaping my lungs as I turned to her. I almost fell to my knees when her tongue peeked out and she slowly licked her ruby red lips. I forced my eyes to look away from her lips only to spy her fingers caressing the bedding. Her fingers were mesmerizing, the glint of red broke me from my trance. On her ring finger was a gold ring with a very large ruby.

"Samantha?" She repeated her voice once again sending a shock wave through my body. I snapped my eyes shut and stepped away from her. When I felt the door pressing into my back I reached for the doorknob. It turned but the door failed to open. "Why am I here?" My voice shaking as I squeaked out the words.

"I brought you here." Was hissed in my ear. My eyes snapped open and I found her standing directly in front of me. Somehow she had closed the distance between us without my hearing her movements. "You were hurt," she continued as her long fingers caressed my neck. My skin prickled from her touch.

"I'm not hurt now," I said in a voice just above a whisper as I felt her body leaning into my own. Her touch warmed my weary body.

"No you've been healed, bathed and given a very nice room," she said as her hot breath caressed my ear. I whimpered as her tongue traced my ear. "Now it is up to you if you wish to stay," she purred before dipping her tongue into my ear.

My entire body quivered with desire as her hand drifted to the back of my neck. I tried to fight against the passionate urges coursing through my body. "And what is my debt for your kind hospitality?" I stammered already knowing the answer.

"The price I will ask for extending your visit isn't what you think it is," she echoed my thoughts. "Look at me," she instructed me. My heart was beating wildly as I looked up into her eyes. "You

can leave now with the filthy rags I found you in with a simple thank you. Or you can pay the price for enjoying the comforts of my home for a while longer. All I ask in return is that you share your smile with me."

My head fell back as she pressed the length of her body against me. I was lost in an emotional tug of war. She felt so good, and it wouldn't be the first time I had given myself up for a warm meal and a bed to sleep in. I shivered as I felt the robe I was wearing opening and her fingers dancing along my skin. "Giving me the gift of your smile is really a small price to pay," she once again echoed my thoughts as her fingers brushed along the swell of my breasts. "In the past you've paid a much higher price to be given far less than I am offering," she encouraged.

"Damn you!" I barked out as I pushed her away. I wanted her but the harsh truth of her words sickened me.

"Too late," she said as she released a deep throaty laugh.

I looked at her in puzzlement before I noticed the glimmer of a mirror on the opposite wall. My eyes widened in horror as I looked over her shoulder and noticed only my reflection. "Hmm," she sighed as she once again reclined onto the bed. "I don't know why I bother hanging those things," she added as she glanced over at the mirror.

"This can't be happening," I stammered in disbelief as I looked over at the beautiful woman lying across the bed. "Wings. I heard wings. It was a bat . . . A vampire bat?" I suddenly gasped in horror.

"Don't be ridiculous," she laughed. "Vampire bats are a species of bat found in South America. Why would one be flying around New York City?"

"It wasn't a bat," I babbled trying to make some sense out of the situation.

"Yes and no," she sighed seemingly bored with the conversation. "I can take many forms."

"Oh peachy," I finally blurted out as I wondered if I was hallucinating or had just gone completely insane. "I must be insane to think I'm in a mansion being seduced by Dracula's daughter."

"Vlad the Impale was never one of us," she quickly corrected me as she rolled her eyes in disgust. "That guy was just a big psycho."

"Knew him personally did you?" I found myself laughing.

"No," She smiled in response. "He was a bit before my time."

"And just how old are you?" I asked as I sat down onto the bed. For some reason I suddenly found the situation funny. I think that at the time I was convinced that none of it was real and I had just finally gone off the deep end.

"Let's just say I'm older than I look," she responded in a droll tone. "You're not imagining things," she informed me in a gentle tone.

"Of course I am," I answered her with a heavy sigh. "I have to be. If I'm not then I really am having a chat with a vampire."

"Would that be so bad?" She asked me as I, once again, found myself captivated by her piercing gaze. "My name is Khristina Belcourt. I have been alive for over four hundred years; I am not mortal. I was born a creature of the night. I have never walked in the daylight. I am not going to harm you. My only wish is to bask in your smile. As I said before I've never walked in the sunlight. Your body is your own only to be given or taken, as you desire. When I said I wanted to see you smile that is all I meant. If you refuse then you are free to go back to New York."

"I'm not in New York?" I blurted out.

"No," she answered me with a weary sigh. "I will return you where I found you."

"And if I stay you won't hurt me or drink my blood?" I asked as I pondered my unusual situation and just why my hostess seemed so flippant about everything.

"I said I wouldn't hurt you," Khristina corrected me. "I have to eat," she added as her tongue glided over her pearl white teeth revealing the sharp fangs for the first time.

"Oh like that isn't going to kill me or turn me into one of you," I hissed in response.

"You will only die if I drink too much, and you can't become one of us unless we drink from one another at the same time," Khristina informed me once again her flippant tone seeped through.

I gave her a skeptical look and despite her sincere expression I doubted her motives. I would have been a fool not to. "Right and all I have to do is smile and we can just cuddle," I scoffed at her suggestion. "And if I want to I can just walk right out of here? Then why is the door locked?"

"Go," Khristina said with a smile as she waved her hand and the door opened. "It is true I desire you, but I will only take what you offer."

"You'd let me just walk out of here?" I growled as my skepticism grew. "Aren't you afraid I'd tell someone?"

"Go right ahead," She laughed as she adjusted her body so that she was leaning up against the plump pillows lined up against the headboard. "Walk up to the first cop you find and tell him that some mean, old lesbian vampire took you home and made a pass at you. Either way you'll get three meals a day and a bed to sleep in."

The gravity of her words hit me hard. "Yeah and I'll be heavily medicated," I moaned as I buried

my face in my hands.

"I don't need to hide who I am," Khristina continued as she rubbed my weary shoulders. "No one would believe you. One of the joys of progress is that no sane person would believe that I exist."

I began to weep. I cried harder than I had in years. She cradled me in her arms and held me as I continued to sob. "Stay," she whispered softly in my ear as I curled up in her embrace. "If just for one night let the pain go. A few hours ago you were welcoming death, tonight just welcome a blissful slumber."

Much to my surprise Khristina only held me during the night. She could have done anything she wanted to me and I wouldn't have refused; yet she simply held me as I cried myself to sleep. When I awoke the following morning I did what she asked me to do. I smiled. For the first time in years I smiled. Sadly she was fast asleep and failed to see it. "I owe you one," I whispered as I climbed out of bed and gently pushed back the drapes.

The room echoed with a fierce growl that sounded like a jungle cat. The drapery snapped shut of its own accord. I jumped back fearfully and spun around to find my benefactor rubbing her tired eyes. "Sorry I'm not much of a morning person," she wearily apologized with a deep yawn.

"Right," I said as I carefully crossed back over to the bed. "I forgot."

"This bed is very comfortable," she said absently releasing another yawn.

"This isn't your room?" I asked before my eyes widened in realization. "Of course you need to sleep in a coffin."

"Where do you mortals get this stuff?" She said as she shook her head in disbelief. "I sleep in a bed. I just don't usually sleep in this bed. This is the guest room. And for the record I love garlic."

I couldn't help myself as I laughed and smiled at her joke while I climbed back up on the bed. "Now that is what I wanted to see," she sighed deeply as she cupped my face in her hands. I leaned into her touch drawn in by her warmth.

"Why are you doing this for me?" I asked unable to accept that someone could simply be kind to another person. But then again she wasn't really a person.

"Why do you doubt that you deserve kindness?" She asked as I felt myself being drawn to her.

I was unable to answer her question. In my heart I truly believed that I didn't deserve kindness. The dark glimmer in her eyes trapped me in her spell. I licked my lips eager to taste her ruby red lips. Her lips brushed softly against my own. The simple touch sent a tremor through my body. I kissed her again as her arms encircled my body. I was greeted by the soft fragrance of magnolia mixed with leather.

Her long leather coat slipped from her body. I caressed the leather suddenly feeling as I was embracing fire. My fingers became entangled in her hair as the kiss deepened. I remember moaning as our tongues greeted one another. I find it hard to explain but her kisses felt as if she was giving me life. Suddenly for the first time in years I wanted to live.

I still wonder if perhaps she had indeed cast a spell over me. At that moment I didn't care. It felt far too good touching and being touched by this woman. Each time my tongue grazed one of the sharp fangs I felt a void that only she could fill. I had spent years not feeling anything and at that moment all I could do was feel.

The feeling that possessed me was pure desire. I was gasping for air as her lips broke away. My head fell back as I felt her hot breath on my skin, and her tongue caressing my neck. My stomach clenched when I felt her fangs dragging along my neck.

I fell back dragging her body along with me. I pressed her mouth closer to my neck and begged her to drink from me. The soft growl of a jungle animal filled my ears as sharp fangs pierced the skin at the base of my throat.

My entire being burst into flames as she drank from me. I clawed at her body in a need to become one with her as she opened my robe and filled her hands with my breasts. My body bucked beneath her as I climaxed. Then the moment was over and she was licking the droplets of blood from my throat. "More," I pleaded helplessly.

"No," she moaned against my skin. "You are still weak."

"Please," I pleaded once again as I felt her body rising. Dark blue eyes gazed down at me as she hovered above my quivering body. Her leather-clad thighs straddled my body and she caressed my breasts. "How did you find me?" I asked as I gave in to her touch.

"I was hunting," she moaned deeply while the tips of her fingers brushed lightly across my nipples. "I could smell your blood."

"Why did you heal me?" I asked my body arched against her touch. "I've already lost my soul. Why not feed on me and let me die."

"You haven't lost your soul," she corrected me. "Perhaps I saved you because of your soul. You have a bright light inside of you that I will never know."

I reached up and began to unlace the ties of her leather vest. "How did you heal me?" I asked in an effort to fully understand what was happening to me.

She raised her left wrist, which bore a strange scar and pressed it to my lips. "You drank from me," she explained. Her deep sultry voice called to me like a siren. I kissed the scar before tracing it with my tongue. I slipped the vest down off her body. The vision above me was poetry. Her body was sheer perfection. Her movements stilled as my hands explored her skin.

My eyes followed the shy sweeping motions of my hands. It had been a lifetime since I had touched another woman this way. I didn't want to waste a single moment knowing that I could awake to find myself back in that building bleeding to death.

"This is real," Khristina softly whispered encouraging me to continue my exploration.

"It can't be," I whispered not truly believing that I was really feeling her skin responding to my touch. Her flesh was so warm and smooth and my hands needed to feel all of her. I felt a sense of freedom as I touched her. Perhaps it was the first time in my life that I had been granted the choice of touching and being touched by someone I truly wanted. And yet my weary mind still didn't believe that any of what I was experiencing was real.

My hands caressed her firm full breasts as she leaned closer allowing me to play with her. The feel of her rose colored buds hardening against my touch sent another shock wave through my system. My movements paused for a moment as I stared at my hands on her body. I felt dirty and unworthy of her touch. It was then I realized that my body had been bathed for the first time in years.

"You are beautiful," she said in a tender voice as she covered my hands with her own and guided them down to her flat stomach. She leaned closer and pressed one of the hard buds against my trembling lips. My tongue snaked out and flickered lightly against her nipple. I felt her hands caressing my body; her touch was like a loving kiss.

She purred like a contented lion as she slipped away from my touch. I looked up at her the confusion washing over me. I sighed deeply as she licked traces of my blood from her lips. "You must be starving," her voice caressed me as she spoke. "I will have the cook bring you up some food. Feel free to rest or walk around the grounds. Do whatever you wish to do today."

She closed my robe and tied the sash in a knot before climbing off the bed. I stared at her with astonishment as she redressed herself. "Wait," I called out to her as she opened the door. "Don't you want to make love?"

"Yes," she answered me with a brilliant smile that once again revealed her sharp fangs. "When that is what you are offering."

"I don't understand," I whimpered like a child.

"I know," Khristina sadly responded. "I need to rest. I hope you will stay and join me for dinner." Then she was gone. I jumped from the bed and opened the door just to reassure myself that it was unlocked. I looked down the long barren corridor searching for her. Unable to find any trace of Khristina I returned to my room and climbed back into bed.

At the time I failed to understand the depth of her words. I didn't understand why she just didn't take what she wanted. Of course back then I didn't know that what she wanted was more than I thought was possible of giving. I thought that making love was just a polite expression for sex. The raw physical act was something I understood. I had no concept that there could be

something deeper, more meaningful.

The only thing my weary mind could focus on was how comfortable the bed I was nestled in felt and that Khristina was sending food up to my room. My stomach growled at the mere thought of having a hot meal. Prior to that morning my last meal had been a half eaten Big Mac I had retrieved from a trash can two days ago.

I drifted off to sleep only to be awakened by the delightful aroma of food. I was drooling when I opened my eyes to discover a plump woman placing a tray of piping hot food down on the dresser. The woman I discovered was Nettie, the cook and maid. Nettie didn't bother to hide her distaste for my presence. She bristled about having to deliver my breakfast and how she was unaccustomed to having to feed the lady of the house's guests. And by guest I clearly understood, she meant whore.

Nettie's treatment was more of what I was used to. I was worthless and she didn't feel a need to pretend otherwise. The truly sad thing was at the time, I agreed with her assessment. During my time at Belcourt Manor Nettie and I never took to one another. Our dislike for one another was never very well hidden from the other members of the staff or Khristina.

How can I describe my life at Belcourt Manor? In many ways I had been set free. Khristina made certain that I was fed, clothed, cared for and I was free to come and go as I pleased. And still I felt imprisoned. Khristina's manservant saw to my every need and was even teaching me how to use the computer.

When I first met the tall, thin, brooding man I expected him to introduce himself as Igor. I laughed outrageously when I discovered his name was Biff. Khristina still doesn't understand why I think his name is so funny. At times she doesn't get my sense of humor. Of course I was only just discovering that I had one. It had been far too many years since I laughed.

Belcourt Manor was elegant to say the least. Nestled amongst the willows just outside of New Orleans and prying eyes. My hostess was more than gracious, and often absent. So why was I so unhappy? I was gaining the skills that would enable me to find work, if I left the safe confines of Khristina's home. But could I leave her? And did I really want to?

She rarely drank from me. When she did the feel of her fangs piercing my skin sent me into a euphoric haze. The feel of her drinking my blood was pure ecstasy. When she was around at night, she would hold me, caress me, sleep beside me yet never make love to me.

I wanted to feel all of her and I was afraid to touch her. I couldn't reconcile the fear that my need to be with her was born out of a sense of obligation. I knew she felt my hesitation. I could see it in her eyes when she looked at me. Her eyes were clouded with sadness and I knew I was the cause. I spent every day wondering if this would be the day she finally tired of my fears and cast me out, sending me back to the streets.

There were nights when she would return late. I knew that she had fed upon or been with another and I was filled with a bitter rage. Strange to feel jealousy when I couldn't reconcile whether or

not it was Khristina I wanted or what she gave to me.

I entered my bedroom late one evening and the balcony doors were wide open. A gentle breeze and the scent of magnolias filled the room. Suddenly there she was, teetering on the rail of the balcony. I was not surprised to find her suddenly standing there. Her sudden appearances were something I had quickly become accustomed to.

She flowed into the room as if she was carried on the wind. Her movements always made my heart beat faster. The leather-clad woman moved with the sleekness of a panther. Again I questioned whether I was drawn to who she was or what she was?

"Always questioning," she purred deeply as my body shivered in response. I hate that she seems to be able to see my inner most thoughts.

I pulled away suddenly and glared at her. I could smell another on her. "Would you deny me my pleasures?" She asked as my inner torment returned.

"Why am I not enough?" I demanded bitterly.

"You do not offer what I need," her voice was weary as she spoke. "Samantha when you know what you want, then and only then will we have a chance."

She reached out and cupped my face. I was helpless to resist her. I pulled her closer and kissed her deeply. I loved the way this woman kissed me. I felt as if our souls were touching each time our lips met. Only problem was I was the only one with a soul. Still I felt as if I was a part of her. "I want you," I murmured against her lips.

"Do you?" She questioned me as her hands roamed along the curve of my body. "Or are you simply offering your body, because you feel obligated to do so?"

"You can see inside me," I continued to plead my case as I slipped her long leather coat from her body. "Can you not feel my desire?"

"I can," she moaned deeply as her hands drifted up to the swell of my breasts. "I can also feel your fear. If you wish to leave you need only to ask," she reassured me while my hands busied themselves with the thick laces on her vest. "You have the skills now to find work. If you wish to leave I will not send you back to the streets. I have spent centuries amassing enough money to ensure that I will never want for anything."

"What are you saying?" I asked her while I guided the vest down her arms and dropped it to the floor.

"I can give you a new start," she moaned deeply as she leaned into my touch. "An apartment and a job. Whether you keep them and survive is entirely up to you."

My movements stilled once I realized just what it was she was offering to me. It was a fresh start with no strings attached. Once again, Khristina had rescued me and asked for nothing in return.

"Khristina," I sighed deeply my hands returning to the smoothness of her skin. "You've quieted my fears but not my desire."

I looked up at her. Khristina's eyes took on a mystical glow while she filled her hands with my breasts. I inhaled sharply as I felt her touch gently exploring my body. "Ask me for your freedom," she encouraged me as she tugged my shirt out of my pants.

I could feel that her request was breaking her heart. I didn't want to hurt her and yet I knew that I had to do as she requested. Neither of us would ever feel that our passion was true unless I was free. "Set me free," I sobbed.

"It will be done," she promised her voice filled with pain as she whispered her response.

"Make love to me," I pleaded understanding for the first time in my life the true meaning of the words.

That night she did as I requested. For the first time in my life I understood what it felt like to be loved. I will never forget how it felt to be touched by her. Khristina's hands were magical. There is no other way to describe her touch. She undressed me slowly, I watched as her hands glided along my body.

She guided my naked body down onto the bed. I couldn't breathe as I watched the leather slipping from her body. Gazing at her naked body was the most amazing sight I had ever witnessed. She stood beside the bed her eyes roaming along each curve of my body. As her gaze touched me, I felt as if her hands were already caressing my flesh.

My body arched beneath her fiery gaze, I was ready to explode and yet her hands still hadn't reached out to me. I felt a love and a sense of belonging I had never known existed. My experiences with women had been limited, to the youthful fumbling of the bi-curious girls I knew in high school and the tawdry paid encounters I endured in the dank back alleys in New York.

Rarely had I been touched by another. I was simply there to provide a service and shamefully I did what was asked of me. Until that night I didn't understand how it felt to be treated like a lover. Khristina made me feel complete simply by looking at me. My body was trembling as I reached out to her.

She purred as she accepted my hand. My body burned as her skin greeted my own. I kissed her. Khristina's hands slowly traced the curve of my hips. I moaned deeply as I ran my tongue along her sharp fangs. The feel of them made me quiver; I laced my fingers in her silky hair and drew her closer. I could feel her fangs tease my neck; I pressed her closer as I begged her to feed upon me.

Strangely she hesitated for a moment before plunging her fangs into my skin. I recall that I cried out while my body quaked. I also can still recall the scent of her filling me with desire as I clung to her while she licked the blood from my neck.

I dug my blunt nails into her shoulders as our bodies became one. I will never forget the rhythmic movement of her body as she pleased me. Everywhere she touched my skin burned. With her tongue and fangs she teased my nipples until they ached from the pleasure. The feel of her fingers inside of me was heaven. I rode against her gentle touch crying out her name until my voice and body were exhausted.

She cradled me in her arms; the feel of her body touching mine re-ignited the fire. Soon I was exploring every inch of her body with my hands and my mouth. My touch was slow as I tried to memorize every inch of her. We gave and took throughout the night. I feared the morning thinking that I would never see her again. Our lovemaking brought me to heights I had never known existed and I was not ready to be released from my bliss.

Khristina shared my unspoken desires keeping me in her arms well into the following evening. It wasn't until I drifted off to sleep that the magic began to fade. I awoke the next day in a strange apartment. She left me the keys, some money, new clothing, furniture and a note. She gave me my freedom. The rest as she said was up to me.

I went to the job interview she had arranged for me. I got the job. It was simple data entry, something I was now trained to do. I am certain that many would scoff at my meager paycheck. To me it was more than enough. It paid my bills, kept a roof over my head, and food in the refrigerator. I had a new life. It was slow adjusting to living in comfort.

I still felt uneasy around my co-workers and neighbors. Before Khristina flew into my life I had very little interaction with other people. Now at times I feel claustrophobic. It was harder at night, when I was all alone staring up at the night sky missing her.

One night I had left the balcony doors open in an effort to catch a breeze. The scent of magnolias filled the air. I smiled knowing that when I turned around, I would find her. Khristina's long leather jacket billowed as she breezed into the room.

"I've missed you," I confessed as I wrapped my arms around her slender waist.

"You are doing just fine without me," she complimented me as she kissed the top of my head.

"Thanks to you," I sighed.

"No," she cautioned me. "I gave you an address, got you an interview and that is all I did."

"You are my landlord aren't you?" I asked already knowing the answer. "That is how you can enter my home without an invitation isn't it?"

"True," she conceded. "But paying the rent is entirely your responsibility. I don't even get involved with the running of my properties."

"It feels good to say," I offered as I guided her to my bed. "My home,"

"You deserve it," she smiled at me as she reclined onto the bed.

"I've started school," I boasted as I took her by the hand.

"Tell me all about it," she encouraged me.

I began to prattle on until I noticed the lateness of the hour. "We don't have much time," I offered as I began to undress her.

"This isn't what I came for," she whispered capturing my hands as she spoke.

"Don't you want to?" I whimpered like a small child.

"Of course I want to," she smiled kissing the back of my hand.

"So do I," I asserted before claiming her lips.

We made love until she was forced to flee before the fire sprung in the sky. She visits me almost every night. She has no other; I coax her to feed from me. My body is growing weaker, yet I can't stop myself. She needs to feed and I can't bare the thought of another touching her. She fights with me. Perhaps that is why I have begun this journal.

My life is slipping away. Soon I will either perish or she will stop visiting me in order to save me. Each time I pull her to me, we argue. "I'm killing you," she screamed at me the other night. "If you bonded with me, drank from me and became one with me you would be safe."

"I can't," I confessed. "I just discovered the light in this world, I can not give it up now. And I can't give you up."

Every night is the same, we love, we laugh and I give her my essence. She tries to stay away. Neither of us can breathe without the other's touch. It is true what she has said she is killing me. I no longer care. I can't leave her and I can't leave the joys of the morning light. She is trapped in the darkness. I have found my soul and it belongs to her, yet we can never really be together. Our different worlds are tearing us apart. I have decided that if she comes to me tonight, I will leave my world and become a part of hers. It is the only way.

That is where the journal ended. I stare blankly at the pages. How odd it is to be reading about my love life and not recall a single detail. I reread the journal over and over again looking for some small clue as to what happened next. It always ends the same. If I had decided to bond with her then why am I here? And more importantly where is Khristina?

I spend day after day reading each word in the blasted journal and come no closer to

understanding what happened. It is early evening on Halloween night. One year ago my life changed forever. I am at my wits end as the need to find out the whole truth has driven me to the last door I ever thought I would enter.

A bell chimes as I step into the bustling little shop. The tourists have filled every nook and cranny. My eyes dart around in search of the mysterious Madame Carlotta. "Now why would someone with the mark of Belcourt step into a slayer's den?" Is whispered coldly in my ear.

I jump with surprise as I turn to find Madame Carlotta standing beside me. "And how is it that you traveled here with the sun still in the sky?"

"I don't know," I meekly answer her question.

"Come with me," she commands me. "I'll take no more clients this evening," she calls out to the younger woman working the cash register while guiding me away from the crowd.

We step behind a curtained area. The room is filled with plush velvet furniture and a mahogany table. I spy the tarot cards spread across the table. She motions for me to sit. I follow her instructions while I twirl the ring that still hangs around my neck. She sits across from me, eyeing me as if I'm a circus attraction.

"So you're a slayer?" I jest still not really believing everything I read in my journal.

"Not me," she explains in a firm tone as the curtain opens and the cashier steps in. "My daughter."

"Okay Mother I've locked up the shop," the younger woman begins in a weary voice as she looks down at me. "This had better be good."

"So Buffy," I tease the tall brunette.

"I hate that," she scowls with disgust. "The name is Keren and you are?"

"Samantha," I offer as I shift nervously still clutching the paper bag I have brought with me.

"Show Keren your neck," Carlotta commands.

I wince slightly as I brush my long blonde hair from my neck. "The mark of Belcourt?" Keren says with disbelief. "Amazing. Slayers have a long history with the Belcourt line. We have an uneasy alliance. Each of us are trained to distrust the other, yet neither has had cause to interfere with the other's life. That was until very recently. Stefan, the family elder, is very upset. It seems his favorite daughter is missing."

"Khristina?" I ask fearfully.

"Yes," she coldly confirms. "And here you sit with her ring and her mark on your neck. Care to

enlighten me as to just how it is that she marked you so deeply, and yet you still walk in the daylight?"

I fumble with the paper bag and extract my journal. I hand it to Carlotta. The old woman accepts it in her gnarly grasp and places it on the table. "I think that is my story," I try to explain.

"It is," Carlotta sadly confirms while she runs her fingers along the unopened notebook. "Your words are true."

"Please tell me what happened." I beg as her daughter looks on.

"Everything happened just as you wrote it did," she explains in a direct manner.

"But it isn't the whole story," I fume. "Why do I feel something is missing besides my memory? What happened to me? What happened to her?"

"You did offer to bond with her. She refused. You made love that night. While you slept she removed her ring and placed it at your bedside. She walked over to the balcony and drew open the curtains. For the first time in her existence she felt the sun on her skin." Carlotta's voice is filled with sadness as she retells my story.

"That would have killed her." Keren protests.

"It did," Carlotta confirms.

"Why?" I sob.

"To save you," Carlotta flatly explains. "When she left this world she took your memory with her. Now you are free."

"Wait," Keren interjects. "Khristina Belcourt committed suicide? I don't buy it. Why would she do it?"

"True love," Carlotta scolds her daughter. "This one doesn't understand," she directs towards me. "She has the worst taste in men."

"Hey," Keren objects.

"A matter for another time," Carlotta calmly dismisses Keren. "For now the question is would you do what she did? Samantha would you sacrifice everything to save her?"

"I don't even remember her," I argue. It was true. I read the words in the journal as if they had been written by a stranger. Still something in my heart screams out my answer. "Yes."

"Give me her ashes," Carlotta demands as she begins to light a series of candles and the strangest smelling incense.

"Betty was right about you," I concede as I hand her the coffee tin.

"Mother what are you doing?" Keren complains.

"Hush and fetch me the ivory urn," Carlotta commands her child. "I'll need her ring."

I listen to Keren's grumbles as she storms out of the room. I slip the ring from the safe confines of my neck and place it on the table. My eyes widen fearfully as Carlotta rummages about placing an odd array of items on the table. They include an animal bone, a lock of hair, and most disturbingly a dagger.

"This rarely works," Keren cautions her mother as she places the urn on the table. "And you've never tried it before."

"You've never done this before?" I squeak out with horror as I try to understand what the old woman is up to.

"Best to prepare yourself then," Carlotta scolds Keren as she places the ashes in the urn. "We don't know who or what will be joining us."

"Son of a . . .," Keren mutters as she digs through a leather sack. The items she retrieves are like something from a movie, a wooden stake, and a vial of holy water, and of course a cross.

Carlotta is now kneeling beside me chanting as she burns more incense, the aroma is disgusting. She grabs my hand and holds the dagger above the palm. "What would you give to save her from Hell?" Carlotta moans.

"Everything," I confess praying that my words are true as I kneel beside the old woman.

"Her blood is in your veins," she moans as I feel the dagger piercing my skin.

I watch in disbelief as my blood flows freely. I have no idea why I am doing this. I simply allow Carlotta to guide my bleeding hand over the urn. I feel the room spinning, as her chanting grows louder.

I close my eyes as the sounds of bells chiming fill my ears. I am crying and I don't know why as the sounds in the room grow louder. I hear a loud clap of thunder. I blink open my eyes to find the room is now dark as night with the exception of a urethral glow hovering above the urn.

The table snaps like kindling, as the glow becomes a bright light. The disjointed sounds of a weeping child fill the room. "She isn't coming," Carlotta wearily sputters as she collapses.

"No," I cry out as I jump to my feet. Still I have no understanding as to why I am doing this. I feel the sadness wash over me as I reach out to the light. "Take my hand," I demand. I can feel her pulling away from. My heart feels her near me. "Take my hand!" I call out to her my eyes

filled with tears. The air escapes from my lungs as I feel her clutching my hand.

It is Khristina, I feel her warmth, I sense her pain and I remember everything. "Come back to me," I beg from the very depth of my being. In a flash the room explodes. I shield my eyes while I tighten my hold on her. I open my eyes and the room is not the mess I am expecting. "Khristina," I sniff as I find her standing before me looking weary and very naked.

"Samantha?" She utters in disbelief before wrapping me up in her arms. "Why did you do it?"

"Why did you leave me?" I sob.

"You shouldn't have remembered me," she argues.

"I didn't," I confess. "And still I felt the void of your absence. You left me wounded." It is the truth. All this time I thought I was searching for my past when in reality I was searching for her.

She smiles at me. I blink with surprise as I notice that her brilliant smile has changed. It is brighter than I recall and the fangs are absent. "What?" She asks. I smile at her as she runs her tongue along her teeth.

She turns towards Keren, "Slayer," she hisses at the smirking woman. "What have you done?"

"Your father is going to be pissed," Keren supplies with a saucy grin.

I grab up the first thing I can find. I wrap a long curtain around my lover's body in an effort to conceal her naked body from the others. "I would find the only bi-slayer in town," I grumble.

"I'm mortal?" Khristina addresses Carlotta seemingly unconcerned about her nakedness.

"You were pulled from hell," Carlotta explains as if these things happen every day. "You could have returned just as you were or as a demon. Human isn't that bad."

"Our worlds have met," I shyly offer. "You could go back to yours."

"I could never bond with another," she protests as she takes me by the hand. "I love you. Now all I need to know is how you feel?"

"I didn't bring you back into this world just to your friend," I scold her. "I love you too. I'm just afraid that I have nothing to offer you."

"Your smile," she beams down at me.

I can't help it and smile up at her. "That is all I ever needed," she reassures me.

"We need to get you dressed and quickly," I inform her.

"Why the hurry?" She asks. "We have a lifetime."

"I want to walk you home before the sun goes down," I explain quickly as Carlotta and Keren go in search of some clothing. "Today is your birthday, and I want to share your first walk in the daylight."

She dresses quickly. Her clothing doesn't fit, but it is Halloween and I am certain that no one will notice. She looks like a little kid as we step out onto the bustling streets. The sun is beginning to set, but we enjoy the few moments of sunlight left. "Let's go home," I say as I tug on her hand.

"Take me home," she echoes as she eagerly follows behind me.

I hurry to get her home so we can begin our new life together. Each of us had paid the price for our freedom. The price we paid was very simple yet very dear. We gave our hearts to one another, and placed unwavering trust that the other would treasure our gift.

The End

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