

CHAPTER ONE

1:00pm March 2nd, 2012

Austin hospital: Sixty minutes from the Melbourne CBD.

DELIBERATE INAUDIBLE footsteps approached the doorway. Before entering the room, the twenty-two-year-old woman stopped to view the scene. A stethoscope clung to her neck; the ends dangled down over her chest. The rectangle shaped name tag pinned to her shirt, read.

‘Doctor Amber Cantala-Haleton.’

The dark-haired doctor entered the room. She strolled across the floor to stand next to the sixty-five-year-old woman sobbing at the side of the hospital bed.

Doctor Amber Cantala-Haleton placed her hand securely on the soon-to-be-widow’s shoulder.

“Marie, it’s time to turn off the life support machine.”

Her voice sounded gentle, warm, friendly. Not one staff member working at the hospital could come close to her perfect bedside manner.

Grey haired Marie Watson looked up into the young Doctor’s eyes. The words she wanted to say failed to leave her throat. Another tear rolled down her cheek.

Doctor Amber Cantala gently stroked Marie’s left shoulder blade.

“I understand your torment,” she whispered.

Marie swallowed in an attempt to moisten her red raw throat. “How can you?” she rasped.

“In ways, you could never understand.”

Marie clung to hope the future might be different. What she’d give so her husband could hold her in his arms for one last dance? Just one more walk in the park. For one last kiss. She reached out to stroke her husband’s hand clinging desperately to the idea he’d wake. Pulling her hand back she knew it was time to give her final gift of love. Slowly her nods, though hesitant, grew stronger.

The doctor picked up on the signal. She walked a death march to the front of the bed. Her glances volleyed between the grieving widow and her brain-dead husband.

Sobbing quietly, Marie closed her eyes. She lowered her head into the palms of her hands. When she finally lifted her head, the doctor gave the woman a long gentle, caring look. Marie stared directly into the eyes of the female doctor hovering over the life support machine. She searched the doctor’s eyes for something which might change her dismal, lonely future at the last second.

The tall, thin doctor draped in a white coat, gave no inkling of a sign. She turned her attention to the silver toggle switch on the face of the machine. Using her left hand, she reached out for the metal switch. A nerve in her hand twitched several times. The doctor frowned, hiding her apprehension from Marie.

Doctor Amber Cantala looked at the man lying in the bed for the last time. The ends of her lips curled up ever so slightly, her face changing to a white wash colour. She applied pressure to the toggle switch. It clicked to the off position. The noise echoed around the room. Instead of a single long monotone noise, the life support machine kept up its slow rhythmic beep. Marie Watson looked up at her dead husband then slowly focused on the doctor. Wrinkles in her brow deepened. Conspiracy thoughts flashed into her mind. Her pupils constricted. Using the edge of the bed for a brace, she started to stand on trembling legs. She spat angrily.

“What have you done? My husband is still alive? You and the other so-called medical experts have misdiagnosed my husband’s supposed fatal disease.”

Doctor Amber Cantala-Haleton’s face glistened in the light of the overhead fluorescent tubes. Her eye teeth seemed longer than usual. Her face looked slightly tainted. Her eyes flashed a red luminosity. Before Marie could note the subtle change, the colour of Amber’s face returned to a normal soft feminine glow. Red rosy cheeks replaced the tainted look.

The machine’s beeps gradually faded, replaced by the unmistakable long slow constant beep. The Doctor walked across the room, opening the door. She stepped into the corridor, quietly closing the door behind her, allowing the widow to grieve in silence.

CHAPTER TWO

Midnight March 2nd, 2012

‘VAMPIRES, VAMPIRES,’ screamed William Haleton inside his head.

He sat bolt upright in bed. Lifting both hands, he wiped the sweat from his face.

Looking around the room he saw it in the corner.

The outline of the shape resembled a person darker than the surrounds. It stood staring at him. A cold chill ran down Haleton’s spine. His stomach turned into an agonizing knot causing him to feel nauseous. Involuntary muscles tightened throughout Haleton’s body. His blood pressure quickly increased to a dangerous level. He could hear his heartbeat throbbing in both ears. Haleton glanced about the bedroom. He couldn’t detect anything different. Nothing seemed out of place. Moving his stare back to the shape, he hissed.

“What is it you want?”

Light from the full moon seeping out from behind a cloud illuminated his black jacket on the coat stand in the corner. A grin instantly flashed across Haleton’s face. He dropped his gaze to the woman sleeping next to him. Her chest rose and fell in a constant rhythm.

“Amber, are you awake?” he whispered.

The woman rolled over on her side, facing Haleton. He commenced studying her youthful looks. Lust fogged his brain. He reached out to wake her, eager to make love to his wife again. At the last moment, he decided to pull his hand back. From the moment they were married, his love for Amber had never diminished. His desire for her seemed to have doubled every day since they first met. Arriving in the time zone at the right place must have been fate. He easily saved her from the ex-boyfriend when he threw Amber off a building’s seventh floor. He dived over the side of the building and managed to catch her before she reached the second floor. The cops who arrested him didn’t know they handcuffed a vampire. He slipped away by dematerializing into smoke.

From the day they were married, Haleton grew confident his vampire urges were defeated. Wandering the Earth from one-time zone to the next for centuries was an absolute horrid nightmare. Thanks to Rose-a-lee Cantala, the vampire antidote that she developed seemed to be a complete success. Haleton’s experiments in prolonging the time between each dose of the antidote seemed to be a positive win. He wanted so much to inform Amber of the news he believed he was in recession from the vampire curse. His nightmares were the only time he ever thought of his murderous cousin, Alex Crompton, whichever time zone he’d been imprisoned in.

Haleton slid from between the dull red coloured sheets. The moment his feet touched the carpet a tingling sensation shot through his body. Sweat trickled down the center of his back. When he looked at the bed he noticed the soaking wet sheet. Pausing momentarily to run his fingers through his thick black hair, Haleton chewed over his next thought for far too long. Medically speaking he felt fit enough to run a marathon. He didn’t feel fatigued or hungry, however, his stomach relayed the fact he should be starving. Knowing Rose-a-lee Cantala invented a formula to eradicate all the evil doers in the world by turning each mortal who broke the law into a vampire came back to haunt him yet again. He was framed for murder. No end of pleading to the council of four could change their minds. The vow he made to himself to forever track down the vampires and defeat them seemed to have grown old. Constantly thinking of Amber’s love had quickly replaced the idea. When she said ‘I do,’ in the church, it happened to be the best thing to ever have happened in his long life.

Haleton staggered to the bathroom. Leaning against the vanity, he stared into the mirror at his reflection. Looking back at him he could see a tall, athletic built broad-shouldered man. He seemed to have the very thing he craved for centuries; the love and devotion of a beautiful woman. To top it off he felt proud of his successful medical practice.

A natural smile creased his handsome looks when he hoisted the photo of Amber and himself from off his side of the vanity. He stared lovingly at the picture of them on their wedding day. The first time around it was a whirlwind marriage ceremony. The priest, Craig Benyon and a female librarian were the only witnesses. The librarian confessed she felt shocked beyond belief when they fought Alex Crompton. The orb of light materialized, determined to suck him and Crompton back to 1749AD. The particular fight started when Crompton tried to murder Amber using the poisonous ‘Blood Red Rose.’ Fortunately, the second marriage ceremony Amber organized two weeks later was perfect. She wore a long white silk wedding dress, and Haleton wore a tuxedo. Photos and friends helped to make the ceremony a mementos occasion. Their small picture-perfect wedding was a moment in time he’d never forget.

Attempting to place the photo back where he found it, Haleton absentmindedly slipped it into the back pocket of his shorts. Looking through the doorway at his sleeping wife, Amber Cantala-Haleton; he felt content. Haleton had even looked up the name Cantala on the internet hoping to discover the reason why the Cantala name never changed. The trail led straight to Rose-a-lee Cantala. Each of her descendants never married. Each child, a female, was born out of wedlock. The reason, he could only guess. A low growl came from the back of his throat at remembering Rose-a-lee Cantala's name. He loved the woman but loathed her very name at the same time. He could never forgive her for transforming him into a vampire.

Haleton and Amber sailed through medical school in triple quick time to the astounding comments of their lecturers. Each exam they sat for ended in a one hundred percent pass. The same day they completed their last exam they opened the doors to their private practice. In days, the appointment books were filling. Summing up their success Haleton couldn't shake the feeling something seemed slightly distorted. He'd almost forgotten how it felt to have the acid from the vampire blood surging through his veins. Haleton quickly dismissed the idea as frivolous. Glancing at the small bunch of red roses he gave Amber several hours earlier, Haleton noted their edges were withered. The only trouble spot, he could detect in his life came from the same horrid nightmare which manifested itself for the past three consecutive nights. After being chased by vampires, he woke at around midnight in a cold sweat. Haleton didn't want to imagine his dreams could be a warning. He lowered his head into the sink to drown his face in cold water.

Haleton straightened, wiping the water from his eyes. Staring at his image again, he stood shocked at what he thought he saw. The image suddenly vanished. In a blink of an eye, it returned, staring at him. Haleton held his breath, twisting and turning in front of the mirror hoping to see something unusual again. Nothing different happened. His mirror image copied exactly what he did. From the lifting of his hands to the gnashing of his teeth to pulling obscure faces at himself: nothing changed.

"I'm over tired," Haleton whispered.

Lowering his head towards the water to take a drink, Haleton saw something he prayed he'd never see again. The water in his cupped hands turned red; blood red. The faint heartbeat he could hear in his ears started to grow louder. The ache in his stomach began to evolve into something far worse than a cold chill. He felt to be on the verge of vomiting. Sweat started to flow from the pores of his skin. He felt disorientated. He could feel the remnant of the vampire curse still flowing through his body. It always began as a trickle of water which quickly transformed into a raging river. Over time he learned to ignore the feeling. Thanks to the vampire antidote he hoped the feeling would never be any more than a trickle of water.

'Surely not,' he thought. 'The antidote wasn't due to be renewed for at least twelve hours. If nothing else Rose-a-lee's success saved him. If he were ever to be a fully-fledged vampire again Amber's sweet-smelling blood might be too hard to resist. He'd hate his very existence if he turned her.'

A more horrid thought flashed into his mind. 'Maybe he'd made a grave mistake by prolonging the time between each dose of the antidote.'

Haleton stepped back from the mirror. Panic deepened the lines on his forehead. The realization of how he and Amber achieved so much in so short a time hit him hard. 'She must be a vampire. How could this be possible? He'd never bitten her. It seemed the only explanation. He'd rather die than taste her blood. He detested the idea she could be a vampire. Having to endure the curse which is incurable is an insane proposition. He'd never forget the night the soldiers threw a large fish net over him and Crompton. If he knew the villagers planned a trap, he'd have been somewhere else. He might have even been at the party dancing close to a lovely lady. He missed those times. He missed 1749AD. Watching Rose-a-lee Cantala from a distance, pretending to be looking somewhere else whenever she looked his way didn't make him smile. What he'd give to be able to change the past. There must be a reason why he'd been born to have the vampire curse in the first place. Now married to a beautiful woman if he could control the vampire curse, his life would be complete.' He sighed. Fortunately, Crompton failed to murder Amber. First came the poison stem of the blood red rose, the out of control truck then he forced her and Craig Benyon to stand on the roof's ledge of separate building's waiting for Haleton to choose which one of the two he would let fall to their death.

Haleton looked across the room at the bed. He again stared lustfully at the curled lump under the blanket.

'Amber has never spoken of any vampire symptoms. How could he even contemplate asking her? What if she wasn't? What if she knew the antidote could fail? After all, she's a clever woman,' he thought.

Haleton's stabbing unanswered questions tumbled around in his mind endlessly. No matter how hard he tried he couldn't shake the thought Amber might be a vampire. If the vampire curse was ever reactivated, time could separate them for eternity.

Another sharp pain in his stomach saw Haleton slip to the floor. He curled into a tight ball waiting for the pain to ease.

It didn't subside.

His body went into slight convulsions. He groped for the vanity. Slowly he forced his body to stand. His knees were trembling from the weight. He leaned over the wash-basin. His hands started shaking. The act of slurping water from his cupped hands appeared to be impossible. Through blurred vision, he again looked into the mirror. To get past the gnawing feeling in his stomach, Haleton tried to convince himself the reason behind the pain was due to the nightmarish memories of being a vampire. He needed to fight harder if he wanted to stay a mortal.

Haleton's body convulsed again. The pains seemed to have doubled in strength. The throbbing inside his ears sounded worse to the point of being a deafening noise made by a base drum. He vomited in the sink.

"Amber, wake up, I need your help," Haleton croaked. He lifted his head so he could see the lump in the bed. He called again.

Amber opened her eyes. "William, I've just woken from an incredible dream about vampires. I've also something important to tell you," she added, sitting straight backed.

"Please, I need your help," called Haleton, only just managing to whisper the words.

Amber sat staring into the panic filled eyes of her husband. She watched him slowly crawl his way to the bed. Stooping on legs which could buckle at any second, Haleton tried to lift his feet off the floor so he could climb onto the bed. He knew exactly why they felt glued to the floor. Staring at Amber, Haleton's torso started to sway. He wrapped his arms around his waist. Opening his mouth, his voice sounded no stronger than a feeble squeak. Slowly uncoiling his right arm, the pain in his elbow felt excruciating. His fingers brushed the side of Amber's face. She lifted her hand to help him back into bed.

The moment their fingers touched, Amber vanished.