

INNOCENZA

*L*ousy idea, us sitting like that on the railroad tracks. If we had had to jump, it would have been a heart-stopping drop to the lake below. But Kieren had said he could hear a train coming from far away, in more than enough time for us to scramble from the middle of the bridge to safety. And I trusted him. Liked him watching out for me, too.

To the west, the fading horizontal clouds had turned a bloody tangerine color, fuzzy and tinged with violet,

like the inside of a conch shell. So, I imagined picking one up, a curved shell, and shaking it to see if the animal within had died.

Then Kieren's fingernails began tracing the pattern on my upturned palm, and it was hard to think about anything. I knew it bothered him, though, my laugh line, my love line, my lifeline. Slight and severed, all of them.

This was four years ago, so we were in middle school, past due for handholding. I'd been staying with Kieren's family, helping with the baby, while my folks were in Guatemala doing whatever professors with archaeology Ph.D.s did there. Daddy anyway. Mama had just gone along for the ride. They'd be back the day after tomorrow, I realized. And tomorrow could be gone in a heartbeat or two.

"It's not just a sunset," I said, going for poetic. "It's a moonrise, too."

Kieren's nostrils flared at that, which I found exceedingly manly. Besides, I'd always loved this time of day, late evening when the world went smoky and soft. Dusk. Twilight. Such pretty names. We owed something to the night, didn't we?

I tried pressing my newly rounded right boob against his forearm. Even though it was well covered in a sweat-stained T-shirt, even though the temperature had to be over ninety degrees. I had it on good authority that most

boys my age were due to go boob crazy at any time. But my hand was all he was interested in.

As the sun melted into the horizon, I stared into the rippling water and decided to take the lead. If Kieren backed off, I'd make like I was joking.

It seemed to take forever, turning my palm until our fingers aligned, rested against one another, ready to intertwine. His face was flushed, moist from the heat, and his expression didn't tell me anything.

Taking a shallow breath, I went for it. There. My fingertips touched the back of his hand. His fingertips touched the back of mine. And he was letting it happen. I was about to say something—I didn't know what—when distant but sure I heard the train.

“Kieren?” I whispered.

I'd distracted him.

A cause for celebration if it hadn't been for the penalty.

His head snapped in the direction of the oncoming threat, the one that would reach me first, and his eyes in the evening light looked flat and yellow. I didn't feel the pain when I first heard the wet crunching, didn't feel it for long even, wicked hot, turning my sweat cold. There was an instant, just one, when I looked down at my hand and felt the blood dripping and realized his nails . . . claws . . . had extended, piercing clear through,

five crescent-shaped punctures, catching raw muscle and splintering bone.

“Oh,” I said, like that explained everything, and suddenly, the train didn’t matter so much anymore. Then the world swirled, faded, took me floating into the darkness.

FANGS ARE US

*F*ou're nuts!" I exclaimed after swallowing a bite of tender scallops twirled in garlic fettuccine. "My uncle will never sign off on this."

"No, no, not nuts, Quincie," the chef countered in an accented baritone. "Garlic. He said 'Italian.' Change this. Pave that. But still, Italian. So, garlic."

"But Vaggio!"

His triumphant smile let me in on the joke. "Ah, *bambina*, so predictable."

It was nearly 9 P.M., and since sevenish that evening, I'd been playing taste tester for the teasing and tiring chef. Each dish had been sensual, succulent, but none had screamed, "*Presto*: blood lust!" And that's what we were going for.

Sanguini's was to be Austin's first restaurant built around a vampire theme. More class than kitsch, but not without a sense of playfulness. A reboot of Fat Lorenzo's, the family-style Italian restaurant on South Congress that had once belonged to Gramma and Grampa Crimi, who'd left it to Mama. She'd often called the business her "other child" and seemed more at home there than she did in the house.

At least until three winters ago, when she and Daddy died on the icy 183 exit ramp off MoPac Expressway, orphaning me and the restaurant. The will had placed both of us in the care of Daddy's younger brother, Davidson, until I hit twenty-one.

Back then, Uncle D was in his mid-twenties, barely out of Texas State University. I was only fourteen, and the marinara in my veins came from Mama's side of the family, not Daddy's. But Vaggio, the chef who'd known my late grandparents since back in their Chicago days, helped Uncle D get up to speed. And from then on, I spent more time at Fat Lorenzo's than anywhere else, even Kieren's.

All was well until last year when Pasta Perfecto opened a few blocks south. Though our regulars had stayed regular, their parking lot was twice the size of ours. Within six months, Fat Lorenzo's was in the red.

Something had to change, I'd said, or we'd find ourselves out of business. Vaggio had argued that we should stick with Italian, claiming he didn't know how to cook anything else. Uncle Davidson had suggested the vampire concept.

"Can't we just do a ghost?" Vaggio had asked. "It's an old building. We could make up a story, say somebody who worked here died."

"Nah," Uncle Davidson had replied. "Haunted has been done to death."

I didn't know much more about vampires than anyone else. After all, the last reported sighting of one in Texas had been about the time of the Kennedy assassination.

And even though Kieren, my hybrid werewolf best friend, was a self-appointed expert on creatures of the night, he didn't like talking about vampires. He'd once said, though, that it offended him that "the leeches" could turn into something wolflike, too.

"What if some real vampires actually show up?" I'd wanted to know.

"We'll make a fortune" had been my uncle's reply.

In the end, Uncle Davidson's plan had seemed like a bang-up way to keep us all in Chianti. He'd hired a contractor to remodel, expanding into what had once been the vintage threads shop next door. That had doubled the size of the main dining room, offered space for two four-stall *baños*, allowed for a small break room and private dining room, and increased the kitchen square footage by a third.

For most of my fellow Waterloo High School seniors, the future was little more than a misty dream. Mine had a liquor license from the state of Texas and an uncle-manager who'd bailed tonight to go skinny-dipping with his girlfriend, Ruby.

Picking up a menu cover that had been sitting on the stainless steel counter, I studied it once more. White with pinkish blue undertones, made of pressed leather with an impractical gold tassel for trim and hard-to-decipher, gothic-style crimson lettering. The effect—as intended—was a body bled dry and dressed in party clothes.

The interior was empty, though, awaiting Vaggio's frantic efforts to produce one more main course, the appetizers, and desserts. He had five weeks until opening and claimed to work best on deadline.

After a moment, Vaggio plucked the menu from my hands, stepped to a refrigerator, and handed me a

small plate of green olives. “Go away. Take this with you to the break room. Your friend—”

“His name is Kieren.” I closed my fingers around the cold plate. “Kieren Morales.” I wouldn’t blush. Girls who wooed werewolves were beyond blushing, and Vaggio had known Kieren forever. He was just telling me without telling me that he had reservations about our relationship.

“Yes, Kieren.” Vaggio poured me a glass of water. “Tonight, will you confess your *amore*? To the lucky one you chose as friend?”

Had I been that transparent? Kieren probably knew, but Kieren knew I’d come down with the chicken pox at age four at Disney World and something far more unpleasant at age nine in Ecuador. He knew the first boy I’d kissed was Julio Gutiérrez, in the hall next to the janitor’s closet at the eighth grade Spring Fling. He even knew when I started my period, and not just because he could smell it.

“I have plenty of friends.”

“Do you?” Vaggio moved to the sink, dropping the Italian accent he’d been practicing for Sanguini’s launch party.

“I’m always busy, aren’t I?”

“That is true.” Vaggio turned back to look at me. He’d given up on suggesting I abandon the

restaurant—at least for a few years—in pursuit of my “endangered” youth. But he would urge me, now and then, not to forget I was a teenager. “Fear not, *bambina*. I’ll send back Kieren when he arrives.”

“*Grazie*,” I replied, then paused, uncertain. “Everything’s going to work out, isn’t it?” I wasn’t sure whether I was talking about Sanguini’s new menu or what might happen tonight between Kieren and me.

“Are you kidding?” Vaggio extended his arms, king of the kitchen. “This is the life!”

Laughing, I exited the swinging door and crossed the break room to set my snack on the coffee table. The phone beside my glass started ringing. “Hello? Hello?” I answered, snagging the receiver. “Howdy?”

With a shrug, I hung up on the dial tone.