**Excerpt from The Shade of Things**

The once-elegant gothic manor hulked like a boxer down on his luck. The upper broken window and front door hanging partially off its hinges gave the impression of a bruised eye and a missing tooth while the sagging roof was like a head hunched into its shoulders.

“This can’t be where Damien lives,” Eli said. “He’d get fried by the sunshine pouring in through all the holes.”

“The description of the bloodsucker who lives here matches Damien,” I said, hands on my hips.

Eli snorted. “And you trust Tatiana’s information on this?”

I squirmed uneasily at the mention of my boss. Not because I doubted her, but because hearing her name reminded me that I wasn’t being wholly truthful with her. About a week ago, I’d discovered a bombshell of a secret tying my parents to her.

Not only had I kept Tatiana in the dark, I’d done the same to Laurent, her sexy wolf shifter nephew with whom I’d hooked up. To be fair, he’d been away in the interior of the province stalking a dybbuk, and it wasn’t exactly a conversation to have over the phone, but that wasn’t the real reason I’d been reluctant to talk about it with him.

Zev BatKian, Vancouver’s head vampire, had recently hired me to find the Ascendant for him. I snorted. If by “hired me” you meant “blackmailed me viciously and without remorse,” then sure. The ways he could destroy me and my loved ones were legion. He powered the ward around my house, keeping demons at bay. He was a master vamp whose minions had been forbidden from feeding off my ex-husband and daughter. And any Ohrist enemies would think twice about coming after me or my family while we were under Zev’s protection.

The new condition of all this protection was that he’d sworn me to secrecy about both this job and the magic amplifier in general until he decreed otherwise. Telling either Tatiana or Laurent was out of the question—for now—despite my wishes.

Sadly, in the magical world, I had to stick to those boundaries, or I wouldn’t be able to take care of the people who were important to me—including Tatiana and Laurent.

Still, I was sick and tired of Zev using me to fulfill some unknown agenda and angry that I was left with no real choice but to accede to his demands.

I sighed. Those were problems for future me.

Eli shredded a couple of long grass stalks. “Ian’s last known address was a shelter and the residents there are transient. Yes, the employee I interviewed remembered him going off with someone who matched Damien’s description, and when you suggested we look into the vamps and got a connection, I was hopeful. But looking at this dump?” He brushed grass off his hands. “I’m second-guessing that employee’s memory. That or we were too quick to ascribe the mystery person Ian went off with to a vampire.”

“It’s the only lead we have. Damien does have a Sapien donor, so that’s another point for this being the right place.”

We snuck through the unkempt weed-choked grass to the rotted front steps. Really the house was best viewed at a distance. Like from the moon.

The first tread creaked under my foot, and the house seemed to shiver, exuding a gust of stagnant air. A family of mice peeked their heads up through a jagged hole.

Eli tested his weight on the unvarnished stairs, which were slippery with moss, but when the stairs held, he quickly joined me on the porch, once more taking shelter under my invisibility mesh. He pulled out a penlight. “Can anyone see this light if we’re cloaked?”

I shrugged, peering inside. “The floorboards are all twisted, and I’d rather not break an ankle, so let’s chance it.”

Eli cast the light around the entrance hall.

The interior walls were cold to the touch. The tattered remnants of wallpaper were sun-bleached almost colorless save for dark spores of mold that blossomed like a Rorschach test. Rusted wires hung from the ceiling, but any lighting had been stripped.

For all the general decay, the blackout curtains over the windows were nearly new. I jostled Eli’s elbow. “Dead giveaway.” I gave an exaggerated wink. “Or should I say undead giveaway.”

My partner groaned.

The stairs leading to the second floor listed dangerously so we headed downstairs first. The stairwell was narrow and twisty but at least the treads were solid. It led to a damp basement, which was just as deserted as the rest of the house.

Most of the space was taken up by an enormous ballroom, where sheets thrown over furniture cast menacing shadows. The warped floorboards with inlaid mother-of-pearl beckoned to be waltzed upon, to be spun, dazed and flushed, by an attractive partner across the room.

Leaving footprints in the thick layer of dust, we wandered through pillars still bearing faint traces of gold gilding. Thanks to a series of warped glass doors, which led out to a wild overgrown garden, there was just enough light to make out the ceiling boasting ornate crown molding.

I could almost hear strains of music over the musty air blowing through the broken panes.

Eli tugged on a crystal knob, but the glass door was stuck fast. “We’ll have to check out the top floor, but it looks like this place has been deserted for ages.”

I shook my head. “Why hang blackout curtains in a deserted house?”

“Or even just hang them in the entrance hall? Did you see a coffin with a sleeping vamp there? Because I sure as hell didn’t.” Eli was getting testy, but it wasn’t directed at me, and I didn’t take it personally. He toed at the dust, erasing a footprint. “We’re clearly the only ones who’ve been down here.”

I frowned, teasing out a thought. “Oh! That’s it. Come on.”

Grabbing his sleeve, I tugged him back up the stairs and into the entrance hall. “Look. The floor is dust-free.”

Eli frowned. “So?”

“That means it’s been walked on. Damien has been here, which explains the blackout curtains. Hopefully Ian is with him.”

“Then where are they now?”

“If I’m right?” I led him outside, turning to examine the rotting door barely holding on to the frame.

Eli prodded me impatiently. “If you’re right, what?”

After a moment, a front door zoomed out toward us like a 3D stereogram. The solid modern structure clicked into the frame, almost slyly, as if saying *Little old me? I was here all the time*. Even so its reveal didn’t give me the rush of watching a stage magician’s showy flourish. It was more a quiet delight that I had access to secrets. Like finding an old book in an archive that you needed or digging up a piece of information at just the right time.

Eli gasped.

“They’re still here.” Grinning, I pushed on the handle running vertically along the right side and swung the door open.