

CHAPTER
FOUR



I woke with a start in the darkness of my bedroom, the covers and delicate lace pillows thrown off the four-poster bed and the night air chilling my bare legs. Feeling exposed, I sat up and pulled my white cotton nightgown back down over my knees. I'd been dreaming of snakes, I realised with a shiver. Thousands and thousands of snakes. I wrapped my arms tightly around myself, wondering what it was that had so violently woken me from my nightmare.

Screeeeech.

Something was scratching against the glass pane of one of two narrow, arched gothic windows. I squinted through the darkness, and to my horror saw that something was there, beyond the mist – a shape – a human-like shape, but inverted. A pale white face sat against the glass, grinning at me upside down.

I gasped and covered my mouth.

It was Deus. The ancient Sanguine. At my window.

Don't open the window, I thought. *Don't!* Yet despite all ideas of self-preservation, I swung my legs over the side of the bed and my arms reached out towards the window, as if animated by an outside force. I noticed that the latch was undone. He could have easily pushed himself inside already, but he had

not. He was just there, floating outside my window. I pulled the window open and regarded the ancient Kathakano, face to inverted face. He continued to smile at me despite what appeared to be a lustful thirst. His fangs were fully extended. They were such big fangs, I thought. So fascinating to look at. I'd only seen them once before and that had not been a good moment at all. Now it was like looking at two shining tusks – surreal and beautiful.

Am I still dreaming? I wondered.

I thought I could feel the night air on my face. I thought I could feel myself standing on the hardwood floor. These sensations *felt* real but this simply could not be happening because I was somehow not alarmed by this predator at my window, and the sight of his enormous, thirsty fangs comforted and fascinated me.

‘Deus,’ I said in a voice that did not sound like mine.

‘Pandora English, The Seventh,’ he replied.

‘Please come in,’ I said before I could stop myself from speaking those three vital, unwise words. Sanguine were not invited into the main penthouse. He could not enter without my permission and somehow, for some reason, those words had just fallen from my lips, as natural and necessary as exhaling. ‘I am still dreaming, aren’t I?’ I said aloud as he drifted in my open window and turned in the air until he was the right way up, standing on the floor of my bedroom in his black suit, his black, collared shirt open to show a hint of pale, smooth chest.

His fangs. Just *look* at them.

‘Come,’ Deus said, and led me to my four-poster bed as casually as if he had done it a thousand times.

He will bite me now, won't he? I thought. That is what he does. Deus is a vampire, a killer. Somehow, though, I was relaxed about the proposition, as if I too had done this a thousand times, as if there was nothing at all to fear. It felt as if I was watching myself from a great, comforting distance. The frustratingly magnetic, smiling creature seated himself on the edge of my bed, ignoring its dishevelled state, and I sat next to him. Now I was smiling, and I thought, *Yes, this is a dream*, as the ancient vampire lifted his wrist to his mouth and tore it open with those white fangs. I did not flinch at the sight of his spilled blood. He offered his wrist to me, and I bent over his lap like an automaton, and suckled happily from his bleeding wrist like a hungry child. I could feel the blood dripping down my throat, and my chin, warm and sweet.

Ahhhhh . . .

The blood. It transported me.

And now I was back in the familiar realm of that hilltop in my dreams, my white nightgown billowing out in the wind. I was in the company of a great and beautiful ancient tree, the two of us basking in the wholesome rays of the sun, my arms outstretched like the great tree. Softly, something fell upon my head, and I saw that the green leaves upon the tree's branches had begun to wither and darken, turning brown with the season and preparing for death. One by one, the browning leaves floated down at my feet and shrivelled there, until, in decay, they joined the earth itself. I licked my lips and they tasted of warm, salty blood.

Time passed, the sun rotating across the great sky and the leaves rotting and the tree bending with the wind as she shed

her leaves and stood bare. The skies turned red then and the rays of the moon broke through, a crimson moon taking the sun's place. And still, I stood. Waiting. Waiting for something.

He is come.

On the horizon, a figure appeared. My soldier. This was a familiar part of my dream, and some distant part of my mind recognised it – acknowledged that I was indeed dreaming. *Lieutenant Luke*, I thought with some relief. But as he approached I could see that he was not himself. His mouth was fearsome and misshapen, his jaws stretched downward and his teeth pointed like a shark's. His flesh seemed to rot on his bones.

There was a rumble of hooves as his horse approached, and the tree at my back began to shrink into the ground, as if out of fear.

And then came the hissing. A terrible hissing.

Snakes. The tree was not a tree at all. It was a mass of snakes. *Thousands of cobras.*

