

Chapter One

She rested one hand on the rusted lip of the old dumpster. Sweat escaped between the fingers of her other hand as she tightly clenched her fist around the edge of a heavy-duty garbage bag. The bag developed stretch marks, its belly full of scrapings and waste from a long night of business. She tugged at the over filled brown blob, attempting to heave it into the large receptacle when she saw two profiles standing at the alley's entrance. The orange-yellow glow from the streetlight did little to expose their activities. The mere sight of them rattled her more than a California aftershock. She wondered how long they had been standing there. The thought wouldn't have crossed her mind twice if it hadn't been for the two bizarre women that had come into the restaurant earlier that evening. They sat in the furthest booth in the dimmest corner of the large eatery. A hollow aura circulated from the corner as the two women sat emotionless. They moved slowly, taking small sips from glasses half-full of cola and melting ice. The two of them ordered very little. Still they lingered for nearly two hours. Elena noticed them when they first entered the restaurant, which was insignificant, she noticed everyone. After forty-five minutes passed, it became apparent they were keen on her every move. Like sloth, they moved only when necessary, and even then their motions were drawn out and calculated--most often to watch Elena as she served other customers.

With a loud hollow thud the large bag came to rest inside the dumpster. She did her best to ignore her racing heart which drove perspiration to form on her brow--fear rolled beneath her skin. With little hesitation, she entered the back door of the restaurant without giving the shadows a second glance. When her shift was over in a few hours, she hoped the strangers would be gone.

Elena loved her job as a server at one of the most famous restaurants on Hollywood Boulevard. She received a modest paycheck, but with the tips she received from the celebrity regulars and the year round supply of tourist, she was able to live somewhat lavishly compared to how she lived back in El Paso, Texas. Her parents were

upset when she left school and a scholarship behind to risk her future on a movie career. Her father, a sergeant major in the Army, had spent the last twenty-five years working hard and tolerating years of separation from his family. He wanted to provide his children with opportunities that were unavailable to him after high school. Elena was the oldest of three girls and the first to have the chance to attend a university at eighteen. It had taken her father over ten years to attain his bachelor's degree. Her mother grew up in Juarez, Mexico and worked as a housekeeper from the age of fifteen.

Elena remembered the last night she saw them. It was two years ago at the bus station as she boarded the bus. Grasping at the blanket her Nana made for her when she was a little girl, the bus slowly pulled away from the station. Tears streamed down her mother's cheeks. Elena's father shook his head as he held his wife. He looked to the sky for divine intervention. Two long years later, the closest she had been to a movie career was a small role in a commercial, low budget movie that never made it into a theater. Months after the movie completed filming and edits, Elena learned it was selling on the street as underground pornography. Even though she struggled to progress toward her goals, she enjoyed her independence, promising herself daily she would continue to pursue her dream.

She worked a lot of late hours at the eatery. It was ten after midnight as Elena walked down the boulevard toward the nearest bus stop. Every night she walked along the Walk of Fame imagining Elena Santiago inscribed on a shiny gold star. According to her watch, it was twelve-twenty seven, and her bus should be arriving in the next five minutes. Five minutes passed, then ten, twenty, and finally a half hour became a useless part of history. She realized she would have to walk the nearly two miles to her small apartment. She hated walking home during the late hours of the night. On occasion, the late night darkness brought out the weirdoes, drunks, and homeless. They paraded the dimly lit city streets, scavenging the streets and alleyways for sustenance and begging for money.

A thick layer of grey clouds loomed over southern California. The unusually muggy night may have derailed the nightly vagabond activities. Along the way, Elena got an eerie feeling someone followed closely behind her. At one point she was sure someone had been close enough behind her to fan her hair away from her shoulders. She walked faster, glancing in the windows of darkened shops and parked cars attempting to get a glimpse of what or who followed. Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a blurry flash. A quick moving object crossed behind her and hid near a parked vehicle. Elena had no idea what to do next. She tried to tell herself her imagination got the better of her. Perhaps only a stray dog sniffed the fragrance of salmon or steak left on her clothing and her fright filled chill stemmed from the whispering moist breeze and exhaustion. Just a few feet ahead, Elena saw the glow of light coming from one of the open convenience stores. When she arrived at the shop, she walked in without looking over her shoulder. Elena stepped apprehensively through the store until she stood in the aisle furthest from the entrance. Keeping her eyes on the doorway, she waited to see who or what passed. It was hardly a surprise to see the two strangers from the eatery. Her gut wrenched. As they crept past the entrance, their heads turned simultaneously. Both made direct eye contact with Elena. Their blackened eyes were dark soulless pits. Elena felt as if she was looking into the shadows at the back of their skulls. She clumsily ducked behind the canned goods knocking a few cans off the shelf.

“Hey what are you doing over there?” the cashier yelled across the store.

Elena looked outside one last time before answering. “Nothing, I’m sorry. I’ll pick them up.”

Elena stood in the doorway of the store and stared out. She took a deep breath, apologized one last time to the cashier, and stepped outside. She turned first to her left and then to her right. Elena was relieved to see the women were gone. Unless she took a shortcut through a long alley, about another half mile lay between the convenience store and her apartment. The alley trailed behind a group of apartments two blocks from

the convenience store. Again, she felt the cold rush of fear cramping her joints as she attempted to speed up her pace. Elena refused to turn around. She knew her pursuers stalked closely. If she looked over her shoulder, Elena would have known the two women were within an arms reach. They moved with the wind, silent and with little effort. At any moment, the devious strangers could have snatched her. Their instincts made them patient for the exact second when Elena's body was at its ripest. The point in time when her heart pumped erratically and her life's energy was so full of horror that when they bit into her flesh her vital fluid would spill into their mouths as uninhibited as water from an overflowing dam. It was all part of the game to them, a strategic element of the hunter. They consumed the fear radiating from Elena's body.

Once she reached the alley, it was a straight shot to her front door. Elena forced herself to believe she had reached a semi-safe point in her journey. If anything were to happen, she presumed her screams would echo amongst the walls, encouraging one of the tenants in the apartments above to call the police. Turning the corner into the alley, she glanced over her shoulder to determine the distance separating her and the two menacing women. The two anomalous strangers had disappeared into the darkness once again. Elena saw the small light from the front porch of her apartment. A quarter of the way into the alley, she began to hear a sound similar to whispers all around her. She marched through the darkness observing everything that hid in the shadows. Her eyes filled with terrifying illusions. Every box, garbage can, or heap of trash became a threat. There was no one there. She turned toward her apartment and gazed intently into the beacon of light. She sauntered steadily, nearly running. Elena's ears filled with the unnerving ring of whispers. The whispering grew louder, sounding more and more like hissing, or the unmistakable rattle of someone shivering. She looked over her shoulder again. This time two shadows appeared behind her at the corner where she entered the alley. She heard their laughter as they moved closer and closer. A powerful gust blew by. Suddenly a blackened figure appeared next to Elena shoving her to the ground. As she rolled on the cool pavement kicking and screaming, the two women grabbed her legs, reeling her in like a hooked salmon. The women's eyes were darker than the darkest night, resembling black shiny marble. They bore into Elena's soul. Both hissed--

exposing their jagged demonic fangs. When Elena felt the icy fire of pain arch through her body, she knew she was going to die. The monsters moaned as they cut into Elena's limbs, ripping away the firm flesh. She closed her eyes as the demons sucked blood from her wounds. She tried to scream. Her muscles cramped from the lack of blood flow. She grew weaker and weaker. The two ferocious women continued to pull tissue away from her legs.

Cars drove by on the narrow street in front of Elena's apartment. No one heard her screams. Suddenly the two beasts relinquished their bloodletting. Both ran off giggling playfully as a man approached. Elena's tears blurred her vision. She silently thanked the mysterious man for arriving before the two demons had eaten her completely. She lay paralyzed. Droplets of blood escaped from her mutilated legs--pooling underneath shredded tears at the back of her arms. She whispered for the man to help her. Elena could not see him clearly. As he moved cunningly toward her, she realized his soothing eyes hypnotized her. Something about him made her feel relaxed even after all that had happen only seconds before. He kneeled close to her. Softly grabbing her hair, he yanked her head back exposing her neck. She could feel the warmth of his sharp fangs as they pierced her skin. Elena struggled to breathe as the man sucked harder and harder. Slipping in and out of consciousness, she tried to reach up to pull the man away from her neck. His thirst drained the little strength Elena had left. She heard him purring as her eyes closed. When she opened them again, the man had disappeared. In the humid heat of the summer night, the chill of death coursed through Elena's young body. She took two slow gasping breaths and then she breathed no more. Elena lay lifeless--eyes wide open, fixated on the small light on the front porch of her apartment.