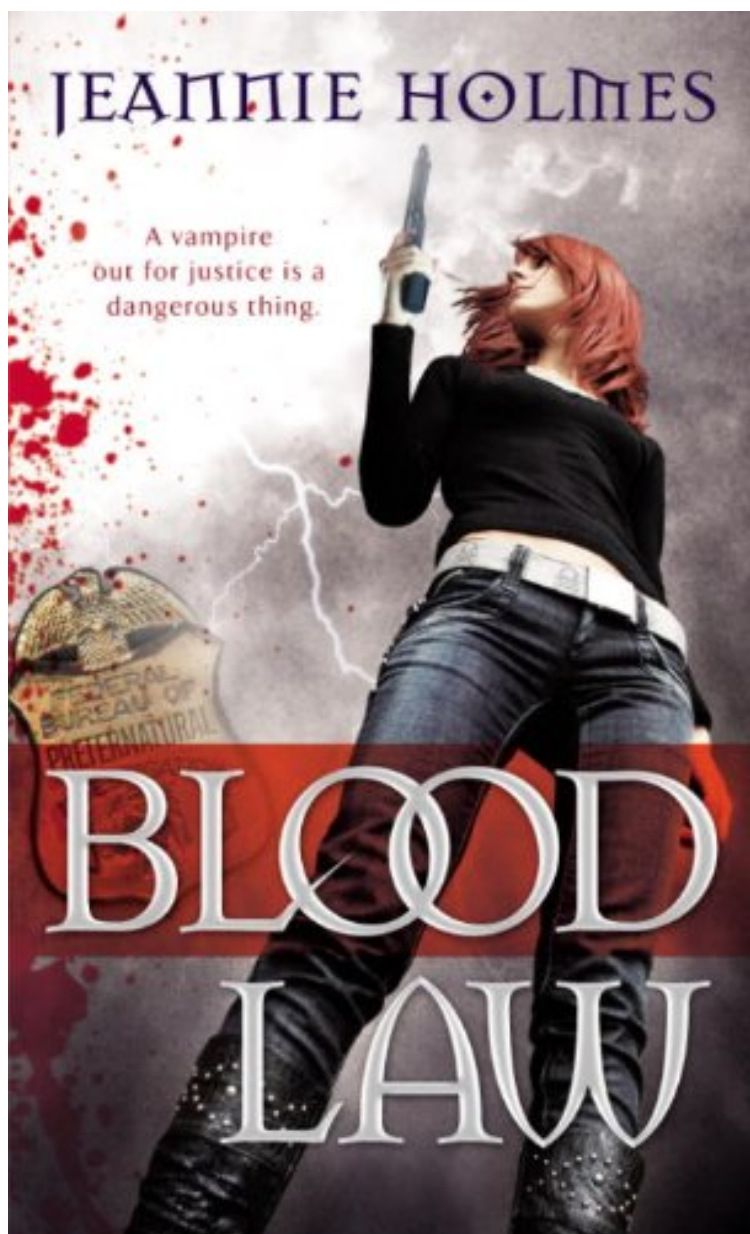


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# Blood Law



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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurTo stop a vampire killer, shell have to slay her own demons first.A provocative and savvy vampire, Alexandra Sabian moves to the sleepy hamlet of Jefferson, Mississippipopulation 6,000, half vampiresto escape the demons lurking in her past. As an enforcer for the Federal Bureau of Preternatural Investigations (FBPI), Alex must maintain the uneasy peace between her kind and humans, including Jeffersons bigoted sheriff, whod be happy to see all vampires banished from town. Then really dead vamps start turning upheaded, crucified, and defanged, the same gruesome manner in which Alexs father was

murdered decades ago. For Alex, the professional has become way too personal. Things get even more complicated when the FBPI sends in some unnervingly sexy backup: Alex's onetime mentor, lover, and fianc, Varik Baudelaire. Still stinging from the betrayal that ended their short-lived engagement, Alex is determined not to give in to the temptation that soon threatens to short-circuit her investigation. But as the vamp body count grows and the public panic level rises, Varik may be Alex's only hope to stop a relentless killer who's got his own score to settle and his own bloody past to put right.

From the Paperback edition.

Chapter One

October 13

Alexandra Sabian hated cemeteries. During her twenty-plus years as an Enforcer with the Federal Bureau of Preternatural Investigation, she'd been in far too many. Some thought cemeteries were calm and peaceful places, but for her it was like stepping into a waking nightmare. Blue and white emergency lights strobed across the landscape, casting strange shadows on the ground. The pulsing wash created the illusion of movement in the corners of her eyes, which relentlessly searched for the shadows that moved against the direction of the light. Crime scenes attracted both the living and the dead, and it was her job to listen to both. She pulled her shoulder-length auburn hair into a crude ponytail and secured it with a paper hair cap similar to what surgeons would wear in an operating room. She carefully stepped into a disposable Tyvek jumpsuit and slipped paper foot coverings over her boots. Preservation of the scene was vital, especially with outdoor sites. In today's world of forensic science, a stray hair or fiber could make or break a case, and this was one case she wanted to get right. The protective gear she donned was to prevent cross-contamination and had the added benefits of rendering the wearer androgynous, giving the appearance of multiple Pillsbury Doughboys prowling the scene. She signed in her name and badge number with the communications officer responsible for keeping track of everyone who entered and left the scene. Steeling herself against what awaited her on the other side of the yellow tape barrier, she ducked under the barricade and picked her way through the headstones, snapping a pair of latex gloves into place as she walked. Murder, my ass, someone said in a raised voice from a group of uniformed officers huddled in the darkness. Killing vampires should be considered a public service, if you ask me. Alex recognized the voice as belonging to Harvey Manser, Nassau County's duly elected sheriff and all-around jackass. His dislike of vampires, and even more so of her, was well documented, and the feeling was mutual. Tonight, however, she wasn't in the mood to respond to the obvious bait he provided. She ignored the comment and kept walking. Even though it'd been forty years since vampires her people had revealed themselves to humanity, relations between the two species remained tense. Progress had been made in educating the human population about the difference between real vampires and those portrayed by Hollywood, but some of the old fears remained and combined with the new. She could understand their fear. Suddenly waking up to discover that humanity wasn't the only intelligent life on the planet must have been quite a shock. Floodlights illuminated the scene, and she blinked against their glare as she joined the group of similarly attired detectives and officers surrounding a freshly discovered body. Centuries of evolution had made her entire race photophobic a misnomer because they didn't actually fear light. Instead, they experienced varying degrees of eye discomfort or pain, depending on the amount of brightness. Like most vampires, she thought wearing sunglasses during the day was a fair trade for the superior night vision she gained. Not that it helped her much under the glare of police spotlights.

Alex. A short Doughboy wannabe with a round caramel face broke from the group. Im sorry to call you out in the middle of the night like this. Alex shrugged, already focusing on the scene before her. Night. Day. Doesn't really matter. It's not like killers punch a time clock, right? Lieutenant Tasha Lockwood sighed. No, I guess not. As the liaison officer between the human-operated Jefferson Police and Nassau County Sheriff's departments and the FBPI, Tasha had worked closely with Alex for the six years Alex had been living in the tiny southwestern Mississippi town. While neither of them would categorize their relationship as a friendship, they'd built a level of mutual respect and understanding that both found comfortable. Alex indicated the body with a thrust of her chin. So, what've you got for me? Same scenario as before, Tasha answered, leading her around the scene's perimeter. Caucasian male vampire, nude, no signs of defensive wounds on hands or arms, no blood present at the scene, cross-shaped stake driven through the heart, and no head, Alex finished as they stopped beside a tombstone, in front of which the body lay. The corpse lay on its back with its arms stretched out at shoulder height, feet bound with bright yellow nylon rope, in a classic crucifix position. The ragged neck stump abutted to the sleek black granite tombstone, so it appeared as though the marker itself was the body's head. The image of another body, bloodied and lying crumpled beside a gravestone, pushed its way into her consciousness. She closed her eyes and forced the memory to retreat into the darkness of the past once more. Opening her eyes, she looked over the scene and noted the leather pouch draped around the arms of the cross-

stake. Who called it in? Anonymous tip came into the main switchboard at JPD, Tasha answered. The nine-one-one system automatically logs the numbers of calls received. Switchboard doesn't. Photos been taken? Yeah, it's all yours. Alex skirted around the tombstone, careful not to disturb the body's position, and knelt beside it, inhaling deeply. A vampire's sense of smell was ten times that of a human, and she found a complex kaleidoscope of scents: the cleanness of pine from the trees hidden in the darkness beyond the floodlights. The earthy smells of a nearby freshly dug grave. The stink of sweat mixed with adrenaline from the humans moving at the periphery of her vision. Leaning close to the corpse, she inhaled again and fought the urge to sneeze. Body smells of decay and a faint trace of ammonia. Ammonia? Tasha echoed. Didn't you say the same about the other bodies? According to the ME's report, our killer scrubbed the bodies with an ammonia mixture, presumably to limit the amount of evidence we could gain. It also keeps insect activity to a minimum. Crap. Well, that makes our job all the more difficult. Yeah, but it also tells us that our subject has at least a working knowledge of forensics, which is one more reason for us to be careful when handling the scene. Plucking the leather pouch from the cross-stake, Alex pried the cords open and dumped the contents into her gloved hand. A golden wedding band. A Mississippi driver's license. Two bloodstained pieces of what appeared to be ivory. Are those teeth? Tasha asked, peering over Alex's shoulder. Fangs, she said, poking them with her gloved finger. Disgust rose within her. Vampires didn't grow fangs until puberty, when hormonal changes forced the body to undergo its physical transformation from child to adult, and they were permanent dental fixtures, not the retractable kind favored by film and fiction. Until that time, human and vampire children were virtually indistinguishable. Defanging a vampire was the equivalent of forcibly castrating a human—a brutal practice that was reported all too frequently. She dropped the fangs back into the leather pouch and examined the ring. It was a plain golden band with no inscription or other identifying marks. She checked the corpse's left hand and saw a clear delineation in the skin coloration of the third finger that matched the width of the band. Our victim was married, she said, and added the ring to the pouch. Interesting, Tasha said. Our last vic was single. Four days prior, Alex and Tasha had worked a similar scene across town. The body of Grant Williams, an employee of Phancy Photos Studio and Video, was discovered in a loading bay at Kellner Hardware. Williams had been positioned in the same manner, and the pouch draped over his cross-stake contained fangs, a blood-smeared photo of the victim and his girlfriend, and his driver's license. A tattoo on his lower back had helped them confirm his identity. However, Williams wasn't the first body. Nine days before, a startled security guard at a rest stop north of town had found the body of an as-yet-unidentified vampire in one of the men's room stalls. Alex held the new license in her hand, turning it toward the light. Eric Stromheimer, age ninety-seven, address is four thirteen Cork Lane. She glanced at Tasha. He's local, just like Williams. You'll notify the family? I hate this shit. Alex slipped the driver's license back into the pouch. Notifying families that a loved one was dead was never easy, and when that loved one had been murdered, it was even worse. She stood and slowly began searching the ground around the body for anything that appeared out of place. Evening, ladies, a young man pulling a gurney said as he approached. Hey, Jeff, Alex replied without glancing up. May I be the first to say that the marshmallow-man look is not flattering on either of you? Jeffery Stringer, assistant medical examiner for Nassau County, announced with a broad grin. Tasha launched into a lecture about proper conduct at a crime scene, to which Jeff alternately smirked and chuckled, and Alex rolled her eyes. Twenty-three, long-limbed and skinny, and with delusions of being a ladies man bouncing in his head, she knew Jeff was more talk than action, and even though his comments often bordered on inappropriate, she just as often found he brought a much-needed levity to an otherwise gruesome occasion. Besides, Tasha was wrapping up her lecture and glancing at her watch. How can you possibly be so damn chipper standing in a graveyard on a weeknight? Jeff grinned as he laid out a black body bag next to their victim. Caffeine, sugar, and sex. Not necessarily in that order. Tasha groaned and shook her head. Alex snorted and paused in her search. That's more information than I needed, Jeff. He shrugged and worked a pair of latex gloves over his long fingers. The lieutenant asked. Alex chuckled and resumed her search of the surrounding area. She circled the perimeter marked by the tape and on each subsequent pass moved closer to the center point. Eric Stromheimer's headless body. Jeff whistled softly as he squatted beside the headstone for a closer look. Another decap for your collection, huh, Alex? I'd prefer the collection to end with three, thank you. So would Doc Hancock. Jeff rose and grabbed a large case from the gurney. By the way, I called him, and he's not going to be happy if this interferes with his New Orleans plans this weekend. Granddaughter's wedding? Tasha asked. Jeff nodded. He said if he misses seeing her walk down the aisle, then he was going on strike. In the meantime, he'd be able to take a look at your latest acquisition in the morning. Great, Alex muttered. That means he should have the autopsy done by

the time the cavalry arrives. Cavalry? Tasha faced her. What cavalry? I called FBPI headquarters after Doc Hancock gave his findings on our last victim. A couple of forensic techs and a mobile lab will be here tomorrow. Once they arrive, we'll be able to process evidence quicker. Thanks for the heads-up. Irritation added a hard edge to Tasha's words. As the liaison officer between the Bureau and local enforcement, I'd like to know these things in advance. Alex frowned at the detective. Sorry, Tasha, but between notifying the Williams family, tracking suspects, and all the corpses piling up, I guess it slipped my mind. You don't have to be snarky. I'm asking for a little communication, that's all. Alex could understand Tasha's annoyance, but not telling her of the mobile lab's arrival earlier had been an honest mistake. She'd been surprised by Chief Enforcer Damian Albere's willingness to send the lab to Jefferson. The Bureau had three mobile labs, and all were precious commodities, usually assigned to large or high-priority cases. The fact that he'd agreed to send one to Jefferson for only two bodies now made her uneasy and left her wondering what Damian knew that she didn't. Her footsteps slowed and then stilled as something in the grass beside an adjacent tombstone caught her eye. She squatted beside the marker for a closer look and called to the others over her shoulder. I need tweezers and a small evidence envelope. Tasha appeared at her shoulder. Find something? Alex accepted a tiny manila envelope and a pair of long tweezers that looked more like small tongs from Jeff. Kneeling down, she pointed to a wad of paper and waited as he snapped a series of pictures with a digital camera before seizing the tiny ball with her tweezers. She held it up for closer inspection.

Looks like a gum wrapper. A gum wrapper isn't that unusual, Tasha said. Considering we're in a publicly accessible area, it could belong to anyone. Alex moved it below her nose and inhaled. Smell anything? No, but this is the one thing close to the body that was also near the others. Are you thinking the killer dropped it? It may be nothing, and it may be just the thing we need to break the case. She slipped the wad into the envelope, sealed and labeled it, and handed both to Jeff. Alex stifled a yawn but was unable to avoid a full body stretch as she stood. Even though the night was young and dawn hours away, she could see the subtly shifting colors along the eastern skyline and feel the changes in the air. Microcurrents swirled around her.

Their molecules vibrated in response to the gradual changes in the sun's and moon's positions in the sky. Shadows faded from black to gray in tiny increments too faint for human eyes to detect. One shadow danced along the edges of her vision, drifting against the slight breeze that caressed her cheek. The shadow elongated, seemed to take on more mass, then quivered and faded, becoming less distinct. It moved away from the floodlights, returning to the darkness. Alex recognized the shadow as one of the unquiet spirits haunting the cemetery. Most were harmless and unseen to human eyes. But she wasn't human, and her own close encounter with death six years previously had heightened her awareness of the spirit realm. She often wondered if she'd be able to see them at all if it weren't for her innate empathic abilities and her talent for psychometry—the ability to gain knowledge and visions of past events through physical contact with objects, including bodies such as the one she now left behind—her gift she'd possessed since birth, and a rarity among vampires. More than once she'd wished for the ability to control her talents, to direct them and use them to aid in her work as an Enforcer. Unfortunately, control was something she lacked, and her visions of the past came at random and in disjointed fragments, leaving her to muddle through the interpretations. She pushed all thoughts of the shadows aside, and watched Jeff as he placed paper bags over Eric Stromheim's hands to preserve any trace evidence that might be present. However, a cursory look earlier had shown no visible signs of trace under his fingernails. She could only hope that once the mobile lab arrived, the techs would be able to find something usable. Alex rummaged through Jeff's kit and found two small plastic evidence bags.

Once again she opened the leather pouch that had been draped around the cross-stake and inserted Stromheim's driver's license into one bag and his wedding ring into the other. The fangs remained in the pouch and would be sent on to the ME's office with the body. As she labeled the bags to establish a chain of evidence, her stomach rumbled loudly and she sighed. Sounds like someone's in need of a break. Jeff's voice carried more than a hint of humor, and Alex blushed. Yeah, I guess so. The wind shifted and carried the smell of blood to her. Her eyes found and lingered on the bloody stump that once supported a head, and she licked her lips. Her gaze shifted from the body to Jeff, locking onto the young man's neck and the pulsing vein beneath the surface. Her stomach rumbled again. Whoa. Tasha's voice intruded into Alex's mind as plainly as the woman's hand now latched on to her arm. I think it's time for you to go. Alex focused on Tasha's face. The detective's caramel skin pulsed with life, and Alex's eyes slid involuntarily to the woman's neck. She pulled away, forcing herself to look at the ground. Yeah, I think you're right. I'll wrap things up here. Alex nodded, picked up the two plastic bags containing the driver's license and ring, and headed for the yellow tape barrier. She removed her protective gear as she made the trek back to the scene's entry point. She dropped the

clothing items into a bag provided by the communications officer and signed out, indicating that she retained possession of the two items now nestled in the inner pocket of her leather jacket. Human officers huddled in the strobing wash of blue and white lights, stealing furtive glances and whispering as she passed. Being the only Enforcer assigned to police Jeffersons vampire population made her a minor celebrity, as if her name alone wasn't enough. She was the youngest child and only daughter of Bernard Sabian, whose brutal murder in the spring of 1968 in Louisville, Kentucky, had led to vampires announcing their presence to humanity after centuries of secrecy. She'd been five when her father's decapitated body was found with a wooden stake through his heart. Bernard Sabian had become an instant martyr to the vampires, and the community as a whole had taken up the rallying cry of Never again. They offered up Alex, along with her older brother and their mother, as the paramount image of lives shattered by violence, ignorance, and hatred. But seven years later, the Braxton Bill, named for the senator who introduced it to Congress, passed and vampires became legally recognized citizens of the United States. Once the human government finally gave them equal protection under the law, the Sabians were forced out of the spotlight. Bernard Sabian and his family had served their purposes. The vampire community gave them pats on the back and quietly shuffled them off to relative obscurity, which suited the Sabians just fine. Seven years after Bernard's death, his family had finally been allowed to grieve, but Alex's father's murder still haunted her. She hurried past the final group of officers. The scent of fear and adrenaline drifted up from the crowd and spiked her oncoming blood-hunger. Holding her breath, she trotted the last few yards to her Jeep and climbed inside. Her hands shook as she reached into the glove compartment. It'd been three days since she'd properly slaked her blood-hunger. If she didn't do it soon, the tremors would worsen. Her concentration would start to slip. The hunger would gnaw at her until it consumed her thoughts, and the spiral would deepen, drawing her down, down, down, into madness. A triumphant cry escaped her lips when she shook the carton she'd pulled from the glove box and she heard the distinctive rattle within. She ripped open the carton and dumped the single vial into her hand. Thick liquid, one clear and the other a pale pink, sloshed within the tube. She applied enough pressure to the tube to rupture the thin gelatin barrier between the liquids and shook it to combine them. The mixture turned a dark red, and the chemical reaction warmed the new compound until it matched her body's temperature. She ripped the black stopper from the tube and greedily drank its contents. The fluid coated her tongue and throat like oil. A metallic tang failed to completely cover the bitter taste of chemicals. Alex sucked the last drop from the tube and then exhaled loudly, like a swimmer surfacing from a deep dive. She hated Vlad's Tears, the synthetic blood product vampires used as a stopgap measure when a human donor was unavailable. It wouldn't rid her of the blood-hunger, only delay it for a time. She shoved the drained tube back into its box. At least her hands had stopped trembling. She cranked up her Jeep and rolled down her window, allowing the cool air to permeate the suddenly warm interior. The scent of pines, adrenaline, and blood wafted to her on the night breeze, and she felt a sharp hunger pang in her belly. Damn it, she muttered, and threw the SUV into gear. Only when she was out of the cemetery and away from humans did she allow herself to breathe freely. Varik Baudelaire peered through the window inset in his Victorian-style home's front door and swore softly before thumbing the latch on the dead bolt. The door swung open and he stared at the huge black mass standing on his porch. What the hell do you want? Nice to see you, too, Damian Albrez, Chief Enforcer for the Federal Bureau of Preternatural Investigation, said in a rumbling bass voice. You going to invite me in? Do I have a choice? Not really. Varik stepped back, holding the door wide, and gestured for the vampire to enter. Damian ducked his bald head beneath the stained-glass transom and entered the foyer. Standing a few inches over seven feet with a barrel chest and biceps nearly as large as Varik's thighs, he was an imposing figure long before he ever flashed his fangs. He tapped the edge of a file against one meaty palm. We need to talk. Well, I didn't think you were here for milk and cookies. Varik closed the door, slipped around his oldest friend, and passed through an open archway leading to the front parlor. He'd been slowly restoring the Victorian manor on the outskirts of Louisville in the five years since his retirement from the Bureau. Working on the house gave him something to do besides dwell on the past and the woulda-coulda-shouldas of his life. While much of the first floor was complete, the second floor was in varying stages of demolition and reconstruction. On the first floor, he'd retained the original moldings around the dormant fireplace and high ceilings throughout, and the heart-of-pine wooden floors would glow a warm gold in the sunlight. Much of the home's color scheme remained true to the Victorian era, but the walls of the front parlor were painted a light gray and the furnishings a mixture of burgundies, grays, and cream colors that brought him comfort. Comfort he wished he felt as he settled into a wingback chair and watched as Damian perched on the edge of a sleek burgundy leather sofa. So, to what do I Damian slid the file he held

across the glass-top coffee table to Varik. He stared at the FBPI seal emblazoned on the folder but made no move to pick it up. He met Damians steady gaze and shook his head. Im not Pick it up. Look at it. Varik sighed and grabbed the file. He flipped it open and was greeted with a full-color photo of a decapitated corpse legs bound with yellow nylon rope, arms outstretched, and a cross-shaped stake driven through its chest. More photos followed. Wide-angle shots of a loading bay. Close-ups of the cross-stake. Another wide view of the scene, with a woman standing beside the body, a mix of horror and recognition on her face. A yawning pit opened beneath him, threatening to devour him, and he closed the file. When were these taken? Four days ago. Varik glanced at the folder in his hands. His heart now pounded in his chest, and it sounded like a drumbeat in the stillness of the room. She needs you, Damian said softly. Did she ask for me? No, she asked for a mobile lab and two forensic techs. Varik smirked. Then she doesnt need me. Light from a tableside lamp seemed to be absorbed by the blue-black of Damians ebony skin, giving him the appearance of a humanoid black hole. He nodded toward the file. That was the second. The first showed up over a week ago, and another body was discovered about an hour ago in a cemetery. You cant possibly think this Varik held up the folder has anything to do with Bernards murder. Damian shrugged. A good investigator doesnt rule out anything. Varik tossed the file onto the table and rose to pace to the archway. When he turned, he spread his arms wide. Alex hasnt asked for me. After He paused, fighting the flood of memories that crowded his mind. He pulled in a deep cleansing breath and released it slowly. After what happened between us, she wouldnt ask for me, even if she did think I could be of some use. Shes in over her head. He threw his hands up in frustration. Im retired! Dont you understand that? I dont work for you anymore. Damian drew himself up to his full height and produced a silver badge and identification card from a pants pocket. He set them both on top of the file. I took the liberty of reinstating you with full pay and benefits. Director of Special Operations assigned to the Jefferson, Mississippi, field office. Damian. Mobile lab leaves from Bureau headquarters in two hours. Damian rounded the coffee table and strode toward him. He paused as he drew even with Varik and gave him a meaningful stare. I expect you to be there and ready to go to Jefferson tonight, he said, and then continued toward the door. Do I have a choice? Damians coal-black eyes settled on him, and the vampire smiled, showing the full extent of his fangs. Not really. The door closed behind Damian, and Varik crossed to the coffee table and slid the folder from under the badge and ID card. He pulled out the photo showing the entire crime scene, dropped the file on the table, and sank onto the sofa as he studied the woman in the picture. Alexandra Sabian stood beside a vampires corpse, wind billowing her hair around her face, a moment frozen in time. Her emerald-green eyes, visible in the wash of lights from the loading bay, seemed to stare back at him. He knew all too well that the past had a habit of intruding on the present. Sometimes it was for the best, but more often it was better for the past to remain in the past. Now he had an opportunity to atone for some of his past by intruding on Alexs present, something hed sworn hed never do unless she asked for him, which she hadnt. But if by going to Jefferson he kept part of her past where it belonged, he owed it to the Sabian family to try. Ready or not, here I come, he said, and shoved the photo back into the file before heading upstairs to pack. Presentation de l'diteur To stop a vampire killer, shell have to slay her own demons first. A provocative and savvy vampire, Alexandra Sabian moves to the sleepy hamlet of Jefferson, Mississippi population 6,000, half vampiresto escape the demons lurking in her past. As an enforcer for the Federal Bureau of Preternatural Investigations (FBPI), Alex must maintain the uneasy peace between her kind and humans, including Jeffersons bigoted sheriff, whod be happy to see all vampires banished from town. Then really dead vamps start turning up beheaded, crucified, and defanged, the same gruesome manner in which Alexs father was murdered decades ago. For Alex, the professional has become way too personal. Things get even more complicated when the FBPI sends in some unnervingly sexy backup: Alexs onetime mentor, lover, and fianc, Varik Baudelaire. 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