

Chapter 1

Crash! Then total darkness. . . .

The unmistakable scent of coolant acted as smelling salts, shocking Alexandra back to consciousness. Her first visual was that of the car stereo's display. She had only been out for a minute or so, according to the clock.

It was not the end that Alexandra had foreseen. Letting him in had changed everything. She could not begin to conceive what effects this would have on the future. Her thoughts were racing, almost as fast as had the engine of her crumpled, tan Lexus. How would Catherine know what to do? Who would help guide her daughter down the right path? A single tear ran down her cheek, intersecting with the blood she could feel trickling down her temple. Alexandra wasn't ready to leave Catherine all alone. She needed more time.

Alexandra hadn't even taken the opportunity to tell Catherine who she really was, her importance during the years to come, and now it was too late. How could she have been so careless? Things had already been set in motion. It was so obvious to her. But would Catherine be able to read the signs? It was *her* responsibility to protect that which is most precious, and now she had failed.

It's in God's hands now, Alexandra realized while struggling to remain conscious. At least they were well hidden, out of his reach, but she must not think of that now. He may hear. So she cleared her mind of it.

Alexandra could feel the end was near and feared what he still had in store for her. She had tried to get away from him once she recognized who he was, his dubious influence, his intoxicating ways, but too little, too late.

She didn't know how, but he had found her again. Alexandra hadn't stayed in the same place, not even a day, for quite some time now. Could he still feel her, despite all the other precautions she had taken?

Alexandra flinched, startled by high-pitched scratching against metal. The sound grew louder as her pain grew stronger. The unnerving grating stopped without warning, only to be replaced with the crash of breaking glass a few seconds later.

She moaned in pain, attempting to unfasten her seatbelt, shards raining down from behind her. She was desperate to fling open the door and run away to safety, but Alexandra was unable to move. Her body was not responding. Every inch of her ached. Trapped, like a caged animal.

Her heart beat faster when she felt his familiar lips, which used to thrill her but now caused panic, caressing the right side of her neck. His velvet kiss deepening, causing her essence to tremble with both pleasure and fear.

"Oh no . . . please don't," she begged, suspecting what might come next. But what method would he use? He could choose to smother her with the deflated airbag. Maybe light a match, igniting the fuel she could smell leaking from her vehicle. "You've won, now leave. Let me die in peace."

There was silence for a moment, but then a deep voice whispered, his warm breath in her ear, "Now what kind of boyfriend would I be if I didn't put you out of your misery? I've missed you so, my raven-haired beauty."

She couldn't fathom how anyone could be so cruel. Alexandra prayed it would be over quickly.

He sensed this of course, which is why he would prolong it for as long as nature would allow.

Terror gripped her when, with great force, the driver's seat was jerked backward onto the back seat of her vehicle. Alexandra could no longer feel her legs, which were now pinned under the dash, as the panther first began tearing into her neck, then traveling the rest of her body with scrupulous intensity.

Alexandra tried not to cry out, didn't want to give him the satisfaction, but had lost control of her actions. There was no way to escape, nothing she could do but lay there in excruciating agony and wait to succumb.

The panther's black coat was beginning to glisten with her blood as loud, horrific screams drifted off into the darkness along the desolate highway. No one to hear her suffering or come to her aid.

Alexandra sought to transcend to another place. She was cold and tired. Her voice had left her. Glimpses of ruby splatter were perceived through blurred vision. Before losing consciousness, she swore she could see the panther flaunt a facetious grin, glaring at her with icy, steel-blue orbs containing no compassion or sympathy. Just pure, unadulterated evil.

Her eyes began to glaze over. The panther stopped its attack to watch in anticipation. What neither of them realized in those final moments - it was not the end, but a new beginning. . . .