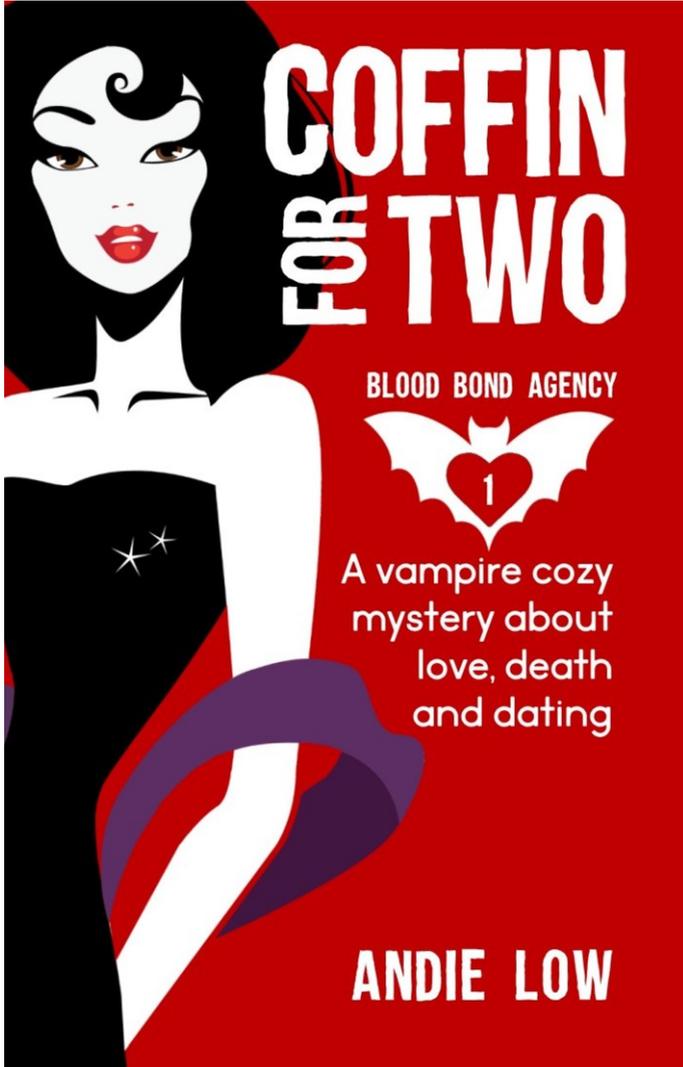


**CHAPTER ONE
TASTER**



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Eva straightens in the large leather chair behind her grandmother’s desk at the Blood Bond Agency, her hands splayed on the ornate inlay top.

Nope, she still feels like an imposter.

As she does every spring, Georgia De Silva has left for two weeks in Greece to “recharge her batteries”. As on previous departures, Eva’s grandmother had muttered something about wanting to embrace the Mediterranean diet. She was still going on about it when they nailed shut the lid of her specially designed travel coffin.

To be fair though, on returning from previous jaunts, her Georgia did look centuries younger. But, having seen her grandmother in action, Eva doubts this had anything to do with salads featuring copious amounts of feta cheese and virgin olive oil.

Rather it’s more likely the ancient vampire helping herself to the blood of virile young Greek men that’s responsible for the improvement in skin tone. It isn’t a beauty treatment Eva has tried herself, happier drinking from a mug than a human; a tricky proposition before the advent of blood banks.

Eva’s gaze darts around the office, taking in the trappings of success. She’s struggling to believe she’s in charge. But with them unable to locate Eva’s parents, there’d been no option.

Georgia’s vacation time was sacrosanct; delay was not an option, her granddaughter would ‘have to do’. Hardly a vote of confidence, and now that she’s sitting in the hot seat, Eva fully supports her grandmother’s misgivings.

The only plus is that Georgia had cleared her diary for when she was away. All Eva has to contend with is taking bookings for her grandmother’s return and making sure the place doesn’t burn down.

It should be a piece of cake, right?

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And here she sits Monday evening, and her first night on the job. The agency is closed at weekends to give them a break from the demands of clients.

And some of those clients can be incredibly demanding, especially when it comes to the matriarchs of the older clans. Eva scans the ornately framed portraits that pepper the back wall of her grandmother's office.

That the eyes of every single 'client' follow her is as creepy as it sounds. She'd happily turn them all to face the wall if it weren't for the chance one of them would arrive unannounced. Eva will deal with creepy over scary any night.

Eva straightens the pens and pencils on the enormous Cherrywood desk for the third time in half an hour. They hadn't needed straightening on either of the earlier occasions, but this hadn't stopped her.

While some young vampires would jump at the chance to be in charge of a marriage agency as prestigious as BBA, Eva isn't one of them. She'd much rather be upstairs, in her own office, managing the family's property portfolio as she usually did.

Calling in a plumber or electrician to fix something was child's play when compared to arranging blood bonds. Even collecting rent arrears was a doddle compared to that.

No, it's her parents who should be here running the show. Instead they're off who knew where with eyes only for each other.

Their blood bond was such that it left them oblivious to all else, making them pretty much useless when it came to running a business. It's not easy to match other couples when you're so besotted with your own life partner that even breathing is a challenge. In their favour is that with of both of them being haemaphytes—vampires born—breathing is pretty much optional.

It's also one of the reasons Eva has been raised from birth by her grandmother. Better this than die of starvation and neglect because your parents had forgotten you existed.

Eva looks up from the regimental line-up of pens and pencils and out to reception. The darkly panelled space is mercifully empty. Likewise the oxblood leather Chesterfield sofa next to a coffee table piled high with the latest magazines.

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The last thing Eva wants on her first night on the job is one of those dreaded matriarchs making an unscheduled appearance. Sure, she knows the basics, and she's even had luck with setting her friends up on dates, even dates that have led to marriage. But doing it for a real deal client? That's a different story completely.

Eva gathers her waist-length hair, flicks it over her shoulders out of the way and huffs in annoyance, both at her missing parents and life in general. Much as she'd love to abandon the agency to its fate, she can't.

Georgia started it up close to one-thousand-years ago. If the business were to fail while she's in charge, her grandmother would track her down and make her pay; especially if they lost custom to the local feeders dating agency. Sebastian Draco the owner of Blood Bites would do anything to see the Blood Bond Agency out of business, anything.

Eva's up to her armpits in a death spiral of worry when Dede Polansky, the company receptionist-come-bouncer, calls out. "There's been another one!"

Eva doesn't need to ask what the vampire is talking about. The murders plaguing their neighborhood in recent days are all anyone's talking about. After swiveling the chair to one side, Eva gets to her feet and walks briskly out into reception. Eva never moves slowly; it's not in her nature.

While there's a newspaper open on the reception desk, this is only for show. Dede's attention is firmly on the tablet sitting on her lap out of sight. It wouldn't be something the receptionist would do if Georgia De Silva was on the premises.

Eva's grandmother is wedded to the old ways, considering technology to be the very devil. Unfortunately, so are a lot of the agency's clients, hence the dummy paper in plain view.

Eva folds her arms atop the high counter. "That's the third one! Where did they find the body this time?"

Dede scrolls down the article, hissing through gritted teeth and stabbing at the screen as though it's an actual newspaper. "In the alley!"

Eva's brow wrinkles and then darkens. "The alley, as in right behind our building? That alley?"

"Yes, that one. They're getting closer every time."

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“That’s too close, far too close.” That they hadn’t heard the murder or the subsequent crime scene investigation comes as no surprise. The back wall of the property is made of granite block, with no windows or obvious openings. Add to this them sleeping below ground level and there wasn’t a chance they’d have been woken. It wouldn’t have mattered how much racket the cops made. “Another backpacker?”

Rather than answer verbally, Dede nods slowly.

“Completely drained?”

Again Dede nods.

“A woman?”

Dede grimaces in response.

“This is so not a good look. The last thing we need is unwanted attention while Georgia is out of town.”

Not once in the eons that the Blood Bond Agency has operated has there been so much as a hint of scandal attached to it. Eva knows for sure it won’t be any of their clients responsible for the murders. The old clans are experts at flying under the radar, literally in some cases.

With age comes power, and the best way to avoid the whole ‘villagers with pitchforks and flaming torches’ scenario is by being smart. No, the murders slowly closing in on their premises have to be the work of a particular kind of vampire.

“Nouveau sang,” say Eva and Dede in unison. *New blood*. A vampire made, not born, and in this case very new. One who in their first undead years has little to no control over their thirst. One who doesn’t think, but simply acts, their blood-lust blinding them to all reason.

They’re quiet for a couple of beats, before Dede voices a thought Eva has already dabbled with, and discarded.

Eva shakes her head hard, her hair flying around her in a silver halo. “No, I don’t buy that. It can’t be Lilith. Have you seen how much blood she helps herself to from the client entertainment fridge?”

Dede opens her mouth to respond, revealing wickedly long fangs in the process. “That’s a good point. There’s no way she could snaffle as much blood as she does AND drain backpackers without exploding.”

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Dede gives into girlish giggles, something that's out of whack with her age, with her made immortal north of one thousand years earlier.

At the other extreme is Lilith, the agency's newest hire, if you can call six years 'new'. The Welsh-born Goth lost her life to a Blood Bites client, one without the skills or desire to even turn her properly.

He'd simply seen her as a late-night snack, something that still irritated the young woman. If not for Georgia De Silva coming upon her, the young vamp would have been left in a half-state and a danger to anything with a pulse.

"Me a zombie? I don't think so. I'm far too pretty for that!" was a refrain often heard whenever her elevation to the ranks of the undead came up.

A gamer and hacker in life, her programming skills have been invaluable in bringing the agency up-to-date. But only to those in the know, and Georgia Da Silva definitely isn't one of those.

Dede taps the screen of her tablet again. "Whoever it is, this murder is the most brazen to date. They didn't even try to hide the body, just left it out in the middle of the alley where anyone could drive over it."

Eva snarls. "Kinda hard for Captain Useless and his lot to ignore the murder, this time." She doesn't have a high opinion of the local law enforcement, their spectacular lack of arrests down to a combination of incompetence, inaction, and good old-fashioned bribery. "It's as if the murderer wants to get caught."

No sooner have the words left her mouth, than Eva is sprinting for the stairs. Rather than descend into the basement, she heads upstairs, eventually exploding through the door at the very top and onto the roof itself.

After reaching the corner of the parapet at the back of the building, she leans over the edge, sniffing deeply. She moves along, repeating the process. It's just as she suspected.

She returns to reception just as swiftly, finding Dede leaning back in her office chair, completing lazy rotations.

The receptionist's gaze is locked on the tin ceiling high above their heads, although not for long. She tips forward, looking at Eva as though she's been there all the time. She quirks her head to the side.

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“The poor girl wasn’t killed in the alley.” Eva shakes her head slowly as if to back this up. “If she’d died out there, I’d be able to detect traces of blood. I couldn’t.”

“Okay, so the killer is out to have someone else take the fall.”

Again, Dede has voiced Eva’s own thoughts. There’s only one problem with the theory. “But Georgia has the skinny on everyone in town. Who’d be stupid enough to implicate her?”

Again the two vampires go quiet before yet again speaking in tandem. “Sebastian!”

Perhaps *speak* is too kind a word, with the women hissing his name as if to get rid of the aftertaste. Anything to avoid the disgust saying his name is capable of producing.

Eva pushes herself away from the reception desk and takes a couple of steps toward the windows, looking out over the town square. “No, not even he’s that stupid. And anyway, it makes no sense. It’s kinda hard to pin the murders on Georgia when she isn’t even in the country.”

Dede slides the tablet into the top drawer of her desk. “Good point. But you know Georgia isn’t the only De Silva they could be targeting, don’t you?”

Eva thinks on it for a beat. “Hmmm. Unfortunately, I do.”