

Excerpt from

First Blood

by Erin McCarthy

An August 2008 Release from Berkley

ISBN: 0-425-22400-7

Alistair Kirk embraced the darkness of the night. British born and raised, he had been used to cloudy overcast days, and early in life had despised the bright burning heat of the summer sun. Ironic then, that as a vampire, he found himself living in New Orleans, where the sun could sear your skin to a crisp throbbing burn in twenty minutes.

But it was also a city that at night still moved and breathed, people flowing in and out of the French Quarter at all hours of the night, together, alone, shifting through shadows in search of good, clean fun, or not so clean fun. It suited Alistair, the contrast of bright and dark, and he stayed inside during the day, asleep, and hit the streets at night to work, to dine, to socialize.

He wasn't doing any of those on this night. He was doing something that was undoubtedly a big ass mistake, yet he couldn't not do it. Couldn't leave it alone. Jack, Alistair's bandmate, had told him not to get involved, but as Alistair moved silently through the lush back courtyard of the expensive condo building, he knew it was the right thing to do.

There was a woman being held captive inside, and while it wasn't any of his business, he knew about her situation, and couldn't just stand back and do nothing. He was a vampire, not an asshole, and he wasn't into seeing someone else suffer. So he climbed into the house through a second story back window, by way of the porch roof, trying to make as little noise as possible. It was easy enough to get inside with his vampire strength without breaking a sweat or breathing hard. Gaining entrance wasn't the problem. The real danger was that if the owner of the house caught him breaking and entering, there would be a fight on his hands.

Inside the room he knew was a tastefully decorated guest bedroom, Alistair paused to get his bearings. The house was dark, silent, but he knew immediately he wasn't alone. The room should be empty, but it wasn't, and he was relieved to realize he wouldn't have to penetrate deeper into the house. He sensed the presence of the woman he was looking for, smelled her fear, before he saw her.

When he did, eyes shifting to the left where he knew the bed was, he clenched his fists in fury, disgust. He had no idea who she was, but the woman was strapped down to the bed, blindfolded and gagged, her hands behind her head and shackled to the wall. It was a sight that curled his stomach into knots, made all the more sick and twisted by the surroundings of tasteful upper middle class décor. The bed she was secured to was an antique four poster, piled high with silk pillows, while an impressive art collection splayed salon style over it. Between the bed and the art was the wall mounting for the shackles.

Alistair stared, revolted by the scene in front of him. There was a goddamn flat screen TV across from the woman, and a bureau with fresh flowers and bottled water, like a guest might arrive at any moment and their hostess wanted to be ready with first-rate hospitality. It went beyond what he had expected. This was a kidnapper toying with her victim, amusing herself, and he no longer regretted his decision to become involved.

He moved towards the woman, trying to ignore the way her chest rose and fell quickly as she realized how close he was to her, her panic clearly increasing. Alistair assessed the straps holding her down. Those he could snap with no problem. He did that first, disconcerted by the gasping sound of fear that wheezed out from behind the gag stuffed into her mouth. She couldn't see him, had no clue who he was, and it tugged at him at the same time he knew there was no time for explanations. They had to get out immediately, damn it, but he didn't want to scare her any more than she already was.

It was risky, but he whispered in her ear, "It's okay. I'm going to get you out of here."

Her body went still and the only response was the rushing of air from her nostrils. Alistair wasn't sure if she was calming down or if she had gone rigid from fear. He didn't have time to worry about it. First things first. He didn't want to have to drag her with him like dead weight, so he needed to fortify her. Since she was clearly too weak to break her constraints, she must have been denied feedings for several days.

Slicing his wrist with his fangs, he moved his hand over her mouth, then jerked down the gag. Before she could scream or say anything, he clamped his wrist over her, his blood trickling down into her mouth. She drank eagerly, her long legs moving restlessly. While she fed, Alistair looked at her, still blindfolded, and confirmed for himself that he had never met this woman before. He would have remembered if he had, because even under current conditions in the dark he could tell she was gorgeous.

She had long, thick, lustrous hair, a rich deep blonde that didn't come from a bottle, smooth skin, high cheekbones, a straight nose, and amazing plump lips that covered his flesh so covetously he was mildly disturbed. He was attracted to her, and he hadn't expected that. Didn't

want it. But her long legs, in tight, low riding jeans, and her flat, taut belly, exposed from the pull of her tiny t-shirt, were too difficult to ignore.

He jerked his wrist back out of her mouth, ignoring her moan of protest, and stuffed the gag back in. There was no time for talking, and if she screamed, they would have some serious issues to deal with, like the possibility of Cassandra walking in and discovering them. But he did want to remove her blindfold, needing her to walk on her own. Digging his hands into her thick hair, he found the knot of the fabric and tried to untie it, but his fingers were too big, too clumsy, too aware of the clock ticking and how long he had already been in the room. So he gave up on gentle and just yanked it over her head, taking a few hairs with him.

When he saw her eyes, he almost wished he'd left the blindfold in place. They were dark, nearly black, their almond shape adding to the exotic beauty of her breathtaking face. She was beyond beautiful. She was exquisite. And furious. There was unmasked hatred in her eyes, fear intermixed with a violent and fierce anger, a hysterical need to survive. It unnerved him, but hell, had he expected gratitude? She had no idea who he was or what the hell was going on, and God only knew what had already been done to her.

Ignoring the venomous expression on her face, he whispered instructions. "When I release your hands, get up and head for the window. We'll climb down, then go straight to the street."

She gave a brief nod, so Alistair reached up and jerked the shackles right out of the wall, taking big hunks of plaster with it. As paint flecks and dust rained down on the woman's head, she closed her eyes to avoid the debris. Then before he even needed to prod her, she was up and off the bed, running for the window, feet bare, the shackles still dangling from her wrists. Alistair followed, glad her fear hadn't overrode her sense of survival. It had made an impressive noise when he'd yanked her free and they needed to get the hell out.

Darting a glance back towards the door, he didn't sense anyone coming up the stairs, and he leaped out through the window after her. Reaching down, he quickly grabbed her arm when she lost her footing and slipped, dangling over the side of the porch roof, shackles smacking her in the thighs. He felt her shoulder wrench out of her socket, and heard her gasp of pain from behind her gag, but when he let her down carefully, she ignored the injury and just stumbled to her feet, glanced around to get her bearings.

Before he could say a word, she took off running.

In the wrong direction. She was headed towards the back of the property, into the labyrinth of courtyards and back alleys behind the condo complex. Alistair caught up to her easily and touched her arm, intending to redirect her toward the street. But when his hand landed on her flesh, she turned and swung hard, nailing him straight across the face with the length of the shackles, her fists closed for leverage.

Alistair didn't duck in time, and even as he swallowed his own blood, he had to admire her tenacity. She was no ordinary fledging vampire, which was precisely why she'd found herself chained to the wall in Cassandra's townhouse.

Excerpt from *First Blood* by Erin McCarthy©
Publisher: Berkley Trade (August 2008)
ISBN: 0-425-22400-7

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