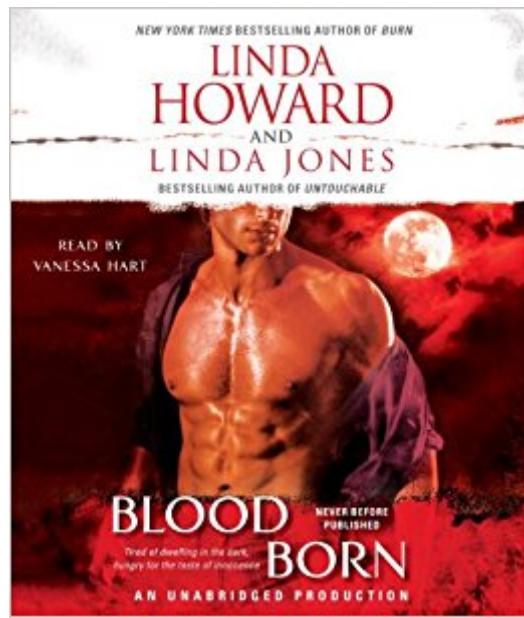


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## Blood Born



## **Synopsis**

When the human and the vampire worlds collide, there will be hell to pay.Â Luca Ambrus is a rare breed: vampire from birth, begotten by vampire parents, blood born. He is also an agent of the Councilâ "the centuries-old cabal that governs vampirekind, preserving their secrecy and destroying those who betray them. When a cryptic summons leads him to the scene of the brutal killing of a powerful Council member, Luca begins the hunt for an assassin among his own people. But instead of a lone killer he discovers a sinister conspiracy of rogue vampires bent on subjugating the mortal world. All that stands in their way are the conduits, humans able to channel spirit warriors into the physical world to protect mankind. Chloe Fallon is a conduitâ "and a target of the vampire assassin whoâ "s killing them. When Luca saves her life, an irresistible bond of trustâ "along with more passionate feelingsâ "is forged between them. As more victims fall, Chloe and Luca have only each other to depend on to save the world from the reign of monstersâ "and salvage their own future together. From the Paperback edition.

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## **Customer Reviews**

Linda Howard is the award-winning author of many New York Times bestsellers, including *Ice*, *Burn*, and *Death Angel*. She lives in Alabama with her husband and a golden retriever.Â Linda Jones is the acclaimed USA Today bestselling author of more than sixty novels, including *Untouchable*, *22 Nights*, and *Bride by Command*. She lives in Huntsville, Alabama. From the Paperback edition.

PrologueLos Angeles, California She was losing her mind. There was no other explanation. She hadn't slept more than thirty minutes at a stretch for the past three days. How could she, when the dreams were so vivid and came so quickly, one after the other, startling her awake every time her name was called? Some of the details were murky, but two things she always remembered very clearly: the man, and the way he called to her. It wasn't fair. She was twenty-three years old, healthy, unattached "at the moment" and living in the bustling and exciting city of Los Angeles, far from the family she'd left behind in Missouri. She should be having the time of her life, the way she had been just a few days ago, and not dragging herself around in a stupor of fatigue. Normally she wouldn't complain about vivid dreams of a very large and muscular, mostly naked, dark-haired hunk who felt so real there were moments she actually forgot he was the product of a dream, but she needed her sleep. Now it was getting worse; he was invading her waking hours, too, though, to be fair, for the past three nights it seemed as if most of her hours had been spent awake. She'd started hearing him at different times, and the way he called her name was getting more and more urgent. Hearing him! Really, truly hearing him. It might be a whisper of her name as she walked down the hall, or a very faint yearning call as she stepped into the shower. She wasn't imagining the voice. It was real. Only it couldn't be real. She didn't do drugs, so that meant she was losing her mind. It was the only explanation. Fine. The mind could go, so long as she could get some sleep. She'd been sitting slumped at the table, picking at an ordered-in meal, but she was too tired to eat and finally she gave up on the effort. Dragging herself to her feet, she cleaned off the table and tossed what was left of her supper into the garbage can. As soon as she lifted the lid, the strong, sour odor of several uneaten meals hit her right in the nose. Shit, she should've taken the garbage out before it got dark. Not that she was afraid of the dark, and the Dumpster for the apartment complex was in a well-lit area just a few yards from the end of the stairwell, but she'd already changed into her at-home grubbies, she was barefoot, and if she dared leave the apartment looking like this the odds were she'd bump into some really hot guy who'd take one look at her and decide she was about as attractive as her garbage. That was the way life worked. On the other hand, did meeting at the complex Dumpster qualify as a meeting cute? She could wait until tomorrow to take out the trash, but that would mean waking up to that smell. And that was assuming she actually got some sleep tonight. She was so tired, she didn't think anything could keep her awake, not even a naked dark-haired hunk. She tugged the plastic trash bag out of the can and tied the top, tested the knot to be certain it would hold, then trudged out the door, down the flight of stairs just outside her apartment door, and around the corner. Johanna! Her hair stood on end

as her name echoed both in her head and from somewhere around her. It wasÂ spooky, the way the sound seemed to come from everywhereÂ at once. It made her want to run home like aÂ scared little kid, to hide her face in her motherâ ™s lap.Â And that was the last thing she wanted to do, consideringÂ how dead set her mother had been against herÂ moving away. Things hadnâ ™t changed since then, either.Â Her mother was always warning her to be careful. L.A.Â was a big city. She hated the idea of her daughter beingÂ in such a heavily populated place. So many people! TheÂ lecture was delivered on a regular basis: Lock yourÂ doors, donâ ™t go out alone at night, watch out forÂ strangers. Yeah, right. That last one was a hoot. SheÂ was a hair stylist, so she met new people every day.Â Moreover, she was fairly new to the area, which meantÂ almost everyone she met was a stranger. Why bother toÂ live in L.A. if she was going to close herself off in herÂ apartment every night? She was here to make her reputationÂ as the hair stylist to go to if you had a specialÂ event, someone who could make you look both elegantÂ and edgy. One of these days sheâ ™d be stylist to the stars.Â The strange sound came again. There was an urgencyÂ in this latest call of her name, as if it were a warning.Â â œLeave me alone,â • she whispered, focusing on theÂ Dumpster straight ahead. The faint sound of her ownÂ voice made her sharply aware that there was no one inÂ the parking lot of the small apartment complex at thisÂ time of night. People who had to be at work early wereÂ already asleep, probably having perfectly ordinaryÂ dreams. Those who worked at night werenâ ™t home yet.Â All she saw were a few cars, including her own, a lamppost,Â and the winding sidewalk that led to the pool. ItÂ was all comfortingly familiar. This was her home now;Â there was nothing to be afraid of, except the possibilityÂ that she was going nuts.Â She tossed the bag of garbage into the Dumpster,Â turned, and stifled a shriek as she lurched backward,Â almost bumping into the trash container. A tall man withÂ long blond hair stood right behind her, reflective sunglassesÂ making his eyes look like giant insect eyes, with theÂ lights reflecting in the lenses. â œShit!â • she exclaimed, thenÂ put her hand over her heart as if she could physically calmÂ its frantic pace. â œI almost jumped out of my skin!â •Â He paused, his head tilting to the side. â œInteresting,â •Â he said. â œI didnâ ™t know humans could do that.â •Â She would have laughed if she hadnâ ™t been so preoccupiedÂ with catching her breath. Where had he comeÂ from? She hadnâ ™t heard a sound, though he had to haveÂ been following almost in her footprints. Surely sheÂ should have heard him leave his apartment, heard hisÂ door open and close.Â Sheâ ™d been right about something like this happening,Â she thought in disgust. Her hair was a mess, sheÂ didnâ ™t have a trace of makeup on, and she was dressedÂ like a bag lady, so of course a trip to the DumpsterÂ would bring her face-to-face . . . well, face-to-chest . . .Â with a hunk. He was dressed all in black; he had a

seriousÂ Johnny Cash vibe going on. Still, she should haveÂ seen him, heard him, but she supposed she could onlyÂ blame her foggy state of mind.Â She tipped her head back to look at him. What wasÂ with those pretentious sunglasses? It was night. NotÂ that there wasnâ ™t a more than fair share of pretentiousnessÂ in L.A., where everyone was a star or about toÂ become one. This guy was no star. She wouldâ ™veÂ remembered this face if sheâ ™d seen it before. Wowza,Â she thought dazedly. He could give her dream stalkerÂ a run for his money in the looks department.Â Like she was in any kind of shape to admire

handsomeÂ strangers.Â â œRun!â •Â The voice was the one in her dreams, and for aÂ moment she was stunned that heâ ™d said anything otherÂ than her name. Then the urgency in the faraway voiceÂ seeped into her weary mind and uneasiness chilled herÂ spine.Â â œExcuse me,â • she said, stepping to the side to allowÂ him access to the Dumpster. He moved, too, his actionÂ mirroring hers, and like a slap in the face she realizedÂ he wasnâ ™t carrying any trash. The taste of copper filledÂ her mouth. Every cell in her body seemed to tense as aÂ rush of alertness seized her, but before her brain couldÂ quite send the message to scream he lifted his hand andÂ used one finger to pull his sunglasses down so she couldÂ see his blue eyes . . . his glowing blue eyes.Â The scream never came. She felt herself sinking intoÂ that gaze, and the odd thing was, she didnâ ™t want toÂ tear herself free. The growing fear of a moment agoÂ vanished as if it had never existed; instead, she wasÂ filled with a sense of warmth and pleasure. He wasÂ beautiful. She wanted to please him, to do whatever heÂ wanted.Â â œOh,â • she said in a voice of wonder, reaching out asÂ if to touch his face.Â He caught her hand instead, lifting it to his mouth inÂ an elegant and old-fashioned salute. The touch of hisÂ lips was warm on her fingers. â œGood-bye,â • he said,Â and slid eight inches of a knife blade between her ribsÂ and into her heart.Â That hurts, she thought, but without any urgency. â œIÂ donâ ™t want to leave,â • she said, faintly bewildered. â œIÂ want to stay with you.â • Why was it so hard to talk?Â Why did she feel as if she couldnâ ™t draw a breath? SheÂ blinked at him, trying to formulate an argument, butÂ thoughts kept slipping away from her and time fadedÂ away. She became aware, on some distant level, thatÂ somehow she wasnâ ™t standing in front of him anyÂ longer but was lying on the ground in front of theÂ Dumpster. That wasnâ ™t right. She would never . . . tooÂ many germs . . . she should get up.Â And there he was again, the man in her dreams, asÂ vivid as he had ever been. He said her name once moreÂ and this time he sounded so sad and angry. Then heÂ faded away . . . and so did she.Â Sorin stared down at the girlâ ™s body. He didnâ ™t rejoiceÂ in her death, but he did regret that he couldnâ ™t feed fromÂ her. The conduits had to be killed in a normal fashionâ "Â that is, a normal human fashion, to keep from raisingÂ the alarm. This one had

been very pretty, so pretty that, under other circumstances, he'd have liked to spend some time with her, feeding and fucking. She would have awakened the next day feeling unusually weak but otherwise in good health, and all she'd have remembered was having a really great time. Instead, an accident of birth had signed her death warrant. He could mark her name off his to-do list. Â Northeast Alabama Melody leaned against the passenger door of a black pickup truck, and relaxed in the warm evening air. A breeze kicked up, blowing warm Alabama air that smelled of honeysuckle across her skin. And there was a lot of exposed skin for that breeze to caress. Even back before she'd been turned, when she was just a silly human teenager, it hadn't taken her long to realize that men were suckers for big boobs, a flat tummy, and long legs. She had all three and didn't mind displaying them if it got her what she wanted. She smiled as the door before her swung open and a couple walked out of the bar. Wouldn't be long now; it was getting late and there were only a few customers left. Before the door swung shut again Melody caught a glimpse of the men lined up at the rustic wooden bar, their beers or whiskeys sitting before them, their gazes cutting to her. They knew she was here. Well, he knew she was here, and that was all that mattered. The conduit caught her eye just before the door closed. She managed to tip her chin in way of a greeting. He was cute "dark-haired and rugged, fit and tall. He had workingman's hands and nice eyes. It was his truck Melody was leaning against, and she was waiting for him. Less than a minute later, he walked out of the bar. His stride was long; his jeans were faded and nicely snug. His pretty green eyes were tired. "Why don't you come back in?" he asked as he walked toward her. "I don't really care for alcohol," she said. "Then why are you here?" "Three nights in a row she'd visited this bar, coming and going quickly, getting a sense of who this man was. She had to be sure. "I dropped in that first night by chance," she said. "Since then I came here for you." He looked a little surprised but not shocked. A goodlooking man who had a decent job had to be in demand in this little town, which was seriously in the middle of nowhere. Melody smiled. She knew there was no one around here who could hold a candle to her when it came to blindsiding men. They were so predictable, so easy. "Take me home," she said simply. "I can't stay around much longer. I have places to go, a job to do. But damn, I don't want to leave without getting a taste of you." He was definitely interested, but still wary. "I'm not looking for anything serious. I got divorced just six months ago and the last thing I need" "I just want your body," she said, and that was the truth. "Why don't we go back to your place?" He flinched a little, and said, "I don't want to go home." There was a fear in his eyes that told her she had the right man. She looked around, blew out a huff of

air. â œltâ ™s beenÂ a long time since I had a man in a truck, but youâ ™ve gotÂ an extended cab and the windows are tinted, so I supposeÂ we can give it a shot.â •Â The keys were out of his pocket in a flash. MelodyÂ stepped out of the way. It was a shame, really, but sheÂ had no choice. The conduit was a soldier in a war heÂ didnâ ™t even know he was fighting, but he was a soldierÂ all the same.Â A gentleman to the end, he took Melodyâ ™s hand andÂ helped her into the backseat. Theyâ ™d be in crampedÂ quarters, but that didnâ ™t matter. They wouldnâ ™t be hereÂ long. He joined her, closed and locked the door behindÂ him, and she moved in.Â Occasionally sheâ ™d been chastised by her elders for playingÂ with her food, but her elders werenâ ™t here, and MelodyÂ didnâ ™t see any reason why she couldnâ ™t make the endÂ pleasant. It wasnâ ™t his fault that he was a conduit, that heÂ had the bad fortune to have the blood of an ImmortalÂ Warrior in his veins, that heâ ™d been contacted. Sheâ ™d giveÂ the good olâ ™ boy a little fun, in his final minutes.Â He could die now or later, but he was going to die.Â There was a little bit of light coming through theÂ tinted windows, just enough for him to see her face,Â though of course she could see his very well whether thereÂ was light or not. She smiled at him. Sheâ ™d been turned inÂ 1956, which made her all but a fledgling in the vampireÂ world, but being so youngâ "relatively speakingâ "meantÂ that she still clearly remembered what it was like to beÂ human, with all the flirting and drama that humansÂ attached to sex. She still enjoyed some of those silly rituals.Â With vampires, it was fuck if you felt like it, and thatÂ was about as complicated as it got. Not that vampiresÂ didnâ ™t make great loversâ "there was a lot to be said forÂ both practice and staminaâ "but humans could be soÂ sweet, both figuratively and literally. Why give that upÂ when she could have both? Sheâ ™d actually heard thatÂ some of the really, really old vampires eventually gave upÂ sex completely, but she couldnâ ™t imagine that. She sure asÂ hell wouldnâ ™t ever make that sacrifice.Â Hell, sheâ ™d had to give up ice cream and sunbathing,Â and that was enough sacrifice for her.Â The conduit was exhausted, robbed of sleep night afterÂ night by his warrior trying to contact him, but he wasnâ ™tÂ so tired that he couldnâ ™t appreciate the view as MelodyÂ shimmied out of her clothes. When she was entirelyÂ naked she took his hand and guided it to her breast,Â where he held it as she slowly peeled his clothes off andÂ trailed her mouth over each section of his body as sheÂ bared it. The anxiousness sheâ ™d seen in him for the pastÂ three days faded, replaced by desire.Â She straddled him, took him in, closed her eyes andÂ enjoyed the feel of coming together. Their position wasÂ awkward, thanks to the small space. His bed wouldâ ™veÂ been better, but he didnâ ™t want to go home. Home wasÂ no longer a sanctuary for him, poor thing.Â Home was where contact with oneâ ™s warrior began,Â and sometimes ended. At home, alone, safe from uninvitedÂ visitors and the turmoil of

public places, the conduitsÂ began to see or hear or simply sense the presenceÂ of their warriors. No wonder the poor boy had beenÂ sleeping on friendsâ ™ couches and in this very truck,Â where he could have a few hours of peace.Â The sex was fast and sweaty and satisfying for both.Â There was a touch of awkwardness that was almostÂ endearing. He was manly but also shy. He wasnâ ™t aÂ smooth operator with the ladies and never had been. IfÂ she hadnâ ™t made the first move, he never wouldâ ™ve spokenÂ to her.Â When they finished, for a long moment they lay awkwardlyÂ tangled, sweating and sated. Melody lifted herÂ head, shook back her thick blond hair, and looked himÂ in the eye. Even in the dark, he saw her . . . and she sawÂ him. She caught his gaze, pushed, and his mind wasÂ hers. She was charmed by how easy and pliable heÂ was. Sheâ ™d be tempted to keep him for a while, if sheÂ didnâ ™t have a job to do.Â She extended her fangs, but because sheâ ™d alreadyÂ established a contact with his mind, he wasnâ ™t alarmed.Â She already had control, and he knew what she wanted.Â Obediently he tipped his head to the side, exposingÂ a long, strong, salty throat.Â Melody lowered her head and bit down, breaking theÂ skin, opening a vein. She couldnâ ™t drain him; sheâ ™d beenÂ ordered to be cautious when killing the conduits, soÂ there wouldnâ ™t be a trail of bloodless bodies that mightÂ lead the humans to the center of power and blow theÂ whole revolution thing. He tasted so good, as if theÂ basic sweetness of his nature flavored his blood.Â Melody hummed a little in delight, and because sheÂ was a generous person she reached down and strokedÂ his penis while she fed. He gave a little moan andÂ pumped his hips against her hand.Â â œThatâ ™s good, sugar,â • she whispered. â œIsnâ ™t it good?â •Â Without waiting for an answer she drew deeply of hisÂ blood, lost in the moment, in the lovely feel of his bodyÂ and the taste of his life force, in the energy that coursedÂ through her as she fed.Â Finally she made herself stop drinking; she didnâ ™tÂ dare take any more. With lingering movements of herÂ tongue she licked his throat, waited for the healing toÂ kick in and close the bite. That done, she placed aÂ strong hand over his mouth and nose, cutting off hisÂ air. She hated that she had to use this method to killÂ when her own appetite was so much more efficient. ItÂ just made no sense to waste that much food. But sheÂ was a good soldier, so she did what sheâ ™d been told.Â He didnâ ™t struggle, except for a brief twitch. She keptÂ his nose and mouth covered until his heart had ceased toÂ beat. Her job done, Melody patted him on the head, thenÂ touched his cheek. At least his last few minutes alive hadÂ been happy ones. She found some comfort in thatÂ thought. She wasnâ ™t a monster, she was just . . . different.Â More than that, she was better. Better than sheâ ™d everÂ been before, better than humans, who knew so little andÂ existed for the benefit of those like her.Â She took her time putting on her clothes, watchingÂ through the tinted glass windows as the last of the

barÂ patrons came out, got in their various vehicles, and left.Â They didnâ ™t pay a bit of attention to the truck. Heâ ™d leftÂ it parked here a few nights lately, getting rides withÂ friends when he was too drunk to drive, or sleeping inÂ the backseat.Â When the last patron left and the neon beer sign wentÂ out, Melody climbed out of the truck, closing the doorÂ behind her.Â It bothered her that the conduit hadnâ ™t fought. EvenÂ though heâ ™d been glamoured, his body should haveÂ struggled for air. Maybe sheâ ™d taken too much. She didnâ ™tÂ have the kind of control an older vampire possessed,Â but that wasnâ ™t her fault, was it? Sheâ ™d get older . . .Â eventually. But if sheâ ™d taken too much blood and someÂ backcountry coroner got suspicious, sheâ ™d be in trouble.Â It really would be best if there wasnâ ™t enough leftÂ of the body for any medical examiner to study.Â The good thing was, she had a natural talent that hadÂ come to life when sheâ ™d been turned, one that came inÂ very handy when she wanted to hide some evidence.Â She lifted her hand, applied some concentration as sheÂ stared at her palm, and a small lick of flame flared toÂ life there. She didnâ ™t feel any pain or heat from theÂ flames, because it was her fire.Â She stood back and with a flick of her hand sent thatÂ flame toward the pickup. It caught, licked across the seat,Â and with her mind she sent it racing through the cab,Â where it engulfed the body. Stepping farther away, sheÂ drove the fire onward, sending it in search of the gasÂ tank. That took some doing, because she really wasnâ ™tÂ sure where gas tanks were located, but by the time sheÂ struck pay dirtâ "so to speakâ "she was far enough awayÂ that the explosion didnâ ™t do much more than ruffle herÂ hair.Â A man came running out of the bar, alarmed by theÂ noise of the explosion. Taken aback, Melody staredÂ at him. Sheâ ™d completely forgotten about the bartender.Â The older man raced toward her. â œDear God,Â what happened?â • he yelled as he fumbled for the cellÂ phone in his pocket.Â Dammit! Under most circumstances Melody wouldnâ ™tÂ have cared that her presence had been noticed, but herÂ orders were clear: donâ ™t draw attention to what wasÂ happening, or else. She didnâ ™t want to find out whatÂ â œor elseâ • meant, though she had a very good idea. TheÂ last thing she wanted was to make Sorin unhappy. SheÂ had to handle this, and do it fast.Â In the blink of an eye she moved in front of the bartender,Â startling him. â œWhaâ "â • he began, already steppingÂ back, but she caught his gaze and he was hers. SheÂ saw the reflection of the fire in his eyes, then she was inÂ his mind.Â â œI wasnâ ™t here,â • she said calmly. â œThat poor boyâ ™sÂ been sleeping in the back of his truck lately, and youÂ knew that but didnâ ™t mind.â •Â â œI didnâ ™t mind,â • the bartender echoed.Â â œPoor fella,â • Melody continued. â œHe hasnâ ™t beenÂ himself lately. Heâ ™s been moping around about theÂ divorce, and he just seemed so sad.â • Slowly she walkedÂ away, and when she was out of the bartenderâ ™s line

of sight she released his mind. She watched as he fumbled with his cell phone, listened to the frantic call. "Send the fire truck, the ambulance, whatever you got!" Walking down the side of the narrow road in the darkness, Melody smiled to herself. That had been fun. Another conduit would soon be hers. As soon as she'd succeeded here, she'd be given another assignment. How would she kill the next one? Knife, pillow, gun, a shove off the side of a cliff . . . it all depended on who and where. She had to be more careful about taking too much blood next time, though, but when the rebels succeeded and vampires ruled, she wouldn't ever have to be careful again. Cool, she thought. Very cool.

Chapter One

The Scottish Highlands There was something special about Scotland in the summer that made it one of his favorite places in the world. It was more than the rain and clouds and heavy mist that called Luca Ambrus here; it was the taste of what had come before, a palpable history that flowed so vividly in his memory that sometimes he could close his eyes and hear the voices of people long gone, feel the impact and vibration of a sword in his hands during countless battles, smell the peat fires. He'd actually been born in Greece "his olive skin gave away his Mediterranean heritage" but he'd spent many more years in Scotland than he had in Greece and was far more at home here. Greece was too hot and sunny; he much preferred cool, misty, foggy places. There were times when he craved the noise and movement and excitement of a city, but more often he preferred his own company and his own thoughts. If he hadn't been comfortable within himself, he'd have gone mad many centuries ago. But he was comfortable and grounded, to use the current phrasing, so he was very content to pass days, weeks, at a time without seeing another soul. The trick was to live in the moment, to enjoy each successive year for itself, for the changes that came both slow and fast, and for the things that never changed. He enjoyed life, and didn't necessarily require companionship. His home here in the Highlands was an elegant cottage with all the modern conveniences, far away from the larger cities. He saw no need to sacrifice his comfort for solitude when he could have both. Once he'd have had to choose between them, but no longer. Times changed. What good was living through the centuries if he couldn't enjoy all that was offered? The things he'd seen come into being during the past hundred and fifty years! Even he, who was seldom surprised by anything, had watched with bemusement as change piled on change. Electric lights, telephones, automobiles, airplanes "it was almost too much to take in, though he enjoyed them very much. He loved movies and television, the travel, the thrill of driving a fast car or getting on a plane and a few hours later being thousands of miles away. The humans had even managed to go into space; the audacity of such fragile creatures was either valiant or incredibly stupid,

andÂ despite two millennia studying them he hadnâ ™t yetÂ decided which it was. Both, perhaps.Â He had money, and he had time. If he was in theÂ mood for city life he stayed in his place near Seattle,Â Washington. When he wanted peace and quiet, he cameÂ here. In a while he would tire of the quiet and move on,Â but for now . . . for now the solitude was as necessaryÂ to his survival as blood. Immortality didnâ ™t come withoutÂ a price.Â Still, he never stayed in one place very longâ "â œelongâ •Â being a relative term. A month might seem long toÂ some, but to him it was the blink of the eye, a heartbeat.Â It wasnâ ™t in his nature to rest. He was a hunter atÂ heart, and he enjoyed the thrill of the chase even more than the inevitable end when the prey was his. One dayÂ soon he would feel the callâ "or receive an actual callâ "Â and in a flash he would leave behind his beloved solitudeÂ to lose himself once more in the blood hunt.Â When twilight came, Luca left his cottage andÂ walked out into the cool fresh air. This was the time ofÂ day he liked best, when the fading light and gatheringÂ darkness accentuated the aloneness he sometimesÂ craved as if it were as tangible as the earth he walkedÂ upon. He took a course that led him through a fragrantÂ meadow, with the craggy mountains looming over himÂ and deepening the shadows. His boots cut slowlyÂ through the tall grass. There was no hurry in his movements,Â no need beyond the moment. He was oldÂ enough that he no longer had to feed very often, unlessÂ he was burning a lot of energy, which allowed him toÂ escape from the world for days, even weeks, at a time.Â The hunger, the need, would eventually come, andÂ when it did he would feed.Â But he wasnâ ™t hungry tonight. Tonight he was satisfiedÂ to walk these stark, dramatic hills and rememberÂ the battles that had been fought here. There was a lotÂ to remember, because there had been so many battles,Â so many wars. Easily destroyed or not, his human fellowÂ warriors had thrown themselves into war withÂ such complete lack of caution that he could only marvel.Â It wasnâ ™t as if they didnâ ™t know they were mortal;Â they did. And still they fought, often long past the pointÂ where sanity or common sense should have kicked in.Â Even after centuries of watching them, preying onÂ them, sometimes fighting beside them, humans couldÂ still bemuse him.Â He didnâ ™t know exactly how old he was; he knew heÂ was over two thousand, but he couldnâ ™t pin down aÂ year or even a birth date, if heâ ™d ever known it at all.Â Vampires in general werenâ ™t big on calendars, evenÂ assuming his mother had known the date heâ ™d beenÂ born. Heâ ™d kept track for a while, the first four or fiveÂ hundred years, but after that heâ ™d lost interest becauseÂ the number wasnâ ™t important; after all, no one wouldÂ be throwing a birthday party for him. All that wasÂ important was his personal power, which had grownÂ with each passing century and would continue toÂ increase, until now the number who equaled him inÂ some ways could be counted on one hand. In power layÂ safety, and one of the first lessons heâ ™d learned was

toÂ always watch his back, even with his own kind, whichÂ was why he didnâ ™t live among them.Â He had everything he needed here. In a lot of ways heÂ was more comfortable with humans than he was withÂ the kindred, because he could relax with humans. HeÂ didnâ ™t fear them, didnâ ™t have to be wary of them. TheyÂ were puny in so many ways, a lot of fun in others, andÂ best of all, they never remembered him.Â A small village lay just over the farthest hill. When heÂ had to feed, he went there. And when he left after feeding,Â the people heâ ™d met, even those heâ ™d fed upon,Â immediately forgot heâ ™d been there at all. Every time heÂ entered the village, the residents greeted him as a newÂ visitor. That was his power, his curse, his salvation: noÂ one remembered him. When he passed by, he passedÂ out of their lives as if heâ ™d never been there at all. OnlyÂ the strongest of his own kind could resist the power,Â which meant he could come and go as he wished. To beÂ forgotten as soon as he was out of sight was as good asÂ being invisible, and gave him a freedom that otherÂ vampires could only dream of having.Â He was engrossed in one particularly deliciousÂ memory when the portable satellite phone in hisÂ pocket rang. He cursed under his breath. The one thingÂ he didnâ ™t enjoy about modern life was the ease of communication.Â In the old days, the Council would have had to send him a written summons, which, dependingÂ on where he was, could take months to reach him. NotÂ that the length of time mattered, because no matterÂ how long a rogue vampire had to go to ground, LucaÂ always found his prey.Â Dammit. His position with the Council required thatÂ he always be available, but heâ ™d just completed anÂ assignment and he needed to get away from the irritationÂ he felt around crowds of people. NormallyÂ months, sometimes years would pass before theÂ Council summoned him again, but the call had to beÂ from them because few others knew how to reach him.Â He didnâ ™t blithely give out his number, not even to theÂ older, stronger vampires who could remember him.Â What was the point? Vampires didnâ ™t call to chat.Â Besides, he made other vampires nervous. Even most ofÂ the Council members, who were powerful in their ownÂ rights, were wary of him. And as far as he was concerned,Â that was a good thing.Â Politics didnâ ™t interest him at all, so his involvementÂ with the Council wasnâ ™t entirely logical. TheÂ ruling branch of vampire society was as beset byÂ back-stabbing, deal-brokering, lobbying, and specialÂ interests as any government yet devised by humans. ButÂ he had skills others did not, and for more years than heÂ could count heâ ™d been an integral part of the workings ofÂ the Council. His assignments gave him a sense of purpose,Â and besides, even this place bored him after a while.Â Individually and collectively the Council had offeredÂ him a more permanent position, a seat at the table ofÂ power, but heâ ™d turned them down so many times heÂ thought they should long since have stopped asking.Â The Council members were as heavily

protected as any American president, and he'd go stir-crazy if he had to live all but imprisoned in the Council headquarters. Their quarters were luxurious, but a prison was still a prison, no matter how high the thread count on the sheets. They would keep calling until he answered the phone. Annoyed, he pulled it from his pocket and glanced at the number. His eyebrows rose as concern replaced his annoyance, and he thumbed the talk button.

âœAmbrus,â • he said. Hector wasn't the member of the ruling Council charged with assigning Luca's missions, but he was an old friend and he wouldn't call unless it was important. In the more than six hundred years they'd known each other, they'd also learned to trust each other, something important in the vampire world. Together they'd seen a lot of changes in the vampire community. They'd kept the peace, and they'd had protected the secret of their very existence, using whatever methods were necessary. Hector hadn't been a young man when he'd been turned, and though he was strong he wasn't at a physical peak, the way Luca was. Hector's strength was in his mind, his shrewdness and his control.

âœThere's a serious problem,â • Hector said without preamble. It wasn't like him to be so abrupt. He was almost twelve hundred years old, so he'd learned there was almost never a need for haste or impatience.

Luca turned to walk back toward his cottage. A problem for the Council meant that, like it or not, he'd soon be on his way to D.C. âœWhat sort of problem?â • Hector hesitated. âœI think there's a traitor on the Council.â • Luca stopped in his tracks. âœA traitor . . . How?â • It was a serious accusation, but not one he could easily dismiss, simply because this was Hector. Treason in the vampire world meant one thing: a vampire doing something stupid that could result in exposure to the humans.

Still, exactly what did a traitor mean? Attacks against the Council didn't count as treason, because Council members, like all the other vampires, had to survive by their own strength and wits. If they couldn't manage that, then they were dead, and the stronger stepped into their places.

âœA rebel faction has formed. Their position is that they're tired of living in the dark, that vampires are superior to humans "which is true" so they want to overcome the humans and take over the government.

One of the Council has joined them. I'm certain of it,â but I haven't been able to find out who.â • Luca grunted, but otherwise restrained his reaction.

If Hector was right "and he almost always was" then this was definitely a serious situation.

Periodically someone or a group of someones would decide it was outrageous that vampires had to hide their existence, and they would have to be dealt with before they could expose the entire race. Never before had a Council member joined in that idea, though, which immediately made the situation more dire.

With some common sense and caution, vampires could live in

relative peace because humans didn't believe they were real. The Council made the rules that ensured that peace, and whenever any vampire didn't obey, well, that was where Luca came in. A vampire who fed and killed indiscriminately risked them all, so Luca was called in to handle the problem. Because he could come and go pretty much as he wanted, and no human remembered him, there were no repercussions. Not only that, he was old enough and strong enough that he could go out in daylight, which meant most vampires were helpless against him. He executed them during the day only under the most extreme circumstances, such as if the vampire had gone totally mad and any delay was too dangerous. Otherwise, he faced his prey and at least gave them the opportunity to fight. They never won "obviously, or he wouldn't still be here" but the exercise gave him fighting practice. Executing a sleeping vampire wasn't any fun at all. He could almost "almost" have some sympathy with the rebels. There were many vampires who considered all humans as far beneath them as a cow or a chicken might be to those humans. They were necessary for nourishment, but to be forced to hide from them out of fear, to be made to cower in the dark . . . some vampire egos couldn't handle it. Luca didn't quite see things that way. For one, he didn't cower. For another, he had fought beside humans, made love to human women, enjoyed their progresses and inventions, and sometimes laughed at their actions until he was exhausted and his ribs ached. Humans were endlessly entertaining, if nothing else. "œHurry, " Hector urged, and his voice changed as his power surged, his tone and cadence sliding into the rhythm that said he was seeing the future. "œBattle is in the air. I smell it. I can almost touch it. Death is coming. Death is coming for us." With a click, the call disconnected. The powerful vampire sounded frightened, which alarmed Luca even more. Death. Vampires lived with death, but some clung to their new version of life with an almost panicked intensity. Others, after living for so many years, actually yearned for an end and would choose to die, but most didn't. Hector enjoyed life, even after all his years, but he wasn't afraid of death. What he feared was something bigger: the collapse of the wall of ignorance that protected the vampires from the humans. Luca reached his cottage and began packing, making phone calls and arrangements of his own as he gathered what he needed. If Hector felt death was coming for them, as he'd said, then their world was in great danger and uncertainty. Luca had many strengths and powers; as a rare blood born, conceived and born to a vampire mother and father, he was much stronger than those who'd been turned to the life. Prophesy, however, wasn't one of those powers. Despite the surety in his tone, Hector's gift of prophecy was relatively mild, and while Luca certainly believed Hector's prediction, he

also knew there was justÂ as much that Hector didnâ ™t see.Â Heâ ™d have liked more time in Scotland, but as he preparedÂ for the trip he felt his heartbeat increasing inÂ anticipation for what was to come. If there was a hugeÂ battle, well, he hadnâ ™t been in a proper battle in a veryÂ long time.Â Washington, D.C.Â Chloe Fallon had just drifted off to sleep when theÂ image popped into her subconscious: a long, thick,Â blond braid hanging right in front of her face. That wasÂ all, just a braid, but so real she felt as if she could reachÂ out and touch it. The shade of blond was darker andÂ more golden than her own, and it seemed to be streakedÂ with several shades. Had to be a natural color, herÂ dreaming mind thought; it would take forever for aÂ hairdresser to work all those different colors in.Â She started awake, absurdly surprised to find herselfÂ alone in her own bed. That was the weird thingâ "Â one of the weird things, anyway. She didnâ ™t feel as ifÂ she was truly alone. She almost felt as if all she hadÂ to do was roll over and sheâ ™d find the person attachedÂ to the braid lying there beside her. Unable toÂ stop herself, she lifted her head to take a quick glanceÂ at the other pillow. Nope, no one there. Good. SheÂ had the bed to herself, as usual.Â She flopped over on her back and stared at the darkÂ ceiling. Of all things to dream about . . . a braid. SheÂ kept having the same dream, over and over, about aÂ damn braid. Maybe she had some deep-seated desire toÂ be a hairdresser, though she didnâ ™t think so. She didnâ ™tÂ even like spending much time on her own hair, whichÂ was why she got the most maintenance-free cut sheÂ could, short of shaving her head. So what did it meanÂ that she kept dreaming about a braid? There had to beÂ a person attached to the hank of hair, but sheâ ™d neverÂ seen a face. She didnâ ™t even know for sure if the braidÂ belonged to a man or a woman. Her first thought hadÂ been a œwoman,â • since long hair wasnâ ™t exactly in fashionÂ for men, but she got a sense of power when she wasÂ in the presence of the braid. It was definitely a strangeÂ thing to be obsessing over.Â The braid dream had been coming for several weeksÂ now. At first sheâ ™d decided stress was the cause. HerÂ job and college classes were both demanding. SheÂ enjoyed them, but they didnâ ™t leave much time for aÂ social life. Relaxation, laughter, fun . . . sheâ ™d had toÂ put them all aside, but now she was out of college forÂ the summer and thought a break would cure all her ills.Â Not.Â It didnâ ™t make sense. All she had to worry about rightÂ now was her jobâ "assistant manager of an upscaleÂ restaurant in Georgetownâ "and her parentsâ ™ plannedÂ visit at the end of August. She had to get the guestÂ room in order before they arrived; thankfully she had aÂ couple of months to get ready. That spare room wasÂ presently a cluttered storage space, but it would onlyÂ take a few hours to turn it into a decent guest room.Â Okay, it would take longer than that, but it was doable.Â Yes, she was obsessing a little over the pending visit.Â What sane, single woman of a certain age didnâ ™t obsessÂ when her parents, who

couldn't understand why their only daughter wanted to live so far away, came to visit? Her mother couldn't quite pull herself out of her protective mode, even though Chloe was scaring thirty and was determined to live a normal life despite having an aortic aneurysm. The way she saw it, the aneurysm was small and stable, and might never change or grow to a dangerous size. The way her mother saw it, however, was that Chloe had a ticking time bomb in her chest and could die at any moment. Finding a balance between those two viewpoints wasn't easy, though Chloe suspected that, if their positions were reversed, she'd feel exactly the same as her mother did. She growled at the ceiling, disgruntled at being awake and stressing over something that wouldn't happen for a couple of months. She loved her parents. They loved her. She could handle being coddled for a few days. But, dammit, the latest encounter with the ownerless braid had left her wide awake. Sighing, Chloe rolled out of bed and headed for the kitchen. A glass of milk would help; she'd rather have hot chocolate, but chocolate had caffeine, so she'd settle for the milk. She could sleep late in the morning. She could sleep as late as she wanted, because she worked the evening shift at the restaurant. After pouring herself some milk, she leaned against the kitchen cabinet while she drank, and stared at her blurry reflection in the window of the microwave. Huh. Maybe there was a little bed-head going on there, which wasn't fair considering she'd been in bed maybe fifteen minutes, tops. She wondered how she'd look with really long hair, like that braid. She kept her hair just long enough that she could pull it back, sleek and neat, to keep it out of her way while she worked. Right now she just looked kind of mussed and messy, in soft, gray cotton shorts and a matching sleeveless tee, but what kept pulling her attention was her own baby soft, blond hair. Dammit, forget about the hair! Impatient with the dream and with hair in general, she moved so she couldn't see her reflection in the microwave and distracted herself by looking around for things she needed to do before her parents came to visit. All in all, she was very happy with what she saw. Her rental house was small, but she loved it. A friend of a friend had moved to California, but hadn't been willing to let go of the little gem, though property values in the district were so high surely there would have been a hefty profit in selling. Still, she couldn't blame them. The house was well-maintained and the landscaping was great. It was the perfect size for her: two bedrooms, two baths, a decent-sized living room, and a kitchen. It was practically within spitting distance of a Metro station. What else did a single woman need? The kitchen was square and well-equipped, and had been recently updated. Chloe liked to cook when she had the time, so a decent kitchen was a necessity. She kept hoping her landlords would decide the move to California was permanent and they'd offer to sell her

the house she'd told them she was interested, basically calling dibs "but so far they showed no signs of giving it up. Just as well. She needed to save more money for a down payment. The house was small, but this was a very desirable neighborhood and at the upper limit of what she could afford. Her parents would freak if she bought a house in the D.C. area. They kept thinking that when was she was finished with school she'd come to her senses and move home to Atlanta. After all, there were plenty of restaurants there that needed managers, as they'd told her time and time again. The truth was, Chloe loved living here. She loved the people, her job, the energy of the city. She had friends "even if her social time was limited when school was in session" and she loved this house. Maybe one day she'd have the man to go with it, even kids if they decided to go that route and her doctor agreed that the risk was acceptable, but for now she liked being independent. A few of her friends felt as if they had to have a guy in their lives or else they were at loose ends, incomplete somehow, missing out on life. Not Chloe. She valued her alone time and her independence. If and when the right man came into her life, that would be great. Until then, she wasn't looking, and she wasn't desperate. She'd watched too many of her friends end up with losers when they thought they couldn't snag anyone better. A time or two, she'd fallen into the loser trap herself. Okay, three times, before she'd come to her senses. She wasn't going to settle for Mr. Right Now because she was afraid Mr. Right wasn't ever going to materialize. Chloe had often thought that if she had one major characteristic, it was that she was level-headed. Wow, wasn't that impressive? But she made a great assistant manager, and one day she'd make a great manager, with an MBA, her level head, and her organizational skills "which did not, she admitted, extend to her guest room. She'd get there, though. She had the whole summer ahead of her to get the spare room in order, get her responses thought out and lined up for the inevitable arguments her parents would fire at her, and get rid of the weird braid that had invaded her dreams. In the bright light of the kitchen, that last detail sounded downright ridiculous. Who let a dream about hair keep her awake at night? Maybe she subconsciously wanted to dye her hair. The color of the braid really was nice. Maybe she'd seen someone on the street with a long braid like that one and she'd mentally filed it away without realizing it. But what about the sensation that she wasn't alone? Maybe she did need to seriously consider looking for that elusive permanent man, even though she wasn't quite ready to settle down. She could start cruising bars until she found a willing and acceptable man "nope, wasn't going to happen. Her level-headedness said that kind of behavior was both sad and dangerous. She'd have to take up jogging again, dammit.

She should have been doing it all along, but she simply hadn't had the time. Now that she was out of school for the summer, she didn't have that excuse. Everyone in Washington jogged, so she'd get out and join the herd. "Chloe . . ." The voice didn't just surprise her, it shocked her like a slap to the face. Her half-full glass of milk slipped from her hand and shattered on the floor, sending glass and milk shooting across her bare legs and the tile floor. Wildly she looked around, certain that someone was there. The voice, that hoarse whisper of her name, had been right there. The sound had been directly in her ear. No one. Nothing. She was completely alone. She began shaking. She wasn't asleep, she couldn't write the whisper off to dozing in the middle of the kitchen while she stood there drinking milk and making plans to drag her running shoes out of the closet. The voice had been real, as real as the mess she had to clean up, as real as the thin trickle of blood where a sliver of glass had cut her leg. After a minute she controlled her ragged breathing, and her panicked senses began settling down. Stepping carefully to avoid the broken glass that surrounded her, she concentrated on cleaning up the mess, focusing on the task so she didn't have to think of anything else. By the time every speck of milk and glass had been cleaned up and disposed of, she could take a deep breath and let it go. She hadn't really heard anything; her imagination had gotten the best of her, that was all. It was either that or admit that she was losing her mind, and pragmatic Chloe couldn't allow herself to go there. Across the city, Hector paced in his private quarters. His ability to read energies, to see bits and pieces of the future, had grown in his years as a vampire, but he couldn't see everything. What use was such an incomplete ability in a time of turmoil? How did he benefit from knowing someone close by was a traitor who had aligned him- or herself with rebels, when the precise knowledge of their identity eluded him? It was the sensation of battle, of coming turmoil, that most disturbed him. The last thousand years had been relatively peaceful, and his six hundred years on the Council had been productive ones. Order was required for the continued existence of his kind. He had done his part to keep the peace, and everything within him told him that the peace would soon come to an end. Hector had no great love for humans; he barely remembered being one himself. But humans were necessary for the existence of his kind, and as long as vampires were thought to be nothing more than myth or fantastical beings from horror tales, their survival was ensured. There were always a handful of vampires who thought differently, who wanted to openly take their place at the top of the food chain, but they had never had the strength of numbers and were easily taken care of. Until now. There was a knock on his door, and with that knock an increased sensation of the end. He didn't answer, but he knew the locked door offered

only a brief delay of theinevitable. He wasn't a warrior, had never been a warrior. If Luca were here . . . but he wasn't, and wouldn't be for a few more hours. All he could do now was use his ability, and Luca's, to pass on what he could. Concentrating, Hector did his best to fill the air with his thoughts, his energy, and his knowledge. He was looking at the door when it flew open, and in truth was not surprised to see who was on the other side. He thought the name, whispered it, imprinted the face in his mind, and set it loose. He fought, of course he did, but he'd been old before he was turned and his physical strength had never been great. The outcome was a foregone conclusion, one he'd sensed approaching. And he was aware, at the very end, that there was another traitor in the hallway, listening, waiting, hiding from the power she knew he possessed. She. Out of respect, the attacker didn't drink Hector's blood before he drove a long-bladed knife into his heart. Three times, it took, before the heart was so damaged that Hector's long life ended in a burst of bitter, gray dust. From the Paperback edition.

Blood Born by Linda Howard and Linda Jones is a great vampire paranormal romance. The plot was solid, there were tons of interesting characters in the large world that the authors created, and sweet romance along the way. Character's actions always seemed believable and emotional reactions were never over dramatic just for the sake of being dramatic, which I really liked. Also, there were no deeply sadistic or overly gruesome scenes, also something I really liked about this book. Not that there wasn't blood, or people getting killed, but the goriness wasn't focused on. The story opens by introducing us to many different characters, one or two at a time, and giving us a view of the world from their perspective, either human or vampire. The main thrust for at least the first 25% of the book is to show us the world that vampires live in, and the battle that some vampires are secretly waging in order to finally stop having to live in the shadows. We do meet the hero and heroine that the romance centers around, but it took me until the 25% mark to realize which characters the romance would be about. This isn't bad by any means, this story just isn't the typical incredibly graphic, hot and steamy romance of many vampire PNR's. Blood Born felt like a great paranormal adventure with some incredibly sweet, and at times, briefly steamy romance thrown in. The vampires don't have human emotions and struggle to understand why they should care about them, and this includes even the vampires that don't want to come out of the shadows and try to dominate humans. So when the vampires do start to feel things for this or that human, it leaves them mystified, which of course leads to poignant things happening. There are so many interesting characters created in

this first novel that you'll be rooting for not only the main couple but for others to find or acknowledge their feelings as well. I really enjoyed this book and hope there are, or will be, more novels.

I absolutely LOVED this book! The story focuses on Chloe, a conduit who needs to call her ancestor forward for a coming vampire war, and Luca a vampire who was born and not made. Luca serves the vampire council as an enforcer and protector (when needed). Luca pays a visit to the council when a friend of his is murdered. While investigating the murder, he encounters Chloe. Luca has a power (or gift?) of being instantly forgotten as soon as a person turns away from him but Chloe remembers him which causes him to become intrigued with her. While he's trying to figure out why she remembers him, he becomes aware that her life is in danger from other vampires and realizes that he wants to protect her. This was the best book. Even though I suspected how it would turn out (I read a lot of paranormal romance), there were lots of interesting plot twists and turns. Even though the main story is about Chloe and Luca, there are other interesting characters and some of their stories are told in the 2nd book (which I blazed through as well).

Wow. Just when you think you have everyone figured out. They change. Some for the better. They find that no matter how long they have walked the earth. They do not know everything.

Not only held my interest but was difficult to put down. The interaction and outcome for Chloe and Luca was inevitable. The ending was not completely expected. I enjoyed the chance to get away from the everyday humdrum into the lives of Chloe and Luca. I love happy endings.

I enjoyed this one. What I'm not excited about is that I have to wait a full year and a few months to read the next book in the series. Lucas Ambrus is blessed and cursed. People forget who he is the minute they're not looking at him. It's helpful being a vampire, but unless you're the strongest of the strong vampires you won't remember him. It's difficult for him to have any connections with vampires or people. Chloe Fallon is a conduit. There's a war brewing and her warrior is trying to come through to stop it. As more and more warriors are trying to get through the rebel vampires are taking the conduits out before they can enter this world. Lucas happens to stumble upon Chloe as one of the rebels is trying to kill her and he saves her. What he doesn't understand is why Chloe is different and can remember him. While Lucas is trying to stop the war he also needs to protect Chloe. There were a lot of character dynamics in this novel. There were a lot of characters I'd like to

learn more about and a few characters that were cut short that I feel like I'll miss. It kept me entertained and wanting to read more and more. I didn't want to put this one down. I was a bit disappointed at the end as it just sort of ended but I think it was mainly to setup the beginning of book two. Still, I wish it had a little more of a conclusion.

I am not usually into this type of reading but Linda Howard is a very good writer and I still enjoyed the book.

I really need to get the rest of this series.

I truly got lost in this book and could not put it down until I'd read every single word , , thanks Linda howard , I'm truly a fan of your work,, keep them coming

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