

The Valerian Series

By Linda Lael Miller

[Forever and the Night \(1993\)](#)

[For All Eternity \(1994\)](#)

[Time Without End \(1995\)](#)

[Tonight and Always \(1996\)](#)

[LINDA LAEL MILLER](#)

# Forever and the Night (1993)



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FOREVER AND THE NIGHT

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I wrote this book for myself; it was a gift from me, to me.

For that reason, and many others,

I dedicate it to the best of who

I am and to all that I hope to become.

Special acknowledgments are in order for Alex Kamaroff, who saw the vision more clearly than I did and helped me to bring it into focus; to Irene Goodman, who was a light in the darkness when things seemed hopeless; to Debbie Macomber, whose confidence in me seemed unwavering; and to Pamela Lael, who fearlessly marked errors of logic and spelling and raved in all the right places. Last but not least, I wish to thank my editor, Judith Stern, for her tireless efforts to make the book shine.

“’Tis now the very witching time of night,

When churchyards yawn and hell itself breathes out

Contagion to the world: now could I drink hot blood,

And do such bitter business as the day

Would quake to look upon.”

—*Hamlet*, Act III, Scene ii

## Chapter 1

That year, on the afternoon of Halloween, great glistening snowflakes began tumbling from a glowering sky, catching the maples and oaks by surprise in their gold and crimson housecoats, trimming fences and lampposts, roofs and windowsill, in shimmering, exquisite lace.

Aidan Tremayne awakened at sunset, as he'd done every day for more than two centuries, and felt a strange quickening in his spirit as he left the secret place in the woods. He allowed himself a wistful smile as he surveyed the snowy landscape, for he sensed the excitement of the town's children; it was like silent laughter, riding the wind.

All Hallow's Eve, he thought. How fitting.

He shook off the bittersweet sadness that had possessed him from the moment he'd opened his eyes and walked on toward the great stone house hidden in the stillness of its surroundings. There were birch trees among the others, gray-white sketches against the pristine snow, and a young deer watched him warily from the far side of a small mill pond.

Aidan paused, his eyes adjusting to the dusk, all his senses fluttering to life within him, and still the little doe returned his gaze, as though caught in the glow of headlights on some dark and forgotten road. He had only to summon the creature, and she would come to him.

He was hungry, having gone three days without feeding, but he had no taste for the blood of innocents, be they animal or human. Besides, the life force of lesser creatures provided substandard nourishment. *Go*, he told the deer, in the silent language he had become so proficient at over the years. *This is no place for you, no time to be abroad in the night.*

The deer listened with that intentness so typical of wild creatures, white ears perked as fat flakes of snow continued to fall, as if to hide all traces of evil beneath a mantle of perfect white. Then the creature turned and scampered into the woods.

Aidan allowed himself another smile—it was Halloween, after all, and he supposed the occasion ought to have some celebratory meaning to a vampire—and walked on toward the house. Beyond, at the end of a long gravel driveway, lay Route 7, the first hint of civilization. The small Connecticut town of Bright River nestled four and a half miles to the north.

It was the kind of place where church bells rang on Sunday mornings. Local political issues were hotly debated, and freight trains came through late at night, the mournful cry of the engineer's whistle filling the valley. The children at the elementary school made decorations colored in crayon, pumpkins or Pilgrims or Santa Clauses, depending on the season, and taped them to the windows of their classrooms.

Aidan still smiled as he mounted the slippery steps at the back of the house and entered the mudroom. He stomped the snow from his booted feet just as a mortal man might have done, but he did not reach for the light switch as he entered the kitchen. His vision was keenest in the dark, and his ears were so sharp that neither cacophony nor silence could veil the essence of reality from him.

Usually.

He paused just over the threshold, focusing his awareness, and knew in the space of a moment that he

was indeed alone in the gracious, shadowy house. This realization was both a relief—for he had powerful and very treacherous enemies—and a painful reminder that he was condemned to an eternity of seclusion. That was the worst part of being the monster he was, the wild, howling loneliness, the rootless wandering over the face of the earth, like a modern-day Cain.

Except for the brief, horrified comprehension of his victims, flaring in the moment before their final heartbeat, Aidan knew no human contact, for he consorted only with other vampires. He took little comfort from the company of his fellows—except for Maeve, his twin, whom he loved without reservation—for they were abominations, like himself. As a rule, vampires were amoral beings, untroubled by conscience or a need for the fellowship of others.

Aidan sighed as he passed silently through the house, shoving splayed fingers into dark, unruly hair. The yearning to live and love as an ordinary man had never left him, even though older and wiser vampires had promised it would. Some remnant of humanity lingered to give unrelenting torment.

He had not known peace of mind or spirit since the night *she*—Lisette—had changed him forever. Indeed, he supposed his unrest had begun even before that, when their gullible and superstitious mortal mother had taken him and Maeve to a gypsy camp, as very small children, to have their fortunes told.

The old woman—even after more than two hundred years, Aidan still remembered the horror of looking into her wrinkled and shrewd face—had taken his hand and Maeve's into her own. She'd held them close together, palms upward, peering deep, as if she could see through the tender flesh and muscle to some great mystery beneath. Then, just as suddenly, she'd drawn back, as though seared.

“Cursed,” she'd whispered. “Cursed for all of eternity, and beyond.”

The crone had turned ageless eyes—how strange they'd seemed, in that wizened visage—on Aidan, though her words had been addressed to his now-tearful mother. “A woman will come to him—do not seek her out, for she is not yet born—and she will be his salvation or his damnation, according to the choices they make.”

The ancient one had given each of the twins a golden pendant on a chain, supposedly to ward off evil, but it had been plain, even to a child, that she had little faith in talismans.

The chiming of the doorbell wrenched Aidan forward from that vanished time, and he found himself in mid-pace.

He became a shadow among shadows, there in the yawning parlor. Cold sickness clasped at his insides, even though they had long since turned to stone. *Someone had ventured within his range, and he had not sensed the person's approach.*

The bell sounded again. Aidan dragged one sleeve across his forehead. His skin was dry, but the sweat he'd imagined had seemed as real as that of a mortal man.

“Maybe nobody lives here,” a woman's voice said.

Aidan had regained his composure somewhat, and he moved to the front window with no more effort than a thought. He might have come as easily from his hiding place to the house, except that he liked to pretend he had human limitations sometimes, and remember how it felt to have breath and a heartbeat.

He made no effort to hide himself behind the lace curtain, for the woman and child standing on the porch

would not see him—not consciously, that is. Their deeper minds would register his presence and probably produce a few spooky dreams in an effort to assimilate him.

The child, a boy no older than six or seven, was wearing a flowing black cape and wax fangs, and he gripped a plastic pumpkin in one hand. His companion, clad in blue jeans, a sweater, and a worn-out cloth coat, was gamine-like, with short brown hair and large, dark eyes. Their conversation went on, ordinary and sweet as music, and Aidan took the words inside himself, to be played over and over again later, like a phonograph record.

Perhaps the other side of him, the beast, willed solidity and substance to his body and made him open the door.

“Trick or treat,” the small vampire said, holding up the grinning pumpkin. In his other hand he held a flashlight.

The woman and child glowed like angels in the wintry darkness, beautiful in their bright innocence, but Aidan was aware of the heat and warmth pulsing through them, too. The need for blood made him sway slightly and lean against the doorjamb.

That was when the woman touched him, and parts of her past flashed through his mind like a movie. He saw that she liked to wear woolen socks to bed, that she was hiding from someone she both cared for and feared, that despite her close relationship with the child, she was as lonely as Aidan himself.

All in all, she was delightfully mortal, a tangle of good and not-so-good traits, someone who had known the full range of sadness and joy in her relatively brief existence.

Aidan felt a wicked wrench, in the darkest reaches of his accursed soul, a sensation he had not known before, in life or in death. It was both pain and pleasure, that feeling, and the possible significance of it dizzied him.

Why had he recalled the words of the gypsy, spoken so long ago, words tucked away in a child’s mind and forgotten five minutes after they were offered, now, on this night?

A woman will come to him. . . she will be his salvation or his damnation. . .

No, he decided firmly. Even given all he knew of the world, and of creation, it was too fanciful a theory to accept. This was not the one who would save or damn him; such a creature probably did not even exist.

Still, the gypsy’s prediction had been otherwise correct. He and Maeve had both been cursed, as surely as the rebellious angels had been, those banished from heaven so many eons before, following the legendary battle between Lucifer and the archangel, Michael.

“Are you all right?” the woman asked, pulling him sharply back from his musings. “You look a little pale.”

Aidan might have laughed, so ludicrously accurate was her remark, but he didn’t dare risk losing control. He was ravenous, and the woman and child standing before him could have no way of knowing what sort of monster they were facing all alone, there in those whispering >woods.

Their blood would be the sweetest of nectars, made vital by its very purity, and to take it from them

would be a bliss so profound as to sustain him for many, many nights. . .

The soft concern in the visitor's manner was nearly Aidan's undoing, for he could not even recall the last time a woman had spoken to him with tenderness. He drew in a deep breath, even though he had no need for air, and let it out slowly, holding the inward demons in check with his last straining shreds of strength. "Yes," he said, somewhat tersely. "I've been—ill."

"If you don't have any candy, it's okay," the child put in with quick charity. "Aunt Neely won't let me eat anything I get from strangers anyhow."

Aidan was almost deafened by a rushing sound stemming from some wounded and heretofore abandoned place in his spirit. *Neely*. He made note of the woman's name—it was a detail that had seemed unimportant, in the face of the devastating affect she'd had upon him—and it played in his soul like music. His control was weakening with every passing moment; he had to flee the pair before he broke his own all-but-inviolate rule and ravaged them both.

Still, he was so shaken, so captivated by this unexpected mortal woman, that movement was temporarily beyond his power.

"I have something better than candy," he heard himself say, after a desperate inner struggle. He made himself move, took a coin from the ancient cherry-wood box on the hallway table and dropped it into the plastic pumpkin the little boy held out to him. "Happy Halloween."

Neely's brown eyes linked with Aidan's, and she smiled.

He watched the pulse throb at the base of her right ear, imagined the vitality he could draw from her, the sheer, glorious *life*. The mere thought of it made him want to weep.

He did not risk speaking again.

"Thank you," she said, turning to start down the porch steps.

The small vampire lingered on the doormat. "My name's Danny. We're practically your neighbors," he said. "We live at the Lakeview Trailer Court and Motel, on Route Seven. My dad is the caretaker there, and Aunt Neely cleans rooms and waits tables in the truck stop."

The blush that rose in the woman's cheeks only made Aidan's deadly hunger more intense. Just when he would have lunged at her, he thrust the door closed and willed himself away quickly—far away, to another time and another place, where he could stalk without compunction.

Aidan chose one of his favorite hunting grounds, a miserable section of nineteenth-century London known as Whitechapel. There, in the dark, narrow, stinking streets, he might select his prey not from the prostitutes, or the pickpockets and burglars, but from procurers, white slavers, and men who made their living in the opium trade. Occasionally he indulged a taste for a mean drunk, a wife-beater, or a rapist; circumstances determined whether his victims saw his face and read their fate there or simply perished between one breath and the next. He did not actually kill the majority of his victims, however, and he had never made vampires of his prey, even though he knew the trick of it only too well. It was all a matter of degree.

He kept a room over a back-alley tavern, and that was where he materialized on that particular night. Quickly he exchanged his plain clothes for an elegant evening suit and a beaver top hat. To this ensemble

he added a black silk cape lined with red, as a private joke.

A cloying, yellow-white fog enveloped the city, swirling about the lampposts and softening the sounds of cartwheels jostling over cobblestones, of revelry in the taverns and whoring in the alleys. Somewhere a woman screamed, a high-pitched, keening sound, but Aidan paid no attention, and neither did any of the other shadowy creatures who haunted the night.

He'd walked only a short way when he came upon a fancy carriage stopped at the curb. A small man, clad in a bundle of rags and filthy beyond all bearing, was pressing a half-starved child toward the vehicle's open door.

Inside, Aidan glimpsed a younger man, outfitted in clothes even more finely tailored than his own, counting out coins into a white, uncalloused palm.

"I won't do it, do you 'ear me!" the little one cried, with unusual spirit for such a time and place. Although Aidan sensed that the small entity was female, there was nothing about her scrawny frame to indicate the fact. She couldn't have been older than eight or ten. "I won't let some *bastard* from Knightsbridge bugger me for a shilling!"

Aidan closed his eyes for a moment, filled with disgust, vividly recalling the human sensation of bile bubbling into the back of his throat in a scalding rush. After all the time that had passed since his making, it still came as a shock to him to realize that vampires and werewolves and warlocks weren't the only fiends abroad in the world.

"Get'n the carriage and tend to your business!" shouted the rag-man, cuffing the child hard between her thin shoulders. "I'll not stand 'ere and argue with the likes of you all night, Shallie Biffle!"

Aidan stepped forward, deliberately opening himself to their awareness. Closing one hand over the back of the ragman's neck, instantly paralyzing the wretched little rodent, he spoke politely to the urchin still standing on the sidewalk.

"This man"—he nodded toward his bug-eyed, apoplectic captive—"is he your father?"

"'ell, no," spat Shallie. "'e's just a dirty flesh-peddler, that's all. I ain't got no father or mother—if I did, would I be 'ere?"

Aidan produced a five-pound note, using that special vampire sleight of hand too rapid for the human eye to catch. "There is a woman in the West End who'll look after you," he said. "Go to her now."

He put the street name and number into the child's mind without speaking again, and she scrambled off into the shifting murk, clutching the note she'd snatched from his fingers a second after its appearance.

The horses pulling the carriage grew restless, but the dandy and his driver sat obediently, bemused, as helpless in their own way as the rag-man.

Aidan lifted the scrap of filth by the scruff of his neck and allowed him to see his fierce vampire teeth. It would have been the purest pleasure to tear open that particular jugular vein, to drain the blood and toss away the husk like a handful of nutshells, but he had settled on even viler prey—the wealthy pervert who had ventured into Whitechapel to buy the virtue of a child.

He flung the procurer aside, heard the flesh-muffled sound of a skeleton splintering against the



soot-stained wall of a brick building. *Fancy that*, Aidan thought to himself with a regretful smile.

He climbed easily into the leather-upholstered interior of the carriage, and there he settled himself across from his intended victim. With a thought, he broke the wicked enchantment that had held both the driver and his master in stricken silence.

“Tell the man to take you home,” Aidan said companionably enough, examining his gloves to make sure he hadn’t smudged them while handling the rag-man’s dirty person.

The carriage was dark, but Aidan’s vision was noonday perfect, and he saw the young nobleman swallow convulsively before he reached up with a shaking hand and knocked three times on the vehicle’s roof. The lad loosened his ascot as he stared at Aidan in confounded fear, his pulse plainly visible between the folds of silk.

Yes, Aidan thought with quiet lust, eyeing the man’s throat. Soon, very soon, the terrible hunger would be satisfied, at least for the time being.

“Wh-Who are you?” the nobleman finally managed to stammer out.

Aidan smiled cordially and took off his hat, setting it carefully on the leather seat beside him. “No one, really. You might say that you’re having a remarkably authentic nightmare—Bucky.”

The young man paled at Aidan’s easy use of his nickname, which, of course, he hadn’t given. Bucky swallowed again, gulped really, and a fine sheen of perspiration broke out on his upper lip. “If it’s about the child—well, I was only looking for a little harmless diversion, that’s all—”

“You are a man of peculiar tastes,” Aidan said without expression. “Does your family know how you amuse yourself of an evening?”

Bucky squirmed in the seat. On some level, Aidan supposed, the specimen’s mind was developed enough to discern that the curtain was about to come down on the last act. “If this is about blackmail—”

Aidan interrupted with *atsk-tsk* sound. “For shame. Not all of us are willing to stoop to such depths as you do, my friend. Blackmail is far beneath me.”

A flush flowed into Bucky’s pasty face, sharpening Aidan’s desire to feed to something very like frenzy. He would wait, however, allowing the prospect to grow sweeter, in much the same way he had let fine wine breathe before indulging in it, back in those glorious days when the only blood he’d needed was that which coursed through his own veins.

“What do you want then, if not money?” Bucky sputtered.

Aidan smiled, revealing his fangs, and watched in quiet, merciless resolution as a silent scream moved up and down Bucky’s neck but failed to escape his constricted throat. He looked frantically, helplessly, toward the carriage door.

“There is no escape,” Aidan told him pleasantly.

Bucky’s eyes were huge. “No more—no more children— I swear it—”

Aidan shrugged eloquently. “I quite believe you,” he conceded. “You will never again have the chance,



you see.”

The carriage rattled on through the foggy London night, and the trip must have seemed endless to Bucky. Indeed, for him it was surely an eternity. Finally, when Aidan knew time was growing short, that dawn would come soon, he decided he'd savored the salty, vital wine long enough.

Slowly he put his hands on Bucky's velvet-clad shoulders, drew him close, even snarled a little, as a media vampire might, to give the moment a touch more drama. Then he sank his teeth into the tender flesh of Bucky's neck, and the blood flowed, liquid energy, not over Aidan's tongue but through his fangs.

As much as he hated everything he was, feeding brought the usual ecstasy. Aidan drank until his ferocious thirst had been quelled, then snapped Bucky's neck between his fingers and flung him to the floor of the carriage.

Aidan rarely fed in Bucky's circles, and he frowned as he imagined the furor the finding of a dandy's blood-drained hulk would arouse in the newspapers. He felt some regret, too, for the confusion that would reign among the diligent, well-meaning souls at Scotland Yard when they tried to make sense of the incident.

They would, of course, blame the Ripper.

Aidan stopped the carriage by freezing the driver's already addled mind, bent to straighten Bucky's stained ascot, then climbed out onto a virtually empty sidewalk.

His sister Maeve's grand house loomed before him, beyond an imposing wrought-iron fence, its chimneys and gables rimmed with the first gray-pink tatters of dawn.

The vampire met the carriage driver's blank stare, dismissed him with no memory of visiting Whitechapel or even encountering a stranger. The vehicle lumbered away through the slow, silent waltz of the fog.

Aidan let himself into the house via a special entrance next to the wine cellar and took refuge in a dark, tomb-like room where inhabitants had once hidden from Oliver Cromwell's men. He bolted the door, then removed his hat and the cloak and settled in a half-crouch against a cold stone wall.

He yawned as the fathomless sleep began to overtake him. He'd been careless, coming here, but after his dawdling with poor, misguided Bucky, there hadn't been time to return to his lair in twentieth-century Connecticut. Besides, satiation always dulled his wits for a while.

He would just have to hope—it was futile for a vampire to offer a prayer—that none of his enemies had been watching when he came to this only-too-obvious place to rest.

Aidan yawned again and closed his eyes. He didn't fear most vampires, for all but a few had to hide from the sun just as he did, but there were other arch-demons, other abominations of creation, who preyed upon his kind, terrible, beautiful things that flourished in the daylight.

Usually Aidan did not dream. All consciousness faded to dense blackness when he slumbered, leaving him vulnerable while his being assimilated the food that made him immortal.

Tonight, however, Aidan saw the woman, Neely, on the stage of his mind, and the little boy with wax vampire teeth, and even in his stupor he was wildly troubled. In two centuries no mortal female had

captured his imagination. This one, this Neely, was different.

It wasn't just her looks—she was pretty enough, though by no means beautiful—but something far deeper, an ancient and cataclysmic affection of the soul, a bittersweet paradox. It was as if he'd been captured by a cunning and much-feared foe and at the same time found a vital part of himself that he hadn't known was lost.

Again, the long-dead gypsy witch's ominous words echoed, fragmented and sharp as splintered glass, in his mind. *Cursed—damnation or salvation...*

When he awakened, many hours later, he knew immediately that he was not alone in the dark chamber.

A match was struck; the light flared, searing Aidan's eyes. Before him stood Valerian, majestic in his vampirism, a giant, beautiful fiend with chestnut-brown hair, patrician features, and a dark violet gaze that could paralyze any lesser creature in a twinkling.

"You are a fool, Aidan!" Valerian spat, and the motion of his lips made the candlelight flicker. Like Aidan, Valerian had no breath. "What possessed you to come *here*?" He waved one elegant arm in barely bridled fury. "Have you forgotten that she searches for you? That she needs neither darkness nor sleep?"

Aidan yawned and raised himself to his feet, using the wall behind him for support. "She," he quoted mockingly. "Tell me, Valerian, are you so terrified of Lisette that you will not even say her name?"

The older vampire's eyes narrowed to slits; Aidan could feel his fury singing in the room like the discordant music of a thousand warped violins. "I have no reason to fear Lisette," he said after a moment woven of eternity. "It is you, Aidan, who have incurred her everlasting hatred!"

Aidan scratched the back of his neck, another habit held over from mortal days. The only itch that ever troubled him now came from far beneath his skin, driving him to take blood or die in the crudest agony of thirst. He arched one eyebrow as he regarded his long-time acquaintance.

"No doubt, if Lisette is near, it's because she followed you," he said reasonably.

Again Valerian's lethal anger stirred. "I am nearly as powerful as she is—I can shroud my presence from her when I wish. You, on the other hand, might as well have laid down to sleep in the full light of the sun as to take refuge here! How long will you walk about with your thoughts naked to whatever demon might be listening? Do you *want* to perish, Aidan? Is that it?"

Against his will, Aidan thought of the woman, Neely, who lived and breathed back in the cold, fresh air of twentieth-century Connecticut. He felt the most torturous and inexplicable grief, coupled with a joy the likes of which no fiend could expect to entertain. "Perhaps I do," he confessed raggedly. Then he lifted his eyes to Valerian's magnificent, terrible face and asked, "Do you never yearn for peace? Don't you ever grow so weary of what you are that you'd risk the wrath of heaven and the fires of hell to escape it?"

"Fool," Valerian spat again, plainly exasperated. "Why do I bother myself with such an idiot? For us, the pure light of heaven would be as great a torment as the blazes of Hades! We would escape nothing by fleeing this life!"

"This is not life," Aidan replied with unexpected fury. "This is a living death. Hell itself could not possibly

be worse!”

Valerian gentled, for he was an unpredictable creature, and laid his gracious hands on Aidan’s shoulders. “Poor Aidan,” he mocked. “When will you accept what you are and stop playing at being a man?”

Aidan turned away and snatched his cloak and top hat from the top of the wine crate where he’d left them that morning before giving himself up to a tempestuous sleep. Valerian’s words had struck a chord of terror in his spirit.

Did the other vampire know about Neely and the little boy? Was that what he’d meant by “playing at being a man”? If Valerian had taken notice of their existence while Aidan’s mind was unguarded in slumber, he might see it as his duty to destroy them.

In the next moment Aidan’s worst fears were confirmed. “You are an even greater fool than I thought,” Valerian said with rueful affection. “Imagine it, your being besotted with a fragile mortal!” He paused, sighed. “You do me injury,” he murmured, before going on to say, in his usual imperious way, “Come with me, Aidan. I will show you worlds and dimensions you have never dreamed of. I will teach you to cherish what you are, *to relish* it!”

Aidan retreated a step, covered his ears with his hands, as though that could keep out the brutal truth of Valerian’s words. “Never!” he gasped out. “And if you go near the woman or the child, I swear by all the unholy vows, whatever the cost may be, *I will destroy you!*”

Valerian looked stung, which was another of his many affectations, of course. Aidan knew the other vampire was not capable of anything so prosaic as getting his feelings hurt, and he certainly didn’t fear a being of lesser powers.

The creature sighed theatrically. “Perhaps Maeve can reason with you,” he said. “I am weary of the effort.”

“Leave me,” Aidan replied.

Miraculously Valerian conceded the point and disappeared.

Aidan tilted his head back as if to see through the thick ceiling. His senses told him that Maeve was not in residence but off hunting in some other place and century.

A small, aching coil of loneliness twisted inside Aidan’s breast. Whatever their differences, he cherished his sister. Her companionship would have been comforting, a warm hearth in the dark bewilderment that tormented him now.

He closed his eyes and thought of Connecticut, and when he looked again, he was there, standing in the darkness of a bedroom he never used.

Aidan tossed the top hat and cloak onto a wing chair upholstered in rich leather and wrenched at the high collar that suddenly seemed to constrict his throat. Somehow, in those few treacherous minutes when Neely had stood on his doorstep, escorting a little beggar in a vampire suit, Aidan had made a truly terrible error. He had brought the woman into his mind, just to admire her effervescence for a few moments, and she had taken up stubborn residence there.

What in blazes was this fascination he’d acquired?

He looked toward the bed, remembering what it was like to lie with a daughter of Eve, to give and take physical pleasure, and was possessed of a yearning so fierce that it horrified him. He had merely *glimpsed* this troublesome woman, and yet he found himself wanting her, not as sustenance, but bucking beneath him in wild spasms of passion, clutching his bare shoulders in frantic fingers, crying out in the sweet fever of ecstasy...

He had to see her again, if only to convince himself that he had built her up into something more than she was, to end this reckless obsession that could so easily end in obliteration for them both.

When he had regained his composure somewhat, Aidan exchanged his gentleman's garb for well-worn jeans and a wheat-colored Irish cable-knit sweater. He brushed his dark, longish hair—a style suited to the current century and decade—and formed a clear picture of Neely in his mind.

In the space of a second he was standing in the parking lot of the truck stop on Route 7, a soft Connecticut snow falling around him, and she was just coming out through the front door, scrambling into her cheap coat as she walked.

She stopped when she sensed his presence, met his gaze, and sealed his doom forever simply by smiling.

"Hello," she said. Her gamine eyes were bright with some hidden mischief, and the snowflakes made a mantilla for her short hair.

Long-forgotten and deeply mourned emotions wrung Aidan as he stood there, powerless before her innocent enchantment. "Hello," he replied, while sweet despair settled over him like snow blanketing a new and raw grave.

Somewhere deep inside him a spark kindled into flame.

It was true, then, what the gypsy sorceress had said so long before. Here, before him, stood the reason for his creation, the personification of his fate.

## Chapter 2

It almost seemed that he'd been waiting for her. Neely Wallace felt both an intense attraction and a rush of adrenaline as she stood in the parking lot of the Lakeview Cafe, gazing into that enigmatic pair of eyes. A spontaneous "hello" had tumbled over her lips before she'd given full consideration to the fact that this man was a virtual stranger.

Remembering that there were people in the world who wanted to silence Neely, or even kill her, she was surprised at her own reaction. Briefly, futilely, she wished she had never worked for Senator Dallas Hargrove, never found the evidence of his criminal acts, thus making herself a target.

He smiled, the snow drifting and floating softly between them, cosseting the land in a magical silence. Something about his gaze captivated her, made her want to stand there looking at him forever.

It was as though he had looked inside her, with those remarkable eyes of his, and awakened some vital part of her being, heretofore unknown and undreamed of.

Neely cleared her throat nervously but kept her smile in place. She should have taken the time to call her brother, Ben, when her shift was over, as he was always telling her to do, so he could come and walk her back to the trailer court. If she hadn't seen the man the night before, when she and Danny had gone out trick-or-treating, she might have thought he was a mugger or a rapist, or that her former boss had finally sent someone to make sure she never talked about his close association with drug dealers. "The cafe's closed," she said. "We'll open up again at five."

He came no nearer, this man woven of shadows, and yet his presence was all around Neely, in and through her, like the very essences of time and space. "Don't be afraid," he said. "I'm not here to hurt you."

Neely figured a serial killer might say the same thing, but the idea didn't click with her instincts. She realized she *wasn't* truly afraid, but her stomach was fluttery, and she felt capable of pole-vaulting over the big neon sign out by the highway. "I don't think I caught your name," she said, finally breaking the odd paralysis that had held her until that moment.

"Aidan Tremayne," he said, keeping his distance. "And yours?"

"Neely Wallace," she answered, at last finding the impetus to start across the lot, the soles of her boots making tracks in the perfect snow. Idly she wondered if she would end up as a segment on one of those crime shows that were so popular on TV. She could just hear the opening blurb. *Ms. Cornelia Wallace, motel maid and waitress, erstwhile personal assistant to Senator Dallas Hargrove, disappeared mysteriously one snowy night from the parking lot of the Lakeview Truck Stop, just outside Bright River, Connecticut ...*

A high, dense hedge separated the parking area from the motel and trailer court beyond, and Neely paused under an arch of snow-laced shrubbery to look back.

Aidan Tremayne, clearly visible before in the glimmer of the big floodlights standing at all four corners of the parking lot, was gone. No trace of him lingered, and the new layer of snow was untouched except for Neely's own footprints.

She stood perfectly still for a moment, listening, but she heard nothing. She drew a deep breath and walked on at a brisk pace, making her way past the two-story motel and into the trailer court. Reaching the door of her tiny mobile home, which was parked next to Ben's larger one, she looked back over her shoulder again, almost expecting to see Tremayne standing behind her.

"Weird," Neely said to herself as she turned the key in the lock.

The trailer wobbled, as usual, when Neely stepped inside. She flipped on the light switch and peeled off her coat in an almost simultaneous motion. Then, as an afterthought, she turned the lock on her door and put the chain-bolt in place.

Her utilitarian telephone, a plain black model with an old-fashioned dial, startled her with an immediate jangle. She grabbed up the receiver, oddly exasperated.

"Damn it, Neely," her brother said, "I told you to call me when you were through closing up the cafe so I could come over and walk you home. Don't you read the newspapers? It isn't safe for a woman to be out alone so late at night."

Neely calmed down by reminding herself that Ben truly cared about her; except for Danny and her best friend, Wendy Browning, he was probably the only person in the world who did. She put away her coat, sat down on her hide-a-bed sofa with a sigh, and quickly kicked off her snow boots.

“I’m sorry, Ben,” she responded, rubbing one sore foot. She frowned, spotting a run in her pantyhose. Even hairspray or nail polish wouldn’t stop this one. “Yes, it’s late, and that’s exactly why I didn’t call. I knew Danny would be in bed, and I didn’t want you to have to leave him alone.” She paused, drew a deep breath, and plunged. “Ben, what do you know about Aidan Tremayne, that guy who lives in the mansion down the road?”

Ben sounded tired. “Just that. His name is Aidan Tremayne, and he lives in the mansion down the road. Why?”

Neely was unaccountably disappointed; she’d wanted some tidbit of information to mull over while she was brushing her teeth and getting ready for bed. “I was just wondering, that’s all. Danny and I went there on Halloween night. He struck me as sort of—different.”

“I guess you could say he’s a recluse,” Ben said, barely disguising his indifference. “Listen, sweetheart, I’m beat. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Emotion swelled in Neely’s throat. She and Ben had more in common than their late parents. He’d lost his wife, Shannon, to cancer a few years before, along with his job in a Pittsburgh steel mill, and he’d been struggling to rebuild his life and Danny’s ever since. Neely had been forced to give up an entire way of life—her work, her apartment, her friends—because she knew too much about certain very powerful people.

“Good night,” she said.

Neely’s trailer consisted of one room, essentially, with the fold-out bed at one end and a kitchenette at the other. The bathroom was quite literally the size of the hall closet in her old apartment.

Resolving to dwell on what she had—her life, her health, Danny and Ben—instead of what she’d lost, Neely took off her pink uniform and hung it carefully from a curtain rod.

After showering, she put on an old flannel nightshirt and dried her hair. Then she heated a serving of vegetable soup on a doll-size stove and sat in the middle of her lumpy fold-out bed, eating and watching a late-night talk show on the small TV that had once occupied a corner of the kitchen counter of her spacious apartment in Washington.

Neely didn’t laugh at the host’s monologue that night, though she usually enjoyed it. She kept thinking of Aidan Tremayne, wondering who he was and why he’d stirred her the way he had. He was one of the most attractive men she’d ever met, and inwardly she was still reeling from the impact of encountering him unexpectedly as she’d left the cafe.

Not to mention the way he’d vanished in the time it took to blink.

She walked to the edge of the bed on her knees, balancing her empty soup bowl with all the skill of a good waitress, then got up and crossed to the sink. After rinsing out her dish, she returned to the bathroom and brushed her teeth. The thing to do was sleep; she would think about Mr. Tremayne another time, when fatigue did not make her overly fanciful.



Aidan was especially ravenous that night, but he did not feed. The hunger lent a crystalline sharpness to his thought processes, and as he sat alone in his sumptuous study, with no light but that of the fire on the hearth, he allowed himself to remember a time, a glorious time, when he'd been a man instead of a monster.

He closed his eyes and tilted his head back against the high leather chair in which he sat, recalling. Like most mortals, Aidan had not realized what it really meant to have a strong, steady heartbeat, supple lungs that craved air, skin that sweated, and muscles that took orders from a living brain. He had thought with his manhood in those simple days, not his mind.

Now he was a husk, an aberration of nature. Thanks to his own impetuous nature and unceasing pursuit of a good time, thanks to Lisette, he was a fiend, able to exist only by the ingestion of human blood. He longed for the peace of death but feared the possibilities of an afterlife too much to perish willingly.

Aidan could travel freely in time and its dimensions, but the Power that pulsed at the heart of the universe was veiled to him. He knew only that it existed, and that its agents were among his most dangerous enemies.

He could not bear to consider the fate that might await him should he succumb to the mystery of true death; he'd had enough religious training in his early years at school to sustain a pure and unremitting terror. Nor did Aidan choose to think of Neely Wallace, for to do that in his present mood would be to transport himself instantly into her presence.

He engaged in a sad smile, letting decades unfold in his mind, and then centuries. He'd been twenty-two when the unthinkable had happened. The year had been 1782, the place an upstairs room in a seedy English tavern, not far from Oxford...

Lisette's waist-length auburn hair was spread across Aidan's torso like a silken veil, and her ice-blue eyes were limpid as she gazed at him. "Lovely boy," she crooned, stroking his chest, his belly, and then his member. "I can't bear to give you up."

Aidan groaned. They'd been together all night and, as always, as the dawn approached, she grew sentimental and greedy. He was amazed to feel himself turn hard, for he'd thought she'd drained him of all ability to respond.

Lisette was older than Aidan by a score of years, and her experience in intimate matters was vast, but other than those things, he knew little about her. One night a few weeks before, when Aidan had been out walking alone, a splendid carriage drawn by six matched horses had stopped beside him in the road. Lisette, a pale and gloriously beautiful creature, had summoned him inside with a smile and a crook of her finger. They'd been meeting regularly ever since.

Now she laughed at his reluctance to surrender even as his young body betrayed him.

She set the pace as the aggressor and the seducer. She took him, extracted yet another exquisite response from him, and left him half-conscious in the tangled bedclothes immediately afterward.

Aidan watched his lover through a haze as she paced the crude plank-board floor, once again clad in her gauzy, flowing gown, her hair trailing down her back in a profusion of coppery curls. He was glad it was nearly sunrise, that she would leave him then as always, because he knew that one more turn in her arms would kill him.



“See that you don’t go dallying with a wench while I’m away,” she flared. “I won’t have it!”

He hauled himself up onto his elbows, but that was all he could manage. “You don’t own me, Lisette,” he said. “Don’t be telling me what you’ll have and what you won’t.”

She whirled on him then, and he saw something terrible in her face, even though there was no light but that of a thin winter moon fading into an approaching dawn. “Do not speak to me in that disrespectful way again!” she raged.

Aidan was a bold sort—indeed, his father’s solicitor swore the trait would be his undoing—but even he did not dare challenge Lisette further. She was no ordinary woman, he’d guessed that long since, and she was capable of far more than ordinary mischief. He guessed that had been her appeal, along with her insatiable appetites and the envy her attentions generated among his peers.

Lisette cast a sullen glance toward the window, then glared at Aidan again, her eyes seeming to glitter in the gloom. They looked hard, like jewels, and they flashed with an icy fire. She made a strangled sound, a mingling of desire and grief, and then she was upon him again.

He tried to throw her off, for the sudden ferocity of her attack had unnerved him, but to his annoyance he discovered that she was far stronger than he was.

“Soon,” she kept murmuring, over and over, like a mother comforting a fitful child, “soon, darling, all the earth will belong to us—”

Aidan felt her teeth puncture his neck, and his heart raced with fresh horror. He fought to free himself, but Lisette was like a marble statue, crushing him, breaking his bones. At that point he began to recede into unconsciousness; he was going to die, never see Maeve again, never laugh or paint or drink wine and ale with his friends.

He renewed his efforts, struggling to return to full awareness, even though there was pain and fear, mortal fear so intense that his very soul throbbed with it.

“Now, now,” Lisette whispered, lifting her head to look into his eyes. “Your friends will think you’re dead, poor fools, but you will only be sleeping. I will return for you, my darling, before they bury you.”

Aidan was appalled and wildly confused. He felt strange; his body was weak to the point of death, and he could barely keep his eyes open, yet his soul seemed to soar on the wings of some dark euphoria. “Oh, God,” he whispered, “what’s happening to me?”

Lisette rose from the bed, but it made no difference that she’d finally freed him, for Aidan could not move so much as a muscle.

“You’ll see, my darling,” she said, “but don’t trouble yourself by calling out to God. He turns a deaf ear to our sort.”

Aidan fought desperately to raise himself, but he still had no strength. He could only watch in terrified disbelief as Lisette’s form disintegrated into a swirling, sparkling mist. She was gone, and even though Aidan was conscious, he knew full well that she had murdered him.

He could not speak, could not move. His heart had stopped beating, he wasn’t breathing, and as the room filled with sunlight, his sight faded. His flesh burned as surely as if he’d been laid out on a funeral

pyre, and yet Aidan knew the pain wasn't physical. He was dead, as Lisette had said, yet only too aware of all that happened around him.

A wench, probably come to fill the water jug and tidy the bed, found him later that morning. Her shrieks stabbed his mind; he tried to move, to speak, to show her he was conscious, but it was all for naught. Aidan was a living soul trapped inside a corpse.

He was aware of the others, when they came, for it was as though the conscious part of him had risen to a corner of the ceiling to look down on the lot of them. There were two men, the tavern owner and his burly, stupid son, but a priest soon arrived as well.

The boy took the door from its hinges, and they laid Aidan's helpless body out on that wooden panel. He could do nothing to resist them.

"Poor soul," said the priest, grasping the large crucifix he wore around his neck on a plain cord and making the sign of the cross over Aidan's mortal remains. "What do you suppose happened to him?"

"He died a happy man," the idiot-boy replied, leering. It didn't seem to bother him that he was addressing a man of God. "That's if the lady I saw him with and the sounds I heard comin'" from this here room meant anything!"

Aidan returned to his wasted body from his vantage point near the ceiling, struggled to move something, anything—an ear, an eyelash, one of the tiny muscles at the corners of his mouth. Nothing. Blackness covered him, swallowed him up, mind and soul, and he was no one, nowhere.

When Aidan wakened, he still could not move. He knew, with that peculiar extra sense he'd acquired soon after Lisette's attack, that he was in the back of the undertaker's shop, laid out on a slab, with coins on his eyes. At first light he'd be closed up in a coffin and probably sent home to Ireland in the back of a wagon, no longer a troublesome responsibility to his prosperous English father. His mother, a dark-haired tavern maid, a woman of light laughter and even lighter skirts, would mourn him for a while, but Maeve would suffer the sorest grief. Maeve, his twin sister, his childhood companion, the counterpart of his personality.

Hope stirred in Aidan's being when he felt a cool hand come to rest on his forehead; his hope died when he heard his murderess's voice. "There now, I told you I'd come back for you," she said, placing a frigid kiss where her fingers had been. "Sweet darling, have you been afraid? Perhaps you'll remember, after this, what it means to defy me."

Aidan knew a pure anguish of emotion, but he could say nothing. He cried out inwardly when she bent over him again, when he felt her teeth puncture the skin of his throat like pointed quills thrust through dry parchment. In the next instant, liquid ecstasy seemed to flow into every part of him; he could see clearly again and hear with crystal clarity, even though he still had no breath or heartbeat. An unearthly and wholly incredible power was spawning inside him, growing, grumbling, surging upward like lava thrusting at the inside of a mountain.

His muscles were flexible again; he sat bolt upright on the slab and thrust Lisette aside with a motion of his arm.

"What have you done?" he rasped, for the joy that seemed to crush him from the inside was the sort denied to mere men. It was dark and rich and evil, and he yearned to throw it off even as he embraced it. "In the name of God, Lisette, *what manner of creature are you and what have you done to me?*"

Lisette thrust her arms up, as if he'd attempted to strike her again. "Do not speak of the Holy One again—it is forbidden!"

"Tell me!" Aidan bellowed.

There was a clamor beyond the door of the morgue, the sounds of rushing feet and muffled voices.

Lisette came to Aidan's side. Her mind filled the room, swirled around his like an invisible storm, swallowed it whole. When his awareness returned, when he knew that he was a separate entity, they were hiding together in a damp place with cold stone walls.

He was lying down once again, this time on an altar of sorts. In the flickering light of a half dozen candles, he saw Lisette, looming at his feet like some horrible angel of darkness.

"Please," he said, his voice a raw whisper. "Tell me what I am."

She smiled and came to stand beside him, smoothing his hair back from his forehead. He wasn't bound, as far as he could tell, and yet she must have been restraining him somehow, for he was utterly powerless once more.

"Don't be so anxious, my darling," Lisette scolded. "You are a most wonderful creature now, with powers others only dream of. You are a vampire."

"No," he protested. "*No!* It's impossible—such things do not happen!"

"Shhh," said Lisette, laying an index finger to her lovely, lethal mouth. "Soon you will adjust to the change, my darling. Once you've felt the true scope of your talents, you'll thank me for what I've done."

"Thank you?" Aidan trembled, so great was his effort to rise and confront her, and so fruitless. "If what you say is true—and I cannot credit that it is—then I shall curse you. But I will never, *never* thank you!"

Lisette's beautiful face became a mask of controlled rage. "Ingrate! You don't know what you're saying. If I thought you did, I would toss you out into the sunlight to burn in the sort of agony only a vampire can know! Count yourself fortunate, Aidan Tremayne, that I am mercifully inclined toward you!" She stopped, seemed to gather herself in from all directions, then favored Aidan with a smile made brutal by its sweet sacrilege. "Sleep now, darling. Rest. When darkness comes again, I will show you places and things you've never imagined..."

In the nights to come, Lisette had kept her promise.

She had taught Aidan to hunt, and despise it though he did, he had learned his lessons well. She had shown him how to move as easily between eras and continents as a mortal travels from room to room. From Lisette, Aidan learned to find a safe lair and to veil his presence from the awareness of human beings.

From Lisette, Aidan learned pure, enduring, singular hatred, and all of it was directed at her.

He pitied his victims and often starved himself to the point of collapse to avoid taking blood. Then, one foggy winter night not so long after Lisette had changed him from a man into a beast, while sitting alone in a country tavern, pretending to drink ale, he'd been approached by another vampire... Valerian.

“Reminiscing about me? How touching.”

Aidan started in his chair by the fire in his Connecticut house and muttered a curse. His unannounced and quite unquestionably arrogant caller leaned against the mantel, indolently regal in creased trousers and tails. He was even wearing the signature gold medallion, which meant he was in a mischievous mood.

Like Aidan, Valerian held the stereotypical media vampire in unwavering contempt.

“This is the second time in as many nights that I’ve taken you unawares,” Valerian scolded, tugging at his immaculate white gloves. “You’ve become careless, my friend. Tell me, have you fed so well that your senses are dulled?”

Aidan raised himself from the chair and faced his visitor squarely. Valerian was ancient, by vampire standards, having been changed sometime in the fourteenth century. He was a magnificent monster, given to sweeping displays of power, but only the stupid showed fear in his presence.

When Valerian sensed cowardice, he turned dangerously playful, like a cat with a mouse between its paws.

“I am allowed some introspection,” Aidan said, pouring a snifter of brandy and raising it to Valerian in an impudent toast even though he could not drink. “I was remembering how I came to join the ranks of demons, if you must know.”

Valerian chuckled, took the glass from Aidan’s hand, and flung the contents into the fire. A furious roar preceded his reply. “The ranks of demons, is it? Do you hate us so much as that, Aidan?”

“Yes,” Aidan spat. “Yes! I despise you, I despise Lisette, and most of all, I despise myself.”

Valerian yawned. “You have become something of a bore, my friend, always whining about what you are. When are you going to accept the fact that you will be exactly this until the crack of doom and get on with it?”

Aidan turned his back on his companion to stand facing one of the bookshelves, running one hand lightly over the spines of the leather-bound volumes he cherished. “There is a way to end the curse,” he said with despairing certainty. “There has to be.”

“Oh, indeed, there is,” Valerian said cheerfully. “You have only to tell some crusading human where your lair is and let him drive a stake through your heart while you sleep. Or you could find a silver bullet somewhere and shoot yourself.” He shuddered, and his tone took on a note of condescension as he finished. “Neither fate is at all pleasant, I’m afraid. Both are truly terrible deaths, and what lies beyond is even worse, for us if not for mortals.”

Aidan did not turn from his inspection of the journals he had written himself, by hand, over the course of two centuries. His musings had kept him from losing his mind and, he hoped, given some perspective on history. He had written a full account of his vampirism as well.

“I don’t need your lectures, Valerian. If you have no other business with me, then kindly leave.”

Valerian sighed philosophically, a sure sign that he was about to pontificate. He surprised Aidan this time, however, by speaking simply. “Lisette stirs again, my friend. Have a care.”

Aidan turned slowly to study his companion. When he'd grown beyond the needs of a fledgling vampire, and spurned her affections, Lisette had first raged, then sulked, then gone into seclusion in some hidden den. She had emerged on occasion and busied herself with her usual dalliances, but she had not troubled Aidan in years. In fact, he seldom worried about her, although Valerian and Maeve constantly chided him for his carelessness.

"She has long since forgotten me," he said. "Kam but one of many conquests, after all."

"You delude yourself," Valerian replied tersely. "Lisette has indeed taken many lovers, and made many vampires. But you were the only one who dared to resist her advances. It's a miracle you haven't perished long before this, and I honestly can't say why I keep trying to save you when you seem determined to die."

Aidan clutched Valerian's silk lapels in both hands. He was not afraid for himself, but he did fear for Maeve, and the human woman, Neely. "Have you seen Lisette?" he demanded. "Damn you, stop your prattling and tell me!"

Valerian shrugged free of Aidan's grasp and seemed to settle his garments closer to his skin, the way a raven might do with its feathers. "I have not been so unfortunate as to encounter Lisette," he said with ominous dignity, "but certain of the others have. She is weak and feeds only sporadically, according to my sources. Nevertheless, she has roused herself, and sooner or later, as mortals so colorfully put it, there will be hell to pay."

Aidan shoved splayed fingers through his hair, his mind racing. "Where? Where was she seen?"

"Spain, I think," Valerian answered. He'd shifted his attention to a mechanical music box on Aidan's desk; Valerian loved gadgets. He turned the key, and the tinkling notes of a long-forgotten tune echoed in the room. "If you say you're going there to look for her," he said distractedly, "I swear I'll wash my hands of you."

"You've made that vow often enough," Aidan said tersely. "What a pity you never keep it."

Valerian chuckled, but the snap with which he closed the music box lid was a more accurate measure of his mood. "What an insolent whelp you are. Who but Lisette would change such a difficult human into an immortal, thereby subjecting us all to an eternity of pathos?"

"Who, indeed?" Aidan replied. He sighed, and his shoulders slumped slightly. He was faint with the need for sustenance, but the dawn was too close now. There was no time for a proper hunt. "I'm sorry," he said, even though he wasn't, not entirely, and they both knew it. "If you see Lisette, will you let me know?"

The older vampire regarded him coldly for a long time, then said, "You may encounter the creature before I do, Aidan." He frowned, adjusted his gloves, and set his top hat at a dashing angle. "And now, adieu. Dawn is nearing. Sleep soundly, my friend, and in safety."

With that, Valerian vanished. He often indulged in dramatic exits.

Aidan banked the fire on the hearth, put the screen in place, and left the house, moving through the silent, snowy woods as noisily as a man, instead of with a vampire's stealth. Maybe Valerian was right; maybe he was courting destruction, in the unconscious hope that there was no heaven or hell beyond death, but

only oblivion.

In oblivion would lie peace.

Aidan's hunger tore at him as he moved closer and closer to the long-forgotten mine shaft that was his lair. He glanced toward the sky, reasoned that he had about fifteen minutes before the sun would top the horizon. There was time to go to Neely, time for one look to sustain him in the deathlike sleep that awaited him.

He shook his head. No. He dared not approach her now, when he needed to feed.

He wended his way toward his hiding place, lowered himself inside, crouched against one dank wall, and folded his arms atop his knees. Then he yawned, lowered his head, and slept.

The mansion had looked spooky to Neely on Halloween night, but now that she stood before it in the dazzling sunshine of that November afternoon, it seemed very ordinary and innocuous, except for its size.

She wasn't sure why she'd come; Mr. Tremayne certainly hadn't invited her to drop by. All Neely really knew was that she was drawn to that house and even more so to its owner. It was as if she'd always known Aidan Tremayne, as if they'd been close once, very close, and then cruelly separated. Encountering him had been a reunion of sorts, a restoration of something stolen long before.

Wedging her hands into the pockets of her coat, Neely proceeded up the walk and climbed the steps onto the gracious old porch. Then, after drawing a deep breath, she rang the bell.

There was no answer, so she tried a second time. Again, no one came.

Neely walked around the large house once, thinking she might encounter the owner in the yard, but she didn't catch so much as a glimpse of him.

Finally, feeling both relieved and disappointed, Neely turned and walked back along the driveway toward the highway. She had already cleaned the motel rooms that had been rented the night before, and she wasn't due back at the café until the supper shift. Danny would be in school until three o'clock, and Ben was busy repairing a water pipe under one of the trailers.

Neely was a free woman, and she was at loose ends.

She decided to borrow Ben's battered old Toyota and head into Bright River. Her emotions were churning; she tried to put Tremayne out of her mind and failed.

She would stop by the local library, she decided. There she would surely find back copies of the Bright River *Clarion*; she intended to scan the microfilm records for interesting references to Aidan Tremayne or his family. After all, she rationalized as she bumped along Route 7 in her brother's car, she needed to keep up her professional skills—especially in research. God knew, she couldn't work as a waitress and maid all her life; her feet would never withstand the strain.

Besides, the project gave her a legitimate reason to think about Aidan on a more practical level, and it would distract her from the riot of emotions and needs that had been bedeviling her ever since their first encounter.

Neely adjusted the car's temperamental heater and shivered in spite of the blast of hot air that buffeted



her. Aidan was going to change her life, and she was going to change his; she knew it as well as if an angel had whispered the fact in her ear. There was a magical mystery afoot here, and she yearned to learn its secrets.

The trick would be to stay alive long enough to investigate.

She sighed and silently reminded herself that she knew too much about her ex-boss's source of campaign funds, among other things. Five years working in the nation's capital had cured Neely of starry-eyed illusion—even though Hargrove was an easygoing sort who would not relish the prospect of ordering her death or anyone else's, he loved the power of his office, and the status it gave him. The senator would never sacrifice money, position, and his marriage, much less his personal freedom, for Neely's sake.

She must be more careful now and stop pretending to herself that all was right with the world.

## Chapter 3

When Aidan awakened, he was dangerously weak, a state that rendered him vulnerable to all manner of enemies. He had no choice but to hunt.

He rose slowly and stretched, this last being an unnecessary habit lingering from his days as a mortal. Aidan's muscles had long since atrophied to a stonelike condition beneath his skin. Even that was changed, he thought, extending his arms and gazing at his hands. The once-living flesh was now as cold and smooth and hard as marble.

Aidan did not stay long in his lair, for the hunger had grown merciless in its intensity, biting into his middle, sapping his strength, threatening his very reason. He climbed deftly up the smooth dirt wall to the surface of the ground. There, the moon shed a silvery light over a new layer of snow.

He thought first of Neely, and ached to be mortal and thoroughly ordinary so that he could be close to her, learn how her mind and heart worked, walk in sunlight with her. Most of all, he wanted to make love to her, feeling his own flesh warm and supple against hers, but that seemed the most impossible of all his dreams.

It was dangerous to think in such a fashion, he reminded himself. He would never be human again, and he would die at the hands of his enemies before he would turn Neely into what he was.

Aidan knew his vampire powers well, despise them though he did, and he feared that the fervor of his emotions would draw Neely to him. If he were to encounter her now, when he was so desperate to feed, when his vile hunger for blood would be coupled with the elemental physical and emotional passion he felt for her, he could not be sure of restraining himself.

As it happened, thrusting Neely from his mind was not enough, for she clung tenaciously to the innermost cords and fibers of his heart.

Maeve hid herself in the chilly mists of the evening and waited. Through the foggy windows of the Lakeview Cafe, she could see Neely Wallace, the woman Valerian was so concerned about.



Valerian was Maeve's mentor, after a fashion, and he had made her an immortal when Aidan refused. Thus, she trusted Valerian, as much as one vampire ever trusts another, and since he saw the Wallace woman as a threat to Aidan, so had she. Maeve had come to this backward country, this century she heartily disliked, prepared to confront and destroy an enemy. Instead she found herself drifting with the breeze in a parking lot, like so much smoke, and questioning Valerian's judgment.

Miss Wallace was an attractive young woman, between twenty-five and thirty, Maeve guessed, with short, shiny brown hair and large gamine eyes. She smiled a lot, and the cafe customers seemed to like her, but she was clearly an ordinary mortal with no special powers of any sort.

How could such a creature be a menace to any vampire, even a reluctant one like Aidan?

Maeve was irritated and not a little bored. She'd fed early so that the evening would be her own, and now she was missing at least one very important social event—specifically Columbine Spencer's supper-dance in Charleston, South Carolina.

"Bother," said Maeve. In a fit of pique she willed herself to Aidan's house, solidifying herself very dramatically in the center of his parlor.

He was there, remarkably, sitting behind the antique library table he used as a desk, bent over one of those interminable volumes of his. Even though there was electricity in this crass century, and his house was wired for it, he worked by the light of a smelly oil lamp.

He raised his eyes at Maeve's appearance, grinned, and stood, as befits a gentleman vampire.

"Kiss, kiss," said Maeve, making an appropriate motion with her lips. She placed her hands on her trim waist—she was wearing an elaborate white dress decorated with hundreds of tiny iridescent beads, because of the Spencer party—and tossed her head impatiently. Her dark hair was done up in tiny ringlets and curls, her flawless white skin prettily flushed because she'd taken nourishment soon after awakening. "Honestly, darling, you're becoming the worst sort of curmudgeon." She held out a slender gloved hand. "Come. I'm on my way to a ball, and I know the Spencers would be delighted to have you among their guests."

Instead of lowering himself into his chair, Aidan perched on the edge of his desk, his arms folded. "I suppose all the very best fiends will be in attendance," he teased, arching one dark eyebrow.

Maeve was not amused. "The majority will be mortals, of course," she said, raising her chin. "Stage actors, an opera singer, some artists of various sorts, I suppose—"

"Along with a vampire or two, a handful of witches and warlocks—"

Color flared in Maeve's alabaster cheeks. "When did you become such a snob?" she demanded. She didn't wait for an answer. "Valerian told me you were developing a dangerous predilection for the society of humans. Even after a firsthand look at the supposed object of your fascination, I still thought he was mistaken. Now I'm not so certain."

All friendliness had vanished from Aidan's manner. His eyes narrowed as he regarded his twin in the smoky light of the oil lamp. "What do you mean," after a firsthand look at the supposed object of my fascination?"

Maeve gathered all her formidable forces, as she sometimes did when she wanted to intimidate a

particularly brazen human. "I went to see Neely Wallace," she said.

Aidan didn't move, and yet every fiber of his being seemed to exude challenge. "*What?*"

Maeve began to pace, folding and unfolding her silk and ivory fan as she moved. "So it's true, then. You're actually smitten with a human being." She stopped and gazed at her brother with tears glittering in her stricken blue eyes. "Oh, Aidan, how could you do something so foolish?"

She saw conflict in her brother's remarkable face, as well as pain. "*Smitten* is hardly the word for what I'm feeling," he confessed. "Maeve, I've encountered the woman exactly twice, and it's as if she owns my soul. I keep recalling what the gypsy woman said that day Mother took us to have our fortunes told. Do you remember?"

Maeve flinched inwardly, wanting to recoil from the memory and all it might mean, even after so many years, but unable to do so. "Yes," she said grimly, "I remember it perfectly well. We visited a flea-infested camp, and Mama, bless her simple heart, paid an old, ignorant crone to predict our futures."

Aidan gazed at her in quiet reflection for a long moment, and Maeve saw something uncomfortably like compassion move in his eyes.

She was indignant. "All right," she conceded, even though her brother had not actually challenged her, "the witch was right about some things—our being cursed, if you want to think of it as that—but there is no reason to believe—"

"That Neely is the woman the sorceress mentioned?" Aidan finished gently. "The one who would mean either my salvation or my destruction?" He paused, evidently gathering his thoughts, and frowned pensively when he spoke again. "Oh, to the contrary, my dear, there is every reason to believe it. I know almost nothing about Neely, and as you've so often pointed out, she is a mortal. And for all of that, when I saw her, it was as though my very soul leapt out of me and ran to her, desperate to lose itself in her."

Aidan looked so haunted, so beleaguered, that Maeve wanted to weep. She began in that moment to fear the Wallace woman, and to hate her, for if Aidan's theory was fact and not fancy, then the situation was grave, indeed.

"What are you going to do?" Maeve whispered, struggling to restrain all the wild, violent emotions that suddenly possessed her.

"Do?" Aidan countered softly. "My dear sister, there is nothing to do." "It is something that must unfold."

"No," Maeve protested, shaken, remembering that long-ago day in the gypsy camp as if it were a part of last week instead of a remnant from a distant century. "The crone said it depended on your choices, yours and hers, whether you would be saved or destroyed!"

Aidan came to her then and laid his hands gently to either side of her face. "But I can only control my own choices," he pointed out with infinite tenderness. "What Neely decides is quite beyond me—" He must have seen the rebellion brewing in Maeve's eyes, for he smiled sadly and clarified, "Beyond both of us."

Maeve was full of fury and fear. "You want to perish!" she accused. "Damn you, Aidan, I followed you into eternity, and now you would leave me to take refuge in death!"

He released her, stepped away, turned his back to stand at one of the tall windows, gazing out upon the snowy night. "To be parted from you would be exceedingly painful," he admitted, almost grudgingly. "Still, we are brother and sister, Maeve, not lovers. Perhaps we simply were not meant to travel the same path."

Maeve steadied herself, called on all her vampire powers to sustain her, as the agonizing truth of Aidan's words settled over her spirit. "You've decided, then, that you will pursue this madness?"

"Yes," he replied wearily, without turning to face his sister. For the first time in all the winding length of Maeve's memory, he seemed unaware of her feelings. "Yes," he repeated. "For good or ill, I will see it through and find my fate at the end."

At last Aidan abandoned that wretched window to look at Maeve again, though he kept his distance. She knew the span was not merely physical, but emotional, too, and she was further wounded by this realization.

"You are not to interfere, no matter how consuming the temptation may be," he warned quietly but with the utmost strength of purpose. "I mean what I say, Maeve—if you value my wishes, if you care for me at all, you will avoid Neely Wallace at all costs."

Maeve was stricken, for she could not doubt that Aidan was grimly sincere. If she meddled in this threatening affair, he might never forgive her, and the thought of his scorn was beyond endurance.

Still, she was angry as well, and suspicious. "Can you possibly believe there is a need for you to defend her against me?"

Aidan did not relent. "I don't know," he answered bluntly, "but aside from wanting to let this thing run its course, be it curse or blessing, I am concerned for Neely's safety. As you well understand, your presence could draw the attention of the others to Neely. Suppose, for instance, that Lisette should learn of her?"

Maeve had heard the rumors that Lisette, the most vicious and unfortunately the most powerful of all vampires, had come forth from her tomb, but she had disregarded them as alarmist drivel. "Don't be an idiot," she replied. "Even if Lisette is stirring abroad now and again, she surely has no interest in the likes of your pitiful mortal."

"She *is not* pitiful in any way, shape, or form," Aidan retorted tersely. "Neely is a magical creature, like most humans, and part of her splendor lies in the fact that she is quite unaware of her own majesty."

Maeve examined her ivory-colored fingernails, which were perfectly shaped and buffed to a soft glow. She was still in turmoil, and her outward calm was all pretense. "You're right to be afraid of Lisette," she said with a lightness she did not feel. She was injured, and in her pain she needed to be cruel. "If your enemies suspect you are fond of the woman, they may use her to make you suffer." She paused a moment for effect, then went boldly on, aware that the attempt was futile even as she made it. "There is one way to solve the problem forever, Aidan. "If thy right eye offends thee..." "

His rage was sudden and palpable; it filled the room with coldness. And it confirmed Maeve's worst suspicions.

"No." He whispered the word, but it had all the strength of an earthquake. "Neely is not to be touched,

do you understand me? Her only sin is that she brought a child to my door one night, on an innocent errand—”

Maeve lifted one hand and laid an index finger to Aidan’s lips to silence him. “You needn’t raise your voice, darling,” she said, again with a levity that was wholly feigned. “I will respect your wishes, you know that. Know also, however, that I love you and that I will do whatever I must to keep you safe.”

They studied each other in silence for a long interval, equally determined, equally powerful.

“Please,” Maeve cajoled finally. “Come to the ball with me. What better way to draw the attention of the others away from Neely Wallace?”

Aidan hesitated, then gave a grim nod.

He went upstairs to change into suitable clothing and quickly rejoined Maeve in the study. He was breathtakingly handsome in a top hat and tails, and for added affect he wore his silk cape.

Five minutes later, distracted and silent, he was entering the Spencers’ antebellum ballroom with Maeve on his arm.

Once her shift was over, Neely lingered at one of the Formica-topped tables in the cafe, sipping herbal tea and poring over the information she’d collected earlier at the library. She became, by an act of will, the detached professional, putting her personal feelings about Aidan temporarily on hold.

She’d found a number of articles regarding the Tremayne family on microfilm and made photocopies of each one. According to the newspaper pieces, there had been an Aidan Tremayne living in the colonial mansion for well over a century. Each generation was as reclusive as the last, apparently marrying and raising their families elsewhere. There were no wedding or engagement announcements, no records of local births, no obituaries. The articles yielded only the most general information—in the summer of 1816, part of the house had been destroyed by fire. During the War Between the States, Union troops had moved into the downstairs rooms. In 1903 a young woman had disappeared after leaving a calling card at the Tremayne residence, and there had been a brief flurry of scandal, an earnest but fruitless police investigation. One of the earlier ancestors had been a painter of some renown, and several of his pieces had brought a fortune at auction in 1956.

Only when one of the chairs on the opposite side of the table scraped back did Neely bring herself out of her revelry. Lifting her eyes, she saw her brother sitting across from her.

Ben resembled nothing so much as a renegade biker, with his long hair, battered jeans, and black T-shirt, but in truth he was a solid citizen. He worked hard managing the motel, cafe, and trailer court, and he was a conscientious father to Danny.

“Digging up more dirt on Senator Hargrove?” he asked. The cafe was closed now, and the night cook and the other waitress had gone home for the night. They could talk freely.

Of course, Ben knew all about the discoveries she’d made while working in the senator’s office as his assistant. She’d told him everything, from the very beginning, when she’d only suspected that her employer was consorting with criminals in general and drug dealers in particular, and he’d known about the documented proof she’d collected, too.

Neely shook her head in answer to his question; there was probably a lot more “dirt” to be dug up

where Dallas Hargrove was concerned, but she was through playing detective. She'd given the FBI numerous papers and even photographs outlining the senator's exploits, and now she could do nothing but wait. And hope the Feds would bring Hargrove down for good before he decided to avenge himself.

"Not this time," she said, somewhat wearily. "I'm curious about the Tremayne family, but I haven't been able to come up with much. I'll try the courthouse tomorrow."

Ben looked puzzled and not a little uncomfortable. "Why, Neely? What interest could you possibly have in that place or those people? Hell, I've always thought it was a little spooky, the way that guy keeps to himself."

Neely propped one elbow on the table and cupped her chin in her hand. "I can't explain it," she answered, because honesty had always come easily with Ben. "It's almost like a compulsion. I've met Mr. Tremayne twice, and both times I felt some kind of paradigm shift—something I never even guessed it was possible to feel. Unless I watch myself, I think I could actually love him."

Ben shook his head and grinned, then got up to go to the pie keeper on the counter. He took out two slices of lemon meringue and returned to the table. Usually he wouldn't have stuck around, but Danny was spending the night in town with a friend from school, and there was no need to hurry home.

"Would that be so awful?" he asked. "If you fell in love, I mean?"

She picked up a fork and cut off a bite-size piece of pie. "When are you going to get married again, Ben?" she countered, purposely stalling. "Shannon's been gone for five years now. Isn't it time you had a romance?"

Ben chuckled, but there was sadness in the sound. "It isn't quite that easy," he said. "Nobody's likely to mistake me for Kevin Costner, for one thing, and for another, well, my job isn't exactly impressive. I have a young son who still looks for his mother to come home, a beat-up old truck that needs an overhaul, a small savings account, and medical bills roughly equal to the national debt. What woman in her right mind would tie up with me?"

Neely reached across the table and touched her brother's tattooed forearm affectionately. "None, if you're going to take that attitude," she scolded with a smile. "What about the fact that you're loyal—you stuck by Shannon through one of the worst ordeals a human being can experience, and you were there for her the whole time, even though you must have been reeling with pain yourself. You've raised Danny ever since, with love and gentleness, and you're resilient, Ben. A lot of other people would have given up, being widowed and laid off in the same year, but you kept going. You're a special guy, and there must be plenty of good women out there looking for somebody like you. All you've got to do is stop hiding behind that gruff exterior of yours."

A slight blush told Neely that her compliments had struck their mark. Ben concentrated on his pie for a time, chewing and swallowing several bites before he met his sister's eye and tried again. "How about you, Neely? Is it serious, what's happening between you and this Tremayne character?"

She looked away. "It could be," she admitted softly, after staring out at the snowy night for a long time. "At least on my side. For all I know, Aidan has never given me a second thought." It was time to steer the subject in another direction, however briefly. "The people Hargrove is involved with may wait years to strike, Ben, but sooner or later they'll see that I meet with an accident. It's bad enough that I'm hanging around here, in such an obvious place, endangering you and Danny. I can't drag some unsuspecting man into the situation, too."

Ben finished his pie and ate what was left of Neely's, since she'd pushed her plate away. "We're a pair, you and I," he said. "Still, the senator and his bunch are bound to go to prison, once the full extent of their sins comes to light.

Then none of them will be a danger to you anymore."

Neely gave her brother a wry look, carried their plates into the cafe's small kitchen, and returned to gather up her photocopies before answering. "We've had this conversation before," she pointed out. "We keep going over the same ground, again and again, as if we believe on some level that the situation will change if we just *discuss* things enough."

With a sheepish shrug Ben stood, taking his lined denim jacket from the brass coat tree next to the door and putting it on. "Who knows?" He waited while Neely donned her pea coat and fetched her purse from behind the counter. "It seems to me that it's taking the FBI a long time to pull the investigation together and make a move. Maybe you ought to give the material you gathered to the producer of one of those tabloid TV shows. I'll bet *that* would bring some action."

Neely passed through the open cafe doorway ahead of her brother, raising her collar against the cold wind while she waited for him to turn out the lights and lock the door. There were several big rigs in the parking lot, their drivers either staying at the motel or sacked out in sleepers in the backs of their truck cabs.

"I may approach a journalist or a reporter," she said, "if the FBI doesn't do something soon." Neely had another set of copies of the incriminating documents stashed away in a safe place, but she'd never told Ben or anyone else where they were. It was something too dangerous to know.

A hard crust had formed on the snowy ground, and the sky was clear, full of icy stars. Misty clouds passing over the moon made it look blurry and slightly out of focus. Neely's clunky waitress shoes made a satisfying crunching sound as she and Ben walked toward home.

Ben escorted her to her trailer and waited while she worked the lock, opened the door, and turned on the lights.

"Tomorrow's your day off," her brother reminded her, hands in the pockets of his jacket. "Do something constructive with it, why don't you, instead of rooting around in the courthouse files or straining your eyes at one of those microfilm machines."

Neely smiled. "Good night, Ben," she said.

He chuckled, shook his head, and walked away toward his own nearby trailer.

After locking up and performing her usual nighttime ablutions, Neely folded out her sofa bed and collapsed. She'd meant to go over the newspaper articles she'd copied at the library once more, just in case she'd missed something. Instead she barely managed to switch out the lamp on the wall above the couch before she tumbled into an unusually deep slumber.

Almost immediately she began to dream.

Aidan Tremayne appeared at the foot of her bed, even more handsome than before in the kind of beautifully tailored dancing clothes leading men sometimes wore in movies made in the thirties and forties.



He even had on a top hat, set at a rakish angle, and his dark cape rustled in the draft.

As the dreaming Neely raised herself on one elbow to stare at him, he winked.

Neely laughed. "See if I ever have a chili dog with onions for dinner again," she said.

Aidan smiled and tipped his hat, tumbling it down his arm and catching it in one gloved hand.

Neely clapped, and he bowed deeply. She hoped the dream wasn't over, that the lemon meringue pie would pick up where the chili dog had left off.

"Is this dream a talkie?" she asked. "Or are we going to use subtitles?"

He held out one hand, and she felt herself rising effortlessly from the bed, floating toward him. "It's wired for sound," he answered. He caught her in his arms, and she felt tremendous energy in him, as well as danger, and, within herself, a tumultuous need. "I'm afraid I'm quite bewitched."

Neely reminded herself that she was asleep and decided to enjoy the night fancy as much as possible before real life intruded. She allowed herself to revel in being held close against him, to savor the melting warmth in her most feminine parts and the bittersweet ache that had taken root in her heart.

"You're dressed for dancing," she observed.

The walls of the trailer seemed to disintegrate; there was only Neely herself, and Aidan Tremayne, holding her, with all the universe silent and still around them. Stars fell in glittering arches and formed a twinkling pool beneath their feet.

Aidan's dark blue eyes sparkled more brightly than anything in the firmaments of heaven possibly could have. "Yes," he agreed. "You, on the other hand, are quite scantily clad."

Neely sighed. One nice thing about the imagination—a person could dance on the night wind in an oversize T-shirt without getting cold and give in to a scandalous attraction knowing that, come morning, it would no longer be real.

"This is wonderful," she said. "A girl can go her whole life without ever having a dream like this."

Aidan said nothing; instead, he drew her closer and bent his mouth to kiss her, and set her very soul to spinning within her like a skater on ice.

The kiss mended some parts of her that she had not guessed were broken, but shattered others, and Neely wept because she knew she loved Aidan Tremayne, that she would always love him, that this love was hopeless outside of her dream.

They waltzed along the treetops, up a staircase of stars, all around the moon. There was beautiful music, of course, for this was a celestial production number. The tune was unique, rife with a bittersweet poignancy, and it was still running through Neely's mind when she awoke with a thumping start, sitting up in the middle of her bed.

She was gasping for breath, feeling as though she'd been dropped from a great height. Her cheeks were wet with tears.



Neely hugged herself and rocked back and forth on her knees, possessed by a sudden and terrible sense of loss. The miraculous fantasy was evaporating, so she scrambled in the darkness for a pencil and a piece of paper in order to record it. She started to write, but the last of the memory faded, like a final heartbeat.

She switched on the light, trembling with this new grief, and read what she'd written on the back of her telephone bill. All that was left of her magnificent vision was a single, hastily scrawled word.

Aidan.

## Chapter 4

Aidan slept profoundly all the following day, beyond the reach of dreams and nightmares that trouble mortals. He awakened only a few minutes after sunset and was still assembling his wits when Maeve appeared, resplendent in a flowing white toga.

She looked around the dark mine shaft, noting its lacery of cobwebs with mild but still obvious disdain. "Your capacity for self-punishment never ceases to amaze me," she remarked.

Methodically Aidan dusted the sleeves of his evening coat. He arched one eyebrow as he regarded his sister. Maeve was dressed for some kind of Roman celebration, but not the authentic article; like most vampires, she was forbidden to venture back prior beyond the instant of her death as a human being. He made *atsk-tsk* sound and shook his head.

"On your way to one of those debauched Victorian parties?" he inquired, taking off his coat to shake out the dust, then putting it on again.

"It isn't 'debauched'," Maeve snapped, her blue eyes fiery. "The Havermails are perfectly nice—"

"People?" Aidan teased.

Maeve looked away for a moment. "Vampires," she said distractedly. "They're vampires, of course." Her temper flared anew. "Stop trying to change the subject. You left the ball early last night, Aidan. Where were you?"

Aidan had a yearning for fresh air, even though he could not actually breathe the wonderful stuff. He pictured himself standing on the snowy ground overhead, and as quickly as that, he was there. Only a moment later Maeve was beside him.

The woods were quiet, except for the far-off hooting of an owl and the vague murmur of tires passing through slush on Route 7. Clouds hid the moon, and a sort of pale darkness had spread itself over the land.

"Where were you, Aidan?" Maeve persisted.

He started toward the house. He would change clothes and feed early that night, he decided, and then play his favorite, futile game by pretending to be a man again. "Assuming that's any of your business, which it isn't," he retorted without stopping, "why in hell do you care?"

Maeve stepped in front of him and glared up into his eyes. “You endanger all of us when you consort with humans, Aidan, you know that! If you truly want to throw away your own existence, I guess I’ll just have to endure it, but you have *no right* to bring risk on the rest of us!”

Aidan winced, for her words stung. “All right,” he said, feeling exasperated and weary, so unbelievably weary. He was like a guilty husband, hastening to explain a gap in his schedule, and he resented the comparison bitterly. “I left the ball, I came back here, and I settled in my lair to hibernate, like any good beast.”

Maeve subsided a little and allowed Aidan to pass, rushing to keep up just as she had when they were children. “Valerian said you were dancing with—with that Neely creature.”

“It was only a mental exercise, a shared fantasy,” Aidan responded. He hated explaining even that much, but it was true that others might be threatened by his fascination with Neely. Too much association with mortals, for purposes other than feeding, of course, served to dilute a vampire’s powers and dull his perceptions. Other fiends, such as Lisette, were frenzied by weakness, like sharks in bloody waters. “You don’t think I’d dare to actually dance with her, do you, to hold her in my arms? A human woman?”

They reached the rear of the towering stone house and entered through the mudroom. In the kitchen, which contained almost nothing in the way of food, Maeve stopped her brother again, this time by reaching out and catching hold of his sleeve.

“Couldn’t you simply put her out of your mind? Surely it isn’t too late!”

Aidan gazed into his sister’s face for a long time before answering hoarsely, “It was too late at the beginning of time,” he responded. “Leave it alone, Maeve. There is no changing this.”

“Put her out of your mind,” Maeve pleaded, sounding frantic. “If you must play at romance, choose an immortal!” Tears glimmered in her eyes, and Aidan was touched; he was surprised that she’d retained the ability to weep.

He gripped Maeve’s upper arms and squeezed gently. “I don’t know what this is,” he told her. “I don’t pretend to understand what’s happening to me. But I know this much—it can’t be avoided. You, Valerian, the others—you must all stay away from me until it’s resolved, one way or the other.”

“No,” Maeve said. “I cannot abandon you, Aidan—”

“You must!”

“I won’t.”

He hissed a swear word.

After a long interval of struggle, plainly visible in her expressive eyes, Maeve lifted one hand to touch his face. “Very well. I will do my best to keep my distance for as long as I can,” she promised in a despairing whisper. “But hear this, Aidan, and remember it well: I will be guarding and nurturing my powers from this moment on. He—or she—who does you injury will feel the full force of my vengeance, and I will not trouble myself with mercy.”

Aidan felt a mental chill. While his twin fed only on those humans whose souls were already damned, as

he did, she did not share his aversion to the life of a vampire. To Maeve, the compulsion to consume human blood was a small price to pay for immortality, the capacity to travel through time and space at will, the heightening of the senses, and the fathomless physical energy.

“Stay away from Neely,” he warned.

Maeve drew herself up, seeming to blaze with white fire. “If she brings about your destruction, she will die.”

Before Aidan could respond, his sister vanished. He was alone in his shell of a kitchen, with its empty cupboards. He leaned against a counter, arms folded, full of despondency and yearning for ordinary pleasures, like the sound and scent of bacon sizzling in a skillet and the embrace of a woman, still warm from sleep.

What cruel irony it was, he reflected, that mortals never seemed to understand what a glorious gift it was, just to be human. If only they knew how they’d been blessed. . .

Washington, D.C.

Senator Dallas Hargrove left his Georgetown house by a side door, wearing battered jeans, a T-shirt rescued from a bag of rags in the laundry room, sneakers, and a jacket so old that the leather had cracked in places. He pulled the collar up around his face and whistled tunelessly as he walked.

He was good at avoiding the press and other pests, and that night his luck held. He walked until he was some distance from the gracious room where his lovely, fragile wife slept, then hailed a cab.

The driver didn’t recognize him—Washington was crawling with government types, after all—and drove him to a park at the edge of the city without question.

“Wait here,” Dallas said. The snow was coming down harder, and not only was the wind picking up speed, but it also had a bite to it.

The man in the cab shifted uncomfortably. “I don’t know, man,” he said. “This ain’t the *best* neighborhood in D.C.”

Dallas handed over the fare, then flashed a fifty-dollar bill and a vote-getting smile. “Five minutes?”

The cabbie sighed, snapped up the fifty. “Five minutes,” he agreed. “But that’s all, and I mean it, man.” He rested one arm in the open window of the battered, smoke-belching old cab and tapped the face of his watch with an index finger. “Once that sweep second hand has made five swings past the numbers, I’m out of here.”

Dallas nodded, turned, and sprinted away into the park. There were a few derelicts sleeping on and under benches, but the wandering bands of thugs who usually frequented the place had apparently stayed in out of the cold. He walked quickly to the statue of a minor Civil War general mounted on a horse and stood in its long shadow.

His contact spoke up right away, though as usual Dallas didn’t see more than a vague form. It gave him the creeps; the guy was like a ghost, moving without noise, materializing where he chose.

“It’s time the Wallace woman was disposed of.”

Dallas felt a twinge of guilt, even though logic told him Neely deserved whatever she got. She'd violated his trust, after all, sneaking around, going through his files and papers the way she had. Still, she was a pretty, vibrant thing and killing her would be like crushing an exquisite rose just opening to the sunlight. "Look," he said reasonably, "my friend at the FBI forestalled any problems we might have had. And Ms. Wallace hasn't made a move since or even tried to hide. She's living in Connecticut, for God's sake, helping her brother run a truck stop and motel. I say we leave her alone."

"She set out to bring us all down, Senator—you included. Who's to say she won't try again?"

Dallas ground his teeth, caught himself, and forcibly relaxed. He didn't want to see Neely die, despite the way she'd betrayed him, but he couldn't stand against these people. If he was foolish enough to try, he would be killed or crippled for his trouble, and then what would happen to Elaine? Who would take care of her if not him?

Once his beautiful wife had been vital and active, a successful journalist. Now she was confined to a wheelchair, suffering from a progressive muscular disease. Elaine's prognosis was grim, and he could not abandon her.

"You know where to find her," Hargrove said, rubbing his eyes with a thumb and forefinger. He had to think about his family, his backers, his constituents. What was one woman compared with so many others?

Almost five minutes had passed by that time, and Dallas was painfully conscious of the taxi driver's promise to leave when that small amount of time had elapsed. He handed over a packet of documents, and the man in the shadows reciprocated with a thick envelope.

It was all for Elaine, the senator told himself as he turned and hurried toward the curb. The cab was already moving when he landed inside.

\* \* \*

Aidan washed, groomed his hair, and put on jeans and an Irish cable-knit sweater. He would hunt early, get the abominable task out of the way, and spend the evening next to the fire, working on his journal.

He guarded his thoughts carefully, for to think of Neely too intensely would be to summon her to his side. That would be embarrassing for him because he would have to come up with an explanation, and for Neely because she would suddenly find herself in his home with no memory of traveling there.

It was, he found, a little like that old schoolyard routine "Don't think of blue elephants." Fortunately the hunger was keen enough that night to provide sufficient distraction.

Aidan took a computer printout from a file cabinet against the wall, laid it on his desk, and ran his finger down the list of names. These men subscribed to the very basest of pornographic magazines, the kind even the most flagrant liberal would happily consign to the bonfire.

He selected a victim in the next county, closed his eyes, and vanished.

Only minutes later he was back.

Neely certainly didn't make a habit of walking alone along Route 7 at eleven-thirty at night, but she was

too restless to stay inside her trailer. God knew, the place wasn't spacious, and that evening it seemed even smaller than usual. She'd felt like a grasshopper trapped in a pint jar.

As she walked, keeping to the far edge of the shoulder in an effort to avoid the headlights of passing cars, fat flakes of iridescent snow tumbled from the sky. She often found such weather peaceful, even festive, but just then it seemed eerie.

How ridiculous, Neely decided, to be so upset over a dream she could hardly remember. Aidan Tremayne had been part of it, she knew that much, and a wisp of weirdly beautiful music echoed in her mind.

As if all that wasn't enough, she had a sense that someone was stalking her, closing in slowly, watching and waiting.

She shivered and walked faster, stopping only when she reached the head of the Tremayne driveway.

"You're crazy," she told herself as a mud-splattered Blazer passed on the other side of Route 7, then slowed.

Neely's heart seemed to slide over an expanse of sheer ice, leaving her breathless. She bolted into the woods, stumbling in the deep snow. From the highway she heard the slam of a car door.

"Hey, lady, come back!" a man's voice called.

Neely ran on, tripped over a fallen birch limb, scraped her shin, scrambled to her feet again, and flung herself headlong toward Aidan's house. She could see the light on his front porch through the trees.

Behind her, the man from the Blazer crashed along in pursuit.

Neely looked back, half blind with unreasoning terror, and collided hard with something. At first she thought it was a tree, but then a pair of strong hands steadied her, and she looked up into the classically handsome face of Aidan Tremayne. She was too breathless to speak.

"You're all right now," he said in a low voice. For the first time she noticed a hint of a brogue in the "tvay he framed his words. "No one's going to hurt you." He glared into the woods with a chilling intentness for a long moment, then shifted his gaze back to Neely again.

He smiled, and some of the starch went out of her knees.

Vaguely she heard running footsteps, the crash of a car door closing, the squeal of tires on wet pavement.

"What you need is a cup of tea," Aidan said, as though it were perfectly normal for the two of them to be standing out there in the woods at that hour. He wasn't even wearing a coat, just jeans and a fisherman's sweater. "Come along now."

Neely allowed him to escort her through the woods; he politely cupped her elbow in one hand.

"Do you always go out walking at such odd times?" he asked. There was no irritation in the question, only a companionable kind of curiosity.

“No,” Neely answered, somewhat weakly. “No, I don’t. It’s just that I’ve been feeling very restless lately—”

“Any idea who the rascal in the woods might have been?”

Neely shook her head, embarrassed. She was making one hell of an impression. “I ran into the trees when he stopped and turned around, and he followed. He was probably harmless, but—”

“But you don’t think so?” he asked. They had gained the edge of Aidan’s sloping lawn.

Again she shook her head. “I have some formidable enemies,” she said.

“So do I,” he replied. They mounted the steps to the porch, and he held the door open for her, waiting politely while she passed over the threshold.

He led her into a parlor, where oil lamps burned cozily and a fire blazed on the hearth. “Here,” he said, depositing her in a large leather chair. “Have a seat and catch your breath. I’ll get that tea. Or would you rather have brandy?”

“Brandy,” Neely said without hesitation.

Aidan smiled, went to a sideboard, and poured amber liquid into an etched glass snifter. He brought Neely the drink but stood well away from her chair while she sipped.

“I know I’ve already disrupted your evening,” she began when her limbs had stopped quivering and her heart had slowed to its normal pace, “but I wonder if you’d mind driving me home. I’m afraid to walk, under the circumstances.”

He was near the fireplace, arms folded, his back braced against the mantelpiece. The first two times Neely had encountered him, she’d been struck by the unusual fairness of his complexion, but that night his face looked quite normal, almost ruddy. “I’ll bring the car around in a few minutes,” he said in that refined voice of his.

Neely stared at him over the rim of her glass, wanting to blurt out that she’d dreamed about him, that she wondered why. But she only nodded.

“These ‘powerful enemies’ of yours,” he said, watching her in a way that made her feel like some unparalleled work of art. “Can you tell me who they are?”

She sighed and sank back in the chair, slouching, running one index finger around the rim of the snifter. “It might not be wise to do that,” she mused after a long time. “It’s dangerous to know too much.”

One moment he was halfway across the room, the next, Aidan was crouching beside her chair.

“It’s often more dangerous not knowing enough, don’t you think?”

Neely felt a purely elemental pull toward him and turned her head slightly in order to protect herself. She sighed. “I used to work for a United States senator,” she said. “He was involved in some very crooked deals, and I gathered enough proof to put him, and the creeps he was dealing with, out of business. Or so I thought.” Out of the corner of her eye she saw that he was looking at the base of her throat, and she felt a sudden and inexplicable desire to surrender to the dark magic she saw in his eyes. “Now it appears that

they've decided to make sure I can't cause any more trouble," she finished shakily in a distracted tone.

He bolted away from her with unsettling swiftness. Had he been anyone other than who he was, Neely would have thought he hadn't heard her explanation, but she knew very little got by Aidan, whether he appeared to be paying attention or not.

"It will require some thought—your predicament, I mean," he said gravely, avoiding her gaze. "Please, make yourself comfortable. I'll bring the car to the front of the house in a few minutes. I don't use it often, so the engine will need some time to warm up."

Neely nodded, feeling both relief and disappointment at the prospect of being separated from him.

"Thank you," she said.

Aidan left the room.

Neely waited, then raised herself out of the chair, supporting her weight with one hand and clutching the empty snifter in the other. Her legs were still trembling, and the small injury she'd done to her shin earlier stung like crazy, but the brandy had definitely restored her. And none of those things were of any consequence at all in comparison to the emotions and yearnings Aidan Tremayne brought out in her.

She crossed to Aidan's desk and set the snifter down.

There was a music box sitting just to the left of the blotter, and Neely automatically reached for it, wanting to think of something else, if only for a moment, to shift her thoughts from the master of that spooky old house.

Besides, she had a collection of such boxes tucked away in a rented storage unit, along with most of her other belongings. The small mechanisms and delicate tunes had always appealed to her.

This one was clearly antique, perhaps dating back to the early nineteenth century. The case was carved of the finest rosewood, and there were tiny forest animals etched into its top.

Neely lifted the lid, and the tinkling notes of an old tune rose from inside. She trembled, and her heart lurched painfully.

It was the same melody she'd heard in her dream.

With a little cry Neely closed the music box and stepped back.

"Is something wrong?" an unfamiliar male voice inquired.

Neely whirled, one shock compounding with another. She had never seen the man standing behind her; he was enormous, imposing, and, she supposed, handsome, with his rich chestnut hair and discerning violet eyes. She clasped one hand to her chest and made an inarticulate sound.

"I've frightened you." With a calm, easy smile the man bowed his head. "I apologize."

Neely was still shaken, but she was beginning to regain her equilibrium. She would work out the music box thing later, she decided. As for the man's sudden appearance, well, that was easily explained. The Tremayne house was large, and Aidan hadn't said he was alone there. She had simply assumed that.



“My name is Valerian. Yours?”

“Neely,” she said, still breathing fast. Could this man be the same one who had chased her into the woods? No—she’d been watching too much television and reading too many thrillers, that was all. This guy was hardly the sort to go rambling through the trees in the dead of night, and it was impossible to imagine him behind the wheel of a Blazer. “Neely Wallace.”

“A pleasure,” he said, taking Neely’s hand, which she didn’t recall extending, and barely brushing the knuckles with his lips.

A shiver went through her, part pleasure and part primal fear. She felt light-headed, almost as if she’d been hypnotized. She wrenched back her hand just as Aidan entered the room again, bringing the scents of fresh air and snow with him.

He looked at Valerian but spoke to Neely.

“The car is ready,” he said. His tone was terse.

Neely nodded and scrambled into her coat, eager to be away. And, if she was to be honest, eager to be alone with Aidan again.

A white English sports car, a Triumph Spitfire with a canvas top and plenty of chrome, waited in front of the house. Aidan opened the passenger door for Neely before going around to the driver’s side and sliding behind the wheel.

“What’s going on around here?” she demanded, surprising even herself with the bluntness of the question. It seemed her troubled subconscious mind had decided to make a move on its own, bypassing the usual channels. “Aidan, I had a very strange, very vivid dream last night, about you. We danced, you and I, to an old-fashioned tune, one I’m certain I’ve never heard before. Tonight I lifted the lid of that music box on your desk, and out came that very same song.”

Aidan shifted the expensive car into gear and stepped on the accelerator. The machine navigated the snowy driveway with ease. “Coincidence,” he said, but he didn’t so much as glance in her direction.

“No,” Neely insisted. She was certain of that one conviction, if nothing else. “I couldn’t remember the dream—it drove me crazy all day long—but when I heard that tune, everything came back to me. You and I were dancing. And—and I’m not sure now that it really *was* a dream. What’s going on here, Aidan?” She paused to gather her courage. “Am I imagining the attraction between us?” she asked in a small but determined voice.

He shifted again, and the car fishtailed slightly but quickly regained its traction. “No,” he said, with succinct reluctance, and in spite of all the danger she was in, Neely felt a rush of wild, flamboyant joy. She wanted Aidan to kiss her again, the way he had in the dream or delusion, whatever it had been, but he didn’t even glance in her direction.

“We’re playing for very high stakes, here—much higher than you can possibly imagine. You must keep yourself safe, inasmuch as you can, and most of all you have to trust me.”

She sighed and settled back in the leather seat, clasping her hands in her lap and memorizing his profile. “Well,” she said. “That was certainly cryptic. Why do I get the feeling you don’t intend to explain?”

At last he looked at her, and even though he kept his distance, Neely had the oddest sensation that she'd just been soundly kissed. The incident left her dizzy and wanting Aidan with an embarrassing desperation.

"I will explain everything when I can," he said kindly.

Neely touched her fingertips to her lips, which were still tingling from a kiss that hadn't happened.

Aidan lifted one corner of his mouth in a teasing and damnably mysterious smile. "I can do other things as well," he said, leaving her even more mystified than before. "One of these nights I'll show you."

Neely blushed and barely kept herself from blurting out that she wanted him to show her all his tricks, then and there.

They had reached the highway, and Aidan made a right turn, chuckling to himself as if he'd heard her thoughts. She squirmed as the small, sleek car shot toward the Lakeview Trailer Court and Motel.

Neely looked around, forcing herself to think of something besides the inexplicable need Aidan had managed to stir in her.

There was no sign of the Blazer; the only other vehicle they encountered was a county snowplow.

Aidan turned onto the gravel road that wound through the trailer court and came to a stop at Neely's door.

She felt as awkward as a teenage wallflower at the biggest dance of the year. She wanted Aidan to touch her and at the same time was terrified that he would. She opened the car door hastily and climbed out. "Good night," she said cheerfully. "And thank you."

He left the car, walked Neely to her door, and waited patiently until she was inside. "Good night," he said formally, although something mischievous smoldered in his eyes all the while, as she closed the door.

It was only after Aidan had driven away, the taillights of his car blinking red in an otherwise white night, that she realized she'd never told him which trailer was hers.

"Hunt with me," Valerian pleaded as Aidan tossed his car keys into a china dish on the bookshelf behind his desk. His attention was focused on the music box.

"I've already fed," he replied, picking up the little rosewood case and lifting the lid.

"Then feed again," Valerian said.

At last Aidan lifted his gaze. "Why? You know I abhor it."

Valerian sighed. "Yes," he agreed. "But a surplus may heighten your powers. It is more important than ever that you be strong, Aidan."

Now it was Aidan who sighed. "Another dire warning," he said, returning the box to its place. "What would you have me do? Become a hedonist as well as a heretic, like you?"

The other vampire slammed his hands down hard on the top of Aidan's desk, making the music box and several other items jump. "Spare me the moral discourse," Valerian rasped, his eyes seeming to burn like Saint Elmo's fire as he glared at Aidan from under his heavy brows. "Others have seen Lisette. She is beginning to circulate."

Aidan shoved a hand through his hair. "Perhaps the thing to do is confront her," he said.

Valerian shook his head. "In your present state, that would be disastrous. Lisette is the queen of all vampires, the first female ever created. Even after a long sleep, her powers will be formidable."

Aidan's mind touched on Neely, on her softness and warmth. He had to protect her, and the best way to do that was to leave twentieth-century Connecticut entirely. "All right," he conceded raggedly, "I'll put myself in your hands, Valerian. We'll feed together, and I'll at least listen to your counsel. I want one promise from you first, however."

The elder vampire did not speak but simply raised one eyebrow in silent question.

"You must give me your sacred vow that you will not come back for the woman."

Valerian made an exasperated sound. "I presume you mean Neely Wallace."

"You presume correctly. I saw the way you looked at her, and I know what you were thinking. I want your word that you'll leave her alone."

Valerian laughed, but there was no mirth in the sound and certainly no joy. He raised one large hand as if to swear an oath. "I will not feed on the waitress," he said. There was a pause. "Just remember, Aidan. I cannot speak for the others."

"They won't bother Neely unless you call their attention to her."

"I could say the same thing to you, my friend," With that, Valerian raised both his arms high in the air and made a sweeping and wholly theatrical gesture.

## Chapter 5

Valerian was not without sympathy for Aidan, and a number of other emotions in the bargain. Indeed, he loved the younger vampire jealously, and with a devotion and tenderness that transcended all earthly meanings of the term.

Which was not to say he did not consider the poor fiend to be wholly misguided. While he himself had been a vampire for nearly six centuries, and a happy one for the most part, Valerian also cherished certain recollections of humanity. There was the warmth of spring sunlight on winter-pale flesh, for instance, the oddly pleasurable sensation of an explosive sneeze, the sweet ache that followed in the wake of unrestrained laughter, the solace of tears. Now, as they sat in the rear of a dingy London pub, pretending to consume ale and kidney pie, savoring those last precious moments before they would be forced underground, Valerian reached out to touch his companion's arm.

Aidan, who had been staring morosely into space ever since they'd left the battlefield where they'd fed

last, started slightly.

“Do you really hate it so much?” Valerian asked in a low and, for him, somewhat fragile voice. He could not credit Aidan’s aversions; in all his wide experience he had never encountered another vampire who did not relish what he was.

Aidan forced a smile; he was a handsome lad, and he stirred things in Valerian’s being that were probably better left alone, but he lacked the sensual abandon of most immortal creatures. “Yes,” he said. He was pleasantly flushed from their recent feast, but there was a look of anguish in his eyes, of torment that far exceeded any felt by the dying soldiers they’d seen that night. “Yes, I hate it. I despise it. Hell itself cannot be worse than feeling this vile compulsion!”

Had anyone else made such a statement, Valerian would have asked archly why they had troubled to become a creature of the night in the first place, but this was Aidan. Aidan, the one blood-drinker he knew who had not made the transition willingly. He sighed, turning his plain wooden cup idly in one hand. “What would you have me do? What is it you want?”

There was a quickening in Aidan; he sat a little straighter in his chair, and his blue eyes glittered with something more than the temporary fever caused by feeding. “You are the oldest vampire in our circle, except for Lisette,” he said quietly, “and among the most self-serving. If there is a remedy for this wretched curse, you either know what it is or how to find out.”

Valerian looked away for a moment, toward one of two small, filthy windows. A subtle grayness permeated the black of night; dawn was near, and they must take refuge very soon, or the sun would catch them abroad. “I heard a legend once,” he said in a ragged, distracted whisper. “Mind you, it was only a story, I’m sure of that—”

Aidan rose and seemed to loom over him. “Tell me!” he demanded.

Again Valerian sighed. “There is no time,” he replied, hoping he’d disguised his relief in feigned regret. “It’s almost morning.” He rose and looked Aidan squarely in the eye. “Come. I know a place where we can rest safely.”

He reached out, clasped Aidan’s arm, and gripped it hard when the other vampire moved to pull away. In the space of a wink they were inside a crypt in a country churchyard, far from busy, suspicious London.

“Damn you!” Aidan cried, lunging toward Valerian with his hands out, as if to choke the life from him. Which was, of course, a macabre joke, since he was neither truly alive nor truly dead. “Tell me what you know of this legend!”

Valerian raised his arms, erecting a mental barrier between them, like a wall of glass. He smiled at Aidan’s frustration and then yawned copiously. “I am too weary to tell tales,” he said. “We will speak of it when the eventide comes again.”

With that, Valerian turned to a stone slab, brushed away the bones and dust and the debris of a coffin that had rested there, and stretched out with a sensual sigh. He saw Aidan hesitate, then slowly, reluctantly recede, until his back touched the crypt’s heavy door. He slipped into a crouch, his arms folded across his knees.

“Until evening,” Aidan said. There was a warning in his tone, though his words were weighted with

fatigue.

Valerian smiled again and slowly closed his eyes. Unlike younger, less sophisticated vampires, he was not totally lost to sleep; he often dreamed and sometimes projected his awareness to other places, leaving his physical self behind.

Such journeys were unquestionably dangerous, for the silver cord that anchored the spirit to the form could be severed in any number of ways. If that happened, the two could never be rejoined, and the traveler would be forced to contend with whatever fate awaited him in the next world.

The mere contemplation of such an event was a terror to sensible vampires, for even they could not see beyond the Veil to determine the true shapes of heaven and hell.

Far down in the deepest regions of his comalike rest, Valerian shuddered at the visions of eternal torment that had been impressed on his mind so long before, while he lived and breathed as a human animal. Since he had been born in medieval England, the images Valerian carried of the damned were especially horrible.

Still, he was an adventurous vampire, interminably curious, and he loved to explore the dusty little corners and pockets of time that generally went unnoticed in the great intertwining schemes of history.

And there was a secret.

Valerian loved secrets, and mysteries, and conundrums of all sorts, shapes, and sizes. All the better that only he and a handful of other old ones knew. By concentrating very hard, Valerian could cast his consciousness into the most remote folds and burrows of eternity, venturing back and back in time, passing beyond his mortal life and even his birth as a human being.

It was perilous work, utterly debilitating, often leaving him too exhausted to hunt for days afterward. Even so, Valerian could not resist occasional forays through the void, each time venturing closer to the Beginning.

That particular day he had an added impetus, bittersweet and compelling; he sought the oldest, most closely guarded secrets of the vampire, for only in finding those could he learn what Aidan so desperately wanted to know.

At nightfall Aidan stirred, opened his eyes, and raised himself slowly out of his crouch against the wall and into an upright position. Valerian still lay on his slab in the middle of the crypt, though he was awake, and he looked shrunken somehow. Even gaunt.

His flesh was a ghastly shade of gray, and there were great shadows beneath his eyes. He raised one hand weakly, to summon Aidan to his side, and even though there were no tears, it was plain that he was weeping deep down in the essence of himself.

Aidan clasped Valerian's upraised hand in both of his; they were not friends, but they were of the same brotherhood, they trod on common ground.

"What is it?" Aidan whispered. "What have you done?"

"I went back—to search—" He paused, made a strangling sound low in his throat. "Blood. I—need—blood." The plea rasped in Valerian's throat like a saw severing hardwood. He clutched

Aidan's ringers so tightly that it seemed the bones would snap, brittle as twigs, drawing Aidan downward to hear, "Bring me blood."

Aware of an inexplicable urgency, and very little else, Aidan did not pause to question the gruesome request. He went to the door of the crypt, stopped to look backward once, and then willed himself to a time and place in London he'd often visited before.

He returned within minutes, burgeoning with the blood of a back-street thief and murderer. By instinct, or perhaps by some subliminal instruction from the still-stricken Valerian, he transfused the life-giving fluid into the other vampire by puncturing the papery neck with his fangs. The process left Aidan temporarily weakened, clutching the edges of the slab to keep from falling, and only partially restored Valerian.

The elder vampire sighed and slipped into a light, fitful slumber. His skin, which had looked as fragile as ancient parchment before, took on the faintest tinge of color, and his frame seemed to fill out slightly, having fewer hollows and sharp angles.

Now that the crisis had passed, whatever it had been, Aidan was wild with impatience. He paced at the foot of Valerian's slab, feeling confined and restless to the very core of his soul. The mere memory of his strange communion with the other vampire sickened him, and yet he could not deny, even to himself, that there had been some sort of fusion of their two spirits.

After a while Valerian stirred and opened his eyes. He seemed stronger, but his whisper was labored and raw. "Leave me, Aidan. I must rest."

It was all Aidan could do not to grasp his companion's lapels and wrench him upright, so desperate was his need. "You promised to tell me what you learned!" he blurted. "You *promised!*"

"And I will keep my vow," Valerian answered, grating out each word. "I cannot—speak of it now. Have pity, Aidan."

"Just tell me this," Aidan pressed, moving to Valerian's side, clasping his cold hand. "Is there hope? Can I be unmade, become a man again?"

The answer gurgled on Valerian's tongue, as though he were choking on the blood Aidan had given him. "It is too—dangerous," he gasped. With that he lost consciousness again.

Aidan was torn between a desire to stay and look after a fallen comrade and an almost uncontrollable urge to flee, to be as far from this place and this horror as possible.

He wanted Neely, wanted her to comfort him, to hold him tightly in her arms. He craved her humanity and her warmth, her very womanhood, but it was just that yearning that forestalled him.

Yes, he loved her, he knew that now, had begun to accept the realization. But he could not allow himself to forget that he was a beast, at least in part, and his need for blood was as great as that of any other vampire. He couldn't be certain, for all that his soul had already joined itself to hers, that his terrible thirst would not cause him to fling himself on her in a fit of passion.

The prospect of awakening from a frenzy, of finding Neely limp and lifeless in his arms, was worse than any punishment a demon could devise.

Frantically Aidan formed Maeve's image in his mind.

Neely had just finished the breakfast shift at the cafe when an ancient station wagon rattled into the parking lot, came to a shrill, steamy stop by the front window, and emitted a tall, gum-chewing blonde. The woman was wearing frayed jeans, an equally worn denim jacket, a tank top with a picture of a motorcycle on the front, and the kind of open, friendly smile that turns strangers into friends.

“Hi,” she said, taking a seat at the counter and reaching out to pluck a menu from behind a chrome napkin holder. “My name’s Doris Craig. I’m flitter-flat, down-and-out busted, and that old car of mine isn’t gonna go much farther. You the manager here?”

Neely untied her apron, glancing past Doris’s right shoulder, which bore a tiny tattoo of a bumblebee, to the loaded-down beater parked out front. But for its relatively modern vintage, the vehicle might have belonged to the Jode family of *Grapes of Wrath* fame, there was so much stuff tied on top and stuffed inside.

“No,” she answered. “My brother manages the whole place. I just work here.”

Doris closed the menu resolutely and gave Neely another of her guileless, openhearted smiles. “You aren’t thinkin’ of quittin’ or anything, are you? If you are, I’d sure like to have your job.”

Ben hadn’t said he was looking for more help, but he hadn’t said he wasn’t, either. Neely poured a cup of hot, fresh coffee and set it down in front of Doris. “I think of quitting for the last three hours of every shift,” she confessed with a grin, tapping her name tag with one finger. “I’m Neely Wallace. Glad to meet you.”

Doris nodded cordially. “If you’re not plannin’ to quit,“ she said, blue eyes twinkling, ”is there any chance of your gettin’ fired?“

Neely laughed. “Sorry—like I said, the boss is my brother, and he’s pretty well stuck with me. I’ll be happy to send him over to talk to you, though. In the meantime, what’ll you have?”

Doris pried two crumpled dollar bills from the pocket of her jeans and smoothed them out on the counter. “Soup and milk, if this will cover it,” she said. While her circumstances were obviously desperate, there wasn’t a trace of self-pity in either her voice or her manner, and Neely couldn’t help being struck by such uncommon courage.

She nodded and went back to the kitchen, passing the teenager who was taking over for the afternoon and early evening shift. Heather was no unchained melody of ambition, but she showed up on time and did her job well enough, which meant she probably wouldn’t be creating a vacancy anytime soon.

In the back Neely dished up a bowlful of vegetable-beef soup and grabbed a basket of soda crackers in individual wrappers. She set the food down in front of Doris, along with a spoon, and proceeded to the milk machine.

She was just putting the glass on the counter when the little bell over the door jingled and Ben came in. He’d been shoveling snow from the walk over at the motel, and his cheeks were red from the cold.

It seemed providential to Neely, his showing up at the perfect moment like that. “Ben, this is Doris Craig,” she said. “Doris, my brother, Ben Wallace. Doris is looking for work.”

Ben’s ever-ready smile flashed instantly; he took off his plaid coat and came over to greet Doris, one



hand extended. Neely poured him a cup of coffee, then grabbed her purse, said good-bye to Heather, and hurried out.

As far as she could tell, glancing back through the frosty cafe window, Ben hadn't even noticed that she was gone.

Neely was deep in thought as she crossed the parking lot. Maybe the fates were trying to tell her something, sending Doris along when they had. Perhaps it was time she got on with her life; she was only marking time in Bright River, and she could no longer overlook the fact that she represented a very real danger to her brother and nephew.

Because of her distraction, Neely all but collided with the dun-colored rental car that was parked just on the other side of the hedge, motor running. There was a whirring sound, and the window on the passenger side disappeared into the door. Senator Dallas Hargrove himself leaned across the front seat and said, "Get in, Neely."

In spite of all the senator had been a party to, and all she had done to ensure his intense dislike for all eternity, Neely still couldn't believe he would actually hurt her. She'd seen him with his wife, Elaine, who suffered from a degenerative muscular disease, and knew there was no violence in him. She drew a deep breath, let it out in a rush, and got into the car.

The senator was handsome, with well-cut blond hair and a square jaw, but there had never been an attraction between them. "That was pretty stupid," he said, steering the car onto Route 7 and away from Bright River. "For all you know, I might be planning to knock you over the head and dump you in some lake."

Neely relaxed against the seat and closed her eyes for a moment. She was so tired all of a sudden, so full of a longing she couldn't begin to understand. "You've made some terrific mistakes in your life, Senator," she said, "but you're not a murderer. Not a direct one, at least."

She could feel his tension; he was like tightly coiled wire, ready to come unwound. Still, she wasn't afraid.

"What do you mean, "not a direct one"?" he demanded.

"We both know you've fixed it so that certain drug dealers can bring their wares into the country without the usual inconveniences," Neely answered with a sigh. "What do you think is happening to that garbage after it hits the streets? Real people are using it—kids, pregnant mothers, people who get behind the wheels of semi-trucks and school buses."

"If I didn't cooperate, someone else would." Hargrove's knuckles tightened on the steering wheel, relaxed again.

Neely reflected that her decision to get into the car with the senator might have been a bit rash after all. "That's a load of horse crap," she replied calmly. "Let's not waste our time debating the subject, since we'll never agree. What are you doing in Bright River? You can't be stumping for votes, since this isn't your district."

He turned the car off the highway onto a bumpy, unplowed road that snaked in behind a large Christmas tree farm. He stopped the car beside a weathered old mill spanning a narrow, silvery brook. His blue eyes were tormented as he looked at Neely. "Look, I came here to warn you. The people I deal with

know you tried to bring the FBI down on their operation, and they want you dead. You've got to get out of here as fast as you can."

Neely regarded him in pensive silence for a time, her arms folded. "There's something I don't understand," she finally said. "I gave the government hard evidence of your involvement in a major crime syndicate. If your man on the inside hadn't managed to turn the tide—at least, that's what *I think* must have happened—you would have lost everything and gone to prison, maybe for the rest of your life. Why are you trying so hard to save me? How come you don't hate me and want me dead, like those hoods you've been hanging around with?"

Hargrove gave a despairing rush of a sigh and leaned forward, letting his forehead rest against the steering wheel. "I'm not a killer, Neely—I never meant for things to turn out this way. I needed money—there were so many debts—and then I was in too deep to get out."

"Debts? For Elaine's medical care, you mean? Come on. Thanks to the long-suffering taxpayer, you have a more than respectable salary and excellent health insurance."

The senator sat up straight, gazing out at the snow-laced mill wheel. The weathered building supporting it seemed about to cave in on itself. "There were all those special treatments, in Europe and Mexico," he said. "None of them worked, of course."

Impulsively Neely reached across the seat to touch his arm. She liked Elaine Hargrove, a brave and smiling person, liked the man the senator became whenever he was in his wife's presence.

"It wasn't just the treatments, though," Hargrove confessed wearily. "When Elaine was first diagnosed, I went a little crazy. I don't know what it was—the fear, the stress—I can't say. In any case, I was involved with a woman for a while, and then there were some gambling debts..."

Neely had known about the woman, but the gambling was a new element. She closed her eyes for a few moments while she assimilated everything. "And I thought *I* was in trouble," she said.

"We're both in trouble," Hargrove replied. "Don't forget that for a moment, Neely. Get your things together and get out of here before they come after you!"

She nodded slowly. Although Neely wanted fiercely to live, just as she always had, it wasn't self-preservation that pushed her over the line, causing her to make the decision she'd been putting off. It was the knowledge that Ben and Danny would be in terrible danger as long as she stuck around.

From out of nowhere, like a careening vehicle, came the thought that she might never see Aidan Tremayne again. She tried to sidestep the realization, but it crashed into her full force, and she gave a soft cry of despair on impact.

Hargrove had turned the car around and was on the way back to the highway again before she could speak.

"You've got to turn yourself in," she said. "Sure, the sky will fall in, and there will be hell to pay, but at least you'll be alive—and free of those awful people."

The senator was shaking his head even before she'd finished the sentence. "No," he told her. "The publicity, the scandal, would be torture for Elaine. She'd never survive it!"

Sadly Neely thought of the once-vibrant Elaine Hargrove. She'd been a famous television journalist, still active and vocal about her opinions even after her sudden immersion into political life. Then, just two years before, she'd started feeling tired and having episodes of unusual awkwardness. The diagnosis was grim, the prognosis, terrible. Elaine had been going downhill, physically at least, from the very first. Neely looked out the window for a few seconds, struggling with emotions of her own—horror, pity, and, yes, God forgive her, a certain savage gratitude that *she* hadn't been the one to be struck down that way.

"I think your wife is a whole lot stronger than you give her credit for," she said.

"She's had to endure enough suffering as it is," Hargrove said. "Once it's all over, and she's—she's at peace, then I'll go to the authorities with the truth." The rental car bumped onto the highway and fishtailed slightly on the ice-coated asphalt. The senator's attention was fixed on Neely. "I'll do anything to protect Elaine," he told her. "Anything."

Neely understood. "You've done your duty by warning me," she replied, "and now I'm on my own. Does that about cover it?"

Hargrove nodded. They rounded a bend, and the cafe sign came into view, a symbol of everything ordinary. Just then Neely would have paid practically any price to have a mundane life again, uncomplicated by desperate politicians, vengeful drug dealers, and her unremitting fascination with Aidan Tremayne.

They came to a stop in front of Neely's trailer, and Hargrove looked around nervously. Then he reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and took out an envelope. "Here—take this cash and get as far away as you can, as quickly as possible."

Neely didn't want to accept the money, knowing only too well where it had come from, but her choices were limited. She'd put aside a little over the past few years, but it was mostly in long-term CDs, and she wouldn't be able to get to it without drawing unwanted attention to herself.

"Thanks," she said without checking the contents of the envelope or looking directly at the senator. She opened the car door and got out, and even before the sound of the engine had died away, Neely was packing a suitcase.

When that was done, she borrowed Ben's truck and went to town to pick Danny up in front of the school. He beamed when he saw her and broke away from his friends, who were boarding a bus.

"Hi," he said, flinging himself onto the springy leather seat beside her. "What's the deal?" Danny paused and frowned. "I don't have to go to the dentist again, do I?"

Neely shook her head and smiled, but at the same time she fought back tears. "No, you're done with dentistry for a while, kid. I do have news, though, and frankly I'm a little worried about how you're going to take it."

Danny's freckles stood out against his pale skin. "Those bad dudes are after you, aren't they?"

Neely drove down Main Street, past the drugstore, the Sweetie-Freeze drive-in, the library, and the bank. She was going to miss this town, but not as much as she'd miss Danny and Ben. She frowned. "What do you know about anybody being after me?"

"I heard you and Dad talking once."

Neely eyed the sheriff's office as they passed and wished she could solve the problem by stopping in and reporting the situation, but she knew that wouldn't work. If the FBI hadn't come through for her, she could hardly expect protection from an aging, overweight sheriff with one part-time deputy. No, her only real hope was to get her copies of the evidence against Dallas Hargrove and the others and turn it over to the media. The trick would be in staying alive long enough to pull it off.

She reached across the seat and ruffled Danny's soft brown hair. "I should have known I couldn't keep something like this from a super-detective like you."

There were tears in Danny's eyes. "You'll come back sometime, won't you?"

Neely was possessed of a sudden and rather ill-advised fit of optimism. Incredible as the prospect seemed, she had to make herself believe she was going to survive this mess— if she didn't, the terror of it all would immobilize her. "You bet," she sniffled. "Once the good guys get their licks in, everything will be okay again. In the meantime, I want you to promise me two things—that you'll say a prayer for me every single night, and that you'll look after your dad."

Danny offered a high five, and Neely completed the gesture. Now all she had to do was tell Ben good-bye, grab her suitcase, and hit the road. She wished she could see Aidan once more as well, but time was short. Besides, she hardly knew the man.

Five hours later Neely was headed north in the car she'd bought from Doris Craig. Saying good-bye to Ben hadn't been easy, but he'd urged her to disappear as quickly as possible, pressing all the money from the restaurant till into the pocket of her peacoat.

She'd turned her trailer and her job over to Doris and set out in Doris's old clunker of a car, making only one brief stop before leaving Bright River to ring Aidan Tremayne's doorbell. She'd hoped to bid him farewell, but he evidently wasn't at home.

Neely scribbled a note on the back of an expired registration found in the glove box of Doris's car, stuck the paper in the frame of Aidan's front door, and fled.

Twilight was gathering by the time the town of Bright River fell away behind her.

Maeve was visiting the Havermails at their estate in the English countryside, circa 1895. She was embroiled in a game of croquet, played by the light of thousands of colorful paper lanterns, when Aidan materialized at her elbow.

With a little cry Maeve started and accidentally tapped the croquet ball wide of the wire hoop she'd been aiming for. "Great Scot, Aidan," she hissed, "I hate it when you do that!"

He clasped her arm, heedless of the staring guests, and yanked her toward the shrubbery. "It's Valerian—he's found some way to change a vampire into a man," he told her.

Maeve stared at him, letting her wooden mallet topple forgotten onto the grass. "What?"

Aidan began to pace, unable to stand still because of the torturous agitation the knowledge had roused in him. "He's ill—I gave him blood—he sent me away without telling me—"

"Aidan, *stop*," Maeve pleaded, reaching out and clasping his shoulders in her extraordinarily white and

graceful hands. “What in the world are you talking about? There is no way to change a vampire into a man—is there?”

“Yes,” Aidan said. Now he couldn’t contain his joy. Dear God, the very thought of it—breathing, having a heartbeat, living by daylight, loving Neely freely and fathering her children, and, when the time came, dying. In peace. “Yes! He says it’s dangerous, but—”

“Would you truly become a mortal again, even if such a thing were possible?” Maeve whispered, plainly stricken.

He paused before answering, looking deep into his sister’s eyes. He loved her with the whole of his being, and it was torment to think of such a chasm opening between them, but the bright, shining prospect of redemption blinded him to everything but itself.

“Yes,” he whispered. “Oh, God in heaven, yes.”

Maeve lifted her chin, but her lower lip was trembling. “You would leave me, Aidan? You want so much to be a mortal that you would turn your back on your own sister, for all eternity? Such a thing would make enemies of us.” She stopped and with visible effort took control of her emotions. She even managed to smile. “I don’t know why I’m worrying,” she said, her voice brittle and bright. “Vampires are vampires, darling. They cannot be men just for wishing, any more than they can be angels. Come—I want you to meet the Havermails.”

Aidan allowed Maeve to loop her arm through his and escort him across the lawn and into one of the estate’s many fragrant gardens, where the mistress of the great house held court. Mrs. Havermail, like her husband and her two children, who gave new weight and substance to the term *brat*, was a creature of the night, and she showed her fangs and made a soft hissing sound as the newest guest approached.

## Chapter 6

Doris’s rattletrap of a car seemed to stagger along the interstate, coughing, flinging itself forward in a wild, smoky burst of fumes and fervor, nearly stalling, then shuddering with the effort to begin the whole process all over again. A little after midnight Neely pulled into the parking lot of a tacky motel and, with no small amount of trepidation, turned off the engine. If the motor wouldn’t start in the morning, she told herself wearily, she would abandon the heap with no real regrets and step onto a bus.

Maybe that would be better anyway, she thought, taking her purse and overnight case and heading for the front office. A neon sign burned dimly in the window, announcing a vacancy.

The clerk was a taciturn Yankee woman, clad in a chenille bathrobe and furry slippers that looked as though they might be developing mange, and she was none too pleased to be awakened.

Neely signed the register with a false name, purposely illegible, and paid cash. She was given a key with a red plastic tag emblazoned with a 6.

The room was small and smelled vaguely of mildew and stale cigarette smoke, but Neely was far too tired and distraught to care about amenities. As long as the sheets and the bathroom were clean, she could overlook the rest.

After carefully putting the chain lock on the door, she undressed, put on a nightgown, brushed her teeth and splashed her face with warm water, then toppled into bed. She was exhausted, both emotionally and physically, and unconsciousness offered a welcome respite from reality.

Lying in the darkness, she found herself longing for Aidan. The desire was not merely sexual, though there could be no denying, at least in the privacy of her own mind, that she wanted him with a wild, primitive, even violent sort of ardor. No, there was much more to her yearning; it was complex, a living thing rooted in the very core of her spirit, spreading graceful vines into her mind and heart and even into the deepest recesses of her unconscious.

Despite her loneliness, life had never seemed sweeter or more precious to Neely. There were so many things she wanted to see and feel and do—not the least of which was to give herself to Aidan—and now she was probably going to die.

Neely turned onto her stomach, buried her face in the musty pillow, and wept, softly at first. Soon, however, her sniffles turned to unrestrained howls as she grieved for a future that might well be denied her.

In the charcoal-smudged hours just before dawn, something awakened Neely, a feeling rather than a sound. She lifted her head from the pillow, squinted into the darkness, felt a twinge at the realization that she was not at home in her trailer, but on the road, and running.

She groped for her watch, which was lying on the nightstand, and peered at the numbers.

3:20 A.M.

With a sigh, Neely rolled onto her back and, in the next second let out a low, croaky cry.

A cloaked form towered at the foot of the bed.

“Oh, God,” Neely whimpered. She didn’t want to think the shadowy shape belonged to one of the senator’s business associates or some serial rapist, but the possibilities had to be considered.

She had just made up her mind to fight the intruder with everything she had when a familiar voice spoke.

“Don’t be afraid.”

Neely snapped on the bedside lamp and gasped. She blinked hard, but when she looked again, Aidan Tremayne was still standing there, smiling at her.

She was at once wildly relieved and totally mystified. Had she conjured an image of him somehow, by entertaining all those scandalous sexual fantasies just after she went to bed?

Neely scrambled to the foot of the mattress, tugged at his cloak to assure herself that it had substance, and then hurtled back to the other end.

“It’s you,” she said in a tone that was almost accusing.

“Quite so,” he replied gently, folding his arms.



Neely swallowed hard. She was at once terrified, sensing in her deepest being that Aidan had not entered her room by ordinary means, and at the same time wanting him to hold and caress and finally take her.

“Damn it, what’s going on here?” she cried impatiently.

Aidan raised both hands, palms out, in a conciliatory, calming gesture. “I’m about to tell you the absolute and unvarnished truth. After that, you’ll understand why I’ve been somewhat... secretive. First, though, I believe I’d best keep a promise I made not so long ago.”

“What promise?” Neely whispered, but she knew. She knew, and her body, suddenly shameless after a lifetime of relative modesty, was already burning.

Aidan arched one eyebrow to show he wasn’t buying her attempt at ingenuousness. “Among my other talents, my darling, I can read minds. You want me to make love to you—is that not so?”

Neely gulped. “What if it is?” she finally managed.

He smiled. “Not good enough, Neely,” he scolded. “If you want me to give you pleasure, you will have to say so, straight out. Whatever my other sins, I do not take women against their wishes.”

Neely stared at him, fascinated, her whole body thrumming with the need of him and his intimate attentions. “I— I want you,” she said.

Aidan did not move from his place at the foot of the bed, and yet Neely felt herself being pressed gently back onto the pillows. After that came light, tantalizing kisses, unseen lips grazing her mouth, nibbling at her earlobe and the side of her neck, tracing pathways of passion across the rounded tops of her breasts.

She moaned, overwhelmed by her need, too caught up in the sensations that were being evoked inside her to question the strange detachment of Aidan’s lovemaking. Even as her nightshirt was gently removed, and her slender body lay bared to whatever magic he was working upon it, she could dimly see that he was still standing some distance away.

Impossible—he was touching her, kissing her, teasing her, everywhere. Wasn’t he?

He told her to part her legs for him, and she did, though she could not have said whether the command had been spoken aloud or had simply come sauntering into her mind on its own.

Neely felt his hand, nimble-fingered and firm, brush the nest of curls hiding the physical center of her wanting. Incredibly she felt his touch in her soul as well, and the tension building there was even more tumultuous than the sweet, frightening eruption rising in her body.

She arched her back to welcome him and whispered, “Yes! Oh, yes...” as he uncovered the hidden nubbin of flesh and gently toyed with it. “Please,” she whimpered, having lost all semblance of pride, tumbling toward a spiritual release of cataclysmic proportions even as an equally powerful physical climax loomed just ahead, waiting to consume her.

“Tell me what you want,” Aidan said.

“I wantyou!” she cried out, not caring if anyone heard. “Oh, God, Aidan, I need you... the real you... inside me!”



Both her breasts were being suckled at once, and she felt strong, warm hands slide beneath her bottom to raise her high for the final conquering. She even felt him enter her with a hard, delicious thrust that made her cry out in ecstasy. Still, even through the fog of this all-encompassing passion, she could see that Aidan had not moved to join her on the bed, that he was watching her pleasure with a shimmer of tears in his eyes.

The crescendos were so violent, her body and her soul being satisfied in the same joyously terrifying moments, that Neely shouted aloud as she came, in involuntary triumph, lost in the glorious dual releases.

It was a very long time before she could speak or move, so completely, so thoroughly, had she been loved. But the moment arrived, finally, when the words that had been clamoring in her mind took shape on her lips.

“Why, Aidan?” she whispered. “Why did you make love to me that way, without actually touching me?”

He turned away from her briefly, and even though he held his head high, Neely knew he was overcome by emotion. Then he faced her again.

“I did not trust myself,” he confessed hoarsely.

Neely managed to raise herself onto her elbows, but she was still in a state of bliss and hadn't the energy to demand answers to all the obvious questions. “What do you mean, you didn't trust yourself?”

Aidan averted his gaze for a moment, then looked directly into her eyes again. “My passion for you is fathomless,” he said. “It is wolflike, a thing of the darkness. I could not be certain of maintaining control.”

She yawned, beginning to drift. “Most people lose control when they make love, Aidan,” she observed. “That's the idea.”

One corner of his inviting mouth lifted in a sad, rueful attempt at a smile. “Yes,” he said. “But I am not a person. I am a vampire.”

Neely sat bolt upright, as wide awake as if she'd just had an intravenous dose of pure caffeine. “Did you just say that you're a vampire?” she asked, sounding ridiculously cordial. A strange excitement rushed through her, along with a whisper of primitive fear.

At long last Aidan rounded the bed and sat down on its edge. “I'm afraid so,” he said.

It was remarkable, incredible, his claiming to be a supernatural creature, but it made an odd kind of sense, too. After all, he'd disappeared that night, in the parking lot outside the Lakeview Cafe, in quite literally the blink of an eye. Furthermore, he'd just made love to her in a very extraordinary way, a way no normal man would have done.

Yes. There was surely some kind of magic at work.

He must have seen the beginnings of belief in her eyes, for his smile was less forlorn than the one that had preceded it, less weary.

“Let me see your teeth,” Neely said impulsively. She was still a little afraid, but she was fascinated, too, and wildly curious.

Indulgently Aidan permitted her to lift his upper lip and peer at one shining, sharp incisor. It was obviously no ordinary tooth, so she checked its counterpart.

“Good grief,” she whispered, marveling. She knew her eyes were wide with wonder as she drew back to look at him, and she felt a shiver of fear as she began the arduous process of letting herself accept the remarkable possibility that Aidan had spoken the truth. “Were you afraid you would bite me?” she asked, unconsciously laying her hands on his broad shoulders. “Is that why you didn’t lie down with me?”

“That’s a rather simplistic way of putting it,” Aidan said, with a glint of humor in his eyes, “but yes. I was afraid of hurting you.”

Neely frowned. “What about your own pleasure? Did you feel what we were doing?”

Aidan looked away, clearly embarrassed, but then met Neely’s gaze again. “Holding you in my arms, entering you physically, would have been better, but yes, I took a certain amount of satisfaction from the experience.”

Neely rolled her eyes. “You make it sound as if I gave you a back rub.”

He smiled. “There are releases that are felt in the emotions, Neely,” he said gently. “It was that way for me.”

On an impulse she couldn’t have explained had her very life depended on it, Neely put her arms around Aidan’s neck and planted a light kiss on his cheek. His flesh felt cool and smooth beneath her lips, strangely like fine marble, and yet pliant, too. He flinched and started to move away, but Neely did not release her hold on him.

“If I trust you,” she said quietly, “why can’t you trust yourself? Lie down with me, Aidan. Sleep in my arms.”

“I can’t,” he replied, and she heard unremitting anguish in his voice, felt it in his magnificent body.

Perhaps it was the ancient, elemental attraction she felt toward Aidan that made her behave so boldly in the instant that followed; Neely didn’t try to analyze the decision. Still naked from his lovemaking, she raised herself onto her knees and brushed her left breast lightly across his lips which felt strangely warm and soft against her flesh. It was the only way she could think of to offer him her trust, as well as the intimate comfort he so clearly needed.

With a moan Aidan took her nipple into his mouth and suckled greedily, and Neely entangled her fingers in his dark hair and tilted her head back, feeling fresh ecstasy rise within her as she nurtured this man—this creature—that she had come to love.

“See,” she told him softly as he moved to her other breast and took pleasure there, too, “you needn’t be afraid—not of me, not of yourself.”

He eased her backward onto the mattress and would surely have taken her, but just when Neely was ready, body and spirit, to receive him, he stopped, held himself utterly motionless, and listened with the intensity of some wild, exotic beast.

“Aidan,” Neely pleaded softly.

But he raised himself from her, his attention so focused on some sound or feeling that he did not even seem aware of her presence.

“What is it?” she asked.

He gathered her into his arms and enfolded her warm nakedness within the whispering smoothness of his cloak. “I’ll explain later,” he promised, and then he bent and kissed Neely on the mouth. A drumming sound filled her ears, and it seemed that she was propelled outward into a dark universe, even while she lay helpless in Aidan’s arms. She was made of thought alone, not flesh, and then she knew nothing.

Nothing at all.

Aidan laid the unconscious Neely gently on his bed in the house in the woods of Connecticut. The sound of her pursuers’ approaching that faraway motel room still echoed in his head; by now the two men would be inside, ransacking the place, wondering how their quarry had managed to escape them.

He bent, kissed Neely tenderly on the forehead, and fought the awesome need to complete the dangerous process she had begun by taking him to her breast. The courage and sweet generosity of the gesture were beyond comprehension; he did not think he would ever fully understand why she had chosen to give him that singular joy.

“Sleep well,” he whispered, tucking the blankets around her. Then he touched her cheek and whispered a command that would anchor her to the bed as effectively as the heaviest chains, for that was the only way he could think of to keep her safe. Then he vanished.

Aidan found the thugs in Neely’s motel room, just as he had expected. They relished their criminality, he thought with disgust, and from what images he could glean from the recesses of their diseased minds, they hadn’t even had particularly difficult childhoods. He filled the doorway, making no effort at all to hide what he was, or to be subtle about his powers.

They whirled to face him, and one of them cried out.

Aidan wanted to kill them, yearned to drain them of every glimmering red, droplet of blood, and then toss their husks aside to rot. This development unnerved him, for he was always coldly dispassionate about his victims, and what he felt now was a fiery and utterly ruthless appetite.

He crossed the room on the impetuosity of that thought, grasped a throat in either hand, and pressed his struggling captives to the wall.

“You may want to rethink this whole matter,” he instructed politely. “It’s a dangerous business, you see, involving forces and creatures you can’t begin to grasp with those pitiful little snot-wads you fancy to be brains.”

The thugs stared at him, mute with confusion. They were strong in a bullish sort of way and must have wondered why a lone man could render them powerless so easily.

“What the hell are you?” one of them managed to croak out.

Aidan showed his fangs then, although he personally thought it was a touch melodramatic—more Valerian’s style than his own.

“Jesus Christ,” murmured the first thug, while his partner fainted.

Aidan sighed. It was nearly dawn, and there was no time to go back to the Havermails and explain his sudden disappearance to Maeve, nor could he return to Neely. No, he must go to Valerian, who still lay stricken in that dusty crypt well outside of London, and it was imperative that he bring blood to give the other vampire sustenance.

Aidan eyed the two criminals before him, one awake and one unconscious. The bloodlust he’d felt earlier had turned to the purest disgust; he would have preferred to drink from rats. Regrettably, though, there was no real choice.

He fed on the larger one first, bringing him as close to death as he dared, and then lifted the smaller man and drank again.

The usual delirium of joy came over him, but it was nothing compared to what he’d felt when Neely had lain naked before him and cried out at the pleasure of his caresses.

But he could not think of her now.

Aidan blinked, and when he opened his eyes, he was in the crypt with Valerian. The sun had already risen by the time he arrived, although its light could not reach through the stone walls or the metal door, but the inevitable fatigue threatened to swallow his consciousness.

“Aidan,” Valerian whispered in a hoarse, fitful murmur of joy, and groped for his hand. “Quickly—”

Aidan bent and, once again, found Valerian’s throat. Black weariness clawed at him, pulled him downward, toward the filthy, bone-littered floor. He struggled back to the waiting vein and willed the blood to flow into Valerian, and it was still pouring forth when he collapsed.

Far away, yet near as the next heartbeat, Neely stirred in her soft, unfamiliar bed but did not climb toward wakefulness. She knew, on some level, that it was better to stay asleep, to wander in dark dreams. When she opened her eyes, after all, she would have to make sense of all that had happened to her in recent hours, and that was going to be virtually impossible.

Maeve found Aidan insensate on the floor of the crypt, his back to the high stone slab, his fine clothes speckled with blood. Ignoring Valerian, who stirred above their heads, she shook her brother and called his name in a frantic whisper.

He was empty and wasted, and Maeve knew he would perish if she did not save him. She ripped away the fitted cuff of her frilly shirtwaist and pressed the inside of her wrist to his lips. He resisted weakly, then drank.

After a few moments Aidan revived, opening his eyes. “Maeve,” he said, giving the name the shape and substance of a sob.

She smoothed his lovely dark hair back from his wan face. “There now, you’ll be fine after this. It’s night, and you’re strong enough to feed properly.”

“Valerian,” he said. “Is he all right?”

Maeve remembered the other vampire, her mentor and erstwhile friend, and rose slowly to her feet. Seeing Valerian's sunken cheeks and shadowed eyes, she clutched his hand and demanded, "What have you done?"

"Atlantis," he said. "Atlantis—"

Aidan scrambled up beside Maeve, fairly shouldering her aside to peer down into Valerian's tormented face. "What are you saying?" he rasped. "What about Atlantis?"

"That's—where it—began," Valerian managed. "The mystery lies on the lost continent—"

"Enough!" Maeve interrupted, her temper flaring. Having fed amply, she was by far the strongest of the trio, and she could afford to issue orders. "There will be no more talk of mysteries and lost continents! Can't you see that he's dying, Aidan? Don't you realize that you nearly perished yourself?"

Despair and frustration howled within Aidan like a spiritual storm. He grabbed at the bloody front of Valerian's shirt and wrenched the other vampire upward with the last of his strength. "Tell me!" he cried, and when Valerian remained silent, clearly too enervated to speak, Aidan wailed with all the forlorn grief of an animal caught in a trap.

Maeve whirled on him, her blue eyes, mirror-images of his own, flashing with pain. She raised one hand, fingers spread, and pressed it to his face. He felt her horrific power surge through him, like a double dose of lightning, and then he swooned.

When he awakened, he was lying on a wide-planked table, stripped to the waist. He turned his head—it felt as though a speeding locomotive had crashed into each temple at full throttle—and saw Valerian lying next to him.

"Maeve?" Aidan lifted his head. The room was dark and dank, and it had the oppressive feel of a dungeon.

"She's out hunting," answered a small, sweet voice.

Aidan relaxed for a moment, getting his bearings. Candlelight flickered over the ancient, moss-streaked walls, where rusted iron rings were bolted. "What is this place?"

A horrible parody of a child appeared at his side, a little girl with brown-gold ringlets, impossibly pale skin, and dark circles around her eyes. Her delicate fangs glinted in the candlelight.

"It's Havermail Castle," she said.

Ah, yes, Aidan recalled, despairing. The august home of Maeve's hideous friends, the Havermails—a mommy vampire, a papa vampire, and two absolutely vicious baby vampires.

He shuddered and tried to sit up, only to find himself too weak to rise.

The child laid a clammy hand on his bare chest. "You're not supposed to move," she said, and while this announcement was delivered ingenuously, it also reverberated with warning. "Neither is Mr. Valerian. You're to be our guests, until Maeve says otherwise."

"What's your name?" Aidan gasped the question, appalled at his weakness. As a mortal man, he had

loved children and been able to communicate intelligently with them.

“I’m Benecia,” the monster said. “And my sister is Canaan. She’s gone out to hunt with Mummy, and when they come back, it will be my turn.”

Valerian stirred next to Aidan, but it was plain that he was still in a stupor.

“How long have you been a vampire?” Aidan inquired of Benecia. This was a ludicrous conversation, in an even more ludicrous setting, but he was certain he would go mad if he tried to keep silent.

“Oh, a long time,” Benecia replied sunnily. “Almost as long as Valerian, in fact—about five hundred and forty years.”

Aidan stared at her, appalled that even a blood-drinking fiend would stoop to turning a child into a vampire. Surely hell itself could not boast of a crueller demon. “How did it happen?”

Benecia giggled, and the sound echoed eerily off the wet stone walls that had absorbed so much misery over so many centuries. “Papa was a scholar, and he joined a secret society. They met only in darkness, and he thought that was very curious, but nonetheless he was flattered to be invited, and he attended the meetings religiously. Finally he was initiated—the members made him into an immortal, like themselves. He came straight home and made Mama into a vampire, and she in turn transformed Canaan and me because she couldn’t bear to be parted from us.”

Aidan whispered a profanity because he did not dare to pray.

Valerian reached out and grasped his arm before he could express his opinion further, however, effectively silencing him.

Alas, Benecia was already offended. “I don’t like you,” she told Aidan in a sweetly vicious tone. “I don’t like you at all.”

“My friend is comparatively young, for a vampire,” Valerian put in quickly, and with good nature aplenty. “Be patient with him, Benecia. Remember what it was to be foolish and impulsive.”

Benecia’s eyes were narrowed, and her searing gaze had not wavered from Aidan’s face. “I’m much older than you are, and much stronger, and much smarter,” she said with icy confidence. “Mind your tongue, fledgling, or I’ll dangle you from a high window by your feet!”

Valerian laughed, though Aidan heard tension plainly in the sound. “Now, now, darling—is that any way to speak to a guest? Aidan is your aunt Maeve’s favorite creature in all the earth. She will expect you to be pleasant to him.”

Benecia subsided, but only after a snakelike hiss and a rather chilling display of her fangs. She turned and flounced away, a small horror in her pink ruffled dress; then a door slammed somewhere, and Aidan knew he and Valerian were alone.

Furthermore, Valerian was in a towering fury, the state of his health notwithstanding. “You are truly remarkable, Mr. Tremayne, for your arrogant stupidity!”

Aidan was in no mood for a dressing-down. He’d been through enough as it was, what with all the high drama of recent nights. “I will not be threatened by a child!”

“*Thatchild* was old when Shakespeare penned his sonnets,” Valerian raged. “She can summon more power in a blink of her eyes than you’ve ever dreamed of attaining! Were she not mortally afraid of her beloved auntie Maeve, your head would probably be bouncing off an outside wall by now!”

Aidan gave a ragged sigh. He still had the psychic equivalent of a headache. “If Benecia is so terribly powerful,” he began, “why is she afraid of Maeve?”

Valerian’s chuckle was raspy, void of all humor, and hollow. “Do you know so little about your own sister, Aidan?” he scolded. “Maeve has special gifts—she lacks your aversion to the finer points of vampirism, you know—and it is said that she will someday replace Lisette as queen of the nightwalkers.”

The thought made Aidan sick. He recalled Maeve as a human girl, warm and pretty and full of laughter and innocent mischief, and he came as near to weeping as a vampire is able. “You did it,” he remembered as hatred pooled in his breast. “You made her into a monster, Valerian.”

There was grief in the other vampire’s voice, as well as resignation. “She pleaded with me,” Valerian said. “She offered me her throat, and I was hungry.”

Aidan had heard the story before, but even now, after two centuries, he couldn’t fully accept the reality. “You might have resisted her. There were others about who could have slaked your thirst.”

Valerian was growing weak again; Aidan could sense it because, for better or worse, their two beings were connected somehow, had been ever since that first sharing of blood. “We’ve been over this before,” he answered wearily. “There is no changing it. I’ve been conscious for at least five minutes, Aidan. How is it that you have yet to hound me about what I learned of Atlantis?”

As incredible as it seemed, Aidan *had* forgotten about the miraculous secret that might be his salvation. His mind had been filled with thoughts of Maeve and of Neely. He rolled onto his side and reached over to clasp Valerian’s arm, which was bare like his own. “Did you go there?”

Valerian shook his head slowly. “No, I tried, but I hadn’t the strength. I caught glimpses of it, though, and heard the music—”

“But you discovered something.”

“Yes,” Valerian murmured. “Vampirism began on Atlantis, with a series of medical experiments.”

“How do you know this?” Aidan demanded, tightening his grasp on Valerian’s cold flesh.

“I’m not sure. The knowledge was just—there. Please, Aidan—I grow weary. Let me rest.”

“Not until you tell me how to change myself back into a man!”

There was a long, horrible silence. Then Valerian answered, “You cannot. There is an antidote, but you would have to venture back even farther than I did to find it, and you are not strong enough. Resign yourself, once and for all, Aidan. You are, and shall remain, a vampire.”



## Chapter 7

It took a long time to awaken, and Neely managed the task in stages, grappling her way from one level of consciousness to the next. The struggle required all the will she could summon, for the lethargy that pressed down on her was oddly blissful, a sweet sleep, peaceful and all-encompassing.

At last she persuaded her eyelids to rise.

She was lying in a strange, beautiful bed, an enormous four-poster of mahogany or some other dark wood. The canopy overhead was trimmed in exquisite ecru tatting, the sheets were the softest linen, and the coverlet was made of worn blue velvet.

Aidan's bed.

Neely remembered everything in a breathtaking rush— fleeing Bright River in Doris's old car, renting the motel room, waking to find Aidan standing at the foot of her bed. It all flooded back, the unbelievable lovemaking, his convincing claim that he was a vampire, all of it.

She gasped, stiffening beneath the covers. Aidan had wrapped her in his cape, and by some incomprehensible magic he had brought her here.

That was it.

Aidan must be a magician, and a very good one at that.

She began to make a case for her theory, in the courtroom of her mind. Yes, she *was* in his house in Connecticut, not a mile from the Lakeview Truck Stop, and she had no memory of making the trip; those were undeniable facts. But Aidan could have hypnotized her, or given her drugs, and planted the other recollections in her consciousness like seeds.

She would just get up, she decided, get herself dressed, and leave. Aidan Tremayne might be the most attractive man she'd ever met, and he'd certainly captured her heart, not to mention turning her inside out sexually, but that didn't mean she was going to let him kidnap her and play crazy games with her psyche.

*Brave talk*, she said to herself. The truth was, if Aidan came to her at that moment, she would let him—let him? she would *beg* him to—make love to her all over again.

She drew a deep breath and released it slowly in an effort to calm the dark, sweet excitement the memory of their strange intimacy stirred in her. In a more rational moment she faced another facet of her attraction to Aidan Tremayne, and that was plain, simple fear. x The man was probably just a very good magician, as she'd decided earlier, but suppose he'd been telling the truth? Suppose he really was a vampire, for God's sake?

Neely was confused and irritated, and besides that she figured her bladder was going to burst at any moment.

She moved to toss back the covers and sit up, but it was as if she were pinned to the mattress by some benign force. She ran a rather frantic mental check of her muscles and found them all in good working order. "Damn," she said and attempted to rise onto her elbows.

It was as if the ceiling had collapsed onto her, though there was no pain.

“Aidan!”

The name echoed in the large, empty room.

Neely waited, working up another burst of energy, fighting the urge to slip back into sleep. “Aidan!” she called again. “You get in here and help me out of this bed, damn it! I have to pee!”

There was no response at all, except for the hollow reverberations of her own voice.

Neely summoned all her will, which was formidable, and managed to make an inch of progress toward the side of the mattress. She waited, then moved again.

After ten minutes Neely was perspiring so heavily that the sheets clung to her skin. She reached the edge of the bed, spent a minor eternity gathering her strength, and then lunged again.

She landed on the cool hardwood floor with a thump and lay there dazed for an interval, exulting because she’d made it, yet so drained by the effort that she wasn’t sure she could stand up.

The insistent complaint of her bladder forced her to try; she reached her knees, gripped the antique bedside table for support, and raised herself shakily to her feet. She stood there, trembling and drawing deep breaths, until she dared attempt a step.

To Neely’s surprise, walking was easy. She went into the adjoining bathroom, which was fitted out in the costliest Italian marble, used the facilities, then draped an afghan around herself to keep warm and set about exploring the enormous bedchamber.

There were high casement windows on both sides of the suite, with built-in seats overlooking the snowy garden and the front yard, and the bureaus, closet, and armoires contained a wide assortment of men’s clothing. The room boasted its own fireplace, fronted in priceless hand-painted tiles, and here and there an exquisite Persian rug graced the gleaming wooden floors.

Neely ventured out into the hallway. She was hungry, and a little reassurance from her mysterious host wouldn’t have done any harm, either.

“Aidan?”

No answer.

She opened the double doors of the room across the hallway from Aidan’s and found another suite, almost as big and grand as the one she’d just left. Here the closets and bureaus were empty, however, and Neely’s hope of finding something to wear was dashed. She returned to the master chamber long enough to drop the afghan and put on one of Aidan’s tailored white shirts, then ventured into the hallway and headed toward the rear stairs.

At the bottom of these was a kitchen, large and immaculate. The shelves of the cupboards and the pantry were bare even of dust, and there wasn’t a plate or a glass or a butter knife to be seen.

Did vampires eat? Neely wondered. She immediately checked the silly thought. This whole setup was getting weirder and weirder.

Neely shifted her concentration away from her grumbling stomach and examined the rest of the massive house. In the movies it would have been filled with cobwebs and dust and spiders, she supposed, but instead the place was as tidy as a nun's dresser drawer. The massive crystal chandeliers glistened, the rugs and floors felt clean under Neely's bare feet, and the walls were decorated with fine original art. In Aidan's study, the only part of the house she had been in before, there were stacks of paper on the large table he used as a desk, and books lined the walls from floor to ceiling, on every side.

Neely gravitated to the music box she had discovered on her last visit, wound the brass key on its underside, and lifted the lid.

Sweet yet unbearably sad music flowed from the tiny, precise mechanism, arousing emotions so deep Neely could not even begin to identify them. She felt hot tears sting her eyes as she whirled round and round in a solitary dance, caught up in the sorcery of the tune, clutching the little chest in both hands. As she moved, twilight gathered at the tall, deeply set windows, and heavy flakes of snow waltzed past the glass.

"What a will you must have," Aidan said, startling Neely so badly that she stumbled and nearly dropped the music box.

He was standing in the doorway leading to the entryway, wearing a black overcoat, trousers, a white shirt, and a tie. Snowflakes glistened in his ebony hair and on the shoulders of his coat.

Neely stared at him, unable, for the moment, to speak. The impact of his presence was overwhelming; her soul trembled, her heart pounded. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry, whether to fling herself upon him in rage or seduce him on the spot.

Aidan's fine mouth tilted upward at one side as he indulged in a weary grin. "I guess I should have brought your suitcase when I carried you away from that dreadful motel," he said, pulling leather gloves from his hands and shoving them into the pockets of his coat. "Though you do look quite charming in my shirt. Tell me—how did you manage to get out of bed?"

She raised her chin. "No force can stop a woman who needs to go to the bathroom," she said.

Aidan laughed. "I see." He removed his coat and hung it from a brass coat tree.

"There's nothing to eat in this place," Neely said, her voice shaking a little.

"Oh, but there is," Aidan replied, disappearing into the entryway and returning momentarily with three cartons of Chinese take-out and a plastic fork wrapped in paper napkins. He smiled when she snatched everything from his hands and sat cross-legged on the hearth rug to rip open the boxes. Then he crouched beside her and said gently, "You're not a prisoner here, Neely, and you won't be mistreated. Please don't be afraid."

She gulped down a mouthful of fried rice. "'Don't be afraid?'" she echoed, somewhat bitterly. "I'd be some sort of idiot if I weren't."

He smiled at her reasoning, touched her hair briefly, then drew his hand back. In the next moment an expression of infinite sorrow filled his eyes.

"I can't bear it," he whispered hoarsely, "knowing that you fear me."

Neely set aside the food, for even though her body still craved sustenance, her emotions had taken full control. She could not stop herself from touching Aidan, from laying her hands on either side of his face.

For one long moment they simply gazed at each other, exchanging some silent, mystical form of comfort. Then Neely said, "How did I get here, Aidan? Did you hypnotize me or something like that?" »

He shook his head. "Nothing so ordinary, I'm afraid," he told her. "I really am a vampire, Neely, just as I said. And you were in rather grave danger last night, I might add. It was foolish of you to set out on your own like that."

She looked away because she wanted him so much, wanted to become one with him right there on the hearth rug, and out of the corner of her eye she saw him stand and distance himself from her.

"What kind of danger?" she asked, a little testily. She suspected Aidan had looked into her mind and seen her insatiable passion for him. His withdrawal struck her with the force of a blow.

"Two blighters came round to kill you," Aidan answered from the vicinity of his desk. He sounded distracted, like an ordinary man recounting the events of his day while flipping through the mail at the same time. "There's no reason to worry, though—I dealt with them."

So that was why he had suddenly stopped and thrust himself away the night before, when he'd been about to make love to her in the normal way. He'd heard someone approaching the room.

Neely allowed herself a slight shudder and took up her dinner again. "I'll bet you came as something of a surprise—especially if you let them see your teeth."

Aidan chuckled. "Yes, I daresay they weren't expecting to encounter me."

"Of course, it isn't over," Neely said with a sigh, reaching for one of the other cartons of Chinese food. "They're not going to give up quite so easily."

"Neither am I," Aidan remarked.

Neely could no longer resist looking at him, and when she did, she saw that he was watching her with a mixture of bewilderment and delight.

"What a hot-blooded little creature you are," he reflected.

Neely blushed. "What makes you say that?"

He laughed. "A few moments ago you wanted to make love on the hearth."

She didn't deny the thought; she couldn't. "I'm not normally so—amorous," she said.

"I should hope not," Aidan teased.

Her eyes flew to his face. She felt fury first, but the tender mirth she saw in his gaze stole her momentum, and she could not be angry with him.

"Have there been other men in your life, Neely?"

She was at once insulted and pleased by the question. “You claim you can read minds. Why don’t you just look inside my head and find out for yourself?”

“Because it would be an intrusion,” he said with a slight and very appealing shrug.

Neely sighed. “Fair enough,” she replied. “The answer is, just one. He broke my heart, my first year in college.” She decided that turnabout was fair play. “What about you, Aidan? How many women have you taken to your bed?”

His jaw tightened, and he looked exasperated. Then he murmured something that sounded like “This modern age!” A moment after that, however, he replied, “There were a number of tavern wenches in my youth—”

“”Tavern wenches“?” Neely interrupted, struck by this old-fashioned turn of phrase.

Aidan was clearly growing impatient again. With quicksilver speed he changed the subject. “I will find you something more appropriate to wear,” he said in a cool and formal tone. “Maeve must have left a few things behind—”

Maeve. Neely was troubled by the name, but she had enough to assimilate without pursuing yet another subject.

By the time Aidan returned, carrying a bundle of clothing with him, Neely had finished eating and stashed the leftovers in the big, hitherto empty refrigerator humming away in the kitchen. She was perched on a window seat, knees drawn up, the tails of Aidan’s shirt tucked modestly beneath her, watching the snow fall.

“There’s still some sweet and sour pork left...”

He smiled. “Vampires don’t eat, Neely. Not in the same way humans do.”

She rolled her eyes, accepting the folded cotton garment he held out to her. “Please,” she said. “You’re no ordinary guy, I’ll grant you that, but you can’t really be a vampire. Can you?”

Aidan’s laugh seemed to burst from his throat, rich and sensual and warm.

Neely slid out of the window seat and went to stand behind a high-back leather chair, her imagination running wild all of a sudden. “You don’t actually drink blood?”

Again she saw that peculiar, fathomless look of mourning in his eyes. “Yes,” he said miserably. “I despise it—I hate everything about being a vampire—but without blood I would die, and I am not quite prepared to do that.”

She felt conflicting desires—to take him into her arms and to run away, as far and as fast as she could. She squinted, a habit she’d acquired in college, when she was trying to work out something that both intrigued and puzzled her.

“Show me your coffin,” she challenged.

Aidan arched one dark eyebrow. “I beg your pardon?” he replied, looking and sounding genuinely

bewildered.

“If you’re a vampire,” Neely said, trying to make reason of the unreasonable, “you have to sleep in a coffin.”

He sighed, and his expression shifted to exasperation. “I most certainly do not sleep in a casket,” he said, plainly insulted. “This is not the second feature of a drive-in movie we’re talking about here, it’s reality. I drink blood, I sleep during the day, and I can indeed be killed by having a stake thrust through my heart. And that, my darling, is the extent of my resemblance to a Hollywood vampire!”

She frowned, trying to remember if she’d ever encountered Aidan before sunset and failing to recollect a single instance. “Calm down,” she said. She ran her tongue over her lips in a gesture of distraction rather than nervousness. “If you hate being a—a vampire so much, then why did you become one? Assuming, of course, that you really *are* a supernatural creature.”

Aidan sagged into the chair behind his worktable with a great sigh, and that was when Neely noticed that he looked gaunt. There were faint smudges under his eyes, like bruises, and his skin was pale as marble. “You are impossible!” he muttered.

Neely smiled. “True,” she claimed and promptly determined to show more appreciation. After all, no matter what Aidan was, or claimed to be, he had saved her from crooks who had almost certainly been ordered to assassinate her. And she still needed a place to hide.

Thinking it was a good time to take her leave, at least temporarily, she slipped out of the study. In the downstairs bathroom she exchanged the borrowed shirt for the graceful blue caftan Aidan had found for her. When she returned, he was standing at one of the windows, staring out at the dark, snowy forest edging the yard.

He turned to face her as she stood uncertainly in the arched doorway.

“I must go out for a while,” he said solemnly. “Do not admit anyone to the house before I return.” While Neely stared at him, trying to assimilate the news that he meant to abandon her, he lifted a fragile necklace over his head and placed it around her neck. A delicately shaped golden rosebud dangled from the chain.

“What is this?”

Aidan chuckled grimly. “Not the equivalent of a silver bullet or a crucifix, if that’s what you’re thinking. My sister and the others know it belongs to me, and that you would not have it in your possession except by my favor.”

Curiouser and curiouser, Neely thought. She should be glad Aidan was leaving, she supposed, but instead she had to fight an urge to drop to her knees and fling her arms around his legs to make him stay. “What—what if those men come after me again? The ones who tried to break into my motel room.”

Aidan made a gentle move in her direction, then drew himself back with a sharp, alarming motion. “They won’t,” he said. Raising his hands over his head, he slipped into a corner of the room and dissolved into the shadows.

Neely just stood there for a few seconds after he disappeared, staring, immobilized with shock. Then she broke her paralysis and hurtled across the room to the place where Aidan had been only a heartbeat

before.

There was no trace of him, nor was there a door or a window near enough to accommodate such a dramatic exit. Murmuring, Neely knelt and felt the wainscoting with both hands, searching for a secret panel.

Nothing.

With a shiver Neely got to her feet. She was going to have to ask Aidan to show her how to do that particular trick—it might come in handy if those hired thugs ever caught up to her again.

Her glance strayed to the telephone on Aidan's table. She wanted to call Ben and let him know that she was all right, but she didn't dare. Dallas Hargrove's drug-dealing associates might have her brother's line tapped, and if they traced a call to this house, she was as good as dead.

With a groan Neely raised moist palms to her temples and rubbed. It would have been a relief to tell someone all that was happening to her, but who'd believe it?

Restless, Neely made a fire on the hearth and began examining Aidan's vast collection of books. A set of thick volumes, bound in Moroccan leather, drew her attention, and she reached for the first one on the left.

The thing was huge, and heavy, and Neely dropped into Aidan's desk chair before lifting the cover.

The paper was fine parchment, substantial and smooth, and the first few pages were blank. Neely flipped carefully through them until she came to one that bore an inscription in fading black ink. *This being the Record and Journal of Aidan Tremayne, Vampyre. Begun March 5, 1793.*

Neely felt something tickle the inside of her spine. She stared at the writing for a long time, then moved on to the next page. Here she found a pen-and-ink drawing that practically stopped her heart; Aidan's laughing, handsome face looked back at her from the parchment, while a beautiful young woman, his female counterpart, peered smiling over his broad shoulder. Both subjects wore clothing typical of the eighteenth century.

For a while Neely just sat there, stunned.

Surely the man in the drawing could not be Aidan—the sketches had obviously been done generations before—no, it had to be one of his ancestors. Still, the image reached out to her somehow, and the laughing eyes pleaded with her to believe.

Just believe.

Shaken, she turned her attention to the woman, one of the loveliest creatures she had ever seen. The resemblance between the two was so strong that Neely knew they were brother and sister, or perhaps cousins...

Neely swayed and closed her eyes. Some primal instinct insisted that this laughing young man in the drawing was indeed Aidan Tremayne—her Aidan.

Impossible.



Believe.

Neely took a deep breath and held it for a moment. Then, with a shaking hand, she turned another page and began to decipher the neatly written but quaint script, with its antique spellings and randomly capitalized words. "I, Aidan Tremayne," she translated, "set Down this Tale for the Sake of my own Sanity, and as a Warning to all those who come after..."

Soon Neely was so absorbed that she was unaware of the passage of time. She devoured page after page, spellbound by the young Irishman's account of his meeting with Lisette, the mysterious woman who had stopped for him in a carriage one evening, along a muddy road, and quickly captured his soul. Even though this other, earlier Aidan—he could not be the one she'd held, the one she loved, could he?—was a shameless hedonist, mostly concerned with sex, music, and good ale, Neely felt pangs of despair and, yes, jealousy, as she read. She did not want another female to figure into the story at all.

When she came to the part where Lisette pounced on young Aidan and sank her fangs deep into his throat to virtually inhale his blood, Neely felt her own face go white and cold as window glass in winter. It was fiction, of course, a brilliantly conceived and quite horrible fantasy, but it seemed *soreal*, the action so immediate and vital, that Neely almost became a part of the scenes herself.

The account only became more incredible. The boy Aidan had died in the bed of a flea-ridden eighteenth-century inn above a tavern, and yet he had *not* died. The innkeeper, his son, and a local priest had declared him dead, and he'd tried desperately to communicate somehow that he was alive, but to no avail. The men had taken the body, never dreaming that a spirit still occupied it, to the undertaker's establishment. He'd been abandoned there in that dreadful place, and forgotten.

Tears blurred Neely's vision as she read of Lisette's return, and how she had raised Aidan up as a monster, *avampire*, by tapping into his jugular vein again, this time giving blood instead of taking it.

While she was fascinated and curious to a morbid degree, Neely found that she could not go on from there, not yet. She was deeply shaken, as if she'd witnessed the occurrences personally, in every gruesome detail. She felt true and abiding hatred for the heartless Lisette, along with an unholy resentment that the woman had lain with Aidan, had given him pleasure, and taken the same from him.

For a long interval she just sat, dazed by the intensity and variety of her emotions, staring into the fire but seeing instead the nightmare images so carefully outlined in the journal. How could anyone, even a vampire, do such a terrible thing to another, to condemn him, as Lisette had condemned Aidan, to an eternal nightmare?

"Neely?"

She started and guiltily slammed the volume closed.

Aidan was standing only a few feet away—she hadn't heard him come in—and he carried her suitcase, the one she'd been forced to leave behind at the motel the night before.

She felt such overwhelming love, just looking at him, that she could not get her breath to speak.

"I thought you might like to have some of your own clothes," he said innocently, sounding almost shy. His gaze dropped to the heavy book in her lap, and she saw both resignation and relief in his bearing. "You've found my histories, I see."

Looking up, Neely noticed that his skin, deathly pale before, was now healthy in color. A wild suspicion played in her mind; she chased it out and dropped her gaze to the suitcase in his hand. "Where did that come from? I thought we left it."

"We did. I went back."

Neely's eyes shot back to his face. "You couldn't have. It's too far."

Instead of replying, Aidan simply raised one of his aristocratic eyebrows.

She bolted out of the chair and grabbed for the case. "I have to let my brother know I'm all right," she blurted, desperate for any distraction from the threatening truth, the reality that was becoming too complex and too pervasive to be ignored or denied. "When the police visit that room and find no sign of yours truly, Ben will hear about it on the news. He'll be frantic. He might even think I'm dead."

Aidan folded his arms. "If you telephone Ben, we may soon have more of the senator's friends to deal with. That's all well and good, provided I'm here when they arrive, but what if you're alone, Neely? What if I'm hunting, or asleep?"

A chill, colder than the center of a snowman's heart, touched her stomach and seeped into her soul. "Hunting or asleep? For God's sake, Aidan—you're really scaring me now. This vampire game has gone far enough!"

He took the book gently from her hands, laid it aside. "I was hoping I wouldn't have to resort to parlor tricks to convince you," he said in a quiet and damnably reasonable tone. "That's my story you were reading, Neely. The image in the drawing is mine, the girl is my twin sister, Maeve—"

"No!" She put her hands over her ears.

Aidan grasped her wrists, lowered them, pressed them to her sides. "You *will* listen," he said in a desperate whisper. "You know it's true—somewhere inside, *you know it's true*."

Neely uttered a sudden, wailing sob, because he was right. As incomprehensible as it all was, as much as she wanted to turn away from the evidence, she could no longer do that. It was no dream, and no one had given her drugs or induced any kind of hypnotic trance. All the strange things that had happened since she first met Aidan had actually, truly *happened*.

Aidan touched her elbows and then her shoulders, tentatively. After that, though, instead of taking her into his arms as she yearned for him to do, he retreated a few steps. "I'm sorry, Neely," he said gruffly. "I should have left you alone—"

"But you didn't!" she cried. She looked up at him, wiping angrily at her wet cheeks. "I'm fascinated, I'm entranced, God help me, I think I'm in love—with someone who isn't even human! Tell me, Aidan—where do I go from here? What do I do now?"

He flinched, as if she'd hurled bricks at his broad back instead of words. He did not face her as he replied raggedly, "I could walk away, and you would get over what you're feeling now. But that wouldn't change the fact that there are more of those cretins out there, waiting for a chance to cut your throat!"

Neely moved to face Aidan and glared up into his face. She was wild with confusion, shock, and pain, and she spoke without thinking. "You could make me into a vampire, like you."

Aidan seemed to loom over her, taller for his fury. “Don’t ever say that!” he cried. “You’re asking to be damned, to be a fiend who feeds on the blood of living creatures! You’re asking God Himself to turn against you, and for all eternity!” His anguish lay naked and vivid in the words, and Neely’s first real comprehension of its extent took her breath away.

She approached him, laying her hands gently on his face. “Aidan—” she whispered, longing to comfort him, knowing there was no way to do that.

He wrenched free of her and moved away. “Didn’t you hear me, Neely?” he growled, reminding her of a wolf that had just chewed off its own paw in a desperate, effort to save itself from the metal teeth of a trap. “I am cursed for all time, and to care for me is to blaspheme against Creation itself!”

She was shaking her head again. “No, Aidan—no.” It couldn’t be a sin to love, could it? But, yes. The act of adoring something evil did not transform it into good, but instead poisoned what was holy.

They both stood still, the silence ringing around them like the deafening toll of some horrid death bell, for the longest time. Then, unable to bear it, Neely muttered, “My brother—”

Aidan moved to his desk, keeping his back to her. “Write him a letter, then, and explain as best you can. Just remember that he will have to live with your words until the end of his days.”

Neely nodded distractedly, well aware of Aidan’s meaning. She could tell Ben only that she was in hiding—it would be an outright lie to say she was safe, and there was no plausible way to describe the terrible truth.

She went upstairs to the room where she had awakened hours before, switched on a lamp, and sat down at a small desk to stare, unseeing, at a blank piece of paper.

Aidan paced his study, too restless to work on his journals, not daring to follow Neely upstairs and continue their conversation. He had fed sparsely that night, and he had yet to look in on the still-ailing Valerian, who was his only hope of finding redemption and, with it, peace. Maeve, adore her though he did, was embroiled as usual in adventures of her own and could not be depended upon to look after wounded ones.

He rubbed his temples with a thumb and forefinger, slouched back against the edge of his desk, and sighed. Then, with the utmost reluctance, he took himself to the dungeon of Havermail Castle.

Valerian still lay prone and ill, his long frame covering the length of a trestle table. In the flickering lights of the candles Aidan saw a small, snarling creature spring out of the shadows and attach itself to Valerian’s throat.

Horror rocked Aidan as he realized that this abomination, this greedy fiend, wore the person of a child. He plunged forward and tore the small, wiry body away from Valerian’s neck as though it were a leech. The little girl—this had to be Canaan, Benecia’s sister—twisted in Aidan’s grasp, baring her lethal fangs and making a vicious sound low in her throat, like a starved she-wolf.

Valerian moaned and rolled onto his side. “Stop,” he pleaded. “Please—*stop!*”

Remarkably, the hellion went still, but when she raised her sherry-colored gaze to Aidan’s face, he saw the most abject hatred there that he had ever encountered. Coming from a being who looked for all the

world like a sweet and warm-blooded five-year-old, the experience was particularly chilling.

“She was merely trying to help me,” Valerian said gently.

“Shall I leave you alone with this one, Valerian?” the fiend-child inquired, in a voice as delicate as the chimes of an exquisite little clock. “I do not favor him, you know.”

Valerian gestured affectionately toward the door. “I am quite safe with Aidan,” he insisted. “Go now, please, and tell your mama and papa that we have a guest.”

Aidan’s gaze sliced to his friend’s face. He had no real desire to socialize with the elder Havermails; they were innately horrible creatures, like their daughters. When Canaan had swept from the room, he bit out, “Honestly, Valerian, I can’t think what you and Maeve see in this family of monsters!”

“We see ourselves,” Valerian answered quietly.

The words left Aidan stricken, for no weapon could wound as deeply and as savagely as the truth.

“This is what *weare* , Aidan,” the elder vampire insisted in an urgent whisper.

“No,” Aidan rasped, shaking his head, trying to pull free of Valerian’s grasp. “Wo! You went back, almost to Atlantis—so will I. I will find the antidote for this curse or die seeking it!”

Incredibly, Valerian smiled. “What a passionate specimen you are. Come with me, my friend, and let me show you other realities.” He paused, patting Aidan’s hand fondly. “You might have been a stage actor, with your flair for the dramatic. Together we could write plays that would outshine the words of the Bard himself. We could—”

“Damn it, Valerian, you’re dreaming!” Aidan broke in sharply. He hadn’t meant his tone to be harsh, but it was, cruelly so, and the momentum carried him farther. “I want nothing from you, do you hear me, *nothing* , except for the secret that would restore the life that was stolen from me!”

Valerian turned his head to one side, and it seemed that he was caving in on himself again. He looked much as he had that first terrible night in the crypt, when he had come so close to perishing. His suffering was tangible; it swelled in the room, choking Aidan, crushing him.

Because of their bond, Aidan felt Valerian’s pain as keenly as if it were his own. And maybe, since he had caused it, it was. With a cry, Aidan let his forehead fall to Valerian’s concave chest. “I cannot offer you the devotion you want from me,” he whispered in agony. “*I cannot!*”

Slowly, and with tenderness, Valerian raised a trembling hand to the back of Aidan’s head and entwined cold fingers in his hair. “Yes,” he said brokenly. “I know.”

Just then, a nearby door swung open with *athunk* , and Aubrey Havermail swept in, accompanied by his small, demonic daughter. He smirked as he watched Aidan step back from Valerian’s side, dazed by despair.

“Such a touching, tender scene,” Aubrey drawled.

## Chapter 8

“We were just about to sit down to dinner,” Aubrey Havermail went on after a brief, charged interval of silence had passed. “Won’t you join us?”

Under other circumstances, Aidan might have laughed at the idea of vampires taking a meal in the human way, but he sensed that his host was in deadly earnest. When Valerian reached out to grasp Aidan’s hand and squeeze, silently urging him to accept, Aidan inclined his head in polite assent.

“We’ll just go on ahead, then,” Havermail went on, when it was clear that Aidan didn’t mean to leave the dungeon before he had a private word with Valerian. “Come, darling.” He took Canaan’s tiny, snow-white hand. “I’m sure our guest will be able to find his way on his own.”

When the pair had gone, Valerian raised himself onto one elbow and regarded Aidan with sunken, shadowed eyes. “Is there any way,” he began, “that I can dissuade you from attempting to uncover the secret that would make you mortal again?”

Aidan shook his head. “No,” he said.

“I thought not,” the stricken vampire replied in a rasp of despair. He struggled for a time, grappling visibly with some fathomless fatigue, and finally went on. “My advice to you, as you already know, is to turn from this foolish pursuit and never look back. Clearly, though, you are not wise enough to heed my counsel—in which case, I offer you what little information I have to give.”

Aidan leaned closer to his companion; had he been a man, he would have been holding his breath. “I beg of you, Valerian—tell me.”

Valerian closed his eyes for a moment and was taken by an almost imperceptible fit of trembling. Then he met Aidan’s gaze and said, “You must learn *to listen*, my friend, if you are to survive! Do you not recall what the other child, Benecia, said before, when you asked how an entire family had become vampires? *She stated that her father had joined a secret society*. I’ve been thinking about it ever since and exploring this dreary castle with my mind whenever I could manage the effort, and I’ve come to a conclusion. Benecia spoke of one of the oldest fraternities on earth, Aidan—the Brotherhood of the Vampyre. This fellowship can trace its origins back to Atlantis itself!”

Now it was Aidan who trembled, for the implications of Valerian’s words were, to him, profound. The Brotherhood, an organization Aidan had heard of only once before, when Maeve had mentioned it in passing, might well possess some clue to the secret of his own redemption—if not the means itself.

“Thank you,” Aidan said, his voice hoarse. He enclosed one of Valerian’s large, elegant hands between his own. “I will come back to speak with you before I go.”

Valerian held him fast when he tried to walk away. “What of that mortal woman you became involved with? Have you set her free, Aidan?”

“She was never my prisoner.”

“You are hedging!”

Aidan forced himself to meet Valerian’s gaze. “Neely is living in my house. I cannot take the time to

explain everything now; suffice it to say that I can neither hold her nor let her go.”

Valerian stared bleakly up at Aidan, saying nothing.

“You have fed?” Aidan inquired quietly. At Valerian’s nod, he went on. “Are you recovering your strength?”

At this, the elder vampire turned his face away from Aidan and remained stubbornly silent.

Reluctantly Aidan left Valerian’s side, left the dim candle-glow of the dungeon for the torch-lit passageway beyond. Instinct led him up a curving flight of stone stairs, worn to slippery smoothness by centuries of use, through a dusty corridor, and into the castle’s great hall.

There was every probability that all manner of knights, nobles, ladies, and wenches had dined and celebrated in this yawning chamber in some distant century. Now, however, the place was empty, except for the four Havermails, who sat around a long wooden table next to an enormous fireplace, their empty plates and glasses making clinking sounds, their horribly beautiful faces bathed in the crimson glow from the hearth.

Aubrey, head of this ghoulish family, rose from his chair when Aidan approached. “Our guest has arrived. We wondered at the delay.”

Aidan reminded himself that this posturing creature he so despised might be the very one who could solve his dilemma. “I hope I did not inconvenience you,” he said evenly. “I was concerned for my friend.”

Benecia looked up at him with large, malevolent eyes, her tarnished-gold ringlets capturing the firelight. “Valerian is not your friend,” she said. “No vampire is, truly, for you are not one of us. Why do you pretend?”

“That is quite enough,” Aubrey interceded. He was a slender, finely built man, obviously a product of generations of aristocracy. “Do join us, Mr. Tremayne.”

Aidan was, for the first time in recent memory, mildly embarrassed. He took the only empty chair at the table, situated between Mrs. Havermail—Maeve had introduced her as Roxanne during his last visit—and Canaan, who looked as fragile as a kitten and was clearly about as well-mannered as a white shark in frenzy.

Roxanne gave a trilling laugh that tripped down Aidan’s backbone, leaving patterns of frost as it passed. She had rich, dark hair, uncomfortably reminiscent of Lisette’s, perfect bone structure, and practically no color at all to her skin. “Please don’t be alarmed by our strange custom of sitting down at table together, Mr. Tremayne,” she said. “It is the one semblance of family life that remains to us.”

Aidan nodded, his eyes moving from one lovely monster to another. Despite differences in size and in human age, all the Havermails were no doubt equals in their powers and experience as vampires. Roxanne’s reasoning made a grisly sort of sense; while seated around a table, they could *pretend* to be flesh and blood again. »

And that was something Aidan understood.

“Do you miss being mortal?” he inquired, just to make conversation.



Roxanne's chuckle was wicked enough to curdle a saint's blood. "Miss being mortal?" she echoed. "Dear me, Aidan—I feel that I know you well enough to address you informally, since dear Maeve has spoken of you so often—why would anyone miss head colds and bunions and broken hearts?"

"And having to die," Benecia put in.

Canaan wrinkled her delicate, freckle-spattered nose. "And sitting in the schoolroom hour after hour, learning dull lessons."

Aubrey called the group back to order by raising both hands, palms out, making a silly smirk, and turning his head slightly to one side. "Here, now. Let's not be rude."

Rude, Aidan thought. Amazing. These were beings who surely stalked their mortal counterparts by night, drained them of their life's blood, and slept off the kill by day in perfect contentment. And Havermail was concerned about their table manners?

"I don't like you," announced Canaan, as her sister had before, regarding Aidan with cheerful disdain.

"I feel much the same way about you," Aidan replied cordially.

The other Havermails were amused by his audacity and cackled among themselves, putting Aidan in mind of the three crones in *Macbeth*. *Double, double, toil and trouble*, he thought, *fire burn and cauldron bubble*.

Roxanne startled everyone by picking up a silver spoon and setting it clattering against the side of a crystal goblet. "Canaan, Benecia—you will atone for your poor manners by entertaining. Canaan, you may recite. Benecia, you will sing."

Inwardly Aidan groaned. Was this atonement, or was it free rein to torture a hapless captive?

"Jolly good idea," said Aubrey Havermail, leaping up from his chair with such suddenness that he overturned his empty wineglass. "To the main drawing room, then, where we shall find the pipe organ."

Aidan smiled, already in acute pain, and followed the family of vampires across the great hall and into another, smaller chamber. There was indeed an organ, along with tarnished candelabras and dingy chandeliers, all dripping cobwebs, and rugs so long neglected that wisps of dust floated up from them as they were trod upon.

Canaan took her place next to the organ, while Roxanne sat down at the discolored keyboard. Aubrey sank into a leather chair and drew Benecia onto his knee, just as a human father might have done. Aidan perched gingerly on the arm of a settee, trying to comprehend the fact that his sister deliberately spent time with these beasts.

The younger daughter, not even three feet tall, clasped her tiny white hands together and held forth, reciting Shakespeare's poem, "Venus and Adonis," with chilling precision. "I know "The Rape of Lucrece," as well," Canaan said, upon finishing.

"Sit down, dear," Roxanne told her fondly.

Aidan held himself still, though he wanted to fidget and, even more, to flee.



Benecia slipped off her father's lap and sashayed forward to stand in front of the small company. She and her mother conferred, in whispers, and then Roxanne struck an introduction on the stained organ keys, and Benecia began to sing.

The lyrics were Latin—something quite ordinary, concerning bluebirds and meadows and sparkling streams—but it was the child-vampire's voice that struck Aidan. It seemed to move in the chamber like the eddies, swirls, and undertows of some vast, invisible river.

When the performance was over, when the last quavering note had fallen away into silence, Aidan remembered to clap. This drew a look of scathing reprimand from Canaan, whom he had neglected to acknowledge in quite so formal a fashion.

Roxanne rose from the organ bench and gathered her children close. "Come, darlings—there are still several hours left in which to hunt," she said in the same tones a human mother might use to summon her brood to the station wagon for a trip to the nearest shopping mall. "Say good-bye to Mr. Tremayne."

Benecia and Canaan stood primly before Aidan and curtsied in unison. Then they chorused, "Good night, Papa," kissed Aubrey on either of his waxen cheeks, and scampered out, their mother following.

"Am I keeping you from anything?" Aidan asked when he and Havermail were alone in that odd room. The place might have come from the pages of a Dickens novel, he thought; all it really lacked was a spoiled cake being nibbled on by rats, and a demented old woman in a rotted wedding dress.

Aubrey sat back in his chair as Aidan went to stand next to the fireplace, where an old clock stood on a mantel beneath a drapery of spider weavings.

"No," Havermail replied, studying his guest thoughtfully. "I fed some hours ago and have no desire to gorge myself, as my wife and daughters often do. Tell me, Mr. Tremayne—what is it you want from me?"

Aidan thrust his hand through his hair, fingers splayed. "According to your elder daughter, you became a vampire some five hundred and forty years ago, when you joined a select fellowship and undertook their initiation."

Havermail's countenance darkened, and his mouth pursed for a moment. Clearly the lovely, vicious Benecia had spoken out of turn. "What is your interest in the Brotherhood?" he asked after a long and somewhat awkward silence. "It cannot be that you seek immortality, since you are already a vampire."

Aidan framed his words carefully, setting them out like so many fine porcelain plates. "I seek—mortality. In short, I want to be a man again."

After staring for several moments, Havermail burst out laughing. "You cannot be serious!" he howled when he'd recovered just a little.

"I have never been more sincere about anything," Aidan replied evenly. "I was robbed. I want the forty-odd additional years of life that were my due."

Aubrey stood, all vestiges of mirth gone from his expression. "Who made you a blood-drinker?"

Aidan hesitated. "A powerful female called Lisette."

Havermail made a sputtering sound and moved one hand as if to make the sign of the cross over his chest, before stopping himself. An old habit, evidently, that had died hard. “Powerful, indeed,” he murmured. “All sensible vampires fear Lisette, Tremayne. Why should I risk incurring her wrath?”

“You needn’t risk anything,” Aidan snapped, barely keeping himself from grasping Aubrey by the lapels of his cutaway coat and lifting him onto his toes. “I want to know about the Brotherhood, that’s all. Is it true that the fellowship has existed since before the fall of Atlantis?”

Aubrey looked patently uncomfortable. “Yes,” he said, “but that is all I will tell you without permission from the elders.” He moved to the fireplace with that quick, gliding motion typical of vampires, took a poker from its place on the hearth, and jabbed at the burning logs until sparks rose toward the chimney in a crackling shower. “Leave this house, Tremayne. Go on about your business, whatever it is. If the Brotherhood wishes to grant you admittance, you will be contacted.”

Desperation filled Aidan, along with a certain fragile elation. The Brotherhood existed, and he would be given audience only on the approval—perhaps the whim—of these mysterious elders.

Still, the fellowship might well possess the knowledge he needed, the secret that would set him free. He must bide his time and be patient. He started toward the doorway. “I will be back again tomorrow night to look in on Valerian,” he said in passing. “Thank you for a most interesting evening.”

Down in the dungeon, Aidan was surprised to find Valerian sitting up and looking a bit more chipper. He was wearing a snow-white shirt, buttoned halfway up his chest, dark trousers, and boots.

“I’ve decided to go back to Connecticut with you,” he announced.

Aidan stopped cold, felt the smile freeze on his mouth, and let it fall away. “What?”

“I’m bored with this place, and you plainly need a guiding hand, given your reckless ways.” He was rolling down his sleeves, fastening cufflinks made from Roman coins. “Don’t worry, Aidan. I won’t corner your lovely mortal and bite her neck. I only want to help you.”

Aidan sighed. “I suppose there is no persuading you to stay here?”

Valerian smiled fondly. “It would be easier to make a bat love daylight,” he said.

And so it was that when Aidan returned to his house outside of Bright River, Valerian was with him.

Not surprisingly, considering the many recent upheavals in her life, Neely hadn’t been able to sleep. She had taken a long, hot bath in Aidan’s tile-lined tub, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt taken from the suitcase he’d recovered for her, and finished off what was left of the Chinese leftovers she’d stashed in the refrigerator. Then she’d meandered back to Aidan’s study, taken up the first volume of his journal again, and tumbled headfirst into the story.

She’d read, spellbound, of Aidan’s early adventures as a vampire. Early on, he’d traveled to the north of England by night, intending to visit his twin sister in her convent school. He’d stopped at an inn along the way and there been approached by an imposing vampire who called himself Valerian—

“His lucky night,” a masculine voice commented.

Neely jumped in her chair and had to grab at the book to keep it from toppling to the floor. Before her

stood the towering, graceful creature she'd met once before, the night the man driving the Blazer had chased her into the woods. The night she'd found the music box.

"Yes," he said drolly, with a slight bow. "It is I—Valerian—in person. So to speak."

Neely tried to melt into the chair cushions, her eyes rounded, her heart flailing with the purest sort of terror. "Stay away from me," she whispered, holding out the rose medallion Aidan had given her, hoping it had some power to ward off intruders.

Valerian laughed. "What? No garlic? Such is the shameful state of vampire lore in this modern and wholly unromantic age!"

Just then, when she thought panic would surely consume her, Neely caught sight of Aidan. He smiled at her but spoke sharply to the intimidating Valerian.

"I meant what I said. Leave her alone."

Valerian yawned. "Of course I will obey your every wish," he said convivially. "It's almost dawn, in case you haven't noticed. What assurance can you offer that this delicious gamine will not drive stakes through our hearts as we slumber?"

"None," Aidan answered wearily, "except that the task would be a nasty one, and she's probably not up to it. Stop your teasing and retire, Valerian. I want a word alone with Neely."

The great vampire sighed in a long-suffering way, raised his arms over his head, and disappeared without a trace.

Neely stared at the space Valerian had just vacated, blinked, and then passed a hand slowly back and forth in the vacuum, certain her eyes had deceived her.

Gently Aidan took the book from her and set it aside. Then he bent to kiss her forehead. "I know what you're thinking, but you mustn't tax yourself with conundrums about smoke and mirrors," he advised. "What you just saw was neither a trick nor an illusion. Vanishing is elementary vampire stuff."

"Elementary vampire stuff," Neely repeated. By that point she was almost completely overwhelmed, through no fault of her own, and that irritated her. She flushed and looked up at Aidan with defiance in her eyes. "Tell me, Aidan— what else can vampires do?"

He sat down on the hassock, next to her feet, and folded his graceful hands. He looked forlornly amused as he regarded her. "They can travel through time—back to the point of their own death as a human being, though not forward past the present. The future is as much a mystery to them—us—as it is to you. They are able to communicate mentally with other creatures like themselves, across great distances, and move so rapidly that they cannot be seen."

Neely eased past Aidan and stood, her hands on her hips, her mind filled with dangerous puzzles. "Can they—can you—reproduce?"

Aidan sighed and rose to his feet. "Not the way mortals do. But rest assured, vampires are quite capable of making love."

Neely felt the familiar heat, along with a measure of fear and a storm of loneliness that rushed through her

spirit like a wailing wind. "I know," she said, remembering.

He reached out and touched the base of her throat with the tip of a cool index finger. "You know far less than you think you do," he said, not unkindly. "We're greedy, violent creatures, quite fond of pleasure—which explains the typical penchant for immortality."

"Vampires marry, then?"

"They sometimes mate, though it's rare," Aidan clarified, and although one corner of his mouth was raised in the slightest smile, he looked sad. "For the most part, Neely, we nightwalkers tend to keep to ourselves. We mistrust even our own kind, and especially other sorts of fiends." He glanced uneasily toward the window, where dawn was beginning to thin the darkness.

Neely took hold of his arm when he would have turned from her. "You—you mean there are other things"—she paused to blush—"monsters—walking around among regular people?"

"Yes," Aidan answered, sounding mildly impatient now. "There are werewolves and ghosts, angels and fairies—lots of things." And then there are the other dimensions, overlaying this one. Were you truly so vain as to believe that humanity has the universe all to itself?"

The question required no reply.

"I don't want you to leave me," Neely blurted out when he moved to pull away. "Please, Aidan—I want to go wherever you're going."

He laid his hands lightly on her shoulders and looked deep into her eyes. "I cannot allow that," he said gently. "Go upstairs and try to rest. I will come to you through your dreams if I can."

She had to be content with that, for it was almost morning; any minute the sun would spill over the horizon and flood the world with light.

Aidan traced the outline of her jaw with one finger, then raised his arms and disappeared.

Neely lingered for a time, trying once again, and wholly in vain, to make sense of what she had just experienced. Her insomnia left her, she was infinitely weary all of a sudden, and felt as if she could sleep for a century.

After returning the first volume of Aidan's journal to the shelf, she slowly climbed the stairs, entered the bedchamber, took off everything but her T-shirt, and tumbled into bed.

Soon after she closed her eyes, Neely found herself floating serenely on the dark inner waters of her mind. She allowed her consciousness to drift, too weary to anchor it in reality.

Aidan was in his lair, at least physically, crouching against the wall as he always did, but that day he left the husk of himself behind and sought Neely. He was inexperienced at such travel, unlike Valerian; he could not feel the sunshine or the wind, and he could see only dimly. With practice, he knew, his senses would sharpen.

He found Neely easily, saw her as the dimmest of shadows, sprawled in the middle of the large bed he had never actually slept in, her arms and legs askew.

He thought her name, and she stirred, uttering a soft, despairing sound that made him yearn to console her. All the while, Aidan was aware that he should not be testing the limits of his powers in this way, without first taking instruction from Valerian or Maeve. He was in danger because of his wandering, but there was a much greater peril to be considered now—Neely's. As fiercely as he wanted to protect her, she was at risk, for Lisette and perhaps even Valerian would not hesitate to use her, should the opportunity arise.

Valerian was given to dalliances; he would drink from her, toy with her for a time, as cats do with rubber balls and cloth mice, and then toss her aside when his fickle interest waned.

Lisette, and a few others who had reason to hate Aidan, would delight in destroying Neely or, worse yet, turning her into a fiend.

Imagining Neely as a vampire made Aidan cry out softly, in anguished despair. He had to let her go, he thought, to walk away and not look back, to forget her and pray that she would go unnoticed by his enemies.

But could he do that? Did he have the strength, needing the woman as he did? The comfort and affection and love she gave him were as necessary to him as the blood he was condemned to drink, and her whispered gasps of passion engendered in him an ecstasy he had never felt before.

Yes, he admitted to himself, at last, he loved Neely Wallace, fully and completely, as he had never loved anyone else before, in all his two centuries of existence, but he had no right to such tender sentiments. No right on earth, or in heaven.

It was torture, the wanting, the needing and, worst of all, the knowing.

Aidan caused the covers to slide slowly downward, to the foot of the bed, and Neely groped for the pillow next to her and sighed his name.

With that simple, innocent sound the last vestige of Aidan's already tenuous self-control faded. Easily, using only the mental power at which all vampires are adept, he arranged her on her back and removed the T-shirt, drawing it off over her head.

Neely didn't open her eyes, but she was aware of his presence, and she welcomed him, crooning softly and arching her wondrous, supple body once, as if to entice him.

Still, Aidan cherished this fragile, independent creature too much to press his advantage. *May I touch you, Neely?* he asked, exerting no other power now beyond being mentally present in that room. *May I give you pleasure?*

A fine sheen of perspiration glistened on her skin, and the tips of her lush breasts shaped themselves into buds. "Yes," she whispered. "Oh, yes."

"... yes..."

Neely had never had a more sensual, more downright delicious dream. It seemed that Aidan was lying with her in that huge bed, naked and warm and gloriously passionate.

She felt his hands stroking her, moving over the length of her, learning the curves and hollows of her body, taking their time. When it seemed that her every pore was open to him, he narrowed his caresses

to her breasts, weighing them in his palms, fondling them with a gentle reverence that made her want to weep, chafing their nipples with the sides of his thumbs.

She wanted this to be real, this tender, fiery loving. Oh, please, she wished in silence, let all the rest of it, the vampires and the men who want to murder me, let those things be the dream.

Neely cried out in nearly unbearable pleasure when Aidan moistened one nipple with his tongue, then began to suckle. She tried to put her arms around him, but there was nothing to hold, for he was a phantom lover.

Neither waking nor sleeping, Neely responded without restraint as Aidan pressed her breasts together and somehow teased and tasted the straining tips of both. Her body began to undulate, and she felt her hair clinging to her face in moist tendrils. Again she reached for Aidan, again she failed to find him, though he was undeniably *there*, loving her more fully than she'd ever been loved.

She clawed and clutched at the bedclothes as he continued to worship her, rose high off the mattress with a cry of primitive surrender when he burrowed through the silken delta between her legs and nibbled greedily at the very core of her femininity. At the same time he continued to enjoy not one breast, but both, and then—then he added the final element to her conquering. He thrust inside her, hard and hot, while still subjecting her to all the other sensations, too.

Neely was not inexperienced—she'd been deeply in love once before, after all—but she'd never felt anything like this before Aidan. He, and only he, was touching her, and yet all her erogenous zones were being attended at once. She thought the pleasure would surely kill her, and didn't care one whit if she died, if only she could have the promised satisfaction first.

Her release was savage in its intensity, seeming to draw her up onto her elbows, the rounding of her heels, the crown of her head, where she hung suspended, uttering one ragged shout of ecstasy after another. Aidan plied her senses mercilessly, the whole time refusing to allow her to fall after scaling only one peak. No, he took her to another pinnacle, and then another, still higher, and when he finally allowed her to rest, she was mute with exhaustion. She curled up in a corner of her own heart and slept a fathomless sleep.

When she awakened, it was late afternoon. Somewhere deep inside her a chord still resonated with the last sweet music of Aidan's caresses. Neely smiled, stretched, reached for him...

And remembered.

She had only dreamed that Aidan had made love to her.

Tears blurred Neely's vision as she turned onto her side and gazed toward the row of windows on the other side of the room. Winter would soon arrive in earnest, and the first faint shadows of twilight were already gathering. She lay there, watching the daylight fade, mourning for the dream world where she and Aidan had become one.

An hour passed, and part of another. When the room was bruised with darkness, Aidan came to her. She saw Jim, felt him with her outstretched hand, and his weight pressed into the edge of the mattress, gloriously real.

"Aidan."

“Yes, my love.”

She reached up, smoothed the sleek, raven-dark hair at his temple with her palm. “I had the loveliest, most scandalous dream.”

He smiled that sad, poignant, beautiful smile again, the one that never failed to pierce her heart. “Did you?”

## Chapter 9

As he sat beside Neely on the bed, looking down at her and remembering her responses to his purely mental lovemaking, Aidan again acknowledged the most difficult and treacherous reality of all. She was safe from human enemies while in his house, but in the gravest of danger from immortal predators. Valerian would see her as a plaything, Lisette, as a tool of revenge—even Maeve, in her reckless sisterly and somewhat possessive affection, represented a threat to Neely.

Besides, whatever loyalty Maeve and Valerian might feel toward him, they were vampires, first and always, and as such they could not be trusted with a mortal.

Aidan felt starved and enervated himself, for he had expended tremendous energy pleasuring Neely, and he knew better than anyone what a temptation she offered. Even though he was certain now that he could make love to her, with his body as well as his mind, without fear of doing her harm, he was still terrified for her.

He stood, then retreated a pace. “I’ll return in a little while,” he said gruffly. “While I’m gone, I want you to remember—to go over every hour, every moment of your past—until you think of some place where you might hide from the senator and his friends until I can deal with them.”

She sat up, regarded him with round eyes, unconsciously covering herself with the sheets. “You were really here, making love to me, weren’t you? It was some sort of—of vampire magic, like before—and like the night we danced.”

Aidan could not look at her, could not bear to reply. He’d done a vile, damnable thing, tainting her delicate purity with his own foul passions. By loving her, he might well have condemned her to a fate that was quite literally worse than death.

“Aidan,” she persisted.

“Yes,” he admitted, fairly sobbing the word. “Damn it, *yes*, it was real!”

She left the bed, the top sheet wrapped around her slender figure and trailing behind her like a bride’s train, and came to him.

“Are you still afraid?” she asked. Her voice was like balm to his tormented spirit, a drop of water on the tongue of a sinner suffering in hell.

“Oh, yes,” Aidan ground out, visibly forcing himself to look at her. “Not of bedding you, my lass—I know now that the love I feel for you is far greater than any lust for blood—but there are other dangers.”



She stood on tiptoe and kissed him with a tenderness that broke his heart.

“Then let us have whatever time together that we can,” she said. “Come, Aidan, and lie with me.”

He had never wanted anything so much, with the possible exception of his lost mortality, but he forced himself to draw back from her, knowing that every moment they spent together made her doom more likely.

“There are things I must do,” Aidan said, leaving her alone again.

Neely took a quick shower and donned yesterday’s jeans and one of Aidan’s sweaters, then dashed down the stairs. In a moment of panic, she considered bolting out the front door and running—just running—until she collapsed. The problem was, there was nowhere to run to, and there was certainly no place to hide.

Anyway, she couldn’t tolerate the thought of being separated from Aidan—she would rather become a blood-drinker herself than to lose him.

She stood in the dark entryway, breathing deeply, until she’d calmed herself a little. Then she marched resolutely into the kitchen. A bowl of fresh fruit and a loaf of French bread had materialized on the counter; Neely wondered, with grim amusement, if Aidan had conjured the food for her.

Vampire magic, she thought, gazing at the stuff, and doubted that she’d ever feel like eating again.

Although Valerian was ambulatory, he was still too weak to hunt in his usual flamboyant fashion. For exactly that reason—and because Aidan did feel a degree of compassion for the older vampire—he wasn’t about to leave his charge alone with Neely.

Instead, at Valerian’s suggestion, they visited a bar on a back street in a modern American city, where the local deviants gathered. Here, in the Last Ditch Tavern, drug dealers congregated, along with pornographers of every description, and others who preyed upon the uncertain, the weak, and the naive.

It was a crowded dive, too warm and too dark, filled with shrillness and smoke, harsh music with indecipherable lyrics, and the intangible specters of lust and hatred and fear.

Aidan despised the Last Ditch instantly, but Valerian surveyed the place as though it were a superb gourmet restaurant. The elder vampire nudged Aidan and pointed to a lonely figure seated at a corner table. He spoke mentally, since it would have been futile to address anyone in the ordinary way in the midst of such chaos.

That pale, skinny creature, there in the shadows, Valerian said. He’s a serial killer, specializing in teenage prostitutes. Likes to make them suffer a little before he finally snuffs them out.

Aidan regarded the quarry with revulsion. *Scum*, he replied.

*Precisely*, Valerian answered, beginning to weave his way through the howling, oblivious crowd toward his prey—who undoubtedly, and quite mistakenly, considered himself to be the predator.

Aidan followed, albeit reluctantly, reflecting as he went that there were indeed many kinds of monsters abroad, and relatively few of them were supernatural. *Are there other vampires here?* he inquired of

Valerian's broad back.

No, came the sharp retort, rapid-fire, and you'd damn well better learn to sense their presence on your own.

*We're the only immortals, then?* Aidan asked, feeling only mild chagrin. He hated being a vampire and saw no reason to polish the attendant skills.

Valerian turned his head and pinioned Aidan with a brief glare. There are two warlocks at the bar. Go ahead and look at them. They've been watching us since we came in.

Aidan tried to resist, but he could not. He glanced toward the long bar, with its brass rails and milling crowd, and immediately spotted the male witches. They stood out in a subtle way, being taller and handsomer and of brighter countenance than most humans. One lifted his glass to Aidan in an elegant salute and smiled benignly.

Valerian was already closing in on his quarry, the sullen killer sitting alone and feeling sorry for himself. *Don't be fooled by their friendliness*, he warned as a hasty aside, already concentrating palpably on his imminent feeding. *The warlock's blood is poison to us, as I've told you many times before. They envy our powers and use their own to thwart us whenever they can*.

Aidan shifted his attention to the measly specimen Valerian had chosen to feed upon. The elegant vampire smiled his most charming smile, pulled back a chair, and sat down at the table.

"Hello, Udell," he said to the pockmarked boy.

Aidan sat, too, although he could hardly tolerate the psychic stench that rose from the lad's diseased soul. To his amazement, Udell smiled at the beast who would consume and perhaps kill him.

"How'd you know my name?" he shouted over the perverse celebrations and the grating music.

Valerian looked as handsome as an archangel as he settled back in his chair and regarded the monster with apparent fondness. "By magic," he said.

Watching the interchange, Aidan felt sickened, even though he had no pity at all for the hapless Udell. He'd already glanced into the little worm's mind and seen his favorite forms of amusement firsthand. No, it was Valerian's blithe amorality that troubled Aidan now, that hardened hazy suspicions into fact. Here was a creature who, in the final analysis, would indulge his own dark appetites, wherever the opportunity arose. Whether the victim was good or evil, male or female, old or young, might not matter at all.

Suddenly Valerian's gaze sliced to Aidan's face. *It isn't true, what you're thinking*, he told him, in the same silent way they'd communicated before. *I am capable of love and the purest devotion, just as you are*.

Aidan looked away, uncomfortable. *Just get on with it*, he replied. One of the warlocks was moving through the throng toward them, smiling. *I don't want to stay here any longer than I must*.

Valerian held out a hand to Udell, who took it, smiling foolishly, like an old maid who has finally been asked to dance. Together, vampire and witless victim disappeared, blending into the grinding, sweating mass of humanity choking the dance floor.

Great, Aidan thought, watching the warlock. Now I get to make small talk with somebody who wants to turn me into a toad.

The warlock laughed. He was attractive, with soft brown hair, impish hazel eyes, and a quick grin. "I want to do nothing of the sort," he said, holding out his hand. "My name is Cain."

"Figures," Aidan replied, ignoring the gesture. He looked toward the other ghoul, still standing at the bar, and arched one eyebrow. "Is that your brother, Abel?"

All the mirth had drained from Cain's manner. "Not funny." He grabbed a wooden chair, wrenched it around, and straddled the seat, his sinewy arms folded across the back. "You cannot possibly be so naive as you seem," he declared. "Do you know what goes on in this bar?"

"Every sort of depravity, I would imagine," Aidan answered coolly. "Look, I'm not out to make friends or bridge any philosophical gaps between your kind and mine, all right? I'm here to feed, and for no other purpose."

Cain's smile returned. He turned his head slowly and pulled down on the collar of his expensive sweater with one hand to bare his throat in invitation.

Aidan wondered if it was possible for a vampire to vomit. "Thanks, anyway," he said, rising from his chair. He scanned the crowd, looking for Valerian, enjoying a brief fantasy in which he drove a spike through that particular vampire's heart with a croquet mallet.

That night Aidan made a point of selecting a female victim, a very disturbed creature who had left her children with an abusive biker boyfriend to come to the Last Ditch for an evening's diversion. Minutes before Aidan approached her, she had sucked the week's grocery money up her nose through a rolled-up dollar bill. Her name was Fay, and she was more than neglectful, she was a sociopath, untroubled by the dimmest flicker of conscience.

They danced for a while, moving against each other, and then he led her through the hallway at the rear, past the rest rooms, and into the alley.

It certainly wasn't a sexual encounter, but when Aidan bit into Fay's narrow throat to drink, he felt the usual jubilation—and an almost paralyzing rush of guilt.

He left the woman half-conscious, but very much alive, huddled beside an overflowing trash bin, and went in search of Valerian. At first, seeing no sign of the other vampire only annoyed Aidan, but then, when a single, grim possibility struck him, he was alarmed.

Neely was alone, unguarded. And Valerian surely saw her not only as a tempting delicacy, but as a rival.

There, on a snowy street corner, Aidan raised his arms over his head, clasped his hands together as if to pray, and vanished.

Neely had found Aidan's car keys after an impulsive search. She was bending over his desk, hastily penning a note, when there was a rippling stir in the air. Catching her breath, she looked up to see Valerian standing only a few feet away.

She laid one hand to her heart, willing it to slow down to its regular pace, and managed a shaky smile. "I was just going to the market," she said, feeling foolish even as she uttered the words.

Valerian folded his arms and tilted his magnificent head to one side. He had a mane of chestnut-colored hair and mischievous violet eyes, and he grinned as he regarded her, as if he were mildly puzzled.

Neely reminded herself that this was a vampire she was dealing with—an ancient and very accomplished one, according to Aidan’s journals. She took a step backward. “Where is Aidan?”

Valerian sighed. “He’s occupied with other matters just now. You shouldn’t go out. It’s very dangerous.”

She put her hands on her hips, figuring bravado was a better bet than sniveling cowardice, though it was the latter she was inclined toward. “Don’t look now,” she said tartly, “but I’m not exactly safe and sound as it is.”

He chuckled, his arms still folded and his expression still curious. “It’s hopeless—loving Aidan Tremayne the way you do, I mean. He can never be a husband to you in any fashion you would even begin to understand.”

Neely’s temper, an unwary and impulsive force in its own right, flared with all the fury of the fires that burned at the center of the earth. She forgot all about Valerian’s supernatural talents and went to stand directly in front of him, looking straight into his eyes. “You want him for yourself,” she accused quietly. “You want him for a lover.”

Valerian’s eyes flashed, and he seemed to grow taller, fiercer, and much more dangerous. “You cannot possibly comprehend my feelings for Aidan, with your pitiful mortal brain,” he growled. “*I am a vampire*, and my affections transcend such trivial concepts as sexuality! Do you think you can categorize me into your narrow human view of what a lover should be? Well, you are wrong!” He paused and, to Neely’s enormous relief, made a visible effort to restrain his temper. “Once Aidan comes to terms with who and what he is—”

“No,” Neely interrupted quietly, almost gently, shaking her head. “You’re the one who needs to get in touch with reality, Valerian. Be careful, or your delusions will destroy you.”

The legendary vampire actually looked crestfallen, as well as enraged, just for the merest flicker of a moment. He turned aside and shoved a hand through his thick hair. “To be a creature of the night,” he said in a hoarse voice, “is to feel every emotion that mortals feel, a hundredfold, a thousandfold, be it an admirable one or not. In the immortal world, gender has no real bearing on matters of the heart—it is the individual, the object of one’s love, who matters.”

Neely hugged herself and turned away, hoping Valerian would not sense what she was feeling just then—pity. She reached into the pocket of her coat and jingled Aidan’s car keys with her fingers, in a nervous and singularly impotent gesture. She wasn’t going anywhere now, that much was clear.

“Perhaps we’re both fooling ourselves,” she reflected miserably. “I’m as guilty of it as you are.”

Before Valerian could offer a response—maybe he had never meant to anyway—Aidan arrived. His appearance wasn’t subtle, but violent, and the very force of his rage seemed to shake the room like an earthquake.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded, seeming to tower over the gigantic Valerian, like a mountain about to spew lava.

Neely shrank back, taking refuge behind Aidan's desk.

"Calm yourself," Valerian said good-naturedly, laying his hands on Aidan's shoulders. "I was finished before you left the woman."

Aidan flung Valerian's arms aside while Neely sagged into the desk chair, stricken. She had no claim to Aidan's fidelity—and certainly no sane person would expect loyalty—but she was wounded all the same.

"Damn you," Aidan spat at Valerian, as fierce and ferocious as an angry panther, "get out—leave us!"

Even though she'd witnessed the phenomenon before, it still left Neely shaken, the way Valerian just dissipated into the air like so much smoke. Unconsciously she had raised both hands to her face, and now she gazed at Aidan through splayed fingers, unable to speak.

He crossed the room, then stood just on the other side of the desk, looking down at her with an unreadable expression. His words startled Neely further, for she had expected, hoped for, some explanation. Some impassioned defense.

"Well?" he asked impatiently. "Have you thought of a place to hide?"

Neely felt shattering despair at the idea of leaving him, even though she'd been telling herself earlier in the evening she must do just that. Like Valerian, she had been whistling in the dark, making-believe that she and Aidan could ever have any sort of sane relationship. "I really have to go, then?"

Aidan nodded, looked away. She saw her own anguish reflected in his countenance, mirror-perfect. "Yes," he said raggedly. "Involving you in my life was an unconscionable thing to do, Neely. My enemies—good God, even my friends—are infinitely more dangerous to you than any human criminal could ever be."

She wanted to go to him, to clasp his arm and rest her head against the outer length of his shoulder, but she held herself back. "Valerian, Lisette, the others—yes, I can believe they might do me harm. But you, Aidan?"

He whirled on her, imperious in his pain, taller and fiercer for it. "No," he said in a bitter hiss. "But I am not a man—I have no literal, physical heart, no lungs to breathe with, no stomach to fill. I cannot give you children or walk with you in the light of the sun. My passion for you is an unholy thing—" Here he held his hands up, white and strong and elegant, as if offering some monstrous display. "Don't you understand that I am, first and foremost, a beast, cursed by man and by God?"

Neely felt herself go pale, and she wanted to faint from sheer grief, but she would not let it happen. "It's impossible, isn't it?" she mourned with quiet dignity.

Aidan's eyes were bleak indeed as he regarded her. "I made love to you with my mind, Neely," he said despondently, "not my hands, my mouth, my body. I am a monster, and I beg you not to forget that, even if I should. Although I would not hurt you, ever, I endanger you simply by the fact of loving you. Now, is there a place you can go to hide?"

Glumly Neely nodded. "Yes," she said. "There's a cottage on the coast, up in Maine. It belongs to a college friend of mine, Wendy Browning. She's in London now, studying drama."

“Very well,” Aidan agreed reluctantly. “I will take you there.”

Neely shook her head. “I don’t want to be beamed anywhere,” she replied. “It’s too hard on my nerves. If you would just lend me your car, or I could rent one under another name—”

Aidan stood still, visibly debating the idea in his mind. “You will take mine,” he finally conceded. He arched one dark eyebrow and smiled slightly, his gaze fixed on the pocket of Neely’s coat, which she’d forgotten she was wearing. “You were going to, anyway, weren’t you?”

“I didn’t know what I was going to do.” The words were fragile, and several splintered and broke as Neely uttered them.

He moved, as if to approach her, then visibly held himself in check. He went the long way around to reach the desk, giving Neely a wide berth, and took a handful of cash from the one drawer. “Here,” he said. “Take this.”

“Will—will I see you again?” Neely hated herself for asking, but she had to know. She had enough on her mind without wondering about that, too.

“Yes,” Aidan answered, albeit reluctantly. “I have certain hopes for myself, for us, though I can’t discuss them with you now. And wonderfully independent Yankee that you are, I think you’ll need my help to completely resolve your problem with the senator and his buddies.”

It was incredible, Neely thought, the exultation she felt at being told she wasn’t seeing Aidan Tremayne for the last time. She was, logically speaking, in no position to be exulted about anything. “I’ll make a map—so you can find the cottage,” she offered, perhaps too eagerly, and with a snuffle.

Aidan smiled, very sadly. “No need, my love. There is no place, time, or dimension where you could hide from me. Your beautiful, brave spirit shines as brightly as if it were the last star in the universe.”

Neely sniffled again and wiped her eyes with the back of one hand. “You know, if you ever get tired of the plasma business, I think you could make it big as a poet.”

He chuckled, but the sound was hollow and desolate. “Go,” he said.

Neely went, taking his car, the money he’d given her, and her toothbrush.

When Neely had gone, Valerian reappeared. Undoubtedly he’d folded himself into some nook or corner and watched the whole melodrama with acute interest.

“If you know what’s good for you,” he told Aidan, going to the liquor cabinet to pour a brandy he could not drink, “and for that fetching little creature who just left, you’ll never go near her again.”

Aidan was standing at the parlor window. He’d seen the sleek white car move into the driveway, watched until its foggy-red taillights had disappeared into the snowy gloom. “I have never known what was good for me,” he answered.

“That’s why I ended up in this fix.”

“What are you going to do now?”



Aidan sighed, but he did not turn around to face the other vampire. “Two things: make myself available to the Brotherhood, should they decide to pay me a call—and find Lisette.”

The brandy glass clattered to the floor and broke, and Aidan felt a certain triumph in the knowledge that he’d startled the great Valerian. That wasn’t an easy thing to do.

“Are you mad?” Valerian demanded.

“You know I am,” Aidan answered.

“How will you find her?”

“Easily. I mean to put myself directly in her path.”

Valerian’s voice trembled with rage. He gripped Aidan’s arm and wrenched him about so that they faced each other. “She will destroy you!”

“Maybe,” Aidan agreed, lifting his shoulders in a distracted shrug. “I mean to find out, as soon as possible.”

“It’s this girl,” Valerian cried, waving his arms wide in a gesture of fury, “this Neely Wallace, who has brought all this grief and trouble down on our heads! I should have destroyed her long ago!”

Aidan narrowed his eyes as he looked into Valerian’s strained features. “You have that power,” he agreed. “No one can dispute that. But if you harm Neely, my friend, you will have to destroy me as well. For if you do not, I will plague you with every step you take, until the last trumpet sounds!”

Valerian’s expression was one of grief and subsiding fury. “Doesn’t it matter, that I care for you?”

“No,” Aidan answered. “Your kind of caring is perversion to me. There is a bond between us, because of the blood communion, but I cannot give you anything more than loyalty and friendship. The sooner you accept that, Valerian, the sooner we can go on to other things.”

The elder vampire did not reply but instead turned his back to Aidan without a word and made himself into a shifting wisp of smoke.

Aidan sat down in a leather chair near the fire, closed his eyes, and mentally followed Neely’s progress through the town of Bright River and northward, toward New Hampshire and, beyond that, Maine.

Neely stopped at an all-night cafe just before dawn and put a call through to her brother. She had not been watching television or even reading newspapers, but she knew her disappearance from that tacky motel room several days before had probably drawn some media attention. Although she’d finally written a note, which Aidan had delivered by some means she hadn’t asked him to explain, she wanted to reassure Ben and Danny that she was still alive and well.

“Hello,” her brother said, sounding alert even at that unholy hour of the morning. He was an ambitious sort and had probably been up long enough to shower and make coffee.

“Ben,” Neely whispered, hunching close to the pay phone, which was situated in a narrow hallway, next to the cafe’s rest rooms. “It’s me. I can’t talk long, in case someone traces the call, but I wanted to tell you that I’m okay, and that I love you and Danny—”



“Neely.” Ben sighed the name; it resonated with sadness and relief. “Thank God. I thought maybe they’d gotten you, those bastards from the Capitol.”

“Not yet,” Neely said. She smiled grimly, glad her brother didn’t know *whate/*se might be stalking her. “Look, don’t worry about me, Ben, because I’ve got at least one very powerful friend. Gotta go now.”

“I love you,” Ben said in parting, understanding as always. “Take care.”

With that, Neely hung up. Tears stung her eyes as she turned around and nearly collided with a smiling truck driver, who was waiting to use the phone. He was tall and good-looking, and the name “Trent” was stitched on the pocket of his shirt in red thread.

Neely was hungry, but she was afraid to linger too long in one spot, just in case Senator Hargrove’s henchmen were following her. She found a McDonald’s, bought a breakfast sandwich and some orange juice at the drive-through window, and headed back out onto the freeway.

Spain Lisette was feeling stronger with every fall of twilight, every fevered feeding. Her favorite victims were innocents; their blood gave her the most energy and the greatest euphoria, and she always pressed them as close to death as she dared.

She slept in a hidden crypt by day, a safe nook tucked away in the cellar of the villa she’d bought generations ago. Every fifty years or so, she’d willed the place to herself, along with the fortune that had been hers ever since she’d arrived in Europe, many centuries before, and married a very rich mortal. She was feared and revered by all but a few very foolish vampires; she had everything.

Almost.

Seated on the stone railing of the terrace outside her bedchamber, gazing out at the star-dappled water, Lisette thought of the one scalawag in all her long history who had managed to break her heart.

Aidan Tremayne.

She smiled a fragile smile, remembering. She’d given him immortality, the ungrateful wretch, and taught him to stalk and kill, to navigate through time and space, to protect himself from other immortals and veil his presence from humans and lesser vampires. In return for her kindness, he had betrayed her.

Lisette sighed and tossed her head, so that her rich dark hair tumbled back over one alabaster-smooth shoulder. She wore a Grecian dress, strictly for the sake of drama. Her mistake, she reflected, had been in making Aidan into the splendid fiend he was. Instead she should have used him until he bored her, like the multitude of handsome young mortals who had preceded him, and then consumed his life force and discarded him.

“Fool,” she said to herself in a bitter whisper. A soft breeze carried the word out over a warm Spanish sea.

Lisette stepped up onto the terrace railing and stood there, her arms spread wide, her white gown flowing and billowing wonderfully around her slender figure. For a century and a half she had lain dormant in her hidden tomb, rising only when she knew she would perish if she did not feed, languishing in her despondency, too distraught to function.

Then, during one of her brief, slightly frantic forays into the world of humans, she'd caught a glimpse of another female vampire, Maeve Tremayne. Maeve was Aidan's twin, and her resemblance to him had stirred some sudden and harsh violence deep in Lisette's being.

From that night onward, Lisette had forced herself to rise and feed. She had been practicing her powers and regaining her former strength for months. Soon she would be immune to the light of the sun as she had once been, able to track errant vampires to their lairs.

She was still queen of the blood-drinkers, among the oldest on earth, and she intended to show them all that she had no intention of abdicating. After that she would deal vengeance to her enemies, one by one.

Valerian would be first, that despicable traitor. After him, Maeve, who, Lisette was convinced, secretly aspired to reign over the nightwalkers herself. And when Maeve and Valerian were nothing but smoldering piles of ash, shifting in the sunlight, Lisette vowed, she would turn her full attention on Aidan.

By the time she was through meting out her myriad punishments, the very fires of hell would look good to him.

"Lisette."

The voices came from behind her, speaking in chorus and startling her so that she nearly toppled off the high terrace onto the rocky shore below. The fall would not have done her bodily injury, of course, but her dignity might have been hopelessly wounded.

She turned slowly and looked down into the white, upturned faces of her visitors.

Canaan and Benecia Havermail stood before her, wearing identical dresses of yellow satin. Lisette was glad they would never grow to adult size, for their natures were at least as vicious as her own, and she would not relish the competition.

"What do you want?" she snapped, irritated.

Again the child-fiends spoke in eerily perfect unison, their fangs glinting in the starlight as they chattered. "We've come about Mr. Tremayne. He's been to Havermail Castle, you know, inquiring about the Brotherhood."

Lisette floated down from the railing to stand before the horrid little pair. "What does Aidan want with the Brotherhood?" She raised a hand when they both started to talk again. "Only one of you need answer."

Benecia, after a triumphant glance at her younger sister, went on alone. "He desires to be mortal again," she said. At this oddity she giggled, and so did Canaan.

Lisette, however, was not amused. She turned away from her visitors and grasped the terrace railing in both hands. No vampire, to her knowledge, had ever made such a transition, but Aidan was just brazen enough, just fanciful enough, to try.

Perhaps she would be forced to resolve the matter sooner than she'd planned.

## Chapter 10

Neely drove until midafternoon, when she simply could go no farther. She rented a room somewhere in New Hampshire, this time choosing one of the large chain motels, and secured all the locks carefully before collapsing onto the bed. After an hour or so she awakened just long enough to remove her coat and kick off her shoes, then sank back into an exhausted sleep.

When she opened her eyes, feeling as if she'd just risen from the depths of a coma, there was no light except for the red numerals on the clock radio on the lamp table.

3:47 A.M.

Neely would have been glad to sleep another twelve hours, at least, but she didn't dare linger in one place for too long. Although she was fairly certain no one was following her, she couldn't afford to depend on luck.

She stumbled into the bathroom, showered, and put yesterday's clothes back on. Later, she promised herself, she would buy jeans, sweaters, underwear, and the like. For now she was traveling light.

At 4:14, Neely left the motel room. She was starved, but the fast-food places weren't open yet, and the idea of wandering into a big, well-lit truck stop for oatmeal and toast made her feel too vulnerable. In the end she stopped at a convenience store for high-octane coffee and a sweet roll.

As she had the day before, Neely drove until she was blind with fatigue. Then she stopped at a shopping mall, entered a crowded discount store, and bought the clothing she needed, along with a hot dog and a bag of popcorn. That afternoon she checked into a motor court beside a frozen lake. She propped a chair under the doorknob, since the locks didn't look all that secure. After devouring her scanty supper, she bathed and toppled into bed.

Sleep didn't come as readily this time, even though Neely was every bit as tired as she had been the night before. She switched on the television set, turned to one of the cable networks, and settled in to watch a tabloid program.

"This is Melody Ling," a sharply dressed reporter was saying, "reporting from Washington, D.C., where Mrs. Elaine Hargrove, wife of the prominent senator, is allegedly recovering satisfactorily from emergency surgery."

Neely sat bolt upright against the musty pillows at her back, staring at the screen, willing to say more. Unfortunately the piece was over.

She grabbed up the remote, then sought and found the twenty-four-hour news channel. She'd had the car radio on all day while she traveled, but she'd heard nothing about the Hargroves.

Neely watched three segments—a scandal concerning the sale of arms to some hormonal Third-World country, a piece on distraught dairy farmers, and the latest tidbit out of Buckingham Palace. Then, finally, Senator Dallas Hargrove appeared on the screen, striding out of a well-known Washington hospital, looking harried and impatient.

Although Hargrove was definitely a skunk and a moral lightweight, Neely thought, it was impossible not to feel sorry for him just then. Reporters barred his way, the portable lights deepened the lines and

shadows in his face, and microphones stabbed at him like drawn lances.

“Senator Hargrove, can you tell us anything about Mrs. Hargrove’s accident?”

“Is she resting comfortably?”

“Will she recover?”

“Was she driving when the accident occurred?”

The senator stopped and held up both hands in a bid for order. “Elaine—Mrs. Hargrove—is conscious,” he said tersely. “We have every hope that she will survive. And no, my wife suffers from a chronic illness and does not drive. She was riding with our chauffeur when the limousine was forced off the road by a reckless driver.”

“Has an arrest been made?” a reporter called out, but Hargrove was plainly finished with the interview. He forced his way through a throng of newspeople and got into the backseat of a waiting car.

The camera switched to an anchorwoman in the network newsroom, where the scanty details of Elaine Hargrove’s accident were reviewed. She had been on her way to a luncheon, where she was to be presented with an award of some sort, when, according to the chauffeur, another car had come up behind them and crashed hard into the bumper. The driver, already traveling at a fairly high speed, had been startled and lost control of the wheel. The limo had sideswiped a concrete abutment and then swerved into the path of an oncoming semi-truck.

No one else had been injured besides Elaine Hargrove.

Chilled, Neely hobbled in and took another bath, soaking in the hottest water she could stand. When she got out of the tub, however, and wrapped herself in a rough towel, she was still as cold as ever.

Obviously the senator had run afoul of his drug-dealing friends, and they’d made a cruel example out of Elaine. Hargrove would be desperate to appease the mob now, which meant he would make no further efforts to protect Neely.

All thoughts of sleep deserted her, even though she was half sick with weariness. She was on her own, and if she wanted to stay alive, she’d better move fast.

She tore the tags from her new clothes and wrenched on panties and a bra, stiff jeans, and a starchy sweatshirt. Then she groped for the telephone and dialed New York information.

Ten frustrating minutes later, Neely was speaking to someone in Melody Ling’s department at the television network. Ms. Ling was still out on assignment, and it would probably be impossible to reach her before morning.

Neely slammed down the receiver, snatched up her few belongings, and rushed out to the car.

She tried twice more to get through to Ling, the following morning and the one after that, and was unsuccessful both times. Finally, in the midst of a blizzard, she reached Timber Cove, a tiny town on the winter-bleak coast of Maine. Wendy Browning’s summer cottage was five miles north, and after buying a few supplies in a small grocery store, Neely took refuge there.

The front door key was under one of the legs of the picnic table out on the snow-mounded deck, as always. Neely had been a guest in the cottage many times, and before flying off to London, Wendy had told her she was welcome to use the place whenever she wished.

She let herself in, turned up the gas heater, and lifted the telephone receiver to her ear. There was a dial tone.

Neely carried in her bags of clothing and her groceries, set a pot of coffee to brewing, and stood at the glass doors leading to the deck, looking out at the rocky, snow-streaked shore.

When she had had a cup of coffee to warm herself, she put on her coat and trekked outside, through the grayness of late morning on a stormy day, to the woodshed. There she knelt in a corner and raised a loose floorboard with both hands.

Underneath lay a fat manila envelope, wrapped in plastic, just exactly where Neely had left it.

She carried the packet back to the house, opened it, and saw that all the documents and recordings were still there. Trembling slightly, Neely returned to the telephone and dialed Melody Ling's number.

This time she got lucky.

Aidan found Maeve easily, for once. She was at her house in London, in her beloved nineteenth century, entertaining a drawing room full of guests. A string quartet played Mozart in one corner, while elegantly dressed visitors mingled, some sipping champagne and nibbling clam puffs, others only pretending.

It was an interesting mix of vampires and humans, jaded writers and artists who probably knew full well that they were socializing with fiends. In Aidan's experience the right-brain types found such things stimulating.

"Darling." Maeve swept toward him, her crisp satin dress rustling as she moved, both hands extended. Her dark blue eyes were alight with surprise and pleasure, both swiftly displaced by worry. "What a lovely—surprise. Aidan—?"

He kissed her cheek and smiled wanly, but that was the extent of his effort to appear normal. He had not fed for three days, he'd been so grieved over the parting with Neely, and he was faint with the lack of nourishment.

Maeve frowned, still holding his hands, and he felt some of her abundant strength flow into him. She pulled him through the strange crowd and out onto a stone terrace with high iron railings.

The wind was biting cold, but it did little to revive Aidan.

"What's happened?" Maeve demanded. "Honestly, Aidan, if this has something to do with that wretched woman—"

He looked directly into his sister's angry eyes. "It has everything to do with Neely," he said. "I love her. I'd rather perish than lose her, and I would sell my soul, if indeed I have one at all, to live with her as a man."

Maeve's face tightened, and for a moment her fury pulsed between them, but then she let her forehead fall against his shoulder and wept disconsolately.

Aidan held her in a gentle embrace. "I'm sorry," he whispered raggedly.

She looked up at him, after a long time, her beautiful eyes glimmering with tears. Aidan was heartbroken to see his sister in such a state.

"There is no turning you aside from this course, is there?" Maeve asked, lifting her chin. "You'll either succeed in your foolish enterprise or perish in the attempt."

Aidan laid his hand gently against her cheek. "Anything is better than being what I am, darling," he said. "Even eternal damnation."

Her alabaster skin grew even paler, and she clutched at the satin lapels of his dinner jacket. "Don't say that!" she pleaded in an agonized whisper. "To think of you burning forever and ever—oh, Aidan, I can't bear it!"

"Shhh," Aidan said, laying his hands on her glowing shoulders and giving her just the slightest shake. "Then don't think of that."

"How will I know what's happened to you?" Maeve pleaded. "How will I know whether you're alive or—or dead?"

He kissed her forehead. "Wait until you hear the first rumors," he told her with a sad smile. "Then visit my house in Connecticut. If I've managed to make the transition, I'll leave a bouquet of white roses on that round table in the entryway, as a sort of signal."

Maeve studied his face for a long moment, then nodded. "You haven't fed. Surely you know you cannot hope even to survive if you do not guard your strength."

Aidan let his hands fall to his sides, though he still studied his sister with affection. He wanted to remember her always, whether he writhed in hell or was allowed to live out his allotted number of years as a man.

"The hunger makes it possible to think more clearly, Maeve," he said. "You know that."

She touched his cheek, and her lips moved, but no sound came from her.

"Good-bye," he said.

Valerian crashed Maeve's party half an hour after Aidan left, looking distracted and a little frantic. He grabbed her hand and pulled her out onto the same terrace where she'd stood with her brother, her heart broken at her feet.

"Have you seen that idiot sibling of yours?" Valerian demanded.

Maeve bridled, but not because Valerian had called Aidan an idiot—she quite agreed, just now, that the description suited. "Who do you think you are, dragging me away from my guests like this and speaking so familiarly?"

He paused, then shamed her with a languorous smile.

Maeve looked away, remembering things she would rather have forgotten. Valerian had taught her much more than how to travel through time and read minds during their long association. “That’s over,” she said.

“Perhaps,” Valerian agreed. Then he grew impatient again. “Tell me—have you seen Aidan?”

“Yes,” Maeve said, leaning back against the terrace railing and studying her mentor in the cold light of the stars. “He was here earlier, to bid me farewell.”

“What?”

She nodded, and when she spoke, her voice was lined with tiny fractures. “He would rather die than be what we are, Valerian—he would choose oblivion, even hellfire, over the life of a vampire. He despises himself, and us.”

Valerian gave an explosive sigh and shoved one hand through his mane of rich brown hair. “I should never have left him alone,” the magnificent monster fretted. “It’s just that he exasperates me so, and he has no compunction whatsoever about breaking my heart—”

“You don’t have a heart,” Maeve snapped, annoyed. As usual, Valerian was thinking only of himself. “And why*did* you leave Aidan alone?”

“He was moping about over that woman, and I needed to hunt, to rebuild my strength,” Valerian said, flinging his hands out wide in a gesture of angry resignation. “I spent a few nights indulging myself—I admit that—and when I returned to Connecticut to look in on Aidan, he was gone.”

Despair swelled up inside Maeve. “He’s not-coming back, Valerian. The sooner we both give up and accept that, the better it will be.”

“You don’t understand!” Valerian cried. “Somehow he’s learned to veil his whereabouts from me. Maeve, without me he has no defense against Lisette!”

“Some defense you offer,” Maeve accused. “She despises you almost as much as she does Aidan. Leave my brother alone, Valerian—let him work this out for himself.”

“Damn it, Maeve, do you have any idea what she’ll do to him?”

Maeve closed her eyes. “I have to believe he’ll escape her,” she said. “I cannot think otherwise and still go on living.” With that, she turned and would have gone back into the house to rejoin her guests, but Valerian forcibly stopped her, gripping her shoulders and wrenching her around to face him.

“Perhaps you are willing to let Lisette play vile games with Aidan until she finally decides to kill him, but I am not. And I am more powerful than you are, Maeve—don’t forget that.”

She trembled, this female vampire who was afraid of nothing, save seeing her brother suffer. “What do you want?”

“Look deep inside yourself,” Valerian ordered, his voice low and hypnotic, but urgent, too. “There you will see Aidan’s reflection. Tell me where to find him, Maeve.”

Maeve began to shiver. “He’s standing on a terrace— like this one—” She gave a small, involuntary cry



and raised curled fingers to her mouth. "Oh, Valerian, Aidan has gone to Lisette's villa, on the coast of Spain!"

Valerian released her so swiftly that she sank to the tiled floor of the terrace, too weakened by horror to rise. He held out his cloak and spun around, and before he'd completed a single turn, he'd vanished.

Maeve sat dazed on the tiles for a few minutes, sobbing inwardly, longing to rush to Aidan's rescue, as Valerian had, and knowing that her brother would never forgive her if she did. As rash and ill-advised as Aidan's decision had been, no one, not even Valerian himself, would be able to sway him from it.

"*You are* the adventurous type."

Aidan whirled, though he knew the voice behind him wasn't Lisette's, and saw a youth leaning against the stone wall of the villa, his arms folded. He was dressed all in black, like a cat burglar, and wore a cocky grin. By Aidan's guess, the lad was no older than seventeen.

"Who are you?"

The sleek young vampire pushed himself away from the wall with one foot. "The name is Tobias—Aidan. You ought to be more alert, you know. It's nothing but luck that Lisette is hunting elsewhere tonight."

"Yes," Aidan said, "it's luck, all right. Bad luck." He tugged at the cuffs of his dinner jacket. "What do you want—Tobias?"

"Not a thing. I'm here because of what *you* want. Or, at least, what you told Aubrey Havermail you wanted—a chat with a representative of the Brotherhood."

Aidan was taken aback, but he smiled and offered his hand. "Aren't you a little young to be part of such an august group?"

Tobias gave a slow grin. "I guess that depends on how you define the word *young*. I was among the first vampires created." The sudden stunned expression on Aidan's face seemed to please him. "Come. Even we old ones don't enjoy tangling with the likes of Lisette. She can be such a bitch."

In the next instant everything went dark, and Aidan heard a rushing sound. When he was conscious again, he found himself standing with Tobias in a natural tunnel, beside an underground river. There was no light, but that didn't matter, of course, for a vampire's vision is at its best in the blackest gloom.

"Where are we?"

Tobias sighed. "You don't need to know that," he answered with cordial impatience. He sighed again. "I'm afraid Aubrey was quite right about you. You're not much of a vampire."

"No," Aidan said evenly. "I'm not."

"He says you want to be changed back into a man." The words echoed in the dank chamber, hollow with disbelief. "Is that true?"

"Absolutely," Aidan answered. He felt a thrumming excitement deep inside, as well as a certain well-founded terror. "I did not willingly become a vampire. I was forced."

“You are not the first,” Tobias pointed out, clearly unmoved.

“Perhaps not,” Aidan agreed mildly. “But I am a weak link in the chain. You saw for yourself, back there on Lisette’s terrace, how easy it is to catch me unawares. Suppose I fall into the hands of those who are enemies to all vampires—the Warrior Angel, for example. What’s his name again? Ah, yes. Nemesis. What if I were to be captured by Nemesis and forced to tell all I know about blood-drinkers such as yourself? The Dark Kingdom would crumble then, wouldn’t it, like a castle of sand?”

“I have only to destroy you, here and now, to prevent such a tragedy,” Tobias said coolly. Aidan was aware of the creature’s tension, however; he was like a string on an instrument, pulled tight and ready to snap.

Aidan smiled. “I am an insignificant vampire,” he admitted, “but there are those who would miss me, and even dare to avenge my destruction.”

“Valerian,” Tobias said despairingly. “And Maeve.”

“You know them, then,” Aidan chimed, in a pleased tone that was meant to be irritating.

“They are rebellious and cause the elders a great deal of consternation.”

Aidan made *atsk-tsk* sound, well aware that he was on proverbial thin ice. “I don’t know what vampirism is coming to,” he said. “Do you?”

Tobias glared. “This way,” he growled. Then he turned and moved along the stream’s edge, headed into the very heart of the darkness, and Aidan followed.

Eventually they reached a large, torch-lit cave, where ancient scenes and symbols had been painted onto the walls, among the earlier sketches and scrawls of prehistoric man. Aidan would have been fascinated if his business in that place hadn’t been so crucial.

The vampires assembled themselves from particles of dust in the air around Aidan, it seemed to him, the oldest blood-drinkers on earth, some fresh-faced like Tobias, others with flowing silver beards and skin as crinkled and weathered as aged leather.

“This one would be mortal again,” Tobias announced to the gathering, his bewilderment plain in his voice. “He says he was made against his will.”

The elders murmured among themselves as they walked around Aidan, examining him, but their language was unfamiliar.

Aidan kept his shoulders straight and looked each one, in turn, directly in the eye. He caught the name “Nemesis” in the conversational drift, and knew Tobias had reported his threat.

They might well destroy him now, Aidan thought. He was mildly surprised to realize that he didn’t care; having met Neely, and been reminded of what he was missing, he knew he would rather perish by the most horrible of means than live for all eternity knowing she could never be his.

If he could not be restored to his humanity, if he could not love Neely freely, and without fear, he wanted only destruction.

At long last the circling ceased. One of the elders leaned close to Aidan and rasped in English, "Do you follow Nemesis?"

Aidan showed his fangs, in a rather impudent and theatrical way. "I am no angel," he pointed out in the next moment.

The ancient vampire's glacial blue eyes narrowed, and he made an angry gesture with one age-gnarled hand. "Confine this unmannerly whelp where he can do no harm to himself or the rest of us. We will decide his fate later."

Vampires closed in on either side of Aidan, taking his arms, and he struggled, but in vain. Still, he did not regret the course he'd taken, for he was willing to risk anything, undergo any ordeal, in order to be with Neely.

Aidan was dragged to a barred chamber and flung inside. His fine clothes were torn away without ceremony or apology, and he was given a monk's robe, made of some coarse brown cloth. He put the garment on, for the sake of his own dignity, and when his jailers had left him, he tried the bars.

They were immovable.

"I trust you're happy now," a familiar voice said.

He turned to see Tobias standing just behind him, inside the cell, and scowled. "Overjoyed," he replied.

Tobias shook his head, clearly amazed. "Such infernal audacity."

"There's nothing worse than a smart-ass vampire," Aidan agreed.

Tobias laughed outright at that. "If you say so. You're the first blood-drinker ever to ask for transformation—did you know that? That's why you're not staked out in some desert somewhere, waiting for the sun to cook you by degrees, you understand. Because you're an oddity."

Aidan was careful not to let his trepidation show, although to be forced to endure the cruel ministrations of the sun was among the worst fears of nearly every vampire. "Have they destroyed others that way?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. Over the centuries certain rebellious ones have had to be... dealt with," Tobias answered. "We learned that particular trick from Nemesis."

An involuntary chill passed through Aidan at the mention of the Warrior Angel, and Tobias chuckled, recognizing it for what it was. There was no mercy in Nemesis, despite his ties with the Kingdom of Heaven; he had been conducting a personal vendetta against blood-drinkers for thousands of years.

"Is there a way?" Aidan whispered, his voice hoarse. "Is it possible to go back to what I was?"

For the first time since their arrival in that pit, there was a glimmer of compassion in Tobias's deceptively youthful face. "Some of the oldest ones wanted to try, for the sake of learning, but it was always forbidden. After all, those who failed would logically be brought before the Throne of Judgment. If Nemesis is as he is, can you imagine what his Master must be like?"

Aidan squeezed his eyes shut for a moment and nodded. “Yes—yes, I can imagine. And I’d rather face even Him than go on as I have been since Lisette changed me!”

“Then you are either a vampire of uncommon courage or a mad one! Which is it?”

He sighed, ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know,” Aidan said. “I honestly don’t know.”

“Why do you want the transformation so much?”

Aidan knew he could not hide Neely’s image from this ancient vampire, and he did not try. “I love a human woman.”

“You must care a great deal,” Tobias marveled, “to take such a risk as the one confronting you now.” Having offered this observation, he watched Aidan in troubled silence for a few seconds, then vanished.

Aidan slept, dreamed fitful dreams of Neely, and awakened believing they were together. His despair at the discovery that he was still alone, and a prisoner in the bargain, was a cruder burden than any he had ever borne.

Twenty-four hours later, when Aidan was half-mad with thirst, he was given three enormous rats, scabbling inside a picnic basket.

Aidan broke their necks, one by one, and tossed their blood-filled bodies through the bars.

When another twenty-four hours had passed, he was in a fever, crouched against a wall of his cell, his mind loose inside his skull, hot with delirium.

A form appeared before him, wavering and slender.

“Go away,” he moaned, turning his head.

“So stubborn,” a feminine voice scolded, and the sound of it was like cool water pouring gently over his parched spirit.

“Neely,” he rasped.

She laughed at him. “No, silly.” He felt her cold lips nuzzle the burning flesh of his throat, started when her fangs punctured it. Blood flowed into Aidan, reviving, sustaining blood, and he was helpless to resist. He drank, all his dried and empty veins leaping greedily to life, and when at last it was over and he could focus his gaze, he saw Roxanne Havermail kneeling beside him.

She ran her fingers through his dirty hair, and he felt the sticky pressure of her lips where she kissed him on the forehead, undoubtedly leaving a smudge of blood.

“How did you get in here?” Aidan rasped, resisting the urge to push her away.

Roxanne smiled, then touched his mouth tentatively with her own. “What does that matter? I am well able to escape and I will take you with me.” She laid her hand to his face, and he felt its hardness and its chill. “Close your eyes, darling. Think of candlelight, and soft music, and—”

Aidan lost consciousness, mesmerized by her words, her tone, her caress.

When he awakened, he was lying on silk sheets, stripped of the rough robe his captors had provided, and Roxanne was washing him tenderly with warm, perfumed water.

He tried to sit up, found himself too weak. Obviously the one feeding had not been enough to restore his full powers. Instead it had merely drawn him back from the brink of either blessed oblivion or the unbridled wrath of God.

Roxanne bent and kissed his bloodless chest.

“No,” he said.

She drew back, looked at him with wide amber eyes, then narrowed ones. “What did you say?”

Vampire sex, a cataclysmic and usually violent joining of two immortal bodies, was not without a certain appeal at that point, but Aidan wasn't about to indulge. His love for Neely, however hopeless, wouldn't permit it.

“You heard me,” he told Roxanne. “Nothing is going to happen between us—Mrs. Havermail.”

Roxanne sighed and continued to bathe him. “Honor among fiends,” she said. “Tiresome. Plain tiresome.”

*Valerian*, Aidan thought. *Help me* .

## Chapter 11

Melody Ling, the television reporter, agreed to a rendezvous, but only after a little fast talking on Neely's part. Although Neely refused to identify herself directly, she had to do some pretty heavy name-dropping in order to establish credibility—and hint that someone inside the FBI had obstructed justice. The site of the proposed meeting, an isolated, long-unused wooden bridge in the woods of central Maine, was chosen by mutual consent, during half a dozen fragmented calls from as many different telephones.

Neely left Aidan's car parked in the small garage behind Wendy Browning's beach cottage and took the bus to the village, stopping off on the way to purchase a long red wig and big sunglasses. Of course she was taking an enormous chance, trusting a total stranger to meet her alone in an out-of-the-way place, but it seemed like a better bet than heading for New York and strolling into network headquarters with the packet of proof under one arm.

When the bus stopped in snowy Danfield Crossing, Neely remained in her seat, toward the back, watching everyone else get off. Once she was fairly sure no one was lurking outside, waiting for her, she made her way up the aisle, her purse under one elbow, carrying a disreputable old duffel bag she'd found in the shed behind Wendy's cottage.

There was no need to ask directions to the old bridge; Neely and Ben and their father had fished for brook trout there, years ago, and the place shimmered brightly in her memory. After a quick glance around, she set off for the woods, not following the county road, but keeping to the narrow, hard-packed trails left by cross-country skiers.

Melody Ling was waiting patiently behind the wheel of a rental car, looking intent in the chilly afternoon sunlight. Her dark hair was moussed, her makeup too heavy and artful for the occasion, and she seemed poised to go on camera immediately. None of which mattered to Neely.

Seeing her mysterious contact come trundling out of the woods beside the road must have been disconcerting, but Ling didn't flinch. She opened the car door and stepped out onto the icy road in high heels.

Neely glanced around nervously, but no gun-toting criminals or FBI men burst out of the bushes, and it was still too early in the day for vampires.

She approached Ling and held out the manila packet, which was still wrapped in plastic. "Here's the evidence we talked about," she said, considering a preamble unnecessary.

Ling took the offering. "You'll grant me an exclusive interview, once everything has gone down?"

Neely nodded. "I'll be in touch," she said. She smiled. "Good luck—and thanks."

The reporter nodded back, got into her car, and left.

Neely immediately returned to the village, by way of the woods. She bought a fish sandwich and a diet soda in a convenience store and hitched a ride back to the coast with a trucker who wore a T-shirt with a picture of his three toothless children on the front.

It had all gone so well, she reflected, settling into the passenger seat of the big rig to watch the night scenery goby.

So amazingly well.

"What happened to him?" Valerian demanded, arriving in the guest wing of Havermail Castle with an unceremonious crash.

Roxanne turned from Aidan's bedside, one hand to her throat in a gesture of gracious alarm. She was a vile strumpet, without a shred of loyalty to adorn her nature, and Valerian despised her.

She simpered. "Mr. Tremayne actually dared to challenge the Brotherhood," she marveled. "Was that your idea?"

Valerian approached the bed and peered down into Aidan's sleeping face. The basement chamber was completely dark, since the windows were sealed, and tallow candles provided an eerie, wavering light. Gently the elder vampire laid a hand to a pale but well-sculpted shoulder.

"Aidan," he said, despairing, ignoring the female.

"He's weak," Roxanne said with a saintly sigh, "but he'll recover with proper care."

Valerian was at last able to lift his eyes from Aidan's still features to Roxanne's chillingly perfect ones. "He was a captive, and you rescued him." The statement was meant as a question, and it held no note of praise.

Roxanne nodded. "In a manner of speaking. The Brotherhood had thought to break Aidan by punishment, and they failed. No one tried to stop me when I went to him."

"What punishment?" Valerian rasped, furious. He held tightly to his anger, knowing he would give way to utter despair if he loosened his grip for even a moment.

"Poor Aidan. He was confined in a small space and subsequently starved." Roxanne spoke matter-of-factly, making her way around to the opposite side of the bed and taking one of Aidan's limp hands into her own. She ran the pad of her thumb thoughtfully over the protruding knuckles. "It was his own fault that he nearly perished for want of feeding—he refused the rats they offered."

In that moment Valerian felt such contempt, not only for Roxanne, but also for the Brotherhood, that he could barely contain it. "Rats," he rasped. "They gave him *rats*?"

Roxanne shrugged. "It's not such a terrible shame. Most of us have subsisted on vermin at one time or another," she said. "If anything destroys our Aidan, Valerian, it will be his own stubborn refusal to follow the rules."

Valerian sensed that dawn was nearing; they would all be safe from sunlight in this dark cellar chamber, but he did not want to sink into the near-coma of sleep in that place. He didn't trust any of the Havermails, including the children.

He wrapped Aidan's inert form carefully in the bedclothes and lifted him into his arms.

"What do you think you're doing?" Roxanne cried, incensed. "I found Aidan, and I fed him and brought him home. He's mine!"

Valerian held out one hand, fingers splayed, and pressed it to Roxanne's morbidly beautiful face. "Sleep," she said in a sort of crooning drawl, and she dropped to the floor with a thumping sound.

The fiend would succumb to her vampire slumber, there on the cold stones, and awaken just a little the worse for wear when night came again. Only her dress and her temper would be ruffled.

Valerian lowered his magnificent head, until his forehead touched Aidan's fevered one, and together they vanished.

\* \* \*

Aidan dreamed that he was a Viking, that he'd died bravely in battle, and his comrades had arranged his body in the curving belly of a dragon ship. He was covered with straw, which someone set ablaze with a torch, and the small, flaming craft was pushed out onto the still blue sea. It burned brightly, a majestic pyre, and Aidan burned with it, but he felt no pain, only joy and the most poignant sense of freedom...

When he opened his eyes, realized that he'd only been dreaming, that he was still trapped in the immortal, marble-cold body of a fiend, the disappointment was crushing.

He was lying on a flat surface, in a dark place that he didn't recognize, and he was so thirsty that he felt raw inside. "Neely," he whispered, the word scraping painfully from his throat.

Then he saw Valerian looming over him, his face twisted with anguish. He started to say something, this enigmatic ghoul with the looks and countenance of a favored angel, then stopped himself. Instead



Valerian bent, gently plunged his fangs through the skin of Aidan's neck, and gave him blood.

Aidan moaned in a combination of ecstasy and revulsion; he wanted to resist this macabre salvation, but his will to survive, which seemed a wholly separate entity at the time, refused to surrender itself. He felt Valerian's tears on his flesh but decided fitfully that he must have imagined that.

"Where—what is this place?" he managed as the new blood surged through him, vital and warm, as intoxicating as the finest brandy on a cold night.

"Never mind that," Valerian answered shortly, his voice gruff. "Your thoughts are generally written in neon letters five feet high. If you don't mind, I'd prefer that every other vampire between here and the gates of Hades wasn't able to pinpoint us by reading them."

Aidan chuckled, but the indulgence cost him dearly. "You saved me," he said. "Shall I thank you for that, Valerian, or call you cursed?"

"Neither. I didn't truly save you, except from the wiles of that witches' spawn, Roxanne Havermail."

Aidan's laugh was soblike. "Thank you for protecting my virtue," he said. "You'll understand if I consider the gesture a little dubious."

Valerian scowled down at him, but the expression didn't hold. He gave a throaty chuckle, wholly involuntary, and then turned away—ostensibly to compose himself. When he met Aidan's gaze again, his manner was as coldly remote as that of the Grim Reaper. "Fool!" he spat. "Do you realize how close you came to being destroyed?"

"Not close enough, evidently," Aidan reflected, looking past Valerian to the ceiling, which was lined with dusty beams. "What can you tell me of Neely? Is she safe and well?"

Valerian's jawline tightened for a moment, then he bit out, "I wouldn't know. I have only one use for humans, and the fascinating Miss Wallace's association with you puts her off limits. For the moment."

"For the moment," is it?" Aidan asked, reaching up, clasping the front of Valerian's flowing linen shirt in one fist.

Valerian slapped Aidan's hand away. "What an arrogant pup you are," he snarled, "issuing challenges to me—*me*?" He paused to thump his own chest angrily. "If I desired the delectable Neely, I would have her, and no force on earth could stand in my way, including—*especially not*—you!"

Aidan's strength, so temporal, was waning again, but he found enough to press the argument. "Get a grasp on your emotions," he said. "I grow impatient .with your constant histrionics."

The great vampire gave a snarling shriek of frustration and rage and disappeared completely.

Inwardly Aidan sighed. He'd probably just offended the only friend he had, besides Maeve, but fruitless acts of impulse seemed to be a part of his nature of late.

He'd failed miserably with the Brotherhood, he reflected, absorbing the knowledge like a series of painful blows. He'd found out nothing and had managed to infuriate the elders in the process. It probably wouldn't be long before they came for him, he supposed, and dispensed their vampire justice.

Valerian had obviously been right in refusing to tell him where they were. Aidan's mental state was such that he probably would have broadcast the information for any passing ogre to pick up on.

Neely shrieked and sent the magazine she'd been reading fluttering into the air like some ungainly bird. Valerian stood between her and the television set, glorious in the usual fine evening clothes, his arms folded, his big head tilted to one side.

"Are you quite through?" he inquired scathingly, retrieving the magazine and setting it neatly on the coffee table.

Neely's gasps slowly slackened into regular breaths. She gave one violent hiccough, in a spasm of residual terror, and Valerian rolled his violet eyes disdainfully.

"Well, you scared me!" Neely said, more angry, all of a sudden, than afraid. Then even the anger faded away, and she got awkwardly to her bare feet, pulling Wendy's pink robe close around her, like chenille armor. "This is about Aidan, isn't it? What's happened to him?"

Valerian looked down his perfect nose at her for a long interval, then answered, "*You* have happened to him, more's the pity. He loves you, and that foolhardy affection may well cost him his very existence."

"Where is he?"

"I wouldn't dream of telling you that," Valerian said sharply. "Like all humans, and some vampires as well, unfortunately, you have a billboard for a mind—complete with loudspeakers and sweeping searchlights. Suffice it to say that Aidan needs comforting very much just now. Besides, you are probably the only being in the world who can cause him to see reason at this point."

"You'll take me to him, then?" Neely's heart was wedged into her throat. She clutched the lapels of the borrowed bathrobe in one trembling hand.

Valerian nodded grudgingly. "Put on some decent clothes."

Neely turned and hurried into the cottage's closet-size bedroom, where she hastily donned jeans, sneakers, a pink bulky sweater, and her coat. Back in the living room, she looked up into Valerian's face with wide eyes. "Is this going to be a Superman sort of thing? I mean, are you planning to tuck me under one arm and just—fly?"

Valerian only shook his head, came a step closer, and swirled his cape around Neely like some whispering, perfumed cocoon. She fainted, only to revive seconds later and find herself in a place so dark she thought she had gone stone blind.

"Just a moment," Valerian barked impatiently, as if she'd complained aloud. A match was struck, a tallow candle lit.

Neely was taken aback to find herself inside a crypt, an old one, judging by the looks of the disintegrating caskets and random bones lying about.

In the center of it all, on a high Roman couch upholstered in ugly maroon velvet, lay Aidan, as white and still as a corpse.

"He will awaken soon," Valerian said, his voice passing Neely's ear from behind, like a fall breeze

moving through dry leaves. “If you love Aidan, then make him see that there can be no future for the two of you. Should you fail to reach him, he will continue on his present course, careening toward destruction. He will be executed, Neely, as an example to all vampires—staked out in the sun and left to die in the most horrible agony imaginable. Do you want that for him?”

Neely forgot her surroundings and stumbled forward, her white-knuckled hands clasped together. She would rather suffer the death Valerian had just described herself, she thought, than see Aidan endure such torture.

She touched her beloved’s still face. “Aidan?”

He opened his eyes, and she felt a sweet seizing in her heart as he looked at her, apparently dismissed her as an illusion, and then realized she was truly there. “Neely,” he said and groped for her hand.

She pressed her palm to his, and their fingers interlocked. “What’s happened?” she whispered.

Aidan stared up at her, mute, clearly bursting with a sorrow he could not begin to articulate.

She kissed him lightly on the forehead, and then on the mouth, and felt his fever sear her own skin. She laid her head against his chest then, but heard no heartbeat thumping away beneath her ear, no breath flowing in and out of his lungs.

He entangled his fingers in her short hair, holding her close. They were simply *together* in those moments; it was as simple, and as complicated, as that.

After a long interval had passed, Neely raised her head and looked into Aidan’s soul, her vision glittery and blurred, as though she were seeing the world through melted diamonds. She could not leave him now when he was so broken, but deep inside Neely knew Valerian was right. By loving Aidan, by dreaming an impossible dream, she could only destroy him.

And that was unthinkable.

Resigned, heartbroken, Neely climbed onto the Roman couch with Aidan, stretched out beside him, held him close in her arms. Soon enough, they would be parted, for all of time—alpha to omega, world without end, amen.

Amen.

For now, though, nothing would put them asunder.

Valerian’s grief howled within him, like a storm wind, but he dared not release it there in the crypt, however oblivious Aidan and Neely might seem. Brashly, too driven by pain to think, Valerian fled to an earlier century, the eighteenth, and hid himself in an isolated lair. It was little more than a mouse’s nest, really, a hollow place in the wall of an ancient abbey, mortared over so long ago that there was no demarcation between the old stonework and the new.

Now he curled up in that space, as fragile as an unborn chick still cosseted in its shell, and he wept.

It wasn’t as though Aidan hadn’t warned him, more than once, that there was no hope. Still, Valerian had heard what he wanted to hear and forgotten the rest. But now he had seen the true state of matters between Aidan and Neely, and he could no longer ignore the evidence.

Somehow, even without the sacred exchange of blood, the pair had forged that most intimate and unbreakable of all bonds.

Valerian sobbed like a stricken child, his anguish as deep and unbridled as his devotion. What he felt for Aidan was indescribably sensual, and yet it transcended gender and completely overshadowed the simple animal gratification humans know. No, it was communion with the other vampire that Valerian craved, something far more profound than mere sex, for he loved Aidan as he had never loved another creature.

Save one.

He threw back his head and cried out in torment, the sound as shrill as the cry of a wolf on a clear winter's night. When that wail had died away, he loosed another, hoarser this time, and full of despair. Finally, when he could weep no more, when he had purged himself of all emotion, Valerian closed his eyes and slept.

Twelve hours later he awakened and wafted through the cracks and chinks in the old abbey wall like so much pale smoke.

Inside the crypt where he had left Aidan and the woman, Valerian assembled himself again.

Neely was asleep, curled up against Aidan's side like a kitten. Her pale skin was flushed from some dream, and Valerian could hear her heart beating, and he wanted so desperately to drink of her warmth and vitality.

He must not indulge, he told himself. It would be a poisoned victory and, thus, a defeat.

Aidan opened his eyes and spoke to his friend, but with his mind instead of his voice. Take her away from this place, he pleaded. If you ever cared for me, Valerian, put Neely back where you found her and make sure she's safe. Now, before she awakens.

Valerian nodded, but he could not answer, not even silently. He laid his hand over Neely's face, and her breathing deepened, and she was pulled by her own inner forces into that shadowed place well below simple sleep. That done, Valerian lifted her into his arms and thought grimly of the little cottage on the coast of Maine.

The television set was still on when Neely opened her eyes to find herself lying chilled and cramped on the couch in the cottage living room, an open magazine spread under her cheek. She was wearing her nightshirt and Wendy's chenille robe, and there was a blizzard blowing up outside.

Neely tossed the magazine aside, and her fingers were smudged with ink after she rubbed her cheek. She rolled onto her back and stared up at the ceiling, mourning. It had all seemed so real—Valerian, practically giving her a heart attack by appearing from out of nowhere, in all his intimidating splendor. Aidan, lying helpless and sick in that terrible place.

It couldn't have been a dream.

They'd been so close, she and Aidan, so connected, as they lay innocently in each other's arms, their souls fused. She would have given him her very blood, had he asked, and willingly, as a mother gives breast milk to an infant. Such sharing could not have been a travesty, for in those precious hours they were as one being, with but one heart and a single soul, and all their veins were interconnected.

Neely was too numb and too stricken to weep. She rolled off the sofa and raised herself drunkenly to her feet. She went to the thermostat, sent heat booming through the vents with a dusty *whoosh*. Then, shoving her fingers through her sleep-rumpled hair, she made her way into the kitchen and put coffee on to perk. Maybe a jolt of caffeine would get her confused brain back on track, and she would be able to untangle dreams from reality.

Valerian had definitely paid her a visit the night before, she assured herself later as she sipped hot coffee at the window and watched the snowstorm obliterate the ocean from view. She had put on jeans and a sweater, and he had taken her to Aidan...

Neely hurried into her bedroom and opened her dresser drawers, one by one.

The pink sweater was neatly folded and tucked away in one section, the jeans in another.

She unfolded the jeans, felt a whisper of relief when she saw that the denim was embedded with white dust. She made a face and, conversely, held the garment close against her chest, glad of the proof it offered.

She *had* been with Aidan the night before, and for a moment she was joyous.

Then Neely remembered what Valerian had said: Other vampires viewed Aidan as a threat. They might well tie him down in the night and leave him for the brutal sun to find with the morning. He would suffer horribly, devoured by the same light that nurtured virtually every other living thing on earth, and the fault for this would lie, at least partially, with Neely herself.

Desperate for some distraction from her thoughts, she went into the living room and switched on the TV again. The news channel came up immediately.

There was no word of a scandal involving Senator Hargrove and his friends in the drug cartel, and Neely's uneasiness, already considerable, grew significantly. Once before, she'd tried to right a wrong, to stop a gross misuse of authority, and her contact inside the FBI had betrayed her trust. Suppose Melody Ling did the same thing?

Neely glanced at the telephone, but she was afraid to try contacting the network from the cabin. Technology being what it was, the call could probably be traced right back through the circuits to the cottage, and she certainly wasn't ready for that.

She dressed, put on her warm coat and some rubber snow boots she'd found on the floor of the laundry room, and took the keys to Aidan's Spitfire from the hook beside the back door. She might have worn the wig and sunglasses again, but she'd dropped them into a trash bin the previous night, just before catching a ride back to Timber Cove with the good-natured trucker.

Snow had been falling all night, and it was deep enough to make the tires of the sports car spin helplessly in the driveway. The sky was clear by then, however, a soft blue dusted with wispy clouds, and the sun shone brightly.

Neely fetched a wide shovel from the shed and worked industriously to clear a path to the road, which had, fortunately, been plowed and sanded. She went back inside the cottage for her purse and keys, and when she did, she found herself paralyzed by what should have been a very ordinary sound.

The telephone was ringing.

Neely had not given the number to anyone, and she hadn't even contacted Wendy in London to let her know the cottage was in use. No one—besides Valerian and Aidan, who had no use for telephones anyway—was supposed to know she was there.

She hesitated, her hand poised over the receiver. The jangling continued, and Neely thought frantically. Had she given the number to Ben, or to Melody Ling, and simply forgotten? No. A person didn't let things like that slip her mind, not when her very life depended on secrecy.

Finally Neely snatched up the receiver, to end the terrible ringing if nothing else, and said, "Hello?" She hoped she sounded like a man, annoyed at the disturbance.

"Neely?"

Her blood turned to small, jagged shards of ice, piercing her veins in a thousand tender places. The voice was feminine and vaguely familiar, but Neely couldn't match it with a face or a name.

"Neely, are you there?"

She closed her eyes and let out a long breath. She'd already given herself away by staying on the line so long, even though she hadn't admitted to her identity. "Who is this?" she asked.

"My name is Lisa Nelson—I'm Senator Hargrove's personal secretary—"

*What a fool I've been*, Neely lamented silently, *actually telling myself they wouldn't track me down*. Before she could say anything, think of a lie to tell, or even just hang up, Lisa went on.

"Senator Hargrove asked me to tell you that some mutual friends are on their way to pick you up for the services."

"What services?" Neely asked, glancing accusingly at the blank screen of the television set. The remark had to be a warning; if Elaine Hargrove had succumbed to her illness or her recent injuries, there would have been some mention of it on the news.

"He just said, well, that there's going to be a funeral. Didn't some mutual friend of yours pass away?"

Neely's heart was pounding. She was glad Mrs. Hargrove was still alive and, at the same time, painfully aware that her own days—maybe even her hours and minutes—were numbered. "Right," she said. "Thanks, Lisa." With that, Neely hung up with a crash, flung her few belongings back into her suitcase, and ran for the car.

She'd traveled a considerable distance before she realized that she was headed toward Washington, D.C. She'd chosen an out-of-the-way place to take refuge before, by going to live with Ben and Danny in Bright River; now she would try hiding in plain sight.

Too afraid to check into another motel, Neely drove until she was blind with exhaustion, then pulled into a rest area and slept with the car doors locked, slumped over the steering wheel like a drunk. She chose to have breakfast in a tavern, hoping to throw off any pursuers, and gulped down German sausage and a diet cola while the morning drinkers nursed their beer.



There were two bikers at the pool table, big and hairy, with every visible part of their anatomies tattooed, but they didn't bother Neely. They just poked coins into the jukebox and sang along with various artists in off-key voices.

Nobody in the place, least of all Neely, was stupid enough to protest.

There was a television set behind the bar, but the proprietor had tuned it to a game show, and he didn't look like the type who would switch to the news channel just because somebody asked. Neely paid for her food, used the rest room, and started out again.

Aidan's car radio picked up nothing but static for the next few hours, so Neely bought a newspaper when she stopped for gas, along with a plain seltzer. Normally she would have been hungry again by then, but she was scared and upset, and the sausage she'd consumed at the tavern that morning was still roiling in her stomach.

The store's parking lot was empty, except for a few teenagers, so Neely took time to scan the newspaper. There was nothing about Senator Hargrove's shady doings, but in the upper right-hand corner of page five she found an interesting item.

MYSTERIOUS BLAST DESTROYS BEACH COTTAGE NEAR TIMBER COVE, the headline read. Neely folded the paper, then folded it again, and braced the article against the steering wheel. Sometime during the night, the eager reporter had written, an explosion had leveled the Browning cottage on Blackberry Road. It was not known if there had been any casualties, but investigators were sifting through the wreckage.

Neely pushed open the car door, ran behind the store's giant garbage bin, and was still retching long after her stomach was empty. If Senator Hargrove hadn't warned her, however indirectly, she would have been blown to smoldering fragments, perhaps in her sleep.

She went into the public rest room when the bout of sickness was over, rinsed her mouth, and splashed cold water on her face until she figured she'd recovered her senses. Maybe, she thought, leaning shakily against a graffiti-scarred wall, she should rethink the idea of returning to Washington. It might be smarter to find a circus, climb into the tiger cage, and juggle a couple of raw pot roasts until the cats noticed.

## Chapter 12

Even separated from Neely by time and distance, Aidan felt her turmoil in his own spirit. He knew she was in the gravest danger, and yet his weakness pinned him to the couch in that lonely crypt, far more effectively than any physical bond could have done. He struggled, but the effort was fruitless.

"Valerian!" he shouted into the dry darkness of the tomb. He waited, listening as the echo of his voice slowly faded away, but the other vampire did not appear. Aidan's pride would not let him call out again.

He closed his eyes, tried to calm himself. In his mind, he saw Neely standing next to a garbage bin, behind some roadside shop, retching. He watched her hurry into the women's room, tasted the rusty water she used to rinse her mouth, felt the cool relief as she splashed her face. Then he frowned, trying to make sense of a sudden vision of Neely venturing inside a tiger cage at a circus, juggling ugly chunks of raw meat.



The ludicrous image disappeared; Neely was behind the wheel of a car—he recognized the interior as his own Spitfire. He felt her quick, shallow breaths as if he'd drawn them himself, and the warm moisture of tears on her cheeks.

She was afraid and confused, and not being able to go to her was among the greatest agonies Aidan had ever suffered.

*Neely*, he thought, his soul reaching for hers. She didn't consciously hear him, he knew, but she sniffled and squared her shoulders.

"Okay, Wallace," she said aloud. "No more panic. It's time for some straight thinking."

*Atta girl*, Aidan encouraged, still seeing the world through her eyes and picking up her emotions and physical sensations.

"I can't go to the police, and certainly not to the FBI. I don't know if Melody Ling is going to break the story or if she's going to cave in to pressure and pretend it never happened." With one hand she mussed her pixie hair in frustration, and Aidan felt the softness between his own fingers, and the tugging wiggle of her scalp. She sighed—he shared that, too—and his eyes filled with tears because he had been deprived of such simple, sweet nuances of humanity for so long. "If I go back to Bright River, then Ben and Danny will be in danger again. Which leaves my original plan—I'll take the proverbial bull by the horns and head straight for Washington. I'll confront Dallas Hargrove, either in his office or in the Capitol Building, and if the mob shoots me, they might just have to do it on the floor of the Senate." With that, she started the car engine, shifted deftly into first gear, and guided the Spitfire back onto the slush-covered highway.

*No*, Aidan protested, but it was to no avail, of course, for Neely apparently wasn't aware that he was with her, even though he was conscious of her every pulse. He noted the electrical activity of her brain, along with other subliminal processes, like digestion and the manufacture of all sorts of chemicals and hormones. He warmed his own frozen soul at the silver spark of divinity shining at the core of her, the mysterious gift that was given to all mortals with the first tentative *tha-thump* of their hearts.

Aidan rode with Neely for an hour or so, but the effort sapped him, and he withdrew. He had been foolish, he realized now, to squander his strength so recklessly by seeking out Lisette and the Brotherhood the way he had. Now, when his powers might have made a positive difference, he was all but depleted.

He began to drift, now fully conscious, now only half aware. He slept, finally, and awakened to a ravenous hunger and a sense of terrible urgency.

He had to rise, feed, and go to Neely, and the fact that those things might well be impossible had no real bearing on anything. Aidan was fresh out of choices.

He shook his head, fighting the disorientation, the infernal weakness.

After a painful struggle Aidan managed to raise himself onto one elbow. The effort left him grimacing, bruised with exhaustion, but he refused to lie down again. He used all his will to rise to a sitting position and then to stand, knees trembling, beside the couch. The piece of furniture, so absurdly out of place in that old crypt, was high and curved at one end. Aidan gripped that part for support.

He needed blood, a lot of it, and fast.

Aidan thought frantically. The tightly mortared stone walls of the crypt admitted neither the light of the sun nor that of the moon, but he knew it was night simply because he was conscious. What he *did not* know was whether the dawn was hours away, or just seconds, for he carried no watch. How much time had he lost to delirium?

Should he miscalculate and be caught abroad at sunrise, the result would be an interminable and hideous death. That possibility was terrible enough, but there was a very real danger that this cruel passage would be only the beginning of his suffering. If there was indeed such a place as Hell, beyond the mysterious veil that separated the known from the unknown, Aidan would surely be condemned to everlasting torment.

Remembering Neely, Aidan sought and found a forgotten reservoir of courage within himself. He began to pace, stiff-legged, from one end of the crypt to the other, forcing his woodlike limbs to function.

He wanted to tune in to Neely again, to find out where she was, and how she was, and what she was feeling, but he didn't dare waste energy. Before he attempted anything else, Aidan reminded himself, he must feed.

All three floors of Senator Dallas Hargrove's elegant Georgetown house were brightly lit, even though it was nearly three in the morning when Neely arrived. She'd driven for thirteen hours, on and off, and she was hungry, drained of all but the last quivering dregs of energy, and badly in need of a hot bath. For all of that, just the knowledge that she'd reached her destination gave her a second wind.

She glanced around, saw designer Christmas wreaths on some of the doors. Getting out of Aidan's car, Neely felt a stab of chagrin. Had Thanksgiving gotten by her somehow, when she wasn't looking?

She didn't even know the date, she realized, with a sense of quiet shock. She just hoped Ben and Danny had roasted a turkey for the occasion, and maybe invited Doris, the new waitress, to dinner.

Staunchly Neely moved up the front walk, climbed the brick steps, and rang the bell. The senator himself answered the door, and when he saw Neely, he swore and made a move to block her way, but she was too quick. She pressed past Hargrove and stood facing him in that spacious entry hall, with its parquet floors, cherrywood grandfather clock, and marble-topped credenza.

"You must be suicidal!" the senator snapped. He had taken off his jacket at some point and opened his shirt, and his tie hung in a long loop, like a noose about to be jerked tight. There were shadows under his eyes, his cheeks were gaunt, and it was anybody's guess how long it had been since he'd shaved. "Damn it, Neely—I did everything I could to warn you—it's a miracle you're alive—"

Neely didn't retreat, even though Hargrove's stance was intimidating because of his superior size and strength. "I'm tired of running," she said. "I won't be tracked and hounded like some pitiful creature wanted for its hide!"

After regarding her in stricken silence for several moments, the senator groaned. "No, Neely, you won't be hunted anymore," he said. "You won't be hunted because they've *found* you, you little fool!"

At this, four large men in dark, high-quality suits appeared, one from the room on the right side of the hall, two from the left, and another from the curved staircase. Neely dived for the door, but she was tired and her reflexes were poor.

The smallest of the thugs caught her easily, pulling her arms back, hooking his own beneath her elbows.

Neely struggled and screamed, but the man held her easily. One of the others came over and slapped her hard across the face, and the coppery taste of blood covered her tongue.

“There’s no need for violence,” Hargrove protested, but his tone was weak, like his character.

Neely stomped on her captor’s instep with one heel, and he howled in pain and released her. In a movie the trick might have worked, she thought fancifully as the other three bad guys rushed forward. In real life, however, two of the trio of stooges held her, while the third one brought a syringe from the pocket of his coat.

“For God’s sake,” Hargrove pleaded, as ineffectually as before. Neely wondered how he’d ever attained high office in the first place, let alone held on to his seat in the Senate and married a topflight person like Elaine. “I see no reason to—”

Neely struggled, making an inarticulate sound as she tried to avoid the needle. She felt a minute puncture in the side of her neck, then a stinging sensation as the drug, whatever it was, entered her system. After that, reality dissolved into a colorless, shifting mass of nothingness.

When Neely came to her senses, she was surprised and alarmed to find herself lying on the hard, bare floor of a pickup truck or a van, her arms tied behind her back, her feet bound at the ankles. Her throat felt raw and dry.

Senator Hargrove lay beside her, also tied.

He glared at her. “I hope you’re happy now,” he whispered.

Neely didn’t answer immediately; her thoughts were still pretty incoherent. Her head ached, and so did her right hip and knee. She saw a metal roof a few feet overhead and decided the vehicle was probably a van.

“They’re going to kill us,” Hargrove said in a stage whisper.

Neely tried to sit up and failed miserably. The floor of the van was as hard and cold as marble and, worse, it was corrugated, making a new bruise every time they went over a bump.

“And you thought they were such nice guys,” Neely drawled, shifting in a restless effort to make herself more comfortable.

“Shut up,” snapped her former employer.

She tilted her head back, caught glimpses of shadowy hulks in the passenger and driver’s seats. It was still dark, and snow swirled against the dark windshield, while the wipers went *thumpety-thump, thumpety-thump*.

“You aren’t going to get away with this,” she called out cheerfully, toward the front. “I turned all the proof over to a television reporter, and she’s going to make household names of the lot of you. Who knows? Maybe they’ll show your trial on cable...” Neely was well aware that she was ranting like an idiot, but she didn’t give a damn. Her only other option was screaming in hysteria.

The driver crumpled a paper bag in one meaty hand and tossed it over his shoulder. His aim turned out

to be pretty good; the wad struck Neely on the chin, and she caught a whiff of stale french fries. “Put a sock in it,” he said in classic Brooklynese.

Neely didn’t stop talking, she couldn’t, but she lowered her voice and directed her comments to the senator. For once in his life, she thought, he was going to have to actually *listen* to an unhappy voter.

“I can’t believe you ever got involved with these people!” she hissed.

Hargrove closed his eyes for a moment. He looked sick, and Neely scooted back a ways, until she felt the cold steel of the wheel-well against her bottom. “I had to,” he said. “Elaine—needed so many things—”

“Do me a favor and don’t blame this on your wife, all right?” Neely interrupted furiously. “I know the lady, and I can’t imagine her cooperating with a drug cartel for any reason or any amount of money!”

“Keep it down back there,” grunted the guy in the passenger seat. He sounded as though he needed adenoid surgery.

Neely bit her lower lip to keep herself from talking back. These creeps were for real, and if she made them mad enough, they might just pull over to the side of the road and blow her brains out with an illegal handgun.

Hargrove gave a low, strangled sob, and his face contorted into a mask of grief.

Neely felt sorry for him, but there was no way to lend comfort. Her hands were tied behind her back, and, besides, she wasn’t sure she wanted to touch the senator anyway. “I heard about the accident,” she said moderately. “How is Elaine?”

He made a broken sound, deep in his throat, and it was terrible to hear. “She—she isn’t going to make it,” he managed.

Neely ran the tip of her tongue over her lips and tasted dried blood. Perhaps because she was half out of her mind with fear, she wondered what Aidan and Valerian and the others liked so much about the stuff. The flavor was salty and metallic.

“I’m sorry,” she said gently. “About Elaine, I mean.”

Hargrove nodded. “It’s selfish of me, I know,” he confessed in a miserable rasp, “but I’m almost glad. She would be destroyed if she knew what I’ve done.”

Neely followed the old rule of saying nothing when she couldn’t say something nice. She wanted to console the senator, yes, but she also ached to condemn him.

The van bounced violently over what must have been a cattle-guard, and then Neely heard branches scraping the vehicle’s sides. They were in the countryside somewhere, maybe deep in a wood, but she had no idea where because she didn’t know how long she’d been knocked out.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” she called out.

Hargrove sighed. “Don’t try any stupid tricks, Neely,” he whispered. “This is no time to be a hero!”

“It’s no trick,” Neely replied. “I really have to go.”

The driver cursed—more fluent Brooklynese—but he wrenched the van over to one side of the road, and it jolted to a stop. “I told ya we shoulda just shot ’em both dead,” he muttered to his partner. “Next thing you know, this broad is gonna wanna pick up a frozen yogurt someplace.”

“Keep goin’,” the other thug replied. “She can just hold it.”

“I can’t hold M” Neely protested.

“Look, lady, I ain’t gonna fall for any of that TV stuff and untie your hands so’s you can go to the John in some blackberry thicket, awright? Only other option is, I go out there, too, and pull your pants down for you. You want that?”

“No,” Neely snapped. “Of course I don’t.”

“Then shut up.”

“I wouldn’t mind pullin’ down the lady’s pants, Sally,” volunteered the driver.

“Ain’t you been payin’ attention, Vinnie? You can catch bad diseases doin’ stuff like that. And don’t use my name again!”

“Right, Sally,” grumbled Vinnie.

They went over a particularly large bump, and Neely’s head thumped hard against the floor. She closed her eyes and fought a wave of dizzy nausea with all her strength of spirit. This was no time to pass out, even if she did find oblivion more appealing than reality.

The van soon ground to a stop, and the front doors slammed almost simultaneously. On Hargrove’s side there was a click as a latch was lifted, a grinding rush as the panel was shoved aside.

Vinnie and Sally showed no inclination toward gentleness or mercy as they wrenched their captives out onto the snowy ground, the senator first, then Neely. She pressed her thighs together, desperate to relieve herself.

They were propelled forward, toward a shadowy, boxlike house, passing an ancient clothesline and a mossy, snow-dusted cement birdbath. Time and neglect had tilted the structure to one side, and it reminded Neely of a tombstone.

The way things were going, she thought, it might turn out to be her own.

Vinnie, who was at least eighty pounds overweight and probably on the fast track to a triple bypass, lumbered up a set of creaky wooden steps and produced a jangle of keys from the pocket of his pants. Maybe he was a slob, and he’d certainly made poor career choices, but he dressed well.

They entered a room, and the lights blared on, revealing a kitchen with a sagging floor and one of those old refrigerators with the motor on top, among other things. To the left, at the end of a long, narrow hallway, Neely saw the glimmer of white porcelain.

“Please,” she said.

Surprisingly, Sally gripped her by the back of the neck and marched her toward the bathroom. “I never nabbed nobody that was more trouble than you,” he griped. He wrenched the ropes off her wrists and flung her through the doorway. “Don’t try nothin” stupid, neither. That window over the toilet is painted shut, and even if you broke it, you wouldn’t even get across the yard before I caught you. You got it?”

“Got it,” Neely said with a sigh. She went into the bathroom, switched on the light, and quickly attended to her business. While she was doing that, she scanned the small cubicle for a weapon, such as an old-fashioned razor or maybe a plunger with a thick handle. There was nothing visible except for a scrub brush that had been stuck bristles first into a rusty coffee can.

Neely flushed, fastened her jeans, and washed her hands at the stained sink. When she came out, Sally was waiting. He didn’t bind her wrists again immediately but instead gripped her elbow and double-timed her into what had probably been a living room at one time.

There was a piano with a warped keyboard on one side of the room, a wood stove on the other. On the wall over a filthy, rat-chewed sofa was a maudlin portrait of some martyred saint, suffering big time.

*Aidan*, Neely thought.

The distinctness of the answer startled her so much that she jerked, as if someone had touched her with something hot. *Hang on, love. I’m on my way* .

Such relief swept through Neely at the clarity of the thought, and the knowledge that it had not been her own, that she swayed on her feet.

Vinnie thrust her into a chair and wrenched her hands back, to be tied again. The senator was beside her in another chair, also bound. He looked strangely detached, as if he’d managed to move out of his body and watch the evening’s events from a distance.

Inwardly Neely sighed. Given all the things Dallas Hargrove had done, it wasn’t surprising that he was a master of denial. No intelligent person could have betrayed so many trusts, public and private, without practicing a great deal of self-delusion.

Calmer now—although her senses told her Aidan was nowhere near, she *had* heard his voice—Neely watched as Sally built a fire in the stove to take the chill off the room, with its wavy, linoleum-covered floor. Vinnie wandered over to the opposite side of the room and opened a battered old cabinet that looked as if it might contain a Murphy bed.

Instead there was a big-screen TV set inside.

Vinnie switched it on, tuned it to the news channel, and cursed. Melody Ling’s carefully madeup face loomed on the screen; she was standing in front of the Capitol Building in Washington.

Neely listened with gratitude and relief. Quietly, professionally, the journalist blew the lid off the whole scandal, listing crimes and naming names.

Senator Hargrove was still in a stupor; he didn’t look up or react at all to the mention of his part in the complicated, ugly matter. Officers of both the DEA and the Bureau wanted to talk to the politician, Ling said; the head of an eastern crime syndicate and two FBI agents had already been arrested.

As if as an afterthought, she went on. “Added to this tragic perversion of justice is the fact that Elaine Hargrove died tonight at Washington Hospital. She never regained consciousness, following a recent automobile accident, and was surrounded by friends and family at the end—except, of course, for her husband, Senator Dallas Hargrove...”

The senator emitted a wolflike howl of grief that tore at Neely’s heart. *Godspeed, Elaine*, she thought sadly. She had sincerely admired the other woman’s professionalism and courage, and nothing could change that.

Vinnie and Sally were in a panic. “Did you hear that?” one of them demanded of the other—Neely wasn’t paying enough attention to notice which. “They brought down the Boss, for God’s sake!”

The voices became distorted, seeming to pulse and echo through a tunnel.

“I say we kill ’em both!”

“The hell with that! You wanna stay here and play wise guy, you do it, but I’m getting out.”

The senator began to sob, but for once he probably wasn’t worried about his own hide. He’d just learned that his wife was dead, he had not been with her at the moment she’d most needed him, and in spite of all the terrible things he’d done, Neely sincerely pitied him.

## Chapter 13

Vinnie and Sally were still arguing under the painting of the martyred saint when Aidan materialized in a corner of the room.

Neely grinned, being both glad to see him and fairly used to his theatrical entrances and exits. He was wearing the uniform of a Nazi officer, of all things, and he slapped one gloved palm with a riding crop as he stood glowering at the two crooks from Brooklyn.

“Holy shit,” said Vinnie.

“Where did *he* come from?” Sally asked.

Aidan gave Neely a sidelong glance and a wink, though no one else seemed to notice the gesture. “So,” he began, the word properly guttural and Germanic. He took the greatest care to show his teeth. “You have taken these people captive.”

Sally was blathering by then. “God,” he moaned, “it’s that guy Max kept talking about, the one that drank his blood!”

“You don’t believe that crap, do you?” Vinnie asked his partner, but there was a distinct lack of conviction in his tone. Aidan was backing the two of them slowly across the torn linoleum floor.

Senator Hargrove came out of his daze just long enough to mutter, “Who the hell is that?”

Neely didn’t answer but instead glanced nervously toward the windows, then around the room,



searching for a clock. If dawn happened to be imminent, the rescue would be spoiled, to say the least.

Aidan tossed the riding crop aside when he was face to face with Vinnie and Sally, who were now cowering against the wall.

Neely braced herself, suddenly terrified of what he might do. She loved Aidan Tremayne with her whole soul, but that would certainly change if she witnessed the true reality of vampirism.

As if hearing her thoughts, Aidan looked back at her over one shoulder, favored her with a half-grin, and turned again to his prey. Raising both hands, he pressed a palm to either man's face, and a strange energy seemed to move through his body, along his arms, and into the crooks.

When Aidan drew back, graceful and cool, but visibly weakened, Vinnie and Sally glided to the floor, both staring stupidly at nothing.

"What did you do to them?" Neely whispered. He hadn't bitten their necks, but the night was still young. She hoped.

Aidan turned, straightening his tunic. "Not much, really. They're just taking a little nap—one that will last three or four weeks. They'll remember you one day, it's true, but given the recollection of tonight, they won't be anxious to look you up to reminisce."

In the chair beside Neely's, Senator Hargrove sat with his head lolling. He moaned something incoherent.

Aidan untied Neely but regarded the senator with a pensive expression. "What about him?" he asked, frowning.

Neely was rubbing her sore wrists and, at the same time, heading in the direction of the bathroom. She gave Vinnie and Sally a wide berth, even though they looked about as dangerous as a pair of carrots. "Don't do anything till I get back," she called to Aidan.

When she returned, he was pacing.

*Ah*, Neely thought whimsically, *the vampire I love* .

"What's with the Nazi threads?" she asked.

Aidan shrugged, stopping his pacing to lay another thoughtful frown on the senator. "I had to wear something," he answered distractedly, "and this was what came to hand. This is the infamous Senator Hargrove, is it not?"

"You know who he is." Neely sighed, folding her arms. "You're psychic, along with all your other talents."

Aidan walked around the senator's chair once, pondering the slumped figure. "He's not all bad, you know," he reflected, as though reading an in-depth dossier. "Just weak."

Neely nodded, then looked again toward the window. "Yes," she agreed. She explained about Dallas Hargrove's great, destructive love for Elaine. "On top of everything else," she finished, "Mrs. Hargrove died tonight, and he wasn't able to be with her. My guess is, he's probably having the kind of breakdown

a guy doesn't come back from. So maybe he doesn't need prison, too."

Aidan paused, silently considering, and Neely would have given anything to read his thoughts. Was he thirsty, for instance?

"He's gone," the vampire said finally. "The senator has retreated so far inside himself that he may never find his way out."

"What if the prosecution needs him to testify?"

Aidan untied Hargrove and draped the man's inert frame over his shoulders, fireman-style. "Their tough luck, I guess.

Come now, I'll load your friend here into the van for you, but you'll have to get yourself back to Washington because the sun will be up in about forty-five minutes." He nodded toward Vinnie and Sally, who were still sitting on the floor, staring vacantly into the distance. "The fat one has the keys— they're in the inside pocket of his jacket."

Neely approached the men gingerly, fully expecting them to jump at her, but they didn't even seem to see her.

"Even if you're right, and they don't come looking for me when their memories return, I still won't be completely off the hook," she said, fishing a key ring from the appointed pocket and withdrawing quickly. "I'll still have to deal with their bosses, won't I? Am I going to have to be part of the Witness Protection Program or something?"

"Yes," Aidan answered, hauling Senator Hargrove's limp person toward the back door. "The Aidan Tremayne Witness Protection Program." He looked very solemn for a moment. "Frankly, my love, these thugs are the least of our problems. They're far easier to deal with, after all, than some other creatures abroad on this earth."

Neely rushed after him, but she didn't offer a reply to his remark, though it had reminded her of the grim truth. She would probably have to give Aidan up one day soon, in order to protect him from the outraged indignation of his own kind, among others, but she wanted to pretend, for a little while at least, that it wasn't so.

Aidan gave her a wry look over one shoulder, turning so that he could see around the senator's rear end. He'd obviously been reading her mind again. "Come, now," he scolded gently. "You're not going to give up so easily as all that, are you? Where's that Yankee persistence I've heard so much about?"

"I used up a lot of it tonight," Neely answered, but she managed a smile.

They trudged through the deep snow in the backyard, passing the clothesline and the leaning birdbath. The van was parked behind a looming, weathered shed.

The snow had stopped, but there was no moon. Still, Neely could see Aidan as clearly as if he were giving off some inner light all his own. He put the senator in the back of the van, taking care not to hurt him, and closed the door.

Aidan and Neely stood facing each other in the cold chill, Neely's breath making a white cloud between them.

“Thanks,” Neely said. Again she noticed that he seemed enervated, as though the evening’s events had been unusually taxing for him.

Aidan leaned forward and kissed her forehead. “Anytime,” he answered with tender irony. “Can you find your way back? You just follow this road west until it intersects with the main highway, then turn left. After that, there will be plenty of signs to point the way.”

Neely started to speak, but her voice came out as a croak, and she had to begin again. “What about Senator Hargrove? What am I supposed to do with him, Aidan?”

“Take him to the emergency room at the first hospital you see. He’ll be looked after.”

Neely glanced toward the van. It had seemed so sinister before, but now she saw that it had a few dents in the fender and green fuzzy dice hanging from the rearview mirror. It looked, well, innocuous.

“Is the senator going to be some kind of vegetable?”

“I can’t answer that,” Aidan answered with a weary sigh. “I don’t think you’ll ever have anything to fear from him, though—my guess is, he never really wanted to see you harmed in the first place.”

Neely recalled the times the senator had warned her, both directly and indirectly, and nodded in agreement. She would feel pity for him after that night but never fear. She worked up a faltering smile and jangled the keys. “I’ll be in Bright River, at my brother’s place,” she said. She wanted to ask if she was ever going to see Aidan after that night, but she was too afraid of the answer. “Thanks again.”

Aidan lifted his hand in farewell. “Take care,” he said, and then he simply faded away, boots, swastika and all.

Neely stared at the place where he’d stood until a moment before and wondered if she was in any better shape mentally than Vinnie and Sally and the senator. Then she climbed resolutely into the van, started up the engine, and ground the gearshift into reverse.

Aidan barely reached the sanctity of his lair behind the Bright River house before he collapsed. He slept sprawled on the dirt floor of the old mine shaft, and when he awakened, he was sick with weakness.

He had been lying on his stomach, but when he sensed another presence, he rolled quickly onto his back.

Tobias was crouching beside him, grinning his ancient, teenage grin. “You seem to be feeling poorly,” he observed. He ran his eyes over Aidan’s dusty tunic, cobweb-laced breeches, and smudged boots. “Can’t say I care much for your taste in clothes, old fellow.”

Aidan struggled to raise himself to a sitting position, found that he could manage no more. If Tobias had come to destroy him—and he might well do just that, being an elder and therefore exceedingly powerful—then he, Aidan, was done for.

“What do you want?”

Tobias stood gracefully. His garments looked medieval—he wore leggings, a long tunic, and leather shoes that curled at the toes. “You didn’t think you were finished with the Brotherhood just because

Roxanne Havermail carried you off to her castle, did you? Come, now, Aidan, this isn't a fairy tale, and there may well be no happy ending."

"If you're trying to be witty," Aidan replied, groaning a little, "you're only half successful. Get to the point."

Tobias laughed. "Such audacity. That, you know, is both your greatest blessing and your worst curse, Aidan. I suggest you curb the trait if you want the tribunal to decide in your favor."

Aidan got slowly to his feet, swayed, but was steadied by Tobias's quick grasp on his shoulders. "What tribunal is this?"

"You might say it's the vampire version of the Supreme Court," Tobias answered. "They're interested in you and want to know what makes you tick, so to speak."

"Am I to be tried for some crime?" Aidan felt no fear, so none showed in his manner or his words. He was through running; he had to confront his personal demons and be done with it, for better or for worse.

Tobias shrugged. "Not really, though the tribunal does want to determine firsthand whether or not you're a threat to the rest of us. Suppose you turned traitor, for instance, and somehow made contact with Nemesis? We might all be destroyed then."

Nemesis, Aidan recalled foggily, was the Warrior Angel so feared by lesser supernatural beings. "I, too, am a vampire," he reasoned. "If I were to go to Nemesis, it would surely be the end for me." He sighed, ran a hand through his hair. "Or worse yet, the beginning."

"The elders are worried that you might sacrifice yourself in some fit of heroism or despondency. You must admit, Aidan, that you are a very reckless vampire at times."

Aidan sighed, then gave a half-hearted grin. "All right," he said wryly. "I'll go peaceably."

Tobias spread his hands. "You don't have much choice, it seems to me." He ran his gaze over Aidan's stolen Nazi uniform. "You'd better change first, though. Some things are too disgusting even for vampires."

Aidan blinked, and when he opened his eyes, he was standing in the cold bedroom of his great house, the room where Neely had once slept, so warm and womanly. Tobias was right beside him and sat down in the window seat with a sigh.

"I do want one assurance before I submit to questioning," Aidan said, taking jeans and a heavy sweater from his bureau. He strolled into the adjoining bathroom to change.

"And what is that?" Tobias inquired companionably, as if he didn't already have the upper hand.

"I'm concerned about my sister, Maeve. And Valerian. They have no part in my discontent with vampirism, and I don't want the Brotherhood bothering them."

Tobias rose from his seat with another sigh, this one philosophical and slightly martyred. "The elders have no quarrel with them, for the time being at least."

"But you know exactly where they are at all times," Aidan deduced.

“Of course we do,” Tobias answered. “Maeve has taken to her loom and hunts only enough to keep up her strength. As for Valerian, well, he’s curled up in the wall of an old abbey, whimpering over his wounds.”

Aidan felt a stab; he didn’t need to ask what injury Valerian had suffered, because he knew only too well. “He’s strong,” he murmured. “He’ll recover.”

“I have no doubt of that,” Tobias answered, “but it may be a hundred years or so before Valerian is truly himself again. Vampires can lie dormant, except for an occasional feeding, for centuries—but of course, you know that.”

“Yes,” Aidan answered distractedly, thinking of Lisette and feeling a chill grasp his psyche. “I know. But Valerian is different. He’ll sulk awhile, but once he realizes that the world is going right on without him, he’ll come back. He won’t be able to bear the thought that he might be missing something.”

“I hope you’re right,” Tobias said, without evident conviction one way or the other. “Let us go now, Aidan. The tribunal awaits.”

Aidan remembered the cell he hadn’t been able to escape on his own, the hunger, the filthy rats he’d been given as sustenance. A part of him wanted to feel the upcoming confrontation, but he accompanied Tobias without struggle.

Although Ben and Danny were ecstatic at Neely’s return, the hole her leaving had left had already knitted itself closed again. Ben was in love with Doris, as were half the regular customers at the cafe, evidently, and business was thriving.

“All that trouble,” Ben had asked, the night Neely arrived in Aidan’s sports car. “It’s over?”

Neely had nodded. “I can’t explain it, Ben, but my part in the Hargrove thing is history. I wouldn’t have come back here if I didn’t know it was settled.”

Ben had taken her into his arms then and hugged her.

At first Neely had slept a lot, and taken a great many hot baths, and helped out by cleaning motel rooms and occasionally waiting tables with Doris. She yearned for Aidan even as she tried to forget he’d ever existed, but there was no putting him out of her mind. Waking and sleeping, he haunted her.

She took to breaking and entering, letting herself into Aidan’s house through a window off the mud room, and spent night after night reading the chronicles he’d written. In truth, of course, she was waiting for him to return—but he didn’t.

His sister did appear, however, two nights after Christmas, when Neely was sitting by Aidan’s hearth and gazing at the flames.

Her heart wedged itself into her throat and hammered there, for Neely knew from the drawings in the first journal that this was the legendary Maeve. Aidan’s twin was stunningly beautiful, with her rich ebony hair and dark blue eyes, and she was also a vampire. An accomplished one, if Aidan’s written accounts meant anything.

This is it, Neely thought with a strange sense of calm resignation. She’s going to drink my blood and

leave me flat as an old tube of toothpaste.

Maeve laughed, obviously sharing her brother's ability to read minds.

"Are all vampires telepathic?" Neely heard herself ask.

"More or less," Maeve answered. She went to the desk, picked up the music box, and listened thoughtfully as it played its quaint familiar tune.

The ditty left Neely stricken with love and longing for Aidan. She had not been able to bring herself to lift the lid of the small box and wind the key, for fear she would fall apart.

"Do you know where Aidan is?" Maeve asked, quite cordially. She was dressed in a simple muslin gown, and she sat down on a nearby settee, folding her arms and regarding Neely pensively.

Neely gulped, then shook her head. "No," she replied honestly. "I wish I did."

Maeve fiddled with the brocade upholstery on the arm of the settee, not looking at Neely. "He's been taken before the elders of the Brotherhood," she mused, revealing none of what she was feeling. Her blue gaze rose, linked with Neely's. "They may destroy him."

Neely sank back in her chair and closed her eyes. She'd never felt so helpless before, not even when she'd been tied up in the back of Vinnie and Sally's van and slated for a mob-style execution. Somehow she'd known she would survive.

This was different; Neely couldn't return the favor and rescue Aidan, as he had done for her. She had none of his powers.

"I see you're wondering how you might be of help to my brother," Maeve went on. "There is a way, Neely."

Neely leaned forward, still afraid, but curious, too. It wasn't every day, after all, that one sat and chatted with a lady vampire. "What?"

"You could become one of us," Maeve said bluntly. "Then perhaps Aidan could forget this nonsense about being human again."

Maeve's pronouncement brought about an emotional earthquake, and almost a minute must have passed before Neely was able to reply.

She shook her head. "Not that," she said. "I love Aidan more than I've ever loved anybody, but I won't sell my soul even for him. And he wouldn't ask it of me."

"You're right," Maeve said coolly. "He would be furious at first, but he loves you desperately. Can you honestly say it holds no appeal for you, the immortality of being a vampire? The power?"

Again Neely shook her head. "All I want to be is a woman, a plain, ordinary woman." She paused, waited a heartbeat, then dared to ask, "Aidan really wants to be human again?"

"He'd do anything to accomplish it," Maeve answered in a rush of confounded annoyance. She arched one eyebrow, studying Neely, paying a little too much attention to the pulse point at the base of her

throat. "I don't have to give you a choice, you know. I can make you into a vampire without your consent."

Neely thought of the early entries in Aidan's journals, the despair and anger he'd felt. "That was what was done to your brother," she answered evenly, fingering the golden rosebud on the pendant Aidan had given her. "He despises the one who changed him, and he would be outraged if it happened to me as well. Do you want Aidan to hate you, Maeve?"

The impossibly blue eyes widened at the sight of the pendant, then were averted. "I adore him," she said brokenly. "I became a vampire so that Aidan and I would not be separated. Now he wants to change back."

Neely folded her hands in her lap and spent a few seconds gathering her courage, which, it seemed to her, was mostly bluster. Since that was all she had to work with, she proceeded. "Is that possible, for a vampire to be turned back into a human being?"

Maeve stared into space for a long time, then shrugged. "To my knowledge, no one has ever done it. But there are secrets and rituals only the elders know."

Neely bit her lower lip and offered a silent prayer, not for her safety, but for Aidan's redemption.

Abruptly Maeve rose from her seat and stood glaring down at Neely, her expression imperious and completely chilling. "You cannot stay here," she announced. "If I found you, so might the others."

Neely shivered as horrible images from books and movies flooded her mind. "What quarrel do any of you have with me?" she dared, setting aside the last volume of Aidan's journal, the one that mentioned his love for her, and getting shakily to her feet.

"You are a threat to all of us," Maeve answered. "Vampires and humans do not normally mix, beyond the obvious feedings and an occasional brushing of shoulders."

"But what could I possibly do to you?" Neely pressed.

"You have already done it," Maeve said, and her words rang with an infinite and eternal sorrow. "You have taken Aidan's heart and made him into a weak link. He might betray us all, not intentionally, of course, but simply because he's lost a large part of his reason."

Neely put a chair between herself and Aidan's twin, although she knew only too well that no such puny effort would save her if Maeve decided to follow through on her original idea and make this troublesome human into a vampire.

"My crime, then," she whispered, "is that I love your brother with my whole heart. As you do, Maeve." Neely watched as the majestic creature of the night turned her straight, slender back, apparently struggling to contain some emotion. "We aren't enemies, you and I. We're on the same side."

When Maeve turned to face Neely again, there were tears glittering in her sapphire eyes. "What will become of him?" she murmured. "Of all of us?"

Neely actually wanted to touch Maeve, to comfort her, but of course she didn't dare make any such move. To do so would be like petting a wild tigress. "I don't know," she said honestly. "But there is one thing you can count on. I truly love Aidan, and I will never purposely hurt him."



Maeve assessed Neely in silence for a long time, probably weighing her words. In the end she evidently found them true. "I have promised not to interfere in this other madness of Aidan's, this transformation he so foolishly seeks. But there is one thing I can do, and that is protect the woman he loves more than his own soul."

Neely waited, having no idea how to respond. For all she knew, making her, Neely, into some immortal, blood-drinking monster was Maeve's idea of protecting her. Or perhaps the beautiful vampire would simply kill her, angering Aidan but at the same time saving him and a lot of the mysterious "others" mentioned earlier.

As it happened, Maeve stepped back to the desk, found a pen and paper, and scribbled something. "Come to this address, in London, as soon as you can. It is perhaps your only hope, to be under my protection."

Neely swallowed. "London?" she echoed.

"Yes," Maeve snapped, shoving the scrap of paper at her. "And be quick about it. The housekeeper will let you in. You do have money?"

Neely nodded. Dallas Hargrove had given her a healthy sum in cash, and so had Aidan. She'd spent very little. "Is that where Aidan is? In London?"

"Would that he were," Maeve said with a bitter sigh. Having so spoken, she raised both her arms, as Neely had seen both Aidan and Valerian do, and vanished.

"London?" Neely muttered to the empty room.

The next day, after saying good-bye to Danny and Ben and Doris, who had begun to assemble themselves into a tight family unit, Neely got into Aidan's car and drove to New York City. She carried only her passport, a toothbrush, and her wad of cash; she was getting very good at traveling light.

Another day passed, and then Neely flew out of JFK Airport, aboard a 747 bound for Heathrow. She sagged numbly in her seat, now sleeping, now staring out the window at the clouds blanketing the Atlantic. She held one shimmering, fragile hope close to her heart: that she would see Aidan again soon.

The flight was interminable, and when the plane finally landed, there was still Customs to be gotten through. Neely managed the task, practically dead on her feet. Outside, in the gray, slushy twilight of an English winter, she found a cab right away.

Neely gave the driver the address Maeve had written for her and ignored the gregarious cabbie's whistle of exclamation.

"Pretty fancy real estate, that," he said.

Neely wasn't up to chatting, but as it turned out, that hadn't been a problem. The driver had talked nonstop from Heathrow to the quiet, elegant neighborhood that was her destination.

He brought the old cab to a lurching stop in front of one of the most impressive mansions Neely had ever seen, Washington and New York included. The place was three stories high, made of gray stone, and surrounded by a high iron fence.

Even as Neely sat still in that tattered backseat, wondering how she was ever going to get inside the place and what she would do when she got there, a figure came hurrying out to open the gate.

Neely paid the driver, stepped out onto the sidewalk, and was immediately grateful for the bracing bite of the wind. The cab sped away, leaving its former passenger to stand there with her hands in her pockets, gaping.

“Miss Wallace?” the figure asked, clattering a key in a great lock and then swinging open the gate.

Neely blinked. She’d been expecting Frankenstein’s monster, but Maeve’s housekeeper was instead a plump, genial woman with rosy cheeks and bright, mischievous brown eyes.

“Yes,” Neely answered.

The housekeeper beckoned. “Well, come along then,” she prompted, with good-natured impatience. “No sense in our standing out here, freezing our bums off, now is there?”

In spite of herself, Neely laughed, drawn by the woman’s ordinary kindness.

“No sense at all,” she agreed.

Neely made little note of the inside of the house that first night, for she was too tired and too distracted. She simply followed the housekeeper, whose name, to Neely’s delight, was Mrs. Fullywub.

“Call me Mrs. F.,” the woman ordered benignly, depositing Neely in a guest suite on the second floor. “I’ll bring up some tea and scones shortly. There’s a robe and nightgown, folded all neat and tidy on the *bench* in the water closet—through that door.” She pointed a pudgy finger. “A hot bath can resurrect the dead, I always say.”

Neely made no answer, since none seemed to be needed. She took off her peacoat, looking around at the unbelievably sumptuous room in a state of mild shock. There was a fireplace, with glistening brass andirons, and a bed that probably dated from the reign of Elizabeth I. The couches and chairs were upholstered in mint-green silk, to match the spread and pillow shams, and there was a Chippendale desk in one corner.

It was like stepping into a layout in a high-tone decorating magazine, but Neely was too far gone to appreciate her surroundings. She soaked in the guest bath, which was roughly the size of a Scottish loch, then put on the waiting nightgown and robe. She brushed her teeth, stumbled back into the bedroom, and collapsed.

Mrs. F. brought tea and scones, which Neely ignored, and built a fire on the pristine hearth. Soon shadows danced on the high, molded ceiling, taking the shapes of vampires and angels.

## Chapter 14

In the morning Mrs. F. brought Neely breakfast in bed—orange juice, oatmeal, buttered wheat toast, and a slice of melon. Tucked under the housekeeper’s right arm were two newspapers, which turned out

to be the *London Times* and yesterday's *USA Today*. Neely might have enjoyed the small irony, not to mention the luxury, under other circumstances.

"Thank you very much," she said after forcing herself to take a sip of the orange juice, for her fearful yearning for Aidan was a shrill, relentless thing that left no room for food. "But you needn't wait on me after this. I can look after myself."

Mrs. F. beamed, looking bright-eyed and matronly with her salt-and-pepper hair arranged in a loose but tidy bun. She wore a flowered dress, along with a pristine white cobbler's apron. Neely wondered if Mrs. F. knew that the lady of the house was a vampire.

"Nonsense," said the good woman, in her brisk and lively accent. "You've great dark circles under your eyes, you have, and if you don't mind my saying so, miss, it's apparent that you could do with a little seeing to. Besides, there's the jet lag to consider. You'll enjoy your visit more if you give your mind and body time to adjust to the changes."

For a moment Neely wanted to weep. She couldn't remember the last time anyone had treated her with such tenderness, except for Aidan, of course, and that made the experience bittersweet.

She blinked back tears of terror that Aidan would be hurt or destroyed by forces she couldn't begin to understand, let alone combat, but there was an element of self-pity in her sorrow as well. She was exhausted, not to mention confused, scared, and more than a little heart-sore, and she could use some time to heal, gather her scattered thoughts, and make plans for the future.

After a few moments of inner struggle, she managed to compose herself.

Neely pretended to nibble at her toast as Mrs. F. toddled over to the hearth and stirred a cheery fire from ashes and embers. "Have you been working for—?" She stopped. How was she supposed to refer to Mrs. F.'s employer—as Maeve? Miss Tremayne? That woman with the fangs? She redirected. "Have you been here long?"

"A few years," Mrs. F. replied. "Madam isn't around much, so it's quite an easy job, really. Which is good, since my knees aren't what they used to be. The heavy cleaning is done by a service, once every fortnight, regular as teatime. I putter, for the most part—dusting, answering the telephone, the like of all that. Once in a while, the Madam decides on a party, and then there's a flurry, I don't mind saying."

Neely smiled, though she still felt as if she'd been broken to bits and glued back together with some of the pieces missing. This gregarious, talkative woman knew nothing of Maeve's other life, and wouldn't believe the truth in any case. Who could blame her?

"How did you come to be acquainted with the Madam?" Mrs. F. inquired, catching Neely off guard.

No longer pretending to an appetite, she set the tray aside. "I'm a friend of her brother's," she said.

Mrs. F. looked disapprovingly at Neely's untouched breakfast but refrained from comment. In the next instant her face was alight. "Oh, you're one of Mr. Aidan's lot. Now, there's a lovely gentleman for you. As handsome a rascal as the Lord ever turned from His hand, he is. Makes me blush with his teasing, and me twice his age."

Neely thought of Aidan's birthdate—the spring of 1760—and sighed wistfully. She didn't know if she'd ever come to understand the mystery that was Aidan Tremayne; she just hoped she'd get the chance to

try. "You're younger than you think, Mrs. F.," she told the other woman.

The housekeeper took the tray and left, and Neely immediately reached for her newspapers. At that point she was in dire need of a distraction, a way to avoid further thoughts of the dangers Aidan faced.

*USA Today* said nothing about the Hargroves—Elaine's funeral and the senator's subsequent "nervous breakdown," which had rendered him temporarily unfit to stand trial, were old news. The *London Times*, however, contained an update on Dallas Hargrove's condition, tucked away in a corner of page 14.

The senator had contracted pneumonia, and while everything possible was being done for him in the way of medical treatment, he did not seem to be responding. Neely suspected that he'd simply decided to die; without Elaine, without his freedom and his reputation, he might well feel that he had nothing left to live for.

Feeling even sadder than before, Neely refolded both papers, set them on the bedside table, and tossed back the covers. A yellow-gray fog was curling at the mullioned windows, and there was a distinct chill in the air, even with the fire popping in the grate.

"Vampire weather," Neely mused fancifully.

Soon enough she realized that even though she was weary to the point of collapse, inactivity would be the worst thing for her. Perhaps if she just kept moving, she reasoned whimsically, then disaster would not be able to overtake her.

Half an hour later, bathed and clad in a gray cashmere pants and sweater set that probably belonged to Maeve, she ventured out of her room. She would explore the house first, then call her friend, Wendy Browning, who was in London studying theater arts, and make arrangements to meet. Maybe that afternoon, if she felt up to it, Neely would go shopping for clothes. As it was, she had only the outfit she'd worn on the plane, and she couldn't go raiding closets and bureaus for more of Maeve's things.

Neely found the stairway leading to the third floor and climbed it. Here, instead of a nursery or servants' quarters, as many such houses would have had, there was one great, drafty room.

Neely's footsteps echoed off the walls of that lonely chamber as she approached the object that dominated it—a huge old-fashioned loom. Someone, Maeve surely, had been weaving a tapestry in delicate pastels and deep earth colors, though all that was visible was the hem of a pale, gauzy dress, a carpet of brown and crimson maple leaves, and a fallen rose, shedding its ivory petals.

A chill tickled Neely's spine, and she hugged herself.

*Aidan*, she mourned silently. *Where are you?*

Tilting her head back, she saw that huge skylights had been cut into the roof, and the fog brushed against the glass like an affectionate cat.

There was a stack of completed tapestries on a table next to a far wall, but Neely didn't approach. She felt as if she'd seen a private part of Maeve's life as it was, and besides, this was a place of sorrow. Suddenly that huge room seemed as barren of life and hope as a cemetery.

She turned and hurried out of the attic studio.

On the second floor were a number of bedrooms and baths, along with a sitting room that overlooked the sumptuous garden at the rear of the house. Neely proceeded to the first floor, where she found an old-fashioned and purely elegant drawing room, a combination library and study, a formal dining area, the kitchen, of course, and a gallery.

Neely was even more drawn by the paintings on the walls of the gallery than she had been by the curious tapestry in Maeve's attic room. These works, at least, had purposely been put on display, and because of that, Neely could look without feeling that she was prying.

The morning dawdled by, it seemed, and promptly at one o'clock Mrs. F. served a luncheon of deviled eggs, fruit compote, and salad in the kitchen. Neely forced herself to eat a little, then went off to the study to call Wendy Browning.

An answering machine clicked on. "Hi, this is Wendy. Jason and I are probably in class, acting our brains out. Leave a message, and one of us will call you back at the first opportunity. In the meantime, break a leg. Bye."

Neely grinned as she left her name and the number where she could be reached. The thought of seeing Wendy again lifted her spirits, though she wasn't looking forward to explaining why her friend's seaside cottage in Maine had been blown to splinters. This might just be one of those rare incidences where it truly was better to lie, or at least go on pretending she didn't know what had happened.

Feeling restless as the gloomy day wore on and twilight approached—Neely realized that she was both dreading the coming of darkness and looking forward to it because it might bring Aidan to her side—she called for a cab. While she waited for the car to arrive, she reflected on her own mixed emotions.

True enough, Aidan could appear. On the other hand, so could Maeve or Valerian or other vampires she wouldn't even recognize. The cab appeared before she'd worked out the problem in her mind, and Neely put on her coat and rushed down the walk and through the gate to meet it.

It was time for a little therapeutic shopping.

She avoided the posh places, like Harrod's, the designer shops, and the trendy boutiques, and spent the remainder of the afternoon in a fascinating establishment called Tea and Sympathy, which dealt in secondhand clothing. It was upscale stuff but definitely used.

In that hectic, cheerful, crowded atmosphere, Neely felt wonderfully safe and ordinary; she was even able to forget, at least during that brief, shining interval, that vampires were real creatures and that she'd fallen hopelessly in love with one.

She bought a black skirt that had supposedly once belonged to the princess, along with several pairs of equally royal-looking woolen slacks, some sweaters in soft colors, and a black, sparkly dancing dress. On the way home she had the cabdriver stop at a neighborhood shop, where she purchased a supply of underwear, some pantyhose, and three soft cotton nightgowns.

Later, Neely settled into the guest suite, back at Maeve's house. Mrs. F. brought tea and "biscuits," which were really cookies, and built up the fire. Neely couldn't ignore her hunger any longer, so she sipped from a bone china cup, ate exactly one biscuit, and reviewed the day's loot. Briefly she entertained a wry, bereft hope that someday she would have steady access to her own wardrobe again, instead of having to rush out and buy things everywhere she went.

Wendy called just before dinner, and she and Neely made plans to meet for lunch the next day, near the theater academy.

“Anything exciting going on?” Neely inquired, winding an index finger nervously in the telephone cord. She imagined herself blurting out the gist of her own situation. *Guess what? I’m in love with a vampire.*

Wendy’s voice was bubbly and cheerful, like always. “Well, the police in Timber Cove did call to say my cabin in Maine had been reduced to ashes. I’ll have it rebuilt with the insurance check. What are you doing in London, anyway?”

Neely suppressed an urge to tell all.

Of course, she didn’t talk about Aidan, or his mysterious mission, or the other vampires who threatened to demolish any whisper of a chance that they could ever be happy together. “You’ve read about the big scandal stateside, involving Senator Hargrove and the drug cartel, haven’t you?”

Wendy laughed. “All I read is *Variety* these days, and Shakespeare.” She paused, and there was a worried note in her voice when she went on. “Sounds like pretty dangerous stuff. Are you okay, Neely?”

Her friend’s concern warmed Neely, reassured her that there were still regular people in the world, affectionate, funny people who didn’t believe in the Undead.

“I’m terrific,” Neely lied, feeling her hard-won facade starting to slip. “I’ll explain it all tomorrow.”

“Great,” Wendy responded. “Now remember, twelve-thirty at Willy-Nilly’s.”

“I’ll remember,” Neely promised. But a nervous tremor struck her as she hung up the receiver, there in Maeve’s august study, a new and very frightening feeling came over her—the absolute conviction that someone was watching her.

Now, she thought with bravado, if I can just make it to tomorrow.

This time the Brotherhood did not mistreat Aidan physically, though his mental powers and his emotional strength were both severely tested.

He was given an austere chamber in the cellar of a remote hunting lodge in Scotland and allowed to come and go as he pleased, feed in his own way, and wear his own clothes.

Each night, however, as soon as he’d fed, Aidan was expected to present himself in the lodge’s main hall, where he sat in a great carved chair of medieval oak, facing the five members of the tribunal.

The elders lined a long wooden table, sometimes just staring at Aidan, but mostly they interrogated him. They asked seemingly limitless questions about every corner and facet of his life, explored his most private thoughts and beliefs with their probing minds. Since there was nothing Aidan could do to stop them, for his puny powers were laughable beside theirs, he endured the inspection as patiently as he was able.

The experience was intensely painful on a psychic level, and the Brotherhood made no particular effort to be merciful. They saw Aidan as a potential threat to themselves and all other vampires, and half of them argued openly and heatedly for an immediate execution. That, the angry ones claimed, would settle the problem once and for all.



Others, however—Tobias among them—spoke for simple justice. Tremayne had not, after all, committed any crime, and surely he should not be destroyed on the mere speculation that *hemight* betray the others. Besides, if he passed through the ancient purging process—even in his suffering, Aidan was jubilant to learn that such a process existed at all—his memory of life among blood-drinkers would vanish, along with all the powers and demands of vampirism.

The group seemed to be deadlocked, and there came a time when Aidan's impatience and fear and unceasing mental pain made him reckless. He finally demanded some answers of his own.

"Tell me," he dared, believing he had nothing to lose, on the twelfth night of the inquisition, "which of you would make a vampire of a mortal man, if that man did not ask you to do so?"

The five members of the court turned to each other and communicated for several minutes. He did not hear what they were saying because they veiled their words by some mysterious means of their own. There was much Aidan didn't know about vampires, for all his two hundred years among them, because he'd spent most of that time rebelling against his fate.

Finally the archaic creature on the far right stroked his white beard and muttered, "There is no ordinance among us forbidding the making of new vampires, be the mortals involved willing or unwilling. I personally would like to witness the results of such an experiment as we speak of here, however, and for that reason I vote that we allow it."

Aidan started to speak, but the elder cut him off with a look and a warning. "The process is extremely painful, and most dangerous. It is possible, for example, that the silver cord connecting your spirit to your physical being will be severed during the transformation. If this happens, you will be neither vampire nor mortal, and it may be that such a fate is even worse than the Judgment of Heaven."

There was a hush in the great chamber, for this was an eventuality inherently feared by every vampire, warlock, shade, and specter.

Aidan rose slowly from his chair, gripping the armrests.

weakened by the ordeal and all that had gone before it. He did not dare to think of Neely, though her image was safely hidden in his heart, sustaining him, giving him courage, making it possible to bear the pain of the Brotherhood's unmerciful poking and prodding.

"How?" he whispered. "How is it done?"

"Be seated," ordered one of the elders, obviously stunned by such audacity on the part of a mere fledgling.

"I will not," Aidan answered, standing squarely now. He was trembling inwardly, and there was an echo in his brain—*difficult... painful... dangerous*. He didn't care about those things; what was important was that the transformation was *possible*. Besides, the name nestled in his heart made him bold. "I have cooperated with you. I have answered your questions and opened my mind, my very spirit, for your inspection. Now you must tell me how to become a man again!"

More murmuring ensued, then another member of the vampire court stood and rounded the table. He wore coarse, monklike robes that rustled when he walked, and had long, flowing red hair and fierce features.



“In early times on Atlantis,” he said ponderously, “great medical experiments were carried out. Scientists discovered a means of immortality, through a change in the chemistry of the blood, and we, the first vampires, were created by a special system of transfusion. We thought, in the beginning, that our—appetites—could be satisfied intravenously. Soon, however, we learned that it was not so. We had to drink the blood of living beings or perish of a terrible starvation.

“Some chose this fate, rather than prey upon man-creatures, while others allowed the sunlight to burn them to ashes. Most of us, however, chose to go on, for it was eternal life we sought in the first place.”

Aidan listened, and waited, with all his being.

“We escaped the Catastrophe because of our unique powers and brought some of the knowledge with us. Alas, much was lost. There is an antidote for what is to you a curse, and to us a blessing. One receives a transfusion, after the blood has been treated with several chemicals and herbs. The experiments were interrupted by the great Disaster that befell our beloved continent, but some things are known. For one, the procedure is an enervating ordeal, probably as painful as being staked out to burn.”

Aidan did not flinch. No suffering could be worse than what he already felt. He loved a human woman and dared not be close to her, and he drank blood to survive. He clung to life with an involuntary fervor, and yet he called himself monster—abomination—devil.

“I don’t care,” he said hoarsely after a long and echoing silence. “I will risk anything—suffer any torment—to be a man again!”

The vampire who had been speaking—none of them, besides Tobias, had deigned to give Aidan their names—uttered a sigh and turned to stare at his comrades for a long moment. Then he looked upon Aidan again.

“Be aware, fledgling, that should this mad enterprise succeed, you will indeed be wholly human. You will live an undetermined number of years, you will grow old and sick, and *you will die*. With the transformation you will lose all the special powers you possess now and, gradually, all memory of those abilities as well. In time you won’t even believe in us any longer.”

Aidan said nothing.

“You must also remember,” the older vampire went on, seeming stunned and bewildered by Aidan’s determination, “that when you perish, as all men must perish, you will then face eternity—either oblivion or the wrath of a God we all rightly fear.”

Aidan nodded. Hidden away, in a secret fold of his being, was the hope that with the transformation would come some sort of absolution. All sensible creatures, good and evil, trembled at even the mention of God, but was He not known for forgiveness and mercy, as well as damnation and fiery rage?

“I’ll take my chances,” Aidan said.

The elder sighed again, heavily. “Very well. Such a thing cannot be undertaken lightly, however, and we must debate the matter further among ourselves. We will send Tobias when we have reached a decision.”

“Thank you,” Aidan replied with cool dignity. He wanted to scream with frustration and impatience, but of course, to give free rein to such emotions would be foolhardy. He rose again from the chair, turned,

and walked out of the hall without once looking back.

Outside, in the rich black-velvet embrace of the night, he allowed Neely's cherished image to rise from his spirit into his mind.

He wondered how he had come to love her, while no other woman had touched his heart in all his two centuries of living, and knew that there was no real answer. Why did any man or immortal fall in love with another? It was a timeless mystery that would probably never be solved, and in any case, he didn't care. All that mattered to him was the shining, eternal reality that his soul was somehow linked with Neely's, and that as long as he existed as a conscious being, in whatever form, inhabiting whatever part of the vast universe, he would love, adore, *worship* this one woman.

He had forgotten that intense thoughts of Neely would either draw her to his side or carry him to hers, and thus he was surprised to find himself in the elegant bathroom adjoining one of Maeve's guest rooms. Neely sat in the tub up to her chin in soap bubbles.

She gave a little squawk when she saw him, and for a moment he thought she was going to slide right under the water. "What are you doing here?" she sputtered, sending suds skittering with her breath. For all her shock at seeing him, there was a light in her dark sprite's eyes that said she was glad of his appearance.

Aidan shrugged. "I might ask the same thing of you, love," he answered somewhat gruffly. His adoration of her swelled inside him, like another being trying to burst through his skin. It was a sweet agony, and he wondered that he'd never dreamed, in two hundred years, that it was even possible to cherish one woman so thoroughly, so hopelessly.

He saw her love for him in her wonderful eyes and knew it for an emotion as elemental as his own. Such joy, such beauty—what an irony that it might well be doomed.

"Maeve invited me here," she explained in an uncertain voice. "In case you're wondering. I came by plane. Look Ma, no magic."

Aidan chuckled, and the sound held both marvel and despair. At no time had he ever yearned more desperately to be a man again than he did in those moments. If he had been he would have taken off his clothes, climbed into that big bathtub, and made love to Neely until there was nothing left for either of them to give to the other, but he was not a man. He was a fiend, and he was afraid that if she saw his body, pale and statuelike in its hardness, she would be repulsed.

He leaned against the framework of the bathroom door with an indolent impudence that was wholly feigned, his arms folded, one eyebrow slightly elevated. "I didn't know you and Maeve were acquainted."

"We're not, really," Neely answered, making nervous waves under the water by flapping her hands back and forth. "She claimed this would be a safe place for me to stay—I guess it's the old trick of hiding in the open—lest any of your vampire friends decide they want me instead of a V-8. There is, of course, a glaring possibility that she just wants to kill me personally, so she knows the job has been done right."

Aidan shoved splayed fingers through his hair. "Maeve won't do you any harm," he said with quiet certainty.

“Don’t be so sure,” Neely responded, and very quickly, too. “She worships the ground you walk on, and she also thinks I’m the worst thing that could have happened, not only to you, but to the whole vampire community.” She drew a deep breath and let it out again, sending more soapsuds tumbling, and looked at Aidan warily out of the side of her eye as she reached for a sponge on the tiled shelf bordering the tub. “Did you ever like being a vampire, Aidan? Even for a moment?”

He sat down on the lid of the commode, resting his forearms on his knees and leaning toward Neely. She was watching him now, with a fragile hope in her eyes. “There was never a time when I didn’t want to be a man, if that’s what you mean,” he answered. “I did enjoy making love to you, and I will always cherish the memory of the night we danced on a carpet of stars.”

Tears glimmered along her dense lashes. “Can you— can you make love to me again—this time in the regular way?”

Aidan felt his heart splinter and fall into assorted pieces. “It’s possible—mechanically, if you’ll excuse the expression—but—”

“But what?” She sounded impatient. Irritated. “You said yourself that you’re not afraid of—of biting my neck anymore, and we almost made love once, if you’ll remember. Is it that you don’t want me, Aidan? Is it because I don’t look and feel like a vampire?”

“No,” he said, his voice gravelly with the frustration of wanting her so much and, at the same time, struggling to keep himself from indulging. “It’s because/ do look and feel like a vampire.”

She stared at him, her gamine eyes even rounder than usual. “I don’t care,” she said. She raised one toe out of the water and poked at the spigot with it. “What if I said the whole idea turns me on a little? Hell, call me kinky, it turns me *ona lot* !”

He averted his gaze, for although he knew this woman thoroughly, her frankness still surprised him. His last experience with love had happened in the eighteenth century, after all, when young ladies of Neely’s quality and station would have burned at the stake before admitting to such an attraction.

“Neely,” he reasoned finally, making himself meet her eyes again. “Even though I would never willingly hurt you, I am much stronger than you are, and I want you in a way that is almost frenzied. In my passion I might not be gentle.”

“What if I say I’m willing to risk it?” she asked in a tremulous tone.

Aidan felt conflicting urges to laugh and cry. “Then I would reply that you are a damnably stubborn, if very beautiful, woman.”

Neely just looked at him, full of defiance, silently daring him to take her.

In spite of himself, in spite of the ordeal he faced and all his misgivings, Aidan laughed. An instant later he had composed his features into a solemn expression.

Then he simply held out one hand to her.

She blushed furiously, and the very splendor of her made his soul ache within him. She rose, dripping soapsuds and water, and their fingers intertwined.

In order to lighten the moment a little, Aidan glanced at the tub and mentally pulled the plug. A gurgling sound ensued, but Neely wouldn't be distracted by showmanship; she wanted, plainly and simply, to be taken to bed.

Even the prospect filled Aidan with ecstasy, but now that he had made the decision to express his love to Neely in the most intimate way possible, he would not be hurried.

He stepped back to allow her to pass into the bedroom before him, and she did so regally, with all the haughty dignity of some beautiful pagan queen. Her skin was still wet and shiny from her bath; it would be slippery to the touch.

Once Neely was standing beside the bed, however, she lost some of her aplomb. She was, for all her bluster, a virtual innocent where such matters were concerned— even if she'd been with a thousand men, she would have been pure, for her spirit was the sterling sort, rare as golden pearls—and Aidan thought his adoration for her would be his undoing, so intense was it.

He went to her instead of touching her mentally from across the room, as he might have done had he not been so thoroughly bewitched. And when he stood face to face with her, so close that he could literally feel the beat of her heart in his own senses, she reached out and began lifting his heavy fisherman's sweater up, revealing his midsection, then his chest. Finally she pulled the garment off over his head and tossed it aside.

Aidan braced himself for her horror when she saw the alabaster whiteness of his chest, but it never came, instead there was a sort of reverent tenderness in her eyes as she touched him, spreading her soft palms over musculature as hard as the finest marble.

She looked up at him in loving surprise. "Oh, Aidan," she whispered. "You're so beautiful—it's like touching one of Michelangelo's sculptures."

He was unbearably moved by her acceptance—he was the Beast being transformed by the Beauty's tenderness—and he feared for a moment that he would break down and weep. But then Neely opened his trousers and boldly stroked him. Aidan's senses, all of them, were infinitely keener than any mortal's, and he groaned in ecstatic misery as she grew even more brazen and closed her strong fingers around his staff. When she teased the tip with the pad of her thumb, he thought he would go wild with the need of her, but he took care to remember that she was flesh and blood, that the bones and tissue beneath her moist, supple skin were fragile. He drew her close against him and kissed her, softening his lips by a trick of the mind, and knew a stunning joy when she whimpered in pleasure and fell onto the bed, pulling him with her, as eager and wild as a female panther in her season.

Aidan kissed her deeply, once, twice, a third time, but his control was tenuous indeed, for he felt as though he'd dreamed of this woman, yearned for her, since the foundation of the world.

He tasted her breasts, frantically, and delighted in her cries of pleasure as he nipped at their hard, sweet little peaks.

"Take me," Neely pleaded finally. "Oh, Aidan, take me, or I'll die—"

He found the musky, warm entrance to her body and prodded gently with his rod, as much to warn her of its size and its hardness as to tease her into wanting him even more.

"Now, then," Aidan said gruffly as he glided slowly, carefully into Neely's tight depths, "we can't have

you passing on for want of something I would so willingly give you—”

She clutched at his shoulders, spread her fingers over his chest, stroked his buttocks in fevered urging. “Aidan,” she whimpered. “Do it to me—really do it to me—”

He began to move upon her, and her magic encompassed him, and her sweet sorcery tormented him, and he was a man again, not a fiend. His tears—tears born of a joy so fierce he feared he could not contain it—fell softly on her cheekbones and sparkled like diamonds in her hair.

Neely arched beneath him, pleading, in stark Anglo-Saxon terms, for what he and he alone could give her. And when she came, Aidan climaxed as well, and lost his mind in a maelstrom of light and sound and pleasure so intense that it seemed, for a few moments at least, that he had been pardoned and admitted to Heaven after all.

“I love you,” she whispered breathlessly when their love-making was over and they lay still, their limbs entangled.

Aidan kissed her forehead, wanting to hold the truth at bay as long as he could. “And I love you,” he answered. “Whatever happens, Neely, I want you to remember that.”

Her fingers traced a pattern on his chest, and she gave a combination sigh and moan, since they were still joined and he was still steely. The tip of his staff rested against that very sensitive place deep within her, the one scientists had only just given a name to, though lovers had known of it forever.

“Can I—can you—?” Neely paused, and gave an involuntary shiver of rising pleasure. “Can we make a baby together, Aidan? Is that possible?”

Aidan felt a grief as expansive as his earlier jubilation. “No,” he said raggedly, grateful that he could not plant an abomination such as himself in the receptive, nurturing flesh of a mortal woman.

She stirred again, her body deliciously soft under his, and spoke shyly, breathlessly. “I—I think I need you again—” He rotated his hips, and she gasped and clutched at his shoulders. Soon the maiden had turned into a demanding little wench once more, and Aidan marveled at the way she abandoned herself to pleasure and at the same time gave it with such generosity.

Aidan loved Neely again and again that night, until she was exhausted, her lush body flexing with climaxes even in sleep. He withdrew from her gently, kissed both her plump, well-suckled breasts, and rose from the bed. For a time he stood there in the moonlight, admiring her, worshiping her, lusting after her even though she had satisfied him over and over.

He sat in a chair near the bed and watched over Neely, a guardian angel from the wrong side of the universe. Aidan did not leave Neely’s side until just before dawn, when he took himself off to the dark chamber in Maeve’s cellar.

There he crouched against the wall, lowered his head, and slept.

Far away in his lair, within the crumbling ruins of the abbey, Valerian stirred uneasily in his own comalike slumber. She had found him, he could feel her presence stretching over his prone form like a smothering fog.

*Lisette*, he thought, despairing.

Valerian heard her laughter. *So you remember me, do you ?* she trilled, her voice seeming to come from within his skull. *Isn't that touching .*

Having been dormant for several weeks, swallowed whole by his despair, Valerian was feeble. His strength was gone; he had no means of self-defense.

What do you want with me? he asked. We were never lovers. Never friends.

*You poisoned Aidan's mind against me,* Lisette's voice answered, burrowing deeper into Valerian's head like some hard-shelled parasite. *You loved him. Deny it if you dare !*

Valerian's sigh was not physical; it came from the very depths of his spirit. *I deny nothing, least of all my affection for Aidan. I would have died for him .*

How very dramatic. As it happens, my darling, you shall both die. Horribly.

Do what you will to me, Valerian responded, but leave Aidan be. You've already robbed him of the one thing he held most dear, his humanity. How can you ask more?

The whole of the supernatural world seemed to quake with the ferocity of Lisette's fury. Her final words reverberated through Valerian's wasted soul. *I ask. And I will not be denied .*

## Chapter 15

Neely awakened bemused, hardly daring to believe that Aidan had truly visited her the night before, fearing that she might have dreamed the entire encounter. Whether real or strictly fantasy, however, the experience had left her with a vibrant sense of well-being, and she was already up when Mrs. F. knocked at the door of the suite and entered with a tray.

The housekeeper took in the princess's skirt and the soft blue sweater Neely wore with it, and smiled. "Very nice," she confirmed. "Are you going out again today, then?"

Neely nodded. She wanted to visit at least one museum before her lunch date with Wendy Browning and Wendy's boyfriend, Jason.

Mrs. F. set down the tray and glanced toward the windows, where a gray mist was shifting and flowing, a cloud come to earth. "Well, it's typical London weather we're having, and that's for certain. Have a care that you dress warmly, miss, because an English wind will go straight to your marrow and take hold there, if you let it."

"I'll be very careful," Neely promised, feeling at once mellow and energetic. She knew a fresh, fragile new hope that things would be all right, though she couldn't imagine how.

By the time Neely left the house for a waiting cab, having fortified herself with one of Mrs. F.'s substantial breakfasts, the wind was mixed with icy slush, and the charcoal skies promised snow. The trip into the heart of the city was harrowing because of the narrow, perilously slick roads, and Neely felt lucky to be alive when she finally stepped out onto the sidewalk in front of a famous art museum.



She paid the driver hastily, rushed up salted stone steps, and, inside the building, paused to rub her reddened ears with her palms in an attempt to restore circulation.

“Good morning,” a gracious gray-haired woman said from behind a podium. “We ask all our visitors to sign our guest book.”

Neely nodded, handed over the price of admittance, and signed with a flourish. When she stepped into the museum itself, she was stricken by a kind of delighted reverence. It had been a long while since Neely had visited such a place.

She viewed sculpture and paintings of various sorts, along with furniture from the medieval period and pottery from the time of the Romans. Neely indulged herself that day, reading every sign and studying each piece closely, and before she knew it the morning was gone.

She had about twenty minutes to find Willy-Nilly’s, the club where she and Wendy and Jason were to meet for lunch, but even so, Neely didn’t rush. There were still some tapestries she wanted to see.

The first three were pretty prosaic—plump, cherry-cheeked maidens with flowing hair and crowns of flowers, frolicking with unicorns, angels, or fairies—but the fourth creation all but wrenched Neely forward onto the balls of her feet.

She stared up at the eight-by-twelve-foot hand-loomed tapestry in amazed fascination. It showed a beautiful, dark-haired woman—plainly Maeve Tremayne—enfolded in the flowing cape of a handsome vampire—plainly Valerian. There was a castle or an old monastery in the background, along with an oak forest so realistically wrought that delicate veins were visible in the leaves on the trees.

Neely raised one hand to her mouth, both fascinated and repulsed. She studied Maeve’s face, creamy white with the merest hint of pink in her cheeks, and saw joy in the wide blue eyes, as well as a touch of fear.

The tapestry was a cruel reminder that there was much to be resolved before Aidan and Neely could hope to share a life; it left her stricken and supplanted her lingering satisfaction with the old, familiar terror.

“Isn’t it magnificent?” asked a woman standing beside Neely, startling her anew. Neely was flustered and would have babbled if she could have spoken at all, which she couldn’t. She bit her lower lip and nodded instead.

The woman, wearing a severe brown dress, pearls, and a name tag that identified her as Mrs. Baxter, an employee of the museum, smiled, showing large grayish teeth that arched high into mauve-colored gums. “This tapestry is close to two centuries old, you know. We’ve taken great pains to preserve it.”

Neely finally found a fragment of her voice. “It’s— it’s—”

“It’s quite horrible,” said Mrs. Baxter cheerfully. “But the weaving itself reveals an almost supernatural talent, don’t you think?” She paused, studying the ominous work of art solemnly. “One would almost believe in vampires, when looking upon such a piece.”

“Almost,” Neely agreed, shaken. She knew from Aidan’s journals that it had been Valerian who had transformed Maeve from a woman to a vampire, and that Maeve had wanted to be changed. Still, it was



jarring to see a near-perfect rendering of the actual event, as if the moment were frozen in time, existing, always, as an unutterably tragic truth.

It was knowing that the art depicted a very real event—that the travesty had happened before and would happen again, no doubt—that nearly crushed Neely's spirit on the spot.

She made her way out into the museum lobby, fearing she would either vomit or faint, her program rolled tightly in one sweaty hand, and found a fountain. After several sips of tepid water, she felt a little better and, by means of grim resolve, set out to find Willy-Nilly's.

She had to keep functioning, stay in touch with the ordinary world, give herself time to assimilate facts she had been taught since infancy to regard as fables.

A blizzard greeted her at the threshold of the museum's outer door, and Neely was actually grateful for its biting chill. She drew the shocking cold into her lungs and was a bit less light-headed.

There were no cabs, but fortunately the combination club and restaurant she sought was only a few blocks away. By the time Neely rushed down a set of stone steps "to a basement establishment swelling with music, she was numb.

Wendy was there, however, smiling her brilliant smile, her long auburn hair gleaming under the fluorescent lights. Wearing a funky black chiffon dress, a flowered vest, and high-top shoes from some thrift store, she looked delightfully theatrical.

They embraced, and Wendy's dark blue eyes shone as she introduced her tall, handsome actor-student-bartender boyfriend, Jason Wilkins.

Neely felt sane again, and real. She knew the sensation might be temporary, but she grasped it and held on tightly.

Over mugs of dark amber beer and orders of fish and chips served on newspaper and sprinkled with malt vinegar, Wendy and Neely chatted, being sure to include Jason in their conversation. Wendy described her life in London, then propped one elbow on the table, cupped her chin in her hand, and demanded, "Okay, so what was this you mentioned on the telephone, about the senator and some drug cartel?"

Neely drew a deep breath, then told the story, beginning with her first suspicions, a year after going to work as Senator Hargrove's assistant, that something shady was happening. She told of copying files, letters, and memos, and finally turning everything over to the FBI.

Wendy's eyes were bigger than ever. "They didn't help you?"

"I approached the wrong people the first time. The evidence I gave them probably went no further than the office shredder."

"Did you contact the police?" Jason asked.

Neely shook her head. "No. After the debacle with the Bureau, I was afraid to trust anyone else. I hid the duplicates I'd made of everything—" She paused, blushed, then met Wendy's gaze. "I drove to your cottage up in Maine and hid the papers under a floorboard in the shed. Then I took a bus to Bright River, Connecticut, where my brother lives. I wanted to lay low for a while, for obvious reasons."

“Maybe it wasn’t smart to go straight to Ben that way,” Wendy observed. If she’d caught the connection between Neely’s purloined evidence, the cartel’s determination to silence her, and the explosion that had leveled the cottage, she didn’t let on. “I mean, that would be the first place they’d look.”

“I know.” Neely sighed. “I wasn’t thinking straight—I was so scared and confused.” She would leave the most astounding part of the story—falling wildly in love with a true vampire—for another time. Say, some future incarnation, when such phenomena might be commonplace.

With regret Wendy glanced at her watch. “As fascinating as this is,” she told Neely, “Jason and I have a class in ten minutes.” She nodded toward the narrow windows that afforded a view of passing feet and deepening snow. “Have you noticed that we’re having the storm of the century? You’d better stay in the city tonight—public transportation will be hell.”

Neely nodded distractedly; a little snow was the least of her problems.

“I’d invite you to stay at my flat, but all I’ve got is a fold-out couch,” Wendy said, rising from her chair. Jason helped her into her coat before donning his own, and Neely felt a stab of envy. Jason and Wendy were living ordinary lives, sharing days as well as nights. They would probably grow old together, unlike Neely and Aidan; only Neely would age. Aidan was immortal, for all practical intents and purposes, though he was not invulnerable.

Neely said good-bye and promised to call soon, and then her friends were gone, and she felt as if she’d been abandoned in an empty universe.

All her carefully cultivated bravado deserted her.

She toyed with the remains of her french fries for a while, then left the restaurant to brave the frigid streets. She rented the last available room in a shabbily elegant old hotel across the street—apparently quite a few Londoners had decided not to risk the commute—and called Mrs. F. to let her know she wouldn’t be returning that night.

The dotting housekeeper warned her to keep her feet warm and put extra lemon in her afternoon tea, and Neely promised to follow instructions.

After hanging up, she ventured as far as the gift shop in the hotel’s gilt-trimmed lobby, where she purchased several newspapers, that week’s issue of *Time*, and a paperback romance novel. Back in her room she ordered hot tea and biscuits from room service and settled in to wait out the storm.

The air in Valerian’s cramped hiding place fairly throbbed with Lisette’s presence. He felt her energy and her boundless hatred, but he was half-starved now, and far too ill to do battle with such a powerful creature.

She became visible at twilight, curled up beside him, as if they were twins sharing a stony womb. He looked at her bleakly, too spent to speak aloud or with his mind.

It made everything infinitely worse, the fact that Lisette was so beautiful. Valerian had always cherished beauty, whether he found it in a woman-creature or a male, and the reminder that sometimes pure evil was lovely to look upon was like a fresh wound to him.

Lisette laughed, curling a finger playfully under Valerian's chin, where the flesh was paper-thin and dry as fine ash. "So you think me evil?" she chimed in a merry voice. "How very hypocritical of you, Valerian—you, who have always sought pleasure wherever it was to be found."

Slowly, and at great cost, Valerian shook his head. "No," he croaked. "I have no taste for innocence."

She smiled, but her aquamarine eyes were hard with anger. "So very noble," she taunted. "Wasn't the lovely Maeve Tremayne an innocent when you found her? And what of your many and varied lovers, Valerian? Were they all vampires when you seduced them, or were some of them hapless humans who had no idea what sort of fiend they were consorting with?"

Valerian closed his eyes for a moment. "Stop," he rasped. "You will gain nothing by torturing me."

"I will gain everything," Lisette snapped. "And the torture has only begun." With that, she glared at the outer wall of Valerian's narrow lair, and the stones themselves seemed to explode, bursting outward into the purple-gray chill of a winter evening, scabbling onto the ground.

Briefly Valerian yearned for life, and for mercy, but these frail wishes were soon swamped by his despair. What good was there in saving himself, even if he had been able? What right had he, who had fouled what was holy, to live forever?

He did not move but remained curled up inside the crumbling wall.

Lisette scrambled over him, being purposely ungraceful, he was sure, and stood in the soft, powdery snow, the night wind playing in her coppery hair. With a murmur of irritation she reached into the chasm and clasped Valerian in both hands, using her legendary strength to wrench him out like a baby torn too soon from its mother's belly.

He was fragile, like something broken, and lay helpless in her arms, his head against her cold breast. For a time she just stood there, cradling him, crooning some demented lullaby, but then she began to glide over the ground.

They must have traveled that way, a hideous pair abroad on a winter's night, for the greater part of fifteen minutes. Then Valerian recognized the unsanctified ground beyond the outer walls of the abbey, the forgotten place where heretics and murderers had been buried. The weeds and the soft ground had long since swallowed up all but one of two of the few crude markers that had been there in the first place, but Valerian was aware of the moldering skeletons and half mummified corpses beneath the earth, and he shuddered.

Lisette laid him in the center of that desolate place, and he still had no strength to resist. She spread his arms and legs wide of his wasted body and pinned him there, with a mental command, a bond stronger than any steel manacle. He felt the first faint stirrings of fear.

She smiled down at him when she'd completed her work, her arms folded. "Aidan will sense your despair and come to save you like the fool he is. And when he does, I will destroy him."

Valerian moaned, blocking Aidan's image from his mind with the last shreds of his strength. If he didn't cry out to Aidan, didn't think of him, the other vampire might not be drawn into the trap.

Lisette knew Valerian's efforts and laughed, flinging her head back in a fit of mirth. "You're all idiots," she said after the terrible, shrill sound of her amusement had faded away into the night. "Since when do

vampires behave like besotted humans, rescuing each other, pretending to honor and chivalry? Where is your white charger, Valerian?"

Valerian didn't reply. He was losing consciousness; he could feel his spirit seeping into the cold ground, curling like smoke around the bones of the long-dead and eternally unforgiven. As terrible as the experience was, he knew he would long to be as insensate as those corpses when morning came and the sun found him. The hot rays would consume his flesh like a rain of acid, but slowly. Long after his physical body was nothing but a smoldering shell, he would still be imprisoned inside himself, and he would feel agony until his thoughts were snuffed out like the flame of a candle.

And after that he might find himself in Dante's version of Hell, on the threshold of an eternity of suffering.

He groaned aloud at the prospect, and Lisette laughed again, then shrieked into the night sky, "Let all vampires see, and remember, what it means to betray me!"

In the next moment a soft, cool snow began to fall. Flakes covered Valerian's closed eyes, the hollows in his gaunt face and body, and suddenly, vividly, he recalled being a human boy, no older than eight. He remembered the drawing of breath and the steady thump of his heartbeat; he heard his own laughter, felt it in his throat, felt the warm, pliant muscles in his legs as he ran, in just such a snowfall as this.

For the merest fragment of time, Valerian was innocent again. He was free and whole, and the greatest powers of heaven looked upon him with benevolence.

Just before he swooned, a smile touched his mouth.

Aidan awakened in Maeve's cellar, well-rested from a day of slumber and determined to avoid Neely for as long as he possibly could. He knew the Brotherhood was keeping an account of his whereabouts and his actions, allowing him an illusion of freedom while the members decided his fate among themselves, and the last thing he wanted was to draw their attention to the woman he loved.

His soul still hummed with the joy Neely had brought him by offering herself in passion and in trust.

In a blink he transported himself to his room on the second floor of the mansion. He seldom used the chamber, but there were fresh clothes in the wardrobe, and he felt like sprucing himself up. He would hunt in nineteenth-century London, perhaps among the riffraff along the waterfront, and then look in on Valerian. Surely the other vampire would be over his sulk by now, and they could talk. Aidan was eager to tell his friend that it was possible to be mortal again; he wondered if other vampires would step forward and ask to be changed, if he succeeded in making the transformation.

Aidan whistled as he put on his most elegant evening clothes—black trousers with a glistening silk stripe down either leg, a cutaway coat with tails, a ruffled white shirt of the finest linen, a narrow string tie, and a top hat. He wore spats over shiny shoes and completed his ensemble with a long cape lined in gold.

He looked down at himself, decided he looked like a proper vampire, raised his arms above his head, and disintegrated into a wispy vapor.

*I'm going to miss doing that*, Aidan admitted silently when he reassembled himself in a filthy, rat-infested alleyway behind a combination brothel and opium den within a stone's throw of London's waterfront.

Snatches of fog curled around him, around empty crates and whiskey barrels and piles of garbage, like

dancers in a spectral ballet troupe. Aidan sighed and waited; there was a corpse sitting upright, just a few doors down, crouched against a brick wall with its head resting on its updrawn knees.

He shuddered in distaste and tried to ignore the thing, but that was difficult. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the ghost rise from the body, heard it wail in despairing protest.

Suddenly it flew at Aidan, a bluish-gray blob of wavering light, keening and shrieking. The creature was—or had been until about half an hour before—a seagoing lad, barely fifteen years of age. He'd been robbed of the few pence he possessed, then stabbed under the ribs with a fisherman's knife.

"Go on," Aidan told it, speaking kindly but in a tone that would brook no argument. "There is nothing for you here. Look around you for the Light, and follow where it leads." He was no more certain that there was an afterlife than the shade itself was, he supposed. He said the words because he had heard his mother say them to a dying man when he, Aidan, was a small boy. The unlucky fellow had gotten in the way of a runaway coach, and his legs, pelvis, and rib cage had been crushed beneath the horses' hooves and the wheels, but he'd taken comfort from a tavern maid's pretty assurances and passed on peacefully.

Aidan was just about to move along when a great, loud hoyden of a woman burst through a rear doorway, dragging a gawky, half-starved child along with her. Gripping the young girl's hair—she was twelve, Aidan saw, by glancing briefly into her mind—the drunken harridan flung her victim hard against the brick wall.

The child sobbed, almost hysterical, as helpless as an animal with one limb in a trap. She'd stolen from the kitchen, a piece of bread, a crumbling morsel of moldy cheese, and the woman had caught her.

"Now I'll box your ears for you!" the drudge shrilled. "See if you dare steal from Dorcus Moody again, you workhouse brat!"

Aidan stepped out of the shadows, resplendent in his gentleman's clothes, and both the old witch and the child stared at him, obviously confounded.

"What is your name?" he asked the girl gently.

Mistress Moody did not move, for Aidan had frozen her in place.

"Effie," came the whispered response.

"You took the cheese and bread for your mother," Aidan said, having already discerned the fact.

Effie nodded.

"She's sick."

The child nodded again. "We got throwed out of the workhouse—my brother made trouble when one of the blokes as looked out for us there tried to put his hand down me dress."

Aidan gestured for Effie to wait, slipped inside the tavern's gloomy kitchen, and gathered up two loaves of bread, a block of cheese, and a joint of venison. After dropping the loot into a cloth sack, he brought it outside and silently offered it to the girl.

Dorcus Moody was still facing the wall with one meaty hand raised to slap, eyes staring, muscles as rigid

as if rigor mortis had set in.

Effie snatched the bag of food, turned on her bare feet, which were blue with cold and encrusted with the filth of the street, and ran, without giving Aidan, Mistress Moody, or the sailor's corpse a second look.

Aidan walked around Dorcus Moody's hulking frame and smiled into her senseless face. She had a wart beside her nose, and a thin trail of spittle trickled down her chin.

"May I have this dance?" Aidan asked with a slight bow. He put his hands on her, as if for a waltz, then bent his head to her jugular vein and drank.

He left her beside the dead sailor, staring witlessly into space, her pulse thready but regular. She was a vile creature, was Mistress Moody, Aidan observed to himself as he walked away, but her blood was as potent as a fine Madeira.

He turned, there in the gloom of the alley, and took his hat off to her. "May you live to nourish another vampire, Gentle Dorcus," he said.

She made a soft, whimpering sound, low in her throat.

The image struck Aidan from out of nowhere as he left the alley; he saw Valerian, staked to the ground in some snowy cemetery, awaiting the dawn.

Aidan muttered a curse, then focused all his powers into one single thought. *Valerian !*

The reply was faint, but it formed instantly in Aidan's mind. *Stay away. I beg you, stay away !*

Aidan was on the point of ignoring the injunction and seeking Valerian out in the same way he would have sought Maeve, or Neely, when someone on the fringe of a passing mob of drunken swabs bumped into him, hard.

"I wouldn't if I were you," Tobias said good-naturedly. "You could never save Valerian alone."

Tobias was right, but Aidan could not turn his back, even though the scale was balanced between himself and Valerian, and all debts had been canceled. Yes, the other vampire had cared for him when he was ill, nourished him, even brought Neely to his side, but Aidan had saved Valerian once, too, after the attempt to travel too far back in time.

"I can't leave him to burn," Aidan answered.

"Suppose I told you that you have one chance to become a man again, and that you must take that opportunity now, this moment, or lose it for all of eternity?" Tobias asked in a reasonable tone. He, too, wore evening clothes, and the two of them strolled down the street together, an odd sight indeed in that grim, desolate part of London.

Aidan thought of Neely, of all his dreams. He wanted to come to her as a man, not a monster. He wanted to lie beside her in a real bed, make love to her as often as possible, and work in the sunlight every day, until his skin glistened with sweat and his muscles ached. He wanted to vote and attend PTA meetings and drink beer on the beach and complain about taxes.



For all of that, he still could not desert Valerian. Aidan knew only too well that, if their positions were reversed, the older vampire would try to help him.

“I guess I’d say I have rotten luck, and you and the Brotherhood have lousy timing,” Aidan finally replied. “So long, Tobias.”

With that, he did his vanishing number, and almost immediately found himself standing on the ruined wall of an old abbey. His cape floated in the wind, in true vampire tradition, and Aidan felt a certain bitter amusement. Damned if Valerian hadn’t found a way to screw up his plans after all, even if it had been an inadvertent move.

Aidan focused his powers into a single invisible beam and found Valerian almost immediately. He was on the hillside, well beyond the outermost wall of the abbey, and he was helpless.

“Damn,” Aidan said. He closed his eyes, opened them again, and found Valerian spread-eagle at his feet.

The other vampire seemed delirious, drifting in and out of consciousness, and when he saw Aidan crouched beside him, he moaned. “I told you,” he rasped, “to stay away. She’s—she’s here—waiting.”

“Lisette,” Aidan said. “Yes, I figured as much.”

Just then, a weird, shrill music filled the cold night air, and Aidan raised his eyes from his stricken friend to see Lisette pirouetting gracefully atop a crude stone slab.

Valerian began to weep. “Why, Aidan—why did you come? I could have borne anything but what she will do to you—”

“Stop whining,” Aidan instructed him lightly. He discerned the mental bonds that held his friend, tried them with his mind, and found them strong. “If there’s one thing I truly despise, it’s a sniveling vampire.”

Lisette ceased her hideous dance and held out her arms to Aidan. She seemed to waver in her white, shroudlike robe, a specter with substance.

“Come waltz with me, my precious.”

Aidan approached her. He supposed he should have been scared, but he was well beyond that, well beyond cold terror and even outright panic. A strange calm possessed him. If he was never to be a man again, never to hold Neely in his arms, then he wanted to perish.

“Release Valerian. You have no quarrel with him.”

Lisette pouted prettily, and Aidan recalled an innocent time when he had believed her to be a flesh-and-blood woman and had taken unabashed pleasure in her embrace. “I do have a quarrel with him,” she insisted. “He plotted to be your companion for all of eternity!”

“He’s since found me uncooperative. Let him go, Lisette.”

She pirouetted again on top of the gravestone, her auburn tresses blackened by the gloom, moving like living strands woven of the night itself. She laughed, and the sound was silvery, sparkling, and brimming with madness.



“Foolish boy,” she scolded. “Valerian is going to die screaming with the sunrise, and so are you, my sweet darling.”

It was not an idle threat, but Aidan was still calm. If his existence was to end this way, then so be it. No doubt, from a cosmic point of view, his fate was a just one. “I thought you wanted to dance with me,” he said evenly.

Lisette descended to stand facing Aidan in the snow. There was a mischievous glint in her cool blue eyes. “Do you imagine for a moment, Aidan Tremayne, that I don’t know when I’m being patronized?”

He simply held out his arms as he had long ago, when they had danced on summer grass, under bright stars, and he had not yet guessed what horror he courted.

She batted her thick eyelashes coquettishly, then drifted into Aidan’s embrace. He began to turn around and around, and her shroudlike gown billowed out around them, as did his cape, and after a while Lisette began to hum softly.

He thought, once or twice, of the spectacle they all made—he and Lisette, a pair of monsters, waltzing in a moonlit graveyard, Valerian staked out on the ground like some hapless character in an old Western. Aidan might have laughed, had he dared, but dawn was already approaching, a faint grayish glow shimmered along the horizon.

“You were such a delightful creature in the beginning,” Lisette fretted, running the tip of an index finger from Aidan’s throat to the top of his cummerbund. “I should never have changed you, though. That was my fatal mistake.”

Privately Aidan agreed, although he was glad he’d stayed alive long enough to know Neely. That wouldn’t have happened, of course, if he’d lived out his normal span of years. “Did you create others?” he asked on a sudden hunch. “Valerian, for instance?”

She sighed and tossed a disparaging glance in the other vampire’s direction. “That insufferable pest? I should say not. I don’t know how he was made, much less why, and I don’t care if he screams in hell from now until the end of eternity.”

“Why do you hate him so much?”

“Because he dared to love you.”

“Do you hate yourself as well, then?”

Lisette stopped cold and stared up at Aidan, her face rigid. “I do not love you.”

“I think you do.”

She was silent for a time, utterly motionless, her expression unreadable. “It changes nothing!” she screamed in sudden, wild fury. At the same moment a border of golden light formed between earth and sky.

It was almost morning.

## Chapter 16

An unearthly shriek rent the air, and Aidan didn't know if Lisette had made the sound, or Valerian, or even he himself. Full sunrise was minutes, perhaps only moments, away, and already he felt as though a miniature fire blazed in every pore. Pain seared his eyes, and he stumbled slightly, blinded.

*Neely*, he thought, involuntarily unleashing all the power of his love for her, of the dreams he'd cherished, and the hopes. The soul-cry was not offered in an effort to save himself—it was surely too late for that—but because he could not bear to leave her.

Whatever his intentions, the name sent him plummeting through time and space, and he landed with a hard thump on a carpeted floor.

He rolled, still unable to see, as the morning sunlight licked at him like the very flames of hell.

"Aidan!" Neely cried, and he was aware that she'd dropped to her knees beside him. "Aidan, what is it?"

"The light," he managed; it was all he could do to speak without screaming.

She bounded away for a moment; he heard a rushing *whoosh* as she yanked the drapery cord to cover the offending window, and he actually chuckled, impressed by her quick thinking, even though he was suffering the purest agony he'd ever imagined.

Neely returned to him, and he felt her hands against him, pushing. He was sheltered beneath something then, and the pain lessened ever so slightly. Still, he could see nothing but the blazing light of the fire that was consuming him.

Aidan lay gasping, realized that the cooling touch of darkness surrounded him, eased the pain. "Where—what is this place?" he whispered.

"You're under my bed at the Majestic Arms Hotel," she answered breathlessly; he could tell she was rushing about, doing something. "Nice of you to pop in."

He made a groaning sound. "This is no time for morbid humor," he said.

She dropped to the floor and crawled under the bed frame to lie beside him. The mischief was gone from her voice; she sounded fragile, worried, and very sad. "Are you going to die?"

"Probably not, thanks to you," Aidan answered. "For someone who hasn't been trained to administer emergency aid to vampires, Neely, you did rather well." He sensed that she wanted to touch him but hesitated because she feared causing him further discomfort.

"I untucked the blankets and sheets from the mattress and arranged them so the light couldn't get in," she said earnestly. She was about to cry, Aidan thought, and he was at once touched that she cared so deeply and fearful that he would find her sorrow even more torturous than the sunlight.

"Very good." He sighed the words. "It feels as if—I'm going to lose consciousness for a time. There

may be changes—please don't be frightened..."

A sheen of tears glistened in her eyes. "Is there anything more I can do?"

"Yes. You can stand guard, so to speak, and make sure I'm not exposed to the sunlight."

She was silent for a few moments and made no move to leave his side. In fact, she cuddled close and cautiously put an arm around him. "There's a storm outside, you know," she finally said. "A blizzard, actually. The sun is mostly hidden."

Aidan was slipping, though he didn't know whether death and judgment awaited him or an ordinary, healing sleep. "A stroke of good fortune, that," he mumbled, "though the light always gets through—no matter what." He opened his eyes, but Neely was only a faint shadow beside him; his vampire vision, ordinarily sharper than a cat's, was gone.

In the next moment oblivion closed around him like dark, cool water.

Aidan might only be resting, and he might be dead of his injuries. Neely had no way of knowing, since the usual signs of life—a heartbeat and breath—didn't apply in this case. Being careful to let in as little light as possible, she slipped from beneath the bed and got to her feet.

The room was gloomy, since she'd closed the drapes and turned out the lights, but it was a poor substitute for the kind of deep, encompassing darkness Aidan needed.

Neely put the DO NOT DISTURB sign on the door and locked the room from the inside, just to be extra careful. Then she snatched all the towels from the bathroom racks and draped them over the sides of the bed, along with the heavy blankets, sheets, and bedspread, in an effort to shelter Aidan as completely as possible. When that was done, she crawled underneath the bed again, on the side opposite the window, and lay beside him, trying by an effort of sheer will to transfer her own strength to him.

The telephone rang once, but Neely ignored it, leaving the improvised lair only when she needed to use the bathroom or get a drink of water. Since she didn't want to leave Aidan, and was even less willing to call room service, Neely breakfasted on half a candy bar, found adrift in the bottom of her purse, and reminded herself there were worse things than an empty stomach.

Like seeing Aidan die, for instance.

Maybe it was the jet lag Mrs. F. had spoken of, but after a while Neely nodded off into a half-sleep and drifted along the moving surface of dreams yet to be dreamed and hopes yet to be recognized.

Maeve awakened at sunset, in the corner of what had once been the abbey's wine cellar, and saw that Tobias was already conscious. Perhaps he had never slept at all; he was a very old vampire, despite his youthful appearance, and she had heard that some of the old ones did not require rest or even very much blood.

She shifted her gaze toward Valerian's prone form. His skin was lumpy and gray, as if bubbles had arisen beneath. He was utterly motionless, and Maeve sensed no vitality in him, no power. "Is he dead?"

Actually she was much more interested in finding out what had happened to her twin, her beloved Aidan, but caution guided her words. She was not used to these elder vampires, did not know enough of their ways and habits to predict the things they might do. This was not the time for a faux pas.

“Perhaps we were too late.”

Tobias laid one hand lightly on Valerian’s disfigured forehead. “He wanders somewhere far from here,” he mused,

“keeping his distance from the pain.”

Maeve shuddered, the memory of the nightmare unspooling itself in her mind in the course of seconds. She had sensed Aidan’s distress, being so attuned to him, and raced from her den, where she’d been about to settle down for the day, to find her brother on the hillside behind the old abbey.

If she lived to be a thousand, Maeve reflected, she would never forget the terror of reaching his side, only moments before the sunrise. Seeing Lisette, she’d screamed in fear and rage.

Maeve had heard, or perhaps only felt, Aidan’s cry. *Neely*. In the next instant, he was gone, utterly vanished, and then Lisette had fled as well.

“Come,” a voice had commanded from behind her. “Quickly!”

Maeve had whirled, seen the stranger crouched beside Valerian’s inert body, watched mutely as he lifted the fallen one into strong arms. She’d felt the first acid sting of the sunlight then, and hurried to the other vampire’s side.

The next thing she remembered was the blissful, chilly safety of the wine cellar. There she had learned that Valerian’s rescuer, and perhaps hers as well, was called Tobias, and that he was an ancient one, a member of the Brotherhood.

“What of Aidan?” she whispered now as the night stirred around them. Indeed, she could withhold the question no longer. “Where is he?”

Tobias arched an eyebrow. “Don’t you know? The two of you are twins, are you not? Linked by some unseen and unbreakable cord?”

Maeve’s eyes burned, but she told herself that was only a residual effect of her close call with the sunrise. “It used to be that way,” she said woodenly. “Before—”

“Before the woman?”

Maeve looked away. “Yes. Her name is Neely, and Aidan is a fool for her.”

“I know,” Tobias said easily. “He was never meant for this life in the first place, in my opinion. He thinks too much like a mortal.”

“Yes,” Maeve agreed sadly. Eternity yawned ahead of her like a great void, and she knew some of Valerian’s fathomless despair, though she had been slightly contemptuous of it before. She had become a vampire to keep from losing Aidan, but now it appeared that it had all been for naught. Even if he had escaped Lisette and found safety somewhere, he was bent on either destroying himself completely or becoming human again. The very fact that she couldn’t locate him in her mind meant he was veiling himself from her.

“Tell me, please. Where is my brother?”

Tobias sighed. “London, I believe. It was a near miss for him, and he’s blinded—though that condition is probably temporary—but the woman is looking after him.”

Maeve’s relief was so great that she nearly swooned under the force of it. “What will happen now?”

The other vampire shrugged. “Nothing has been decided, really. There are those in the Brotherhood who want to agree to the experiment, merely for the sake of learning. Others feel that rebellious vampires should simply be destroyed, for the protection of all, and as an example to those who would digress from our code.”

“I see,” Maeve whispered. So there *was* a way to be mortal once more, and Aidan had found it. Inwardly she grappled with the staggering realities of what her brother meant to attempt.

“In either case, Maeve,” Tobias said kindly, “there is nothing you can really do besides accept whatever course he chooses.”

“And Lisette?”

Tobias sighed. “I must go now,” he said, nodding toward Valerian, “and hunt for this one, since he cannot hunt for himself. As for Lisette’s whereabouts, I know not, but she has surely taken refuge in some lair. She will not return for a while.”

“Why not?” Maeve asked. She had never feared another vampire, had in fact grown stronger herself with every night’s feeding, exercising her powers, learning, practicing, but she knew Lisette was a dangerous adversary.

“She wants no truck with the Brotherhood,” Tobias said. “And now, adieu.”

With that he was gone, and Maeve was alone with the cobwebs, the rats and spiders, and Valerian’s insensate hulk. She ventured to his side, touched his warped, discolored skin, and remembered a time when she had loved him. Even after she’d come to despise Valerian, she’d thought him beautiful.

“Come back,” she said softly.

One of Valerian’s eyelids twitched, just slightly, but he did not look at her or speak.

She stroked his singed hair, half burned away now, but once so glorious and thick. “You mustn’t leave me, Valerian,” she whispered. “I’ve lost Aidan—I can’t spare you as well.”

The wounded vampire did not stir.

Maeve watched him for a long time, remembering. Soon her own hunger drove her out of the hiding place to hunt.

Night came, finally, and Neely crawled out from under the bed and sat cross-legged on the carpet, biting her nails and waiting for Aidan to rouse. She didn’t think about what she would do if he was dead—weren’t vampires supposed to be immortal?—but she did consider his need for blood.

She even thought of offering him some of her own, though she hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

Ten minutes passed, and there was no ruffling of the edges of the blankets. Neely gathered her courage, lifted the covers, and peeked.

Aidan was gone.

Neely was relieved—surely this meant he was alive—but she was annoyed, too. Why, if it hadn't been for her, that vampire would be nothing but a mysterious pile of ashes waiting to be vacuumed up by the maid, and how had he repaid the favor? By vanishing without so much as a good-bye or a thank-you!

She dropped to her knees and peered under the bed again, just to make sure. There was nothing there, not even a dustbunny.

Soon Neely became restless, her emotions in a tangle, and the half candy bar had long since worn off. She showered, dressed, brushed her teeth, and put the bed back into a semblance of order, so the maid wouldn't speculate, then went out for some fresh air and food.

The night was dark and cold, and, though the storm had abated a little, the great city was still essentially paralyzed. Neely called Mrs. F. again, from a corner pub. She was safe and sound, she told the housekeeper, and taking plenty of extra lemon in her tea.

After eating, and warming herself with said tea, Neely braved the sidewalks again. A part of her wanted to go back to the hotel room and wait for Aidan there, but she discarded the idea. When the time was right, she would see him again.

She bought a ticket to a foreign movie and whiled away a couple of hours in the dark theater, but she never really saw the film itself. She was busy thinking about what it meant to be a vampire, not just to drink blood, but to be a creature of darkness, never stirring into the daylight.

Tears brimmed along Neely's lashes. She was a day person; if she ever traded her flesh and blood for immortality, she would always yearn to see the sun, even as she lived in terror of its rays.

She was pondering this when suddenly the empty seat beside hers was filled.

Wild hope stirred Neely's heart, but in an instant she knew that her visitor was Maeve, not Aidan. The vampire was clad in a hooded cloak of dazzling dark blue velvet, and she brought along with her an ambience all her own, one rife with tension.

"Where is Aidan?" she asked moderately.

"I don't know," Neely answered in a mild state of shock. She'd bought popcorn, but so far she had just held the carton in her lap and played idly with the kernels. She told Maeve about Aidan's sudden appearance the night before, his condition, and her own clumsy efforts to help him.

Maeve was silent for a few moments, probably absorbing the images and emotions Neely's account would stir in a sister's heart. "I see," she said finally.

The remark sounded ambiguous to Neely, but she wasn't foolish enough to say so.

"It was wise, your leaving my house, although I wouldn't have recommended it," Maeve announced presently. "Perhaps this is the safest place for you after all, in the very heart of London, among the

thongs.”

The theater was more than half empty—not much of a throng—but again Neely kept the opinion to herself. “Am I really in such terrible danger?” she asked.

Maeve looked at her in silence for several seconds, then answered gravely, “Yes, you are. After this I recommend that you stay in at night, however. These are, after all, the hours when vampires stalk their prey.”

Neely suppressed a chill. She was well aware that Maeve Tremayne could turn vicious at any moment, like a once-wild wolf thought to be a pet, and tear her apart. “Is there anything you’d like me to say to Aidan if I see him before you do?”

The beautiful creature stiffened, her face glowing pale as alabaster inside the graceful hood of her cloak.

A heartbeat too late, Neely realized her mistake.

Maeve leaned close, so close that Neely squirmed, and whispered, “Aidan and I took root in the same womb. We grew together, each of our hearts beating in perfect unison with that of the other. No one will ever, *ever* displace me in his affections.”

“I don’t want to be his sister,” Neely pointed out, wincing inwardly at her own bravado, especially since it came on the heels of a blunder. Some instinct told her, however, that since she was in for a penny, she might as well be in for a pound. Maeve wasn’t the sort to respect any person less forceful than herself.

“No? And what would you be to him, if you are not willing to become a vampire?”

Neely was defiant, angry that the most basic, the most cherished, of her emotions should be questioned. “I love Aidan. He is a part of me, and I am a part of him. And if he succeeds in making the change, I will be his wife—more than that, his mate, for all of eternity if I have anything to say about it—and I will bear his children.”

Maeve was silent for an uncomfortably long time. “Tell Aidan not to forget the white roses,” she said in a very sad tone, and then she vanished again.

Neely gave up trying to watch the second feature, tossed her popcorn into a trash bin in the lobby, and walked out into the snowy street. Even at that late hour the traffic was still tangled and angry. Accompanied by the sound of honking horns and insults shouted between cars, she hurried back to the hotel.

It was something of a disappointment to find that Aidan had not returned, a conclusion Neely didn’t fully accept until she’d looked under the bed as well as behind the shower curtain and inside the closet.

Unable to sleep, too proud to keep a vigil, Neely opened her romance novel and began to read. She visualized the hero as Aidan and the heroine as herself, and for a brief, tenuous time the story kept her distracted from her own problems.

The return of Aidan’s vision was gradual—the patrons of the Last Ditch Tavern were mere shadows, shifting and swaying—but his other senses compensated quite nicely. He circulated, catching a scent here, picking up a snatch of conversation there.



That night, feeding, and feeding well, was a matter of survival.

Finally he selected his prey, a young thug named Tommy Cook, who made his living snatching purses and holding up the occasional convenience store. Tommy's mind was a greasy, unpleasant place, but Aidan planted an idea there, and it soon bore fruit.

Cook wandered into the gloomy hallway leading to the rest rooms, stopped in front of the cigarette machine, and fumbled in the pockets of his jeans for change.

Aidan closed in, rendered Tommy unconscious with a strategic tap at his nape, and caught him before he slumped to the floor. Though several people passed while Aidan was taking the pint or so of nourishment he needed, no one looked twice, let alone interfered.

Tommy's blood was powerful stuff, like potent wine. Although Aidan hated it, just as he always had, he felt a sweet, dizzying ecstasy, unlike anything he'd experienced before. A moment after he'd hauled Tommy to a chair at a corner table and left him there to sleep it off, however, it was as though someone had just injected him with a syringe full of raw sunlight. He was on fire, but this time his insides burned, not his flesh.

Aidan's knees buckled; he fought to remain upright.

Tommy, stuporous before, was now smiling up at him, his dark, impudent eyes flashing with triumph. Aidan's vision sharpened, dulled, and sharpened again, in sickeningly rapid sequence, and he gripped the table edge to keep from falling.

"What is it, Vampire?" Tommy drawled. "Are you ill?"

*Warlock*, Aidan thought. Too late, he remembered Valerian's injunction to beware of other supernatural creatures when he ventured into such cesspools of consciousness as the Last Ditch Tavern.

Tommy laughed. "Yes," he said.

The pain rose up around Aidan now, as well as within him, like a smothering vapor. He turned, staggered, fell.

The warlock's taunting laughter echoing in his brain, Aidan struggled back to his feet. Mostly by groping, for the vivid world of the night was branded into his injured eyes one moment, hopelessly black the next, he found a side door and thrust himself over the threshold.

He gasped, then fell unconscious into a new, powdery snow.

"Look," said Canaan Havermail, giggling as she pointed a small, chubby finger. "He's a snow angel."

"Do hush!" Benecia hissed as she knelt beside Aidan Tremayne's inert frame and turned him over onto his back. It always made her impatient when Canaan behaved childishly, for she had lived quite four centuries as a vampire, and that was enough to mature anyone. She brushed the soft snow from his scarred but still handsome face and felt a broken yearning in her heart, long since withered and atrophied though it was. She was fond of Aidan, though she hadn't admitted the fact to anyone else, but she could never have him for a lover. In his eyes she was not an adult female with powers equal to and even exceeding his own. Instead he saw her as a monstrous mockery of a child. "We've got to take him to Mother or Aunt Maeve. I believe he's been poisoned."

Canaan sighed, irritated to have the night's adventures interrupted by duty, especially when it was still early. "Oh, bother. What do you suppose it was that got him—a warlock?"

"Probably," Benecia said, speaking tenderly as she lifted Aidan's upper body into her plump, dimpled little arms. "Are you coming with me, or must I do this alone?"

Canaan tapped one delicately shod foot, her head tilted to one side. "If I help you, might we have a tea party?"

"Yes," Benecia agreed wearily.

"With our dolls?"

"With our dolls!" the elder sister snapped. In the next instant she turned herself and Aidan into a wafting mist.

The trio arrived at Havermail Castle seconds later, only to find that both Aubrey and Roxanne were still out hunting.

Canaan wanted to dump Aidan in the dungeon and indulge in the promised tea party, but Benecia wasn't about to let him out of her sight. Thus it happened that the three of them gathered around a low, square monument to a long-dead contemporary, in the oldest part of the castle's cemetery. Aidan slumped in his chair, still unconscious, while Canaan arranged her dolls in little chairs around the improvised table. Her china tea set, complete with miniature silver spoons, was carefully arranged.

"Have some tea, Benecia dear," Canaan urged, her voice chiming with delicate malice. "Don't you think your friend would like a cup?"

Benecia rolled her eyes. "Does he look thirsty to you?"

Canaan pretended to pour, then handed her sister a fragile cup filled with nothing. "You needn't be so tiresome," she scolded. She might have had the body of a little girl, but there was something of the fussy budget spinster in her as well. "It's not as if I'm asking you to do anything terrible."

The elder sister suppressed a sigh and pretended to sip from the cup. Their mother, Roxanne, liked to play the same silly game with plates and glasses and silverware, as if they were all still human and required the sustenance of food and drink.

Aidan moaned and moved his head slightly.

"There, see!" Canaan cried. "*Hedoes* want tea!"

Benecia set her cup and saucer down with a clink and rushed to his side. "Good heavens, Canaan, get a hobby. He doesn't want tea, you ninny—he's dying!"

"Poppycock," said Canaan in a crisp tone. "Vampires don't die."

Before Benecia could respond to the contrary, they were surrounded by dark, shifting forms. She and Canaan huddled close together, trembling slightly, for they did not recognize these creatures.

“Look,” Canaan whispered. “We have guests for our party.”

“Who are you?” Benecia demanded of the robed figures, pretending to possess courage that had long since deserted her. “What do you want?”

A fierce-looking vampire stepped forward, his hair and beard as red as fire. He resembled a Viking, with his hard features and strong build.

He did not trouble to answer Benecia’s questions but instead bent and draped Aidan’s lifeless arm over his massive shoulders, then lifted him to his feet.

“Wait!” Benecia cried, rushing forward, grabbing at the sleeve of the vampire’s tunic. “Where are you taking him?”

Still, the Viking offered no reply. Supporting Aidan against his side, he disappeared into the darkness, and the others filed after him.

Canaan gripped Benecia’s arm when she would have followed. “Let them go,” she said quietly. “We’ll find another plaything.”

Benecia was trembling. “I wanted *him* .”

“Don’t fuss,” said Canaan, shaking a finger in her sister’s face. “He’s gone, and as far as I’m concerned, it’s good riddance.” Purposefully she refilled Benecia’s cup with emptiness, and there was nothing to do but drink of it.

Lisette crouched in a corner of her lair, deep in the bowels of the villa on the coast of Spain, whimpering. Her hands and arms were piteously scarred, and her face misshapen, disfigured. Her once beautiful hair now hung in hanks and wisps, and her scalp was black and crumbling.

She tossed her head from side to side, wailing in her grief. She had been such a fool to dally with Aidan those extra minutes, caught up in the old fascination, forgetting her own vulnerability to the glaring sun. Now he’d escaped her vengeance, as had that miserable specimen, Valerian, and she found the knowledge virtually unbearable.

Lisette collapsed onto her side, too aggrieved to stand, and curled herself into a tight little ball. Inside she was shrieking, but all that came from her parched throat now were soft, squeaking mewls.

Her body was an unbearable place to be, and she left it to wander in happier places, knowing all the while that she would return, stronger and more beautiful than ever. And when she did, both Valerian and Aidan would know the depth and breadth of her wrath.

Neely awakened with a start, sending her book tumbling to the floor. “Aidan?” she whispered, even though she knew he wasn’t with her in the hotel room. In fact, she had a feeling that he was in terrible trouble.

She rushed to the window and pushed aside the curtain. Dawn was still several hours away, but the snow had stopped, and there were cabs and buses moving along the streets.

Neely gathered up her belongings, put on her coat, and took the elevator to the lobby, where she settled her bill in cash. Flagging down a cab took longer than she would have liked, and she was numb with cold

by the time one stopped for her. She sat shivering in the back seat, her teeth chattering as she gave the driver Maeve's address.

The going was slow, given the state of the roads, but roughly forty-five minutes later, Neely found herself standing outside the high iron gates in front of the mansion. The cab scooted away, and she pressed anxiously at the button that would alert Mrs. F. to her presence.

A considerable interval went by before the housekeeper came bustling out, wearing galoshes, her nightdress, and a huge woolen overcoat. "You might have telephoned ahead," she scolded, fumbling with the lock and key on the other side. "At least that way you wouldn't have had to stand out here like a lost soul!"

"I'm sorry for waking you," Neely said, hugging herself, feeling very much a lost soul. Mrs. F opened the gate, and she slipped through. "I came on an impulse, and I didn't think to call first. Is Miss Tremayne around?"

"Well, now, that she is, miss," said Mrs. F., hustling Neely up the walk and through the gaping front door. In the entry hall she set about brushing the snow from Neely's coat. "It happens that she's up in the studio, on the third floor, hard at her weaving. Why, she's working that loom as if all that mattered in this universe hung in the balance."

## Chapter 17

Although Valerian's body was all but ruined, some essential part of him crouched inside the husk, a small spark of consciousness able to recognize itself and, however laboriously, to reason.

Fact by fact, Valerian pieced together what had happened to him. It had all begun with his love for Aidan, an emotion born long before, on that night when they'd met for the first time, in an eighteenth-century inn. Aidan had been new to blood-drinking then, bitter and afraid, wanting only to say farewell to his sister before seeking a way to destroy himself—actually believing it would be so easy to find peace and oblivion.

Soon after, Valerian had met the beautiful Maeve, still warmly human then, and been tempted to his limits. Maeve, after all, had been a female version of Aidan, and for that Valerian had adored her. When she learned what had happened to her beloved twin—convincing her of the truth had been no small task—Maeve had demanded a transformation of her own.

She and Aidan had argued violently, because Aidan despised what he was from the first and could not fathom why his sister would willingly choose such a fate. Maeve had wanted to be close to her brother for eternity, but there were other reasons for her aspirations as well.

Valerian had recognized in her a fierce hunger for immortality, for the singular powers Aidan so reluctantly demonstrated, and from the very first he had taken note of her wild and adventurous nature. She was greedy for life, like Valerian himself, wanting to test every sense, explore every emotion.

After the shouting match, which took place in the moonlit orchard of the convent where Maeve had been raised since the age of seven, Aidan had vanished in a rage. Some things never changed; Aidan was forever acting on impulse and then living to regret whatever he'd done.

Maeve had turned to Valerian and begged him to make her into an immortal, and heaven forgive him, he'd done it. He'd taken her blood and then restored it to her, changed.

It still bruised him to remember how Aidan had hated him for that.

For a time Valerian and Maeve had traveled together. He'd taught her to hunt, to sense the presence of other vampires or such enemies as angels and warlocks, and to hide herself from the sun. They had been lovers, as well, in that unique mental way of nightwalkers that was so much more profound than the frantic, messy couplings of humans.

Eventually, however, Maeve had caught Valerian playing similar games with a fledgling vampire named Pamela. After that, they had not been truly intimate again, though they had finally established a bristly truce. For the most part, Maeve and Valerian had avoided each other, but their common weakness for Aidan often caused their paths to cross.

The glow of awareness inside Valerian's devastated hulk began to gather strength, though the process was torturous and awkward, rather like trying to gather scattered buttons with bandages swelling one's fingers.

His fundamental fascination with Aidan Tremayne had never truly left him. Perhaps, he reflected, Maeve had known that all the while, known the real reason for her appeal to Valerian.

Of course, Valerian had not been the only one obsessed with Tremayne; Lisette, Aidan's creator, had regarded the lad as her own plaything. Had Aidan's angry spurning not wounded the vampire queen to the point that she'd sought dormancy, open warfare between Lisette and Valerian would probably have erupted immediately.

He'd been such a self-pitying fool, he thought now, to curl up in a hole like a wounded rat and let his strength seep away into the rubble around and beneath him. If it hadn't been for that very embarrassing mistake, he would still be a powerful vampire, and not this little flash of sensibility trapped inside a drying corpse.

It came to him then that perhaps, just perhaps, he wasn't imprisoned after all. Suppose he could transmit himself to other places and times, as he'd done so often in dreams?

Valerian gathered his being together into a small, whirling nebula of light and remembered Aidan fiercely. If any bond still linked them, he wanted to travel along it, hand over hand, until he found his friend.

His friend.

That was all that would ever be between him and Aidan, and Valerian found surprising peace in accepting the bittersweet truth. In the next instant he felt himself spinning through space, through dark, mindless oblivion, and then crashing against something hard.

That something was the stone wall of a crypt or cellar.

For a few moments Valerian was disoriented. He collected and calmed himself. There was a creature huddled before him, and he recognized it, though just barely.

Lisette raised her head, aware of Valerian even though his presence was purely mental. She was a hag,

charred and almost hairless, incomprehensibly ugly, and she shrieked and raised her hands, as if to hide herself from his view.

You've failed, Valerian told her. Plainly, I am not destroyed.

If you've come for vengeance, then take it! Lisette responded in torment. I have no spirit for battle.

I will have my revenge, Lisette—you may be assured of that. For now, however, I have more important things to attend to.

With her thoughts, not her melted, misshapen hands, Lisette clutched at Valerian. *Does he live? Does Aidan live? Tell me!*

I don't know, Valerian answered, but hear this, Queen of the Vampires: If you've harmed him—and I swear this by all that is unholy—your suffering will be without end.

Lisette snarled and batted at the ball of light that was Valerian with one blackened claw. It was the movement of an animal, cornered and vicious. *You dare to threaten me? You are an even greater fool than Aidan!*

Valerian offered no reply; he was impatient to move on, to find the vampire he had originally sought. It didn't trouble him that he'd willed himself to Aidan's side and ended up facing Lisette instead. That was probably just some sort of psychic short circuit.

Once again Valerian focused all his energies on finding Aidan. On this second attempt he was successful.

Aidan was in a cavern, far beneath the surface of the earth, a dank place echoing with the sound of water dripping. He lay naked, except for a loincloth, on a table formed of natural stone, his still, pale form surrounded by robed members of the Brotherhood. The light of a few torches flickered eerily through the chamber, dancing with shadows.

The redheaded Viking whirled, sensing Valerian's arrival, and called out, "Who is it?"

There would be no eluding these, the oldest and most formidable vampires on earth. Valerian volunteered his name readily.

"Leave this place," ordered one of the elders with an impatient wave. "We have important rites to perform."

*I want to stay,* Valerian responded. He could not speak audibly as they did, for he had no body, and thus no throat muscles or voice box to form the words.

For a few moments there was utter silence, except for the incessant *plunk-plunk-plunk* of water droplets striking stone.

"What is your business here?" one of the other elders demanded. They were being remarkably patient, but Valerian took nothing for granted.

The wounds Aidan suffered, he suffered because of me, Valerian said. I was Lisette's prisoner, tied down to be burned alive in the sunlight, and he tried to help me.

The Viking gestured toward Aidan with a meaty, hair-covered hand. "Would you have us stand about yammering with you while he perishes? He, too, was injured by the sun, but that is the least of his problems. The Vampyre Tremayne drank the blood of the warlock, and he is filled with poison."

Valerian would have sworn it was impossible to feel more pain than he already had—until now, that was. Through a new and excruciating baptism in despair, he learned that he had not even begun to suffer. He receded into a corner, pulsing with private anguish, to watch the proceedings. *Damn you, Aidan*, he told the inert being on the slab of stone, furious in his grief, *I warned you about warlocks. I warned you!*

Just then Tobias appeared, sparing not so much as a glance for Valerian. He took Aidan's limp hand into his own, but his question was addressed to his companions. "Are we ready?"

One of the others sighed heavily. "Yes."

While Valerian watched, helpless, yearning as he never had for his lost right to petition favor from heaven, the mysterious ceremony began. A golden chalice was taken from a blue velvet bag, along with a gleaming knife with a whisper-thin blade.

The Viking was the first to grasp the knife, slice deeply into his own wrist, and allow some of the blood to drip into the chalice. After that, the others did the same, one by one. Then, when the cup brimmed with crimson nectar, Tobias took a small vial of distilled herbs from his tunic pocket and added the contents to the cup.

That done, he lifted Aidan's head and held the chalice to his lips.

Nothing happened at first—Valerian was certain Aidan had already perished. Then Tobias muttered some quiet urging. Aidan began to drink, though in the vampire way, drawing the liquid through his fangs instead of over his tongue to be swallowed.

Valerian drew nearer—he could not help himself—and hovered just behind Tobias's right shoulder. Aidan had taken all the chalice held, and there were crimson specks of blood on his mouth. Before Valerian's eyes, he turned the blue-gray color of death.

*What will happen to him?* Valerian demanded. Tobias was not truly his friend, for vampires did not generally form such maudlin attachments, but the elder had been Valerian's rescuer not so long ago. There must be a shred of pity or understanding somewhere inside the ancient creature.

Tobias heaved a mental sigh. I do not know—we had to act quickly to counteract the effect of the warlock's poison. Even if our efforts have succeeded, Aidan must endure other ordeals and move through passages none of us can imagine.

Valerian wanted to take the potion and walk through the Valley of the Shadow at Aidan's side, though he did not form the desire into words, even in his mind.

The wise vampire, so deceptively youthful in appearance, read the emotion and responded, Come, Valerian. Would you truly give up all that you are, all that you have, even now, to be a man again? To live a few brief years and then perish? I think you are neither so noble, nor so stupid.

Valerian recognized the truth in Tobias's words and was shamed by it. He drifted into the shadows again and fretfully kept his vigil.



Aidan wandered, as if in a dream, back and back, through foggy drifts of time and memory. He did not suffer, and yet he was suffering itself, pain and struggle embodied. While on some level he knew exactly what was happening—his body was lying in a cavern, with the blood of the oldest vampires on earth sustaining it—other elements of the experience were more nebulous. This other self, this mental energy gone traipsing on its own, was as much his true being as the form on the stone slab.

He saw himself, long ago, lying in the undertaker's back room, undead and yet certainly not alive, either. He felt the horror again, and the helplessness, and cursed Lisette from the core of his soul.

Aidan did not expect to travel farther; he'd always understood that such a feat was impossible, except to the most accomplished and reckless vampires, like Valerian. To his surprise, he heard a whistling sound, shrill and harsh, and felt himself plunging through wisps of moonglow and sharp, splintered stars.

His stopping was a collision, not an arrival, and it was several moments before he recovered his equilibrium. He was in a pit, dark and cold, echoing with the screams and rustlings of beings he could not see.

This, then, was hell, or its anteroom. Aidan stifled a wail of his own, for his despair was crushing, unbearable, and worst of all, almost surely eternal.

In desperation he dared what no vampire would and cried out from his heart, God of Light, have mercy on me—I was condemned on the whim of another, and not by my own choice!

Silence. Even the moaning of the lost souls haunting the darkness was stilled.

Aidan waited.

Valerian remained in the cavern as long as he could, keeping watch, but he soon discovered that this separate, mental self could not long survive apart from the body. He returned, or rather was wrenched back, to that lonely, moldering place, and there he waited. There, almost against his will, he began to heal.

Neely did not trouble Maeve at her weaving, but instead took a bath, put on one of the nightgowns she'd left behind, in the guest suite, and collapsed into bed. She slept deeply, dreamlessly, and awakened to a foggy morning and a ringing telephone.

The jangling stopped and presently there was a tap at Neely's door. "For you, miss," Mrs. F. called breathlessly from the other side. "Your friend Miss Browning, I think."

Neely sat up and reached for the receiver on the bedside table. "Hello?" she mumbled, rumpling her hair with one hand and feeling as befogged as London itself. Beneath that murky layer was the terrible longing for Aidan, and the unfaceable fear that something was dreadfully wrong.

"Hi, Neel," chimed Wendy. "I hope you enjoyed the blizzard. We gave it in your honor, you know."

Neely laughed, though the sound scraped at her throat and made swallowing difficult. "Thanks a whole lot," she said. "Next time, how about a hurricane?"

"Done," Wendy agreed cheerfully. "Listen, we're doing a sort of showcase thing at the academy tonight—scenes from different classic plays—and I'd like you to be there. I do a mean Lady Macbeth."

“Is there any other kind?”

Wendy’s smile was transmitted over the wire, warming her voice. “Such a wit. Will you be there? We could have dinner afterward.”

What Neely really wanted to do was hibernate and wait for Aidan to reappear, but she forced herself to accept the invitation. She made a mental note of the time and address, rose, and dressed in slacks and a sweater.

If she remained in her room, watching the fog shift in front of the windows, she knew she would go insane. So she went to the kitchen, where Mrs. F. was dutifully assembling a tray, and insisted on eating there.

Neely and the housekeeper chatted, though Aidan’s name certainly didn’t come up, and neither did Maeve’s.

After clearing away her dishes, Neely went to the downstairs gallery, though she’d been there before, feeling drawn by the art. Mrs. F. chose that room to dust, probably for want of company.

Neely inspected each painting again, marveling. Some were portraits—Maeve, Aidan, Valerian—but most were landscapes. Intuitively she knew these green rolling hills and harsh rocky cliffs overlooking tempestuous blue-gray seas were glimpses of Ireland. Her practiced eye told her that all but a few of the works had been done by one artist.

She dragged a wooden stool over and climbed onto it to peer at a signature. “Tremayne,” she muttered. Neely turned, still poised on the stool, to look at Mrs. F., thinking of the beautiful tapestry she’d seen at the museum. “Did Maeve do these?” she asked.

Mrs. F. laughed as she orbited a lampshade with her fluttering feather duster. “Oh, no, miss. Those are old paintings, for the most part—look closely and you’ll see that they’re done on wood instead of canvas. Priceless, they are, and not just because they were painted by an ancestor of the Madam.”

Neely swallowed, feeling strangely moved. She touched one of the paintings tentatively, with just the tips of her fingers. Somehow she knew the truth even before Mrs. F. cleared up all vestiges of the mystery.

“The artist’s name was Aidan Tremayne,” she said proudly. “Just like our own Aidan he was, dark and handsome and full of charm, if the stories are to be believed.”

*Just like our own Aidan*, Neely repeated to herself, and then she smiled. Very like our own Aidan indeed, she thought. She had not known that Aidan painted—there wasn’t a word about it in his journals—but she should have guessed because of the sketch of him and Maeve on the first page of the original volume, far away in that Connecticut study.

“It’s where all their money comes from, you know,” Mrs. F. confided in a whisper, her feather duster shedding sparkling particles of dust. “They’ve sold a painting from time to time, and Mr. Tremayne is very good with investments— another family trait.”

Neely turned her face to hide her smile, which might have been a bit secretive and perhaps even a touch smug. “Fascinating people,” she said. The compulsion to explain that Maeve and Aidan were immortal, that they were in fact their own ancestors, was almost overwhelming, but of course Neely kept the

information to herself. It would be a betrayal of trust, and besides, the housekeeper wouldn't believe a word.

Neely lingered a while, to be polite, and went on her way only after Mrs. F., settled in with a cup of tea to look at her favorite morning program on "the telly." Neely was drawn to the third floor, the very place she'd avoided the night before, when she'd known Maeve was there. It was a contradiction, of course, but Neely's life had been fraught with such things since Halloween. That was what she got, she supposed, for hanging out with vampires.

Reaching the studio's high, arched door, which was made of glowing English oak and beautifully carved with tiny birds and acorns, Neely paused and knocked softly, even though she knew Maeve would not be inside. Although the day was cloudy, and the atmosphere gun-metal gray, the sun was shining as brilliantly as ever beyond the earth's shroud of fog. Maeve, like all the other vampires, would be sleeping in some dark and hidden place.

Neely turned the brass handle on the door and stepped inside the great drafty room. She wondered if Maeve had woven the tapestry of herself and Valerian in this room, the one that was on display at the museum in the center of London. The house, like the tapestry and those paintings downstairs in the gallery, was old, and so was the loom.

She approached it cautiously, as though it might spring suddenly to life and chastise her, then touched its rough-hewn wooden frame in wonder. How beautiful and spare it was in its rustic simplicity. It was so plain, that loom, and yet it could mirror the visions of an artist in fine detail.

Neely walked around to look at the emerging tapestry again. There was the hem of the gauzy dress, the toe of one black slipper, the leaves, the petals. Something about this incomplete scene gave Neely a sense of deep sorrow, almost of mourning, and she had to turn away from it.

She moved to the windows, which stretched from floor to ceiling, their diamond-shaped panes lined with lead. The fog had gone, but now there were fat, soft flakes of snow drifting down, draping the metal gate out front, trimming the square tops of the old-fashioned lampposts, disguising cars and other evidence of the modern age.

It might have been 1894, Neely reflected fancifully, as she stood there looking out, or even 1794. She imagined, for a moment, that she could travel through time, as the vampires described in Aidan's journals did, and the idea sent a chill skittering up her spine.

Neely bit her lip as she turned away from the windows. Between getting herself mixed up with Aidan and his crowd and playing chase with the drug cartel back in the States, she'd had all the adventure she needed for one lifetime. She wanted what Aidan did—for him to be a man again, so that they could both live in the sunshine. She wanted to make love to him and to bear his children.

The possibility seemed remote, impossible, and yet Neely clung to it with all the tenacity of her being. She loved Aidan too deeply to give up now, even in the face of incomprehensible odds.

Still, Neely was used to taking action, and waiting was not her strong suit. She needed to be busy, building a life somewhere, carving out a place where she and Aidan could begin again.

He would find her, she thought as she left the studio, closing the door quietly behind her. Aidan would come to her when he could, and she would be waiting for him with an open heart.

One tear slipped down Neely's cheek as she descended to the second floor, for despite her faith in her love for Aidan and his for her, she knew that their happiness would be won only after a fiery battle.

In the guest suite she found her passport, opened it, and wondered at the innocence of the face in the photograph.

After the lonely, whispering darkness came the fire. Aidan felt its heat pulsing all around him, and yet he was oddly detached, untouched by the flames. He was silent now, for he had offered his prayer, and there was nothing left to say.

Then, suddenly, the flames became a living presence, not God Himself, but Someone. Definitely an individual, thinking Someone.

Vampyre, a silent voice boomed. By what name are you called?

Aidan quaked. Now it would happen, now he would tumble into the bowels of hell, to be consumed, and not consumed. So be it, he decided. At least he wouldn't be a blood-drinking monster anymore, preying on humans, passing himself off to the dying as an Angel of Mercy.

*I am Aidan Tremayne*, he answered at length. Then some spark of his old arrogance prompted him to ask, *Who are you ?*

There was a thunderous hush, followed by amusement. *I am the Warrior Angel, Nemesis* , the voice replied. *Do you know that you are damned ?*

Aidan was awe-stricken now, beyond fear into an emotion so profound that he could not call it by name. *Yes* , he replied when he could recall his own language and once again shape its words in his mind.

You have asked for absolution, Nemesis replied. What right have you, a vampyre, a fiend and a demon, to expect the mercy of Heaven?

*None*, Aidan answered. But what right have the humans your Master so cherishes, to their redemption? And yet the choice between Heaven and Hell is their birthright, is it not?

Nemesis was silent for a time, considering. *You are bold, Vampyre* , he said.

At this point, what else would serve me? was Aidan's response.

Again the Warrior Angel, dreaded from one end of Creation to the other, was amused. *True enough. What is it that you would have me do ?*

There was no other course but to brazen it out. None are to be snatched from His fingers, Aidan challenged. So say the holy words. But I am the exception, for my soul was stolen, not given willingly.

Another pause, long and thoughtful, dangerously charged. *I will consider* , Nemesis replied.

Neely put on her black dancing dress, borrowed an evening cape from Maeve's closet, with Mrs. F.'s permission, and took a cab to the address Wendy had given her. The theater academy was in London's West End, and the ride was a long one.

She arrived just five minutes before curtain time, clutching a bouquet of yellow roses she'd sent out for

earlier, but her thoughts were with Aidan, of course, and the need of him was raw within her.

Tomorrow or the day after—as soon as she could get a seat on a plane—Neely would return to the United States. The danger from the drug cartel was past, and she was determined to live constructively while she waited for Aidan to return to her.

When he was ready, he would find her.

She went into the theater, took her assigned seat, and was, for a time, lost in the performances of her friends, Wendy and Jason, and their talented classmates. Between scenes, however, Neely's mind groped for images of Aidan and clung to them.

She figured she was going to need some therapy once this whole thing was over, one way or the other, though God only knew how she would explain her obsession with vampires. Any normal shrink was certain to see that as a neurosis, plain and simple, and classify Aidan and the others as unconscious archetypes.

Once the evening's presentation was over, Neely met Wendy and Jason in the lobby, near one of the stage doors. She handed Wendy the roses and gave her a congratulatory hug, then embraced Jason as well.

They had supper three blocks away, in an elegant club where the music was soft and smoky. Neely surprised herself by actually choking down a reasonable amount of food.

When Jason left the table for a few minutes to speak with friends, Wendy gently squeezed her friend's hand. "What's wrong, Neel? I've never seen you look so miserable."

Neely wished she could confide the whole truth, but of course that was impossible. Even the artistic, talented Wendy, with her fertile imagination, would not be able to take in the undiluted facts of the situation. How could Neely explain that she was hopelessly in love with a vampire?

"I guess I'm just tired. I've been through a lot in the last few months."

Wendy nodded sympathetically, her blue eyes wide with compassion. At least she knew about Neely's adventures with the drug cartel. "You certainly have," she agreed. "What you need is a good rest. You should go somewhere warm, where the sun shines, and think things through."

Neely sighed in agreement. "I don't know where I'll wind up, just yet," she answered, "but I feel ready to leave London now and make a lasting niche for myself somewhere. I'll be in touch with you as soon as I get my bearings."

Wendy patted her hand. "You'll be all right, Neely. You're the bravest, most resilient person I know."

"Thanks," Neely said. She knew her friend had meant the compliment, but at the same time she couldn't really take it in. The days and nights ahead looked bleak to her, for as badly as she wanted to, she could not ignore the possibility that Aidan might never return to her.

She finished out the evening, cried all the way home in the cab, and spent much of the night composing a letter to Aidan. She wrote that she loved him, that she would always love him, that she would wait for him, even into the next lifetime, if that proved necessary.

Neely left the letter on the mantelpiece in the gallery the next morning, beneath one of Aidan's paintings, said good-bye to Mrs. F. and set out in another cab for the airport.

## Chapter 18

For four days and three nights, Aidan lay upon his slab, motionless and pale as death. Valerian came, in spirit, to watch over him and stayed as long as his limited energy would allow, before scurrying back to his own ruined and unwelcoming body to regroup. The old ones returned every twenty-four hours, always at nightfall, to fill the golden chalice from their wrists as they had on that first occasion, and add their concoction of herbs. The only sign of life Aidan ever showed was when he opened his lips to draw from the cup.

Each night, as Valerian kept his helpless vigil, a new fissure traced itself over his heart. He would gladly have taken the beloved one's place on that cold bed of stone, borne all his pain, argued his case for him in that other world, the mystical one, where some part of Aidan surely wandered. None of these courses were open to Valerian, however; all he could do was wait.

When the fourth sunset came, Valerian was there in the cavern even before the elders appeared. It was as if he were the heart of some giant unseen entity, pumping fear, like blood, into veins and limbs and organs beyond his awareness.

He drew near Aidan, but it seemed that a wall of cold surrounded the still form, now as rigid and gray as a cadaver. Valerian withdrew again, scorning his vampire powers for the first time since his making. *Smoke and mirrors*, he thought furiously. *What good are my tricks and secrets if Aidan does not live?*

The others arrived, one by one, solemn in their dignity, wearing it as tangibly as their robes. They made a circle around Aidan, then, in a single motion, lifted him up in their hands.

Valerian was jolted out of his angry reverie; he rushed back to Aidan, shimmering above his bare middle like a firefly.

*Wait*, he demanded of Tobias, seeing no sign of the chalice. Something had changed; the ritual had taken a new turn. *What are you doing? Where are you taking him?*

Tobias sighed, and his effort at patience was lost on Valerian for the moment because he was too frantic to recognize it. The older vampire responded in the language of the mind, though there was never any question that the others could hear and understand.

We can do no more for the fledgling, Tobias said. The sunlight must now be his final judge.

Valerian felt horror batter against him, then surround and absorb him. *What?*

We will lay him out in a place once holy to mortals. If he survives the full rising of the sun, the transformation will be complete. If he cannot be changed, and we have failed in our efforts, he will be destroyed.

Valerian became a scream, since he could not utter one without his body. *No!*



*It is done*, Tobias responded.

In the next instant they were gone. All of them—Tobias, the other elders, Aidan.

Valerian's strength was already waning—his body claimed much of it, being determined to renew itself— but he used all his will to follow the elders and their unconscious burden.

The small, hideous company reassembled itself in the center of a circle of ancient pillars, not far from Stonehenge. Moonlight splashed the ruined monument to some long-forgotten deity and turned the crusted snow to iridescent silver.

Aidan made no sound or movement as the elders laid him in the exact center of the ring of giant stones and stepped back, each one fading slowly, slowly, until they'd all vanished.

Valerian shrieked soundlessly, wild in his frustration and fear. He could not bear it, seeing Aidan left to await the sunrise and suffer the terrible cruelties reserved just for vampires, but there was nothing he could do.

Still, Valerian lingered as long as he was able, and when he saw dawn trim the distant horizon in golden lace, he tried to form himself into some kind of shield, to cover and protect his friend. Alas, he was made of nothingness, and he could offer no protection.

He was wrenched back to his own faraway body, just as the light tumbled and spilled over the snowy hills and into the circle of stones where Aidan lay.

Neely sat numbly on the postage-stamp-size terrace outside her hotel room in Phoenix, sipping iced tea and staring at the shifting patterns of turquoise light playing over the pool below. The sun was dazzlingly bright, and its warmth teased the very marrow of her bones.

She sighed, reached for her ice tea, and took another sip. She didn't know a soul in Arizona, and Ben had made it plain when she telephoned him, on her first night back in the country, that he thought she needed looking after—at least for a while.

Neely didn't want anyone fussing over her, for in those freaky times when the numbness wore off, she was hypersensitive to pain, and the very currents in the air bruised her. During these periods, the slightest sound seemed deafening and hammered against her senses until she trembled.

She needed to think. That was what she'd told her brother. She had money, now that the drug people weren't tracking her anymore and she could tap her personal funds. She wanted to wait, and later, if necessary, do her grieving, in peace and privacy. Before she could go on and begin making some sort of life for herself and Aidan, however, she must finish putting herself back together and smoothing away the rough places where the breaks were mended.

As soon as possible, Neely planned to find herself a job as an assistant to some executive, rent an apartment, buy a car, make new friends. She wasn't planning to sit on the sidelines while she waited for Aidan, though she certainly didn't intend to date other men, either, for Neely knew one thing: For the rest of her natural days and, most probably, throughout eternity as well, she would love no one but Aidan Tremayne.

Neely closed her eyes, leaned back in the chaise lounge, and sighed, letting the sun caress her



winter-whitened skin. It frightened her that sometimes she could almost convince herself that she'd imagined the whole fantastic experience—encountering Aidan for the first time, sleeping beside him under a hotel-room bed in London, Valerian and the paintings and the tapestries and Maeve's grand mansion. The memories always returned, vivid and sharp, and wore well in her mind like a bright picture on a bar of novelty soap, one that would never wash away.

The last thing she wanted was to forget.

Often she awakened in the night, thinking Aidan was there beside her, and weeping when she found herself alone. She tried hard to accept reality: Aidan was a vampire, with all the attendant gifts. If he had not perished in that strange experiment of his, or been grievously injured, he would find her.

Neely waited, suspended, swinging back and forth between one emotion and its opposite, reminding herself to eat and sleep and even breathe.

She would hold on, though—she was determined to do that.

The first thing Aidan was conscious of was light. Dazzling, fiery light. He waited for the glare to consume him, but instead it played sweetly over his skin like some intangible ointment. He slowly opened his eyes, saw nothing but the luminous glow, and closed them again.

The next sensation he recognized was cold. Saints in heaven, he was lying in snow, bare as a pauper's purse, and freezing his ass off in the bargain.

He raised his eyelids once more, only to be driven back a second time into the comforting darkness.

Aidan tried to lift his hands after that, but they were heavy at his sides. Where was he? In Hell? It would be some joke, he reflected, if the place turned out to be an ice pit instead of an everlasting pyre.

“Great Scot, Martha,” a male voice boomed from somewhere above him. “He's quite naked, isn't he? And him out here in the weather and all. Might be he's a Druid or something like that.”

Someone crouched beside Aidan. He felt a woman's hand come to rest on his shoulder, strong and blessedly warm.

“Druid or none, he's in a bad way. Run and get the woolen blanket from the car, Walter, and we'll wrap him up snug in that. Then we'll try to lift the poor man between us.”

He felt the blanket go round him, and the awkward angels wrested him onto his feet. He could neither see nor speak, but as he stumbled along between his rescuers, a momentous realization came upon him.

He was breathing.

Aidan's spirit soared even higher when he explored his chest and found a living heart beating there. “Neely,” he whispered as tears slipped down his half-frozen face. “Neely.”

When he awakened again, he was in the hospital, and the numbness of hypothermia had worn off, leaving a raw, scraping pain in its place.

Aidan exulted in that pain, however, for it was more proof that he'd been given a second chance.

He was a man.

He lifted one of his hands to his mouth, with no small amount of struggle, and felt his teeth. His fangs were gone, leaving an ordinary pair of incisors in their places.

Aidan tried to sit up, only to be gently pressed back to the bed again.

“There, now,” a woman, probably a nurse, said gently, “just rest and don’t be trying to rise. You came very near to meeting your Maker, you know.”

He felt tears gather in his lashes, hot and wet. *You can’t imagine how near*, he thought. He’d been forgiven, it seemed, or at least given an opportunity to redeem himself. He meant to make full use of whatever time was left to him.

“Thank you,” he whispered as the pain took hold and started to drag him under again. The nurse thought he’d been speaking to her and assured him that she was just doing her job.

In the days to come, Aidan tried to keep track of time, but the task proved impossible, since he was conscious only in bits and snatches. During those brief intervals, he reveled in the steady beat of his heart, the ragged but regular meter of his breathing, the ache in the back of his hand, where an intravenous needle was lodged. Even the need to relieve himself in a cold steel urn brought by a nurse was cause to celebrate.

When he found the strength to lift his eyelids for the first time, he saw gray-green walls, uninspired hospital art, a tiny television set that seemed to huddle in a corner of the room, near the ceiling. His bed was the crank-up sort, an iron monstrosity that might well have been a relic of some war.

A moment passed before Aidan realized that it was night, and he was seeing clearly. The knowledge frightened him; he thought for a moment that he’d only dreamed of being a mortal.

Then he saw the vampire, standing motionless and majestic at the foot of the bed. Aidan did not recognize the creature, and that only increased his alarm. He drew back against the pillows and held his breath.

The stranger raised a stately hand. Like his face, it glowed white in the darkness, illuminating him, so that he appeared to have swallowed the moon itself. “Do not be afraid, Mortal,” the creature said, sounding mildly exasperated. “I have not come to change you, but only to bring a message from the Brotherhood.”

Aidan’s heart had risen to his throat and was pounding there. He was frightened, and yet the mere existence of his pulse caused him almost incomprehensible joy. “What is this message?” he managed to ask, and as vulnerable as he was, there was a note of challenge in his voice.

The vampire chuckled. “Tobias was right,” he said. “You are certainly brave to the point of idiocy, Aidan Tremayne.”

He took several items from inside his coat, then rounded the bed to lay them on the stand and look down into Aidan’s defiant eyes. “I’ve brought you a passport, credit cards, some money. You have lost your powers as a vampire, of course, so you will have to make a place for yourself in the world of humankind now.”

Aidan glanced at the leather packet on the bedside stand. He’d had no use for identification and money

before, but they were quite necessary to mortals. “Did Maeve ask you to help me—or Valerian?”

“Neither,” the fiend replied, moving away to stand at the window, looking out. “No one knows where that pair has gotten themselves off to, as a matter of fact. The Brotherhood simply felt that matters should be brought full circle—your mortal life was taken from you, now it is restored. In these modern times it is difficult to function without passports and the like.”

Aidan was silent for a moment, absorbing the knowledge that Maeve and Valerian had both disappeared. He felt his limitations as a man sorely—he could do nothing to help his sister or his friend—and then he accepted the new reality.

“How long?” he asked. “Am I going to live a day—a decade—another fifty years?”

The vampire smiled, then shrugged. “How long would you have lived before, if your life had not been interrupted? Only those beyond the Veil of Mystery possess such knowledge.” He sighed, tugged at the sleeves of his elegant coat, and approached the bed again. “I must go soon and feed.” He laid one of his cold alabaster hands to Aidan’s head. “You will forget what you were, in time, and, someday, even laugh at those who believe in such creatures as vampires and warlocks.”

Aidan caught at the corpse-like hand with his own warm fingers, tried in vain to throw it away. “Wait—there is a woman—I want—I *have* —to find her—”

“You will always be Aidan Tremayne,” the monster said. “Although your mind will soon dismiss her image, your heart will remember forever.”

“But—”

“It is done,” decreed the vampire quietly. And then he was gone, and Aidan tumbled into sleep, as if he’d been pushed over the edge of an abyss.

The next morning he ate solid food for the first time in more than two centuries and wondered why he was so excited over milk toast and weak tea. Wild, macabre images played chase in his mind; he told the pretty nurse he’d dreamed a vampire came to his room the night before, and she smiled and shook her head and pronounced the human brain a strange organ indeed.

Aidan had to agree, at least privately, for he held another picture in his mind, that of a lovely woman with short hair and large pixie eyes. He knew the gamine’s name was Neely, but that was the sum total of what he remembered about her. It was miraculous, considering that he’d had to take his own identity from the packet of identification that had turned up on his bedside table one night while he slept.

He grew strong in the days to come, and his mind manufactured a complicated and quite viable history for him. Soon Aidan believed the assortment of facts and actually thought he remembered the corresponding experiences.

He was alone in the world, having been born to his Irish parents very late in life. He had money, a grand house outside of Bright River, Connecticut, and an impressive career as an artist.

Certain mysteries remained, however. Aidan still did not know where he’d been before he was discovered lying in the middle of that ancient circle of stones, naked as a newborn, or how he’d gotten there in the first place. The police were equally baffled but after an initial round of questions in his hospital room, they’d stopped coming round. No doubt they’d written the patient off as a head case, and Aidan

had to admit there were ample grounds for the idea.

He left the hospital in borrowed garb, bought himself new clothes, luggage, and toiletries, none of which he seemed to possess, spent one night in a London hotel, took a cab to the airport, and then flew to the United States.

In New York he rented a car and drove the rest of the way to Bright River.

Upon arriving in that small Connecticut town, he went immediately to the big house in the country. He didn't remember the place being so gloomy, he thought, as he went from room to room, flinging back the heavy draperies to let in the sunlight.

The snow was melting, and spring wasn't far off. He opened a few windows and doors to let in some fresh air.

Aidan wandered into the kitchen, humming. His breakfast, a muffin and a cup of coffee he'd grabbed at the airport, had long since worn off.

He opened one cupboard after another, amazed to find that there wasn't so much as a can of chili or a box of salt on the shelves. There were no plates, no cups, no knives, forks, or spoons.

Puzzled, he shrugged his shoulders, found a leather jacket in one of the closets, and left the house. There was a truck stop just down the road; Aidan was sure he remembered eating there once or twice.

He set out on foot, his hands jammed into the pockets of his coat, reassuring himself as he walked. Although the doctors in London had insisted that the gaps in his memory would surely close someday, he was still troubled.

For one thing, there was that name that haunted him, and the sweet face and figure that went with it. *Neely*. Who was she? She had touched his life, he was certain of that, but he couldn't remember where he'd known her, or when.

On the most basic level of his consciousness, a driving, urgent need to find the mysterious woman raged like a river at flood tide.

Aidan reached the truck stop, a noisy, cheerful place where the jukebox played too loudly, and felt better for having people around him. He took a seat at the counter and reached for a menu.

A friendly waitress—her name tag read "Doris"—took his order right away. While Aidan was sipping his coffee, a boy rushed in, waving a sheet of pink paper and beaming. He was about seven, Aidan guessed, and he had freckles and one missing tooth.

"Look, Doris!" the child cried, scrambling onto one of the stools, right next to Aidan. The lad glanced up at him, smiled with what could only be amiable recognition, nodded a greeting, and then turned his quicksilver attention back to Doris. "There's a letter from Aunt Neely!"

Aidan's heart somersaulted at the mention of the familiar name. It was unusual, after all, and it followed that he'd known her here in Bright River.

"What does she say, Danny?" Doris asked, grinning as she set a dinner of chicken-fried steak, mashed potatoes, and green beans in front of Aidan. She winked at him before turning her full attention on the

boy.

Danny still clutched the letter in one grubby hand, and it was all Aidan could do not to reach out and snatch it away from him. “She isn’t in Phoenix anymore—she’s in Colorado,” the kid announced importantly. “She was working in an office for a while, but now she’s got a job in a steak house. Aunt Neely was bored sitting behind a desk. She says she’s got all kinds of—all kinds of—” He paused and consulted the paper. “Nervous energy,” he finished.

Aidan felt warm inside, and oddly amused, and he could explain neither emotion. He stuck his fork into his food, but his ravenous appetite was gone.

“And look at this great stamp!” Danny said, slapping a pink envelope down on the countertop.

Aidan strained, saw the return address: 1320 Tamarack Road, Pine Hill, Colorado. “I used to collect stamps when I was a lad,” he commented casually.

Danny beamed at him. “I must have a thousand of them. Aunt Neely sends them to me all the time. I’ve got a whole boxful from England.”

England. That produced another vague recollection, more a feeling than an image. He’d been so certain that he’d met the elusive Neely in Bright River, but the mention of the country he’d just left touched a resonant chord in his spirit.

1320 Tamarack Road, he repeated to himself. Pine Hill, Colorado.

“This Aunt Neely of yours must be a pretty interesting lady,” Aidan commented when Doris had given Danny a cup of hot chocolate and hustled off to wait on some new arrivals.

Danny’s eyes were alight. “She is. She used to work for a real senator. He was a crook, and she almost got killed because she told the FBI what he was doing, but she’s okay now.”

Aidan frowned, for the child’s words stimulated still another memory that wouldn’t quite come into focus.

He finished his meal, returned to his huge, echoing house, and wandered restlessly from room to room.

In the morning, after a virtually sleepless night, Aidan called the car rental company and asked them to pick up the vehicle he’d driven from New York. Then he went out to the garage where his white Triumph Spitfire awaited him.

He smiled when the engine caught on the first try, and sped into Bright River. His first stop was the supermarket, where he purchased staples—milk and butter and bread—along with tea and potatoes, both fresh and frozen vegetables, and a thick steak. Passing a florist’s shop, he suddenly stopped, grocery bags in his arms, oddly stricken by an enormous bunch of white roses on display in the window.

Aidan felt yet another tug at his deeper mind, and this one was patently uncomfortable. The flowers had some significance, he was certain, but that was all he knew.

Walking slowly, Aidan took the bags of food to the car and set them on the passenger seat. Then he returned to the florist’s window and stood there, looking at the roses, trying to work out why they stirred him so.

He swallowed, fighting an unaccountable desire to weep.

A gray-haired woman put her head outside the door of the shop and called, smiling, "Hello, there, Mr. Tremayne. Aren't those the finest roses you've ever seen? I buy them direct from a nice man upstate—he raises them in his own greenhouse. They smell wonderful, too, unlike those poor anemic things they sell in the supermarkets these days."

Since the woman had called Aidan by name, he probably knew her, but her identity eluded him. He smiled and went into the shop, drawn there by some curious force buried in his subconscious.

The scent of the roses was delicate, but it seemed to fill the small shop, overshadowing the perfumes rising from bright splashes of colorful flowers grouped in buckets and pots and vases.

Aidan selected eight of the roses, which were still tightly budded, and put money on the cluttered counter.

"Good day, Mrs. Crider," he heard himself say as he left the shop with the strange purchase. So *he had* known the woman's name, after all, though he still had no recollection of meeting her before.

How odd, he thought.

At home Aidan found a crystal vase in a cabinet in one of the bedrooms and put the roses in water even before bringing the groceries in from the car. He set the flowers on the marble top of the round antique table in his entry hall and then stood staring at them for a long time, his arms folded. He wondered why the sight satisfied him so much, and at the same time stirred in him a seemingly fathomless sense of loss.

He supposed he was probably a little crazy, which wasn't really surprising, considering that he'd been found naked in the middle of an English snowstorm, lying inside a circle of stones like some kind of sacrifice.

He'd get over it, he assured himself, turning from the roses and heading outside for the bags he'd wedged into the passenger seat of his car. One of the few things he knew for certain was that he was a resilient sort, not easily broken.

Still, the scent of those flowers haunted him, and he kept going back to them, wondering and trying to remember.

Something else troubled him, though, even more than the roses did. It was the name Neely and the newfound knowledge that she lived in a place called Pine Hill, far away in Colorado.

After a steak dinner, which he devoured, Aidan retired to his study. The place was crammed with books, some of which he remembered reading and many that he didn't. The paintings on the walls were only vaguely familiar, though he knew he'd done them with his own hands.

He sighed, took an atlas from the shelf, and flipped through until he located a map of the United States. Bewildered, fascinated, *driven*, he sought and found Colorado, then traced the distance between that place and Connecticut with the tip of one finger.

Once again Aidan whispered the name of his private ghost: "Neely." Once again he searched his mind for something more than the fading image, but it was no use. Nothing came to him, except for a sensation

of sweet sadness, and a yearning so keen that it brought tears to his eyes.

Suddenly Aidan was seized with a terror that he would forget the face, and even the name, as he had forgotten so many scattered details of his past.

He rummaged for paper, scrounged up a pencil, and bent over his desk, in such a hurry to sketch the features wavering in his thoughts that he wouldn't even take the time to sit down. He finished in a few strokes, wrote "Neely" beneath the rendering of the beautiful young woman with large, inquisitive eyes and short dark hair, and gave himself up to the sweeping relief of having captured her likeness before she vanished from his mind's eye.

Aidan sat looking at the drawing for a long time, memorizing every line and curve.

Neely huddled in the big leather chair facing her therapist's desk, her blue-jeaned legs curled beneath her. She bit her lower lip, silently reminding herself that she wouldn't be able to come to terms with the events of the past few months unless she talked about them. Still, getting started was hard.

"You work at the Steak-and-Saddle Restaurant, don't you?" Dr. Jane Fredricks prompted kindly, reviewing Neely's information sheet.

Neely nodded, grateful for the gentle push. "I wait tables there. I like being busy all the time—that way, I don't think so much—and since I work the night shift, I'm always with other people when it's dark."

"You're afraid of the dark?" the doctor asked.

Neely bit her lip again, then forced herself to go on. "Not exactly," she said. "I'm afraid of—of vampires. Except for one, I mean, and—oh, hell." She bit down hard on her right thumbnail.

Dr. Fredricks didn't grab the telephone and shout for help, or even gasp in surprise. "Vampires," she repeated, with no inflection at all, making a note on Neely's chart.

Neely's voice trembled. "Yes."

Dr. Fredricks met her gaze directly. "Go on," she said.

Neely stared at her for a moment. "I suppose you're going to say there aren't any such things as vampires," she finally blurted out, "but there are. As crazy as it sounds, they really exist."

"I'm not questioning that," the doctor pointed out calmly. "You needn't convince me of anything, Neely—you're not on trial for a crime, you know. You needn't justify what you believe. Just talk."

Tears welled in Neely's eyes, blurring her vision, and she snatched a tissue from a box on the edge of Dr. Fredricks's desk to dry them. "I met my first vampire on Halloween night," she began, sniffing. "Isn't that fitting? Of course, I didn't *know* Aidan was a vampire then—I just thought he was, well, a little different—"

Dr. Fredricks nodded encouragingly.

Neely spilled the whole story, over the next forty-five minutes, and even though nothing was resolved at the end, she felt better for having told another human being what had happened to her.



“Are you going to lock me up in a rubber room?” she asked, toying with the pile of crumpled tissues in her lap.

The doctor laughed. “No, of course not.”

Neely leaned forward in her chair. “Surely you don’t believe there really are vampires?” she marveled.

“It doesn’t matter what I believe,” reasoned Dr. Fredricks. “We’re here to talk about you. Can you come back next Tuesday?”

## Chapter 19

Neely was just reaching for the handle of the front door at the Steak-and-Saddle when, through the glass, she saw chaos erupt. The fire alarm and the inside sprinkler system went off simultaneously, and patrons and staff alike shrieked and scurried in all directions. Water roared from the ceiling and spattered on the floor, the counter, the people, everything.

Neely stepped back from the entrance just in time to avoid being trampled, and even then she was nearly knocked into the flowerbed.

Duke Fuller, the owner of the restaurant, came out laughing, soaked from the top of his balding head to the soles of his expensive cowboy boots. Duke had a way of taking things in his stride, a trait that made most people like him right away.

“Go on, take the night off,” he said, waving a huge hand at Neely as she stepped over the bricks bordering the petunia patch. “I got an idea Coach Riley’s boys were behind this—they’re feelin’ their oats because of that basketball game they won—and I’m damn well gonna make ‘em clean up the mess.”

Some of the customers stayed to help, but Neely had been feeling drained since her session with Dr. Fredricks that afternoon, and she had cramps in the bargain. So she turned around, got back into the used Mustang she’d bought after arriving in Denver by plane, and drove home.

1320 Tamarack Road was a humble place, a one-bedroom cottage with linoleum floors and plumbing noisy enough to disturb the dead, but it was solid and real, and Neely liked it. Besides, she spent very little time there, since she worked all night and, having developed chronic insomnia, sat reading in the library most of every day.

She hoped she’d be able to sleep, now that she’d told Dr. Fredricks the secret she hadn’t been able to give voice to before. The effects of her problem were beginning to show; she had bruise-like shadows under her eyes, she was too thin, and she cried so easily that it was embarrassing.

Every day, every night, she told herself that Aidan would come back to her, and still there was no sign of him, and no word. Had he perished in the attempt to become mortal again? Or had he simply lost interest in her?

Neely hung her coat in the tiny closet just inside her front door and kicked off her crepe-soled waitress shoes as she moved across the living room. She flipped on the television set as she passed to the kitchen,

which was really just three cabinets and a sink shoved into an alcove, and the frenzied cacophony of some commercial tumbled into the quiet.

The refrigerator yielded the remains of a carton of cottage cheese; Neely got a spoon and went back to the living room. There, she curled up in the ancient easy chair, still in her polyester uniform and her pantyhose, to eat and watch the news channel.

Neely kept expecting to miss politics, all of a sudden, to yearn for the excitement, the prestige, and the intrigue of being in the center of things. All she missed, however, all she ever yearned for, was the sight of Aidan Tremayne, and the sound of his voice. She could adjust to the rest, even the outlandish truth of what he was.

She sighed, spooning a small heap of cottage cheese onto her tongue even though, as usual, she had no appetite. It was downright crazy to be this miserable, she thought, chewing and then forcing herself to swallow—and over a missing monster, no less—but she couldn't seem to lift herself out of the doldrums.

Neely took another bite, then could bear no more and set the thin plastic carton aside, atop last week's issue of *TV Guide*. She got out of her chair, crossed the cool, smooth floor to the television set, and switched channels until she found one showing classic movies.

When a forties-style Count Dracula appeared on the screen, resplendent in his high-colored black silk cape, Neely made a soft, abrupt sound that might have been either a chuckle or a sob. The Count had very white skin, and his hair came to a dramatic widow's peak on his forehead, but of course it was his overlong and extremely pointed incisors that marked him as the dreaded vampire.

Neely reached out for the old-fashioned channel knob—the TV, like the rest of the furniture, had come with the house—but she couldn't quite complete the move. She stepped backward, away from the set, filled with a strange tangle of emotions—panic, joy, fascination, a fierce desire to deny that any such creature could ever have existed.

She went into the bedroom and exchanged her uniform and pantyhose for warm flannel pajamas, figuring that, by the time she returned, either the movie would be over or she would have found the fortitude to turn to something else.

Instead Neely moved like a sleepwalker, sank numbly to the floor in front of her chair, and sat watching as if she'd been hypnotized. She knew she should get up, go to bed, read a book, take a bath, do anything besides just sitting there obsessed, but she couldn't gather the strength to move. Her gaze slid to the telephone on the other side of the room; she wondered if she was finally going to collapse under the strain. Maybe she should call Dr. Fredricks, right now...

And say what? I'm so sorry to bother you, Doctor, but it seems I'm watching an old vampire movie—a hokey one, at that—and I can't bring myself to miss a moment.

Neely caught her right thumbnail between her teeth and bit. The movie went on, darkness gathered at the windows, and still she sat there, mesmerized.

A sudden burst of light, barely glimpsed out of the corner of her right eye, made Neely jump and cry out.

Valerian himself was standing in front of the couch, gaunt and even somewhat scarred, but for all of that, just as magnificent as ever. Instead of his usual dashing evening garb, he wore medieval garments, leggings, soft leather shoes, and a tunic of rough brown wool. A mean-looking sword dangled from a

scabbard on his belt.

Watching the screen image of Count Dracula, the vampire laughed aloud.

Neely's inertia finally left her; she scrambled to her feet and looked around for a weapon, but all she found was the cottage cheese.

Valerian's gaze sliced to hers. "What will you do," he drawled, "stab me through the heart with a teaspoon?"

Neely's own heart seemed to bounce spasmodically between her breastbone and her spine. Valerian had been cordial enough in the past, but she had never deluded herself, for so much as a moment, that he was her friend.

"What do you want?" she asked.

Valerian sighed, one hand fiddling with the fancy molded steel handle of his sword. "It would take more time than I have to tell you that, my lady," he said sadly.

Neely collapsed into the easy chair, since she couldn't stand any longer. Now that the first rush of fear had subsided a little, she wanted to ask about Aidan. At the same time she was afraid—what if Valerian answered that the experiment had failed and Aidan was dead? What if he said his friend was alive and well but had decided not to go to all the trouble of loving a mortal woman after all?

"He loves you still," Valerian said; clearly, he found her thoughts as easy to read as one of those big billboards out by the freeway. His voice seemed to echo the combined sorrows of the ages, deep and profound and eternal.

Neely raised one hand to her throat. "He survived, then."

Valerian's great shoulders seemed to sag beneath his tunic; he was the very image of weary despair. "After a fashion, yes. He's a mere man—good-looking, but really quite ordinary, when you consider what he once was. All eternity would not be time enough to work out the puzzle of why Aidan, or anyone, would make such a sacrifice."

A shout of joy rose in Neely, but she stopped it in the middle of her chest. She wasn't about to put her most private feelings on display for the likes of Valerian, but there was another reason for her reticence as well. Aidan had become a man again, as he'd dreamed of doing, but he'd apparently made no attempt to find her.

Even without his supernatural powers, it shouldn't have been that hard to track her down, she thought, heartbroken. True, she hadn't left a forwarding address on file at the Bright River post office or anything so obvious as that, but Aidan could have reached her through Ben if he'd half tried.

Neely's older brother was a stubborn man, and he probably wouldn't have told Aidan where to find her, but he would surely have acted as an intermediary and passed on any messages.

"Aidan doesn't remember you," Valerian said, mind reading again. "Not completely, at least. He clings to a few scattered images, as I understand it, but in time even those will fade. The Brotherhood thought it better if he could not recall too much of his old life."

Fury and relief warred in Neely's soul, fury because someone had come between her and Aidan, relief because he'd *wanted* to remember her.

She sat up a little straighter. "Is that why you came here? To tell me everything is over between Aidan and me? I won't accept that, Valerian—I won't believe it unless I hear it from him personally."

He looked miserable to her, though that could have been an act. Valerian had loved Aidan—he probably loved him still—and it was unlikely that he had Neely's best interests at heart. Or those of any human, for that matter.

"Be that as it may," he responded in a deep voice. "It must be ended. No mortal can be allowed to go about with knowledge of the sacred things. It is dangerous."

"Sacred?" Neely snapped, driven by impulse, as usual, rather than good sense. "What an odd word to use, in reference to creatures who drink blood to sustain themselves!"

Valerian's countenance seemed to darken, and he towered like some mountain thrust suddenly up from level ground; he was a black cloud, roiling and huge, ready to erupt with lightning and thunder. "I will not debate semantics with a mortal!" he roared.

"No problem," Neely assured him hastily.

The vampire took a few moments to compose himself, visibly smoothing his ruffled dignity. Then, imperiously, he announced, "For the sake of all who walk the night and take the communion of blood, this foolishness must be ended at once." He paused, rubbing his chin with one hand and regarding Neely thoughtfully. "I would be well within my rights to feed upon you. However, I have decided that sparing you shall be my last tribute to Aidan."

Neely let out her breath in a rush, only then discovering that she'd been holding it in her lungs and sinuses. In the next instant Valerian was standing close to her, though she hadn't seen him move.

He raised one hand, laid it to her forehead, like a clergyman offering a blessing.

"No vampires," he whispered. "There are no vampires, and there never were. You will forget, and any mortals who knew of your love for Aidan will give up all memory of it as well..."

Neely fought the barrage of thoughts as long as she could, but Valerian's mind was much stronger than her own; soon her consciousness was swamped in inky darkness.

The following Tuesday, Neely arrived at Dr. Fredricks's office right on time, settled into the big chair, and waited expectantly.

"I believe we were discussing vampires last week," the psychologist said, closing Neely's chart and settling back to regard her patient.

Neely laughed. "Vampires? You're joking, right?"

The doctor frowned. "Joking?"

Neely thought back and remembered telling Dr. Fredricks about her job in Senator Hargrove's office and the subsequent adventures with the mob, in detail, but that was all. "I—I talked about vampires?"

she asked in a small voice. She felt the color drain from her face.

Dr. Fredricks smiled reassuringly, opened the folder on her desk, and read back the outlandish story Neely had evidently told her the week before.

Neely shook her head, frantic to deny what she did not remember. She blurted out the short version of her adventures with Senator Dallas Hargrove and his criminal associates, in a flash flood of wild, eager words.

The psychologist digested the account in respectful silence, then said gently, “Neely, you’ve obviously undergone quite a series of traumas in the past year. Is it any wonder that you invented a flock of vampires—a sort of theater company of the mind—to help you sort through it all?”

The reasoning seemed sound, but Neely still had absolutely no recollection of talking about vampires. She hadn’t even thought of the creatures since last Halloween, in fact, when her nephew, Danny, had worn wax fangs and a plastic cape to go out trick-or-treating.

“I guess that could be it,” she said tremulously.

Dr. Fredricks seemed to be on some private roll. “Often,” she said confidently, “the human mind will create personal myths in order to cope with some struggle in the unconscious. Generally these little dramas are played out in our dreams, but in some cases we feel called upon to produce something more flamboyant.”

From what the doctor had read from her chart, Neely thought uneasily, her own presentation had boasted a cast of thousands. She’d actually mentioned names, if the psychologist’s account was to be believed—*Maeve. Valerian. Tobias.*

She sank back in her chair, shaking. “Could I have a glass of water, please?”

After a week of driving west, thinking all the while that he must have lost his mind as well as large parts of his memory, Aidan crossed the Colorado border. He stopped at a motel that night, wolfed down a bagful of fast food while watching the Comedy Channel on cable TV, showered, and slept like a mastodon entombed in a glacier.

The next morning he bought a road map of the state, located Pine Hill, and pointed himself and his Spitfire in that direction. He had no idea what he was going to do when he arrived in the small mountain town, beyond finding the elusive Neely. Maybe when he looked into those big, luminous eyes of hers, he would remember whatever it was that had happened between them and understand the fascination that tormented him so much.

He arrived in Pine Hill in the middle of a sunny, late-winter afternoon. It was an ordinary place in itself, like a hundred other small towns all over the West, but the scenery was spectacular. The mountains were capped with snow, the landscape densely carpeted in blue-green trees that marched on and on, as far as he could see.

Aidan drove into a filling station parking lot, took the folded sketch from the inside pocket of his jacket, and spread it over the steering wheel to study it for what must have been the hundredth time.

With one index finger he traced the outline of her cheek, the lips that almost smiled—but not quite—the hair he somehow knew was soft and glossy.

For a time Aidan just sat there, engaged in a peculiar mixture of mourning and celebration. Then he folded the sketch and tucked it back into his pocket, as carefully as if it were a map that would lead him to some incomparable treasure.

He frowned as he drove back onto the slushy gray asphalt of the highway. It was just as likely that this was some sort of fool's errand. After all, if whatever had passed between him and this woman had been right and good and real, why weren't they together? Why had he blocked every detail besides her face and her first name from his mind?

Aidan passed a construction sign announcing the building of a condominium complex, shifted into reverse, and backed up to read it again. There was the usual builder's hype, but someone had tacked on a HELP WANTED notice, and that was what had captured Aidan's true interest.

He had a wallet full of money, and much more stashed away in various trust funds and bank accounts, so it wasn't the prospect of a paycheck that attracted him. He felt a craving, in the very depths of his muscles, to work at hard, physical labor, to sweat and pound and carry things under the bright light of the sun.

To put off driving to 1320 Tamarack Road, wanting to savor the prospect a while longer, Aidan located the construction company's temporary office instead. Within an hour he had been hired as a day laborer—he was to start in the morning and arrive with his own tools—and he felt as though he'd just found a part of himself that had long been missing.

He rented a motel room, hastened to the hardware store for a hammer, a tool belt, a handsaw, and a measuring tape, along with a few things the salesman recommended, then bought work clothes and boots at the mercantile. That done, Aidan consumed another of the fast-food lunches he seemed to love—just where he'd acquired the taste was one of many things he didn't quite remember—and continued his search for the woman of mystery.

Neely was waiting tables at the Steak-and-Saddle that night when, through the restaurant's wide front windows, she saw the small white sports car swing into the parking lot and come to a flourishing stop near the door.

She tightened her grasp on the handle of the coffeepot she carried, wondering why the sight of a simple automobile should shake her so. First, she'd babbled out some crazy story about vampires to her doctor, and promptly forgotten the whole thing, and now she was freaking out over traffic.

She'd better get a hold of herself.

Neely poured coffee for her customers and took the pot back to the burner without glancing at the door, even though she felt the rush of cool air when it opened. She was on her way to table 4, carrying two pieces of lemon meringue pie, when she saw the dark-haired man.

He was a stranger, and yet Neely felt a deep connection with him, an almost savage wrenching. It was nothing new; no, this was something ancient, something predating the moon and stars.

He smiled, inclined his head slightly, and said, "Hello, Neely."

The pie plates clattered to the floor. Neely didn't know this man, and yet she did. She knew everything about him, and nothing at all. She had a vague recollection of thrashing on a bed while he loved her,

though that was impossible, of course, since they had never met.

She bolted back to the kitchen for a wet cloth, and when she returned, the newcomer was crouched on the floor, gathering up the plates and broken pieces of pie. He took the cloth from her and wiped the tiles.

“Do I know you?” Neely whispered, blushing and painfully conscious of the fact that practically everyone in the restaurant was staring at them with amused interest. His face seemed as familiar to her as her own, so maybe she’d just conveniently forgotten him, the way she’d forgotten telling Dr. Fredricks about those damn vampires.

He shrugged as he rose gracefully to his full height. “Maybe. My name is Aidan Tremayne.”

Again Neely felt an inner earthquake; again she had no idea why. “Neely Wallace,” she answered. She was flustered all over again. “How did you know my first name?” she demanded.

Tremayne regarded her in wry silence for a moment, then nodded toward the shamble of plates and pies and cleaning cloth in her hands. “Perhaps you’d better tend to business, Miss Wallace. I wouldn’t want to be the cause of your getting the sack.”

Neely bustled away in a quiet panic, gallantly pretending that all was well. She disposed of the spilled food and dirty dishes, washed and dried her hands, and made a second attempt to carry pie to the people at table 4. She succeeded that time, and everyone in the restaurant cheered.

Neely’s cheeks were crimson when she rounded the counter and made herself wait on Aidan Tremayne, who sat at the far end, watching her with laughter in his indigo-colored eyes. “What will you have?” she said, tapping her pencil against the top of her order pad.

He smiled. “I’ll take the special,” he said, closing the menu. “For now.”

Neely narrowed her gaze. She wasn’t angry, exactly—as a waitress, she met more than her share of smart guys, and most of them didn’t mean any harm. No, it was her own overwhelming attraction to this stranger, the way he’d made her pulse flutter erotically, that troubled her.

“Before I get you the liver and onions,” she said in a low voice, “I want you to tell me how you knew my name.”

He leaned toward her. “I’m psychic,” he whispered.

After that a tour bus arrived, and a crowd poured into the restaurant, and Neely was too busy to pay any more attention to Aidan Whoever.

*Tremayne*, supplied a voice in her harried heart.

The next day Neely worked the afternoon and early evening shift again, and Aidan came into the restaurant for supper, in the company of half a dozen workers from the construction site just up the mountainside. He was freshly showered and wearing clean but casual clothes, and Neely felt a sting of annoyance because he didn’t seem to notice her, even when she asked for his order.

“Who’s that?” Angie, another waitress, inquired with interest, her warm-syrup eyes bright with speculation as she looked at Aidan.



Neely glared at the other woman. "He's just some construction worker," she snapped, reaching for a steak platter and a cheeseburger in a basket.

Angie popped her gum in good-natured defiance. "Yum," she growled under her breath. "I think I need some remodeling."

Neely stormed away to deliver her order.

She didn't see Aidan again until Sunday, her day off. She'd been to the supermarket and was carrying in groceries when the expensive sports car purred to a stop behind her dented Mustang.

Neely let the wooden screen door slam behind her when she went into the living room, but she felt a contradictory little lurch of pleasure in her middle when she came outside for another bag of groceries. Aidan was still there, leaning against his Triumph, his arms folded across his chest.

"I've come a long way to find you, Neely," he said quietly. "And I won't be easy to put off."

She felt as though she'd been riding a roller coaster and had stepped off before the thing came alongside the platform. She would have dropped the second shopping bag, but Aidan reached out and caught it just as it slipped from her arms.

"How did you know my name?" This time she wasn't going to let him sidestep the question.

"I own a house in Bright River, Connecticut," he said. "I think I must have seen you there."

Neely saw the confusion and bewilderment in those ink-blue eyes, and it stopped her, put a cap on her rising temper. "My brother, Ben, manages a cafe and motel outside Bright River," she said lamely. "I worked for him for a while, waiting tables and cleaning rooms."

The relief she saw in Aidan's face was too sincere to be false. Something very weird was going on here.

"That must have been where we met," he said. Then he carried the groceries up the walk, onto the porch, and past the green-painted screen door. "Nice place."

Neely felt herself flush again. Suddenly she was embarrassed by the chipped linoleum floors, the television set with foil flags on its antenna, and the cheap, ugly curtains made of dime-store fabric.

Aidan set the bag on the counter, beside the one Neely had brought in a minute earlier, looked back at her over one well-made shoulder, and grinned.

"You're not thinking I'm some kind of lecher, I hope," he said. "I'm a gentleman, Neely, and you've nothing to fear from me. Why don't you stop looking like a deer that wants to bolt into the nearest thicket?"

She smiled and relaxed a little. "Where are you from originally?" she asked, still keeping her distance as she took off her peacoat and hung it up. "You sound English."

"Perish the thought!" he said with drama and yet another nuclear-powered grin. "I'm Irish, though I've spent most of my adult life in the United States."

Neely wanted to know everything there was to know about Aidan Tremayne. She also wanted never to have met him, because he did things to her senses that made her deliriously uncomfortable.

He stayed for dinner.

Neely guessed she still would have had a chance if she'd just let things go at that, but Aidan asked her to go for a ride in his fancy car, with the top down and the moonlight playing over them both like liquid silver, and she couldn't resist.

On a high point overlooking all of Pine Hill, he parked the car, leaned over, and kissed her. His lips moved lightly against hers at first, almost mischievously, and yet Neely felt as if someone had just threaded her onto a live wire, like a bead onto a necklace. Things awakened inside her and collided in a mad rush to find their right places.

"I've never known you," Aidan said huskily, when the kiss finally ended. "And yet I've *always* known you. Can you explain that to me, Neely?"

She thought—as best she could, that is, given the helter-skelter state of her emotions. "Maybe we were together in a past life," she offered.

Aidan smiled. "Maybe," he agreed without real conviction, and then he kissed her once more.

"I want to see you again," he said a few moments later.

Neely could only nod.

After that she and Aidan were together for at least a part of every day. He rented an apartment on the other side of town, and she helped him furnish it. He chose gracious things, antiques and folk art and one very good painting, and Neely wondered what kind of work he'd done before taking up construction.

"I was a painter," he said when she finally worked up the nerve to ask him. They'd eaten roast chicken, corn on the cob, and salad at her place, and he was helping her take down the horrible living room curtains so she could replace them with the snappy white eyelet ones she'd just bought.

Neely felt afraid, as if she were trying to cross an expanse of wafer-thin ice spanning a deep and frigid river. Caring too much would be the equivalent of falling through; she couldn't afford to love this good-looking, bewildering man because he was just passing by, like the other men who'd come to Pine Hill to build condominiums.

"Did something happen?"

Aidan looked at her curiously, raising one dark eyebrow in that ponderous way he had. "What do you mean, "did something happen"?"

Neely shrugged, crumpling the new curtains because she was holding them too tightly. "Last time I looked, you were working on a construction site," she said, and though she tried to offer the statement lightly, it came out sounding momentous.

He grinned. "Nothing dramatic. I just got tired of painting. I'm a sensualist, I guess," he said. "I enjoy the feeling of sunlight on my skin, and the way my muscles move underneath." His blue gaze seemed to caress her for a moment, making her flesh tingle beneath her clothes. "I like everything about being a

man.”

Neely turned quickly away. Ever since that first time Aidan had kissed her, she'd been sizzling like so much water spilled onto a hot griddle. Some primitive sense warned that he had the power to hurt her as no other man ever could, and Neely's emotions were fragile as it was.

If she waited long enough, maybe he'd go away, and she wouldn't have to take the dangerous chance of loving him.

## Chapter 20

Twilight gathered behind the mountaintops, then spilled down over the throngs of evergreen trees, shrouding them in pale apricot, and after that lavender, and finally a velvety purple. Neely and Aidan watched the spectacle from the window in the dining room of his apartment, where they sat at the round oak table, each gripping the other's hand.

Neely's emotions were very close to the surface, and the glorious sunset brought tears to her eyes. She moved to rise from her chair, but Aidan held her in place by gentle force.

“Neely,” he said quietly. “Don't run away. It's time we talked.”

She wanted to look anywhere but at Aidan, but she couldn't; his gaze seemed to hold hers fast. “About what?”

“You know ”about what,“ ” Aidan sighed with a touch of exasperation.

Neely bit her lower lip for a moment. “You're leaving,” she blurted out. “You've been in Pine Hill for six weeks, the construction job is about to end, and—”

“Yes,” Aidan said. His dark blue eyes reflected the faint smile that touched his mouth. “I'm leaving.”

She sniffled and straightened her shoulders. “Okay, good,” she said. “So long.” She tried again to stand, intending to bolt, but Aidan wouldn't release her hand. She sat trembling for a few moments, refusing to look at him, but then the compulsion grew too strong. “What do you want?” she snapped.

He said nothing, sensing somehow that there was more she needed to say, silently insisting that she come out with it.

Neely shoved her fingers through her hair. “I know we— we haven't made love or anything, but—well—I thought something was happening between us. There's a lot of electricity, or so it seemed to me. Now you're just going to leave.”

“There's a great deal you don't know about me, Neely,” Aidan said sadly, staring not at her but through the window, glazed with light on the inside now, dark beyond. “And a great deal I don't know about myself.”

She narrowed her eyes and sniffled again, then dashed the back of her free hand—Aidan still held the other— across her wet cheek. “I know you're an artist, that you have a house in Connecticut, that you

were born in Ireland but raised in the United States—”

He silenced her with an infinitely tender glance. “All those things are true,” he said, running his finger lightly over her knuckles. “At least, they *seem* true. But there are some serious gaps in my memory. You know about my adventures in England, for instance—how I woke up in the hospital, only to be told that I’d been found naked as a flounder in that old pile of stones. What the devil was I up to before that, Neely? How did I get there? Am I some kind of madman? *Whatelse* have I done that I’ve conveniently forgotten?”

Neely slipped out of her chair, still holding Aidan’s hand, and settled on his lap. From the moment she’d met him, she’d wanted him, with every breath she drew and every beat of her heart, but there had been a certain courtly, old-fashioned restraint in his manner. “I don’t know,” she assured him softly. “I’ve got a few ghosts of my own, remember—all that babble to my doctor about vampires, for one thing.” He smiled at that but didn’t interrupt, and Neely went on earnestly. “There are a lot of mysteries in this life, Aidan Tremayne, but there are also a few things I’m absolutely certain of, and here they are: You are a fine, sweet, gentle man, good to the core of your soul, and I love you.”

Aidan touched her trembling lower lip with the tip of an index finger. “Suppose you’re wrong?” The pain of his own uncertainty was clearly audible in his voice. “Oh, Neely, what if I’m some sort of maniac?”

She rested her forehead against his. “I’ll take my chances.” She pulled in a deep breath, let it out in a rush, and sat back to look into his eyes. “Is that why you haven’t made love to me, Aidan? Because you’re afraid you’re really a modern-day Jack the Ripper and the fact has simply slipped your mind?”

He chuckled, but there was anguish in the sound. “No, it isn’t that—I know I could never hurt you, under any circumstances.” Aidan actually looked shy, and she would have sworn there was a blush under that spring suntan of his. “The truth is, I seem to be rather behind the times when it comes to sex. I feel as if I’ve been searching for you for a thousand years, and when we make love, it’s going to be a sacred event.”

Neely’s tough, scarred heart softened, then melted entirely. “Well, then,” she said with sniffly briskness and a pinch of sarcasm, “it makes perfect sense that you’re planning to leave, doesn’t it?”

Aidan gave her a brief, nibbling kiss, the kind that always drove her crazy and left her aching for hours afterward.

“It does,” he affirmed, a few sweetly torturous moments later, “when you consider that I’m asking you to go with me, as my wife.”

It seemed that the floor buckled a little just then, and Neely tightened her arm around Aidan’s neck, afraid she would tumble from his lap. “You want to marry me?”

Aidan grinned, looking damnably Irish and outrageously handsome. “Do I ever,” he replied.

Neely was in a state of blessed shock. All her life she’d been waiting for a man like Aidan, one who could make her heart sing, and help her to be her best self, and she’d been disappointed more than once. In short, Aidan Tremayne seemed too good to be true. “You haven’t even said you love me,” she pointed out.

He took her chin in his hand and then kissed her, with slow, deliberate heat and a skill that incited a riot of sensation inside her, then drew back. “Haven’t I?” he whispered. “Funny, that’s what I thought I was

saying when I told you I've been searching for you for a thousand years. I do love you, Neely. Very, very much."

She buried her face in his neck and held him tightly for a long time, overwhelmed with happiness, struggling to assimilate it somehow.

At long last he stood, holding Neely close and looking down into her eyes. "Here, now," he said gruffly. "I'd best take you home, Miss Wallace, before I break my own rule and carry you straight off to bed."

There was nowhere Neely would rather be that night than in Aidan Tremayne's bed, for her senses had been humming with anticipation since the first time he'd kissed her, weeks before. "You know what they say about rules," she ventured tentatively.

Aidan ran the pad of his thumb over her moist lower lip. "This is one I don't mean to break," he said. He held her a little closer, though, and went on. "It's a gypsy's life I'm offering you, Neely. You'll never want for anything, but I've no idea when or where we'll settle. I want to see everything, be everywhere—to dance on mountaintops and make love to you on star-washed beaches—"

She stood on tiptoe to kiss him. "Such a romantic," she said with a happy sigh. "Tell me, though—what about that big fancy house of yours, back in Connecticut?"

He sighed again, resting his strong, work-calloused hands on her shoulders. "There's nothing there that I want, Neely—it's as if the place belonged in some other man's life, not my own. I'm thinking of signing it over to one of the universities or perhaps some charitable organization." He frowned pensively. "Would that bother you?"

Neely shook her head. "I think it's a wonderful idea," she said. For now, Aidan was all she needed or wanted; she would take all future days and moments one by one. "Let's get ourselves married, Mr. Tremayne."

He laughed, hooked his thumbs through the loops at the back of Neely's jeans, and hoisted her against him for one deliciously frustrating moment. "The sooner, the better," he answered.

Aidan found Neely's jacket and politely escorted her outside to his car. "Time you were tucked up in your own bed, fast asleep," he said when she was settled in the passenger seat and he was behind the wheel.

Neely blushed and kept her attention focused on the windshield, which had become a star-spangled mural. "Kindly stop reminding me that I'm going to be all by myself."

Aidan grinned, starting the Spitfire's powerful engine and deftly working the gearshift. "We'll be together soon enough," he assured her. "Be patient."

Neely was anything but patient.

That night she tossed and turned, catching only fleeting minutes of sleep. She felt like a complicated clock, wound so tightly that her inner springs were about to burst out in every direction.

The following day Neely gave notice at the Steak-and-Saddle, and Duke jokingly told her to go ahead and clear out, because he didn't want her underfoot for another two weeks.

She was so grateful that she flung her arms around the older man's neck and gave him a resounding kiss on the cheek.

She and Aidan applied for their marriage license later that morning at the courthouse, and then they went shopping for their new home.

Neely referred to their house on wheels as a recreational vehicle, while Aidan called it a "caravan." It was a sleek, shiny marvel, complete with its own bathroom, a queen-size bed, and a small kitchen. There were so many options that Neely expected to spend at least a week immersed in the owner's manual.

Of course, it would be some week far in the future, when the novelty of being a gypsy bride had worn off.

Aidan didn't seem to mind trading in the sports car; he took an object from the glove box, dropped it into his jacket pocket, patted the vehicle's gleaming hood, and, walked away. He and Neely were rambling down the road in their RV when he took one hand off the wheel and extended a small box to Neely.

"There were only two things in the Connecticut house that I wanted," he said. "Here they are."

Neely's hands trembled as she accepted an exquisite old music box, surely an antique. When she opened it, a few slow, poignant notes drifted out, then there was silence. She started to rewind the key, hungry to hear more, and that was when she saw the ring glimmering in the worn velvet lining of the lid.

Aidan had pulled the large vehicle off to the side of the road and sat watching her with his heart in his eyes. "According to these strange memories of mine, that ring has been in the Tremayne family for almost a century."

It was a simple piece of jewelry, a wide gold band with a large marquis diamond set at an angle. Inside that magnificent, multifaceted stone glimmered the sunlight of a hundred summers and the sparkle of as many stars.

"It's so beautiful," Neely whispered, slipping the ring onto her finger. It was only slightly too big.

"It can't begin to compete with you," Aidan replied.

That evening Neely found it even more difficult than usual to say good night to Aidan. Yes, she wanted him to make love to her, but even more than that, she longed to sleep in his arms, naked and trusting.

Neely spent the next day cleaning her rented house and packing up the few personal belongings she'd brought with her when she left Connecticut. She found a store selling antique clothing and jewelry in the next town and bought a lovely old dress of ivory and silk, made sometime in the twenties, along with an ornate sterling silver brooch, studded with marcasite.

She hung the dress on her tiny back porch to air through the afternoon and evening, then mended a few tiny tears in the fabric while watching television. Even with everything she had to do, it seemed to Neely that time was passing with all the speed of a snail stuck in neutral.

She was lying on the lumpy sofa in her living room, legs sticking straight up in the air and waving her feet back and forth to dry the polish on her toenails, when the jingling of the telephone made her start. She grappled for the receiver and nearly fell off the sofa in the process.

“Hello?”

Her brother Ben’s voice echoed warmly in her ear. “Hello, Sis. So, how does it feel to be almost married?”

“You tell me,” Neely responded with a grin. The relationship between Ben and Doris had developed into a grand passion, and the two of them were planning a summer wedding.

Ben laughed. “Sweetheart, if you’re as happy as I am, then you’re doing just fine.”

Joyous tears blurred Neely’s vision. “How’s Danny? Is he glad about having Doris in the family?”

“He’s crazy about her.” Ben was quiet for a moment. “Neely, you’re really sure this is what you want to do, aren’t you? I mean, getting married is a pretty big step.”

Neely lifted the hem of her T-shirt to dry her cheeks. “I know it sounds strange, but I’ve never been more certain of anything in my life. I was born to love this man, Ben, and he was born to love me.”

“All the same,” Ben said grudgingly, “if he mistreats you, I’ll take out his teeth. You tell him that for me.”

Neely smiled. “Okay, big brother,” she said obediently. “I’ll tell him, but you don’t need to worry your bushy-bearded head, because Aidan Tremayne is a gentleman.”

After that, Neely talked to Danny for a few minutes, and then to Doris. When the phone call was over, and everyone had congratulated everyone else, she went into her room to admire her wedding dress, which hung on the outside of her closet door.

The moonlight lent the gown a special sort of magic, catching in the pearl buttons rimmed with tiny crystals, making the exquisite, hand-worked lace seem almost new again.

Neely fell asleep admiring it.

Aidan slept with the peaceful abandon only a mortal is capable of, dark hair ruffled, one arm flung up over his head.

Valerian watched him in silence, knowing he shouldn’t linger, but not quite able to tear himself away. A thousand times the dark angel had wanted to reach out his hand and restore Aidan’s memory of all he had been before, and he wanted that now, as keenly as ever. He even went so far as to brush his fingers lightly over Aidan’s forehead, causing him to stir in his sleep, but in the end Valerian drew back.

Rare vampire tears glittered in his eyes. *We could have owned the stars*, he told the sleeping one.

Aidan rolled onto his side, still deeply asleep, and murmured a single word. And with that one word he broke Valerian’s heart.

“Neely,” he said.

Suddenly a burst of strangely dark light filled the room. Valerian raised his eyes and felt the most abject horror he had ever known, for Lisette stood on the opposite side of the bed, majestic and evil, plainly restored to all her former powers. Her once-scarred skin was unmarked, her auburn hair was as lush and



gleaming as ever, her blue-green eyes bright with triumph, fury, and madness.

She looked upon the sleeping Aidan for a long moment, as if to devour every line and fiber of him, and then raised her eyes to Valerian's face again.

Lisette laughed softly, musically, and Aidan stirred on the mattress, unaware that his soul was about to be stolen for a second time.

"Did you think, Valerian, that I would let him go so easily as all that?" Her face became hard and horrible for a moment; no doubt, she was considering the events of recent months. "Aidan is mine—my creation, my treasure. I will not give him up."

At last Valerian found his voice. "You must," he said hoarsely. "If you have any mercy in you, any decency—"

She laughed again, but it was a silent laughter, much like the unspoken language vampires and other immortals use to communicate with each other, and Aidan did not seem to hear it.

"Mercy," is it? "Decency"! Oh, but that's amusing! What good are such fatuous concepts to me, Lisette, the Queen of all vampyres?

Valerian closed his eyes briefly, searching his mind and his soul for a solution, finding none except to plead Aidan's case and, if necessary, to fight Lisette to the death. He held little hope of success either way, however, for the queen was not one to listen to reason, and she had plainly regained her powers, perhaps even garnered new ones through the peculiar graces of suffering.

Think what Aidan has been through, he reasoned, touching the forehead of the sleeping vampire-turned-mortal. Imagine what he risked, what he endured, to be a man again, to find his way in the mortal world. How can you—even you—take that from him? Great Zeus, Lisette—if you must have a plaything, take me.

Lisette glared, plainly displeased, and folded her white arms over the even whiter, flowing fabric of her Grecian gown. *You?* she scoffed. *Do you think me a fool, Valerian? You are as elusive as quicksilver—the moment I turned my back, you would be off dallying with some fledgling. No, I don't want you—you're far too troublesome as it is.*

Slowly Valerian rounded the bed, forced himself between Lisette and the still oblivious Aidan. He loomed above the older and more powerful vampire, the first female blood-drinker ever made, and called upon all the showmanship and bravado he possessed.

Go from here, he commanded. This one you shall not have.

Lisette was clearly undaunted. The sorceress drew herself up, and Valerian felt her powers focus on his midsection just before she sent him hurtling backward over Aidan's bed to crash silently against the opposite wall.

Valerian recovered quickly and moved to stand and resist her further, but she struck him again with another of her purely mental blows, and he felt himself paralyzed, not just physically but spiritually as well. He watched helplessly as Lisette stepped close to the bed again, knelt, and reverently smoothed Aidan's dark hair.

Valerian struggled to shout a warning to the sleeping mortal, but he could not force a sound past his throat. He had, he realized, vastly underestimated Lisette's powers.

I will make you love me, the vampire queen told Aidan. I will show you the stars, and we will not be parted again. No power on earth, or in heaven, shall ever separate us.

Inwardly Valerian shrieked in protest, and his helplessness was in those moments the greatest burden he had ever been made to bear, either as a vampire or as a human man.

*No power...* Lisette vowed again as she bent, fangs plainly in view, to give Aidan the fatal kiss, the one that would damn him for the second time, and for always.

Aidan made a soft, sleepy sound, innocent as a child as he wandered in his dreams, and Valerian could make no move to save him. The only response he could manage, in fact, was the sheen of tears that blurred his vision.

*Please!* he cried out silently to any benevolent being who might be nearby. *In the name of justice — this cannot happen!*

It appeared there was no hope, for Lisette moistened a patch of skin on Aidan's neck, using her tongue, her eyes raised to meet Valerian's. She was enjoying his torment, the damnable, whoring witch, and he swore that even if it cost him his own existence, if it took a hundred years or a thousand, he would avenge the events of this night.

Lisette's long vampire teeth glimmered, pearly in the dim moonlight, and she moved to lunge, to bury her fangs in Aidan's sleep-warmed flesh.

Valerian managed an anguished groan, but he still could not move. Still, the fog in his mind began to clear at last, and he was able to send a single name, in itself a plea for help, echoing into the universe.

Maeve.

In the next instant, just when Lisette's fangs would have broken Aidan's skin and begun to draw upon the healthy blood flowing through the veins and arteries beneath, the chamber seemed to burst with blinding, silvery light.

Valerian's heart surged with hope, though he knew this was not Maeve, or Tobias, or any of the vampires of his acquaintance. No, this was a holy being, sanctioned by Heaven itself, and as such it would surely destroy Valerian.

If Aidan could be saved, he didn't care.

The being of light seemed to push the walls out with its power; Valerian was sure the room, indeed the building itself, would explode into splinters. He soon realized, however, that the temporal world was not affected by this phenomenon—even if Aidan had been awake, he would not have seen or heard anything out of the ordinary.

Humans.

Slowly the entity took on shape and splendor, and Valerian realized that the newcomer was an angel. It was male and dressed, oddly enough, in the garb of a Spartan warrior.

Lisette had raised herself from Aidan's bedside, abandoning her prospective feast, staring in horror. *Nemesis*, she whispered fearfully.

The spirit laughed. No one so important, Vampyre. I am Jafar, and I am an ordinary enough creature—what mortals call a guardian angel. He looked fondly upon Aidan, who had begun to toss and turn upon his modern pallet. This one is my particular charge, and I am sworn to protect his soul with all the powers of Heaven.

Jafar had not yet spared a glance for Valerian, who was recovering now that Lisette's powers had slackened so dramatically, but Valerian watched the angel in stricken fascination. In all his existence he had never seen a being so magnificently beautiful.

What must *Nemesis*, one of the greatest angels in creation, be like?

Lisette had backed herself against the wall of Aidan's very ordinary bedroom, her eyes wide with terror.

Go from this place, Jafar told her. And do not come near my ward again, for if you do such a foolish thing, I will be permitted to destroy you.

Lisette made a mewling sound, one that could be heard only in the spirit, like all that had transpired that night, and vanished.

The angel bent over Aidan with a tenderness that was heartbreaking to see and carefully straightened his blankets, the way a mortal father might do for an exhausted child.

With the return of Valerian's physical powers came a serious fear that Jafar would turn his angel-strength upon him.

The splendid creature knew he was there—there had never been any question of that—but his regard, when he finally looked at Valerian, was remarkably gentle. *You did an uncommonly generous thing by summoning me back to the mortal's side with your cry of despair, but now you must keep away from him.*

Valerian nodded, though he wasn't at all certain he could comply with such an order, even if it came from the most wonderfully frightening being he had ever encountered. He found that he could move, and rose slowly to his feet.

He looked at Aidan, memorizing his features and frame, and then met the angel's gaze once more.

*I hope you'll be more efficient in the future,* he said, and as he vanished, he heard the seraphim laugh.

Come the morning, Valerian knew, Aidan would awaken and marvel over the strange dreams he'd had.

Vampires and angels, indeed, he would think, perhaps with a chuckle.

On Saturday morning Neely and Aidan were married in the big gazebo in the center of the town park, with a justice of the peace officiating. Neely's friends from the restaurant came to share their joy, as did Aidan's buddies from the construction job.

Neely felt beautiful in her antique dress, and the whole ceremony passed in a glorious haze. When the

judge reached the I-now-pronounce-you-husband-and-wife part, and Aidan kissed her, she almost fainted with the joy of it.

Duke held a reception for the bride and groom at the restaurant, complete with wedding cake, supermarket champagne, and lots of rice and birdseed.

“I’ll look after that car of yours,” Duke said when Neely went to him to thank him and say good-bye. He was an old-timer, and it was hard for him to express emotion.

Neely stretched to kiss Duke’s freshly shaven cheek. “When somebody comes through who looks like he needs a dented Mustang,” she said with a misty smile, “you just hand him the keys and tell him to drive it in good .health.”

Duke smiled. “You’ve got a generous heart, little lady. I always knew that. I know somethin’ else, too.”

Neely had never been happier, but she felt sad, too, saying good-bye to such a good friend. “What?” she sniffled, still smiling brightly.

The big man planted a shy kiss on her forehead. “That joy will follow you everywhere you go, from now on,” he answered. “You stop in and say howdy to old Duke if you’re in this neck of the woods again, you hear?”

“You can count on it,” Neely answered softly.

A few minutes later she and Aidan left the reception and drove away in their brand-new “caravan,” a couple of very proper gypsies.

Aidan, who had bought a suit and tie for the occasion, looked comfortable behind the wheel of the RV—perhaps too comfortable. He pulled off his tie and tossed it over one shoulder, then quickly unfastened the top three buttons of his shirt.

“Forgive me if I sound like a bumper sticker, Mrs. Tremayne,” he said cheerfully, keeping his eyes on the open road ahead, “but today is the first day of the rest of our lives.”

Neely scrambled into the back of the RV to exchange her wedding dress for a pair of jeans, a lavender T-shirt, and sneakers. “That’s very profound,” she responded, trying to keep her voice light. The truth was, she was thinking about the patch of strong masculine chest she’d glimpsed when Aidan opened his shirt, and wondering when the honeymoon would begin.

“What are you doing back there?”

Neely rejoined her husband in the front of the RV, plopping into the passenger seat and giving him a sultry look as she fastened her seat belt in place. “What do you think I was doing?” she teased. “Sipping champagne from my shoe? Sprinkling the bed with perfume?”

A slow blush moved up Aidan’s neck and glowed along his jawline. He gave her a sidelong glance and a high-voltage grin. “I wouldn’t put it past you, you hot-blooded little vixen. You’ve been after my virtue from the first.”

Neely felt her own cheeks glow, and she sagged deeper into the seat with a soft but long-suffering sigh. “Now what are we going to wait for? Our golden anniversary?”

Aidan laughed, and the sound was rich and masculine, causing Neely to want her husband that much more. "That or the first wide spot in the road," he teased. "Whichever turns up soonest. Great Scot, woman, did you think I was going to fling you into the sheets the moment we stepped over the threshold and have my way with you, right there in the steak-house parking lot?"

This time Neely laughed, too; but her blush deepened, and she reached across to give her husband a playful slap on the arm. Then she squirmed in her seat and said, "Are we there yet?"

An hour later Aidan brought the RV to a stop at the edge of a sun-splashed meadow. Then he came around to open Neely's door and help her out.

She had looked forward to being alone with her husband, yearned for it, in fact, but now that the time had arrived, Neely suddenly felt shy. "Here?" she whispered.

Aidan laid a hand to either side of her face and kissed her lightly, and much too briefly. "Here," he confirmed. "Look at the way the sun slants between those trees over there. There's something cathedral-like about the place."

He was right, but Neely suspected the reverence they both felt came from their own hearts, rather than from the landscape around them.

"It's beautiful," Neely agreed.

Aidan eased past her, into the RV, and returned in a few moments carrying blankets, a chilled bottle of very good champagne, and two fluted glasses. Slipping one arm around Neely's waist, he escorted her toward the trees where the light fell so gracefully onto the fragrant grass.

He put the champagne and glasses aside to spread the blankets over the soft ground, then beckoned to Neely. "Come over here, Mrs. Tremayne."

She went to him happily, and he took her into his arms and held her close. He kissed her thoroughly, as he had so many times before, but this time he would not be leaving her to merely imagine his lovemaking.

After a while, when Neely was half-dazed with wanting her husband, Aidan began stripping away her clothes. He worked very slowly, tossing aside her T-shirt first, caressing and admiring her for a long time before unclasping her bra and disposing of that, too.

Her breasts stood bare and proud, their tips hardening in the spring breeze, and when Aidan bent with a groan to touch one morsel with his tongue, Neely cried out in hoarse joy and pressed him close.

They sank to the ground one limb at a time, like some graceful four-legged creature, and Aidan continued to enjoy Neely's full breasts. She kicked off her sneakers and tore at the zipper of her jeans, and Aidan chuckled against her nipple and stilled her frantic hand with his own. He made her wait.

Finally, though, each was bared to the other.

Aidan stroked Neely's thighs lightly and made teasing circles on her belly with his fingers.

"No longer, Aidan," she whispered frantically, slipping both arms around his neck. "I've waited too long, and I want you so much—"

“And I want you,” he said, his mouth falling to hers. Their tongues battled, then mated. With a groan Aidan mounted Neely, easing her legs apart with one knee.

She cried out and arched her back as he glided inside her and settled deep for a moment, claiming her, letting her body get used to his.

He chuckled as he nibbled at her lips. “Little vixen,” he teased. She struggled beneath him, wanting to thrash and writhe, but he held her firmly in place.

Neely made a sound that was half passion and half frustration. “Aidan,” she pleaded, “make love to me—please— or I swear it’s going to happen on its own!”

Aidan raised himself onto his elbows, withdrew from her, then made a steady, smooth lunge into her warmth again.

That was all it took. Neely’s body was so primed for Aidan’s conquering that one stroke brought on a raging, cataclysmic climax. Eyes unfocused, she jerked helplessly beneath him while a low, lingering wail of pleasure poured from her throat.

Aidan held Neely while she responded, lodged far within her, and murmured gentle, senseless words against her ear. She’d been still, dazed and sated, for some time before he moaned and stiffened and spilled his warm seed inside her.

For a long time they lay there, arms and legs entwined, bodies joined, and their breaths might have been one breath, their heartbeats a single steady meter.

“I’m sorry,” Neely said when she could finally speak.

Aidan raised his head and looked at her with incredulous, ink-blue eyes. “What did you say?”

“I was so eager. It happened so fast.” Tears started in her lashes because she wanted Aidan to be pleased, the way she was, and she thought she’d failed.

He kissed the moisture away, aroused her all over again simply by caressing her eyelids with the tip of his tongue. “No, darling,” he whispered tenderly, “this day has been an eternity in the making.” He slid lower, brushed his lips over her collarbone and the soft rounding of her breasts. “And the best part is,” he added presently, “that this is only the beginning.”

Neely spread her hands over Aidan’s muscled back then, and a sob escaped her, a hoarse, splendid sound born of jubilation, not sorrow. Their souls spoke a silent, private language, and their bodies needed no words at all.

When they had spent still more of their passion, they drank champagne from their wedding glasses and, with laughing reluctance, began to dress each other. When it became a game, however, and the players started kissing places before they covered them, the clothes came off again.

“We’re going to catch pneumonia, lying out here in the breeze in the altogether,” Aidan said some time later.

“You’re right.” Neely sat up and started reaching for scattered garments and pulling them on. She was

ridiculously happy, and she couldn't help humming a little under her breath. "I'm glad we didn't wait for our golden anniversary."

Aidan, who had dressed more quickly, pulled Neely to her feet and kissed her as they collided. "I could never have lasted past the silver one," he teased.

Once they'd put away the blankets and glasses and the champagne, Aidan got behind the wheel and started the engine.

"Well, Mrs. Tremayne, where do we go now? South to Mexico, or north to Canada?"

Neely considered, smoothing her hopelessly crumpled T-shirt and straightening her seat belt. "Surprise me," she said.

Late that night Aidan and Neely stopped in a moonlit RV park, at the edge of a southbound highway. There they grilled hamburgers on their tiny stove, crowded into their minuscule shower stall together, and finally made feverish love on the fold-out bed.

Aidan slept when it was over, but Neely lay curled against his side, watching the stars through the skylight in the roof of the motor home as they did their intricate, shining dance around the moon. If anybody had ever told her she was going to be this happy, she reflected, she would have thought the notion was insane.

After the sky patterns had shifted several times, Neely rose, pulled an oversized T-shirt over her head, and crept to the drawer where she kept her most treasured belongings. Inside were school pictures of Danny, a necklace that had belonged to her mother, and the antique music box that Aidan had given her the night he proposed.

Holding the box close to her heart, Neely made her way to the door, opened it quietly, and stepped out into the silver-spangled night. She needed to be in the open spaces, at least for a few minutes, because the RV was simply too small to contain all the love and gratitude she felt.

Standing on the metal step, Neely wound the key on the bottom of the rosewood box, then lifted the lid. Sweet, oddly familiar music flowed into the night, and Neely danced in the damp and scented grass, turning round and round, like the stars overhead.

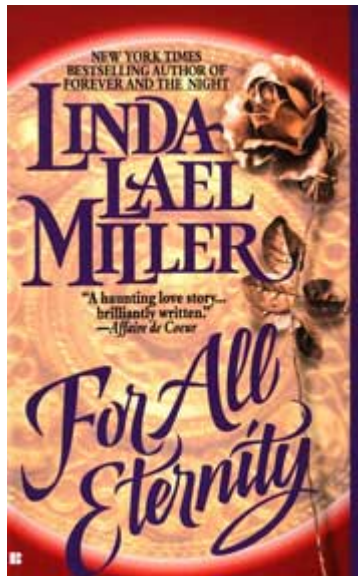
When she had spent her energy, she stopped the music and went back inside to crawl into bed next to her husband.

Aidan slept without reservation, sprawled every which way, with one arm flung back over his head. "Hmmm?" he said.

Neely smiled, kissed the pulsepoint at the base of his throat, and thought briefly of a wondrously handsome, elegant vampire who had once visited her dreams.

How odd, she thought as she toppled into sweet sleep, that she should think of him now.





FOR ALL ETERNITY

LINDA LAEL MILLER

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*For Wendy—again, always, just because.*

*You're still the best thing that ever*

*happened to me.*

*I love you, Sweetheart.*

"We are shaped and fashioned by what we love."

—*Von Goethe*

## CHAPTER 1

*Bright River, Connecticut*

*The present*

Vampires are not supposed to cry.

So Maeve Tremayne told herself, in any case, that day in midsummer, as she stood in the echoing entry hall of her brother's house, gazing through a sheen of tears at the bouquet of dead roses he'd left for her.

The pale, shriveled petals lay scattered across the dusty marble tabletop, their curled edges the color of tea. Clearly Aidan had been away for some time.

Maeve took a certain bittersweet solace in this confirmation that her twin had not forgotten his promise to let her know whether his grand and foolhardy experiment had met with defeat or triumph.

The message of the roses was unmistakable: Aidan had surrendered his immortality to become a man again.

Maeve reached for a papery white petal, turning it slowly in her long, pale fingers. Aidan had never known a moment's happiness as a vampire, she reflected, in an effort to console herself. He had, after all, been changed against his will by a vindictive lover, the legendary Lisette.

For more than two centuries Aidan had despaired of his wondrous powers, instead of glorying in them, as Maeve had in her own. Even now it amazed her that her brother hadn't appreciated the extent of his gifts; vampires could travel through time and space at will, manipulate objects and human beings by mental tricks, disguise their presence from any lesser creature and most equals, and think with the entire brain, rather than just a small portion, as mortals did.

Oh, yes, vampires were far superior to those pitiful creatures, with their fragile organs and brittle bones. Immortals were able to see and hear as well or better than the average alleycat, and except under very bizarre circumstances, they need not fear the specter of death that awaited all humans.

Maeve shuddered, remembering the nightmare scene that had taken place only a few months before in an isolated graveyard on a hilltop behind an ancient abbey. Aidan had nearly died the most horrible of vampire deaths, a hellish, fiery ordeal triggered by the light of the sun.

Damn Aidan and his fatuous nobility, she thought. He'd gone willingly into Lisette's trap in an effort to rescue another nightwalker, his friend Valerian. If it hadn't been for Maeve herself, and for Tobias, one of the oldest vampires on earth, Aidan would have perished, screaming and writhing in the snow.

Maeve gathered petals in both hands and pressed them to her face. She caught their faint scent and tucked it away among her memories to recall at another time.

"Aidan," she whispered brokenly. "Oh, Aidan."

She was alone in the vastness of creation now, Maeve told herself, parting her hands and letting the rose petals rain gracefully down upon the tabletop. She had only enemies and acquaintances, but no friends.

Vampires were not particularly social creatures, since they feared certain angels and warlocks, as well as seemingly blundering humans who were in truth ruthless hunters, out to destroy them. Moreover, blood-drinkers mistrusted each other, and with good reason, for they tended to be greedy and unprincipled, unabashedly devoted to their own best interests.

Maeve sighed and wandered into Aidan's study, where he had worked so many nights on those damnable journals and sketches of his. He had always fed early, if possible, and then returned to this great, ponderous, lonely house to pretend he was a mortal, with a piddly life span of seventy-six years or so. It still mystified her that he'd admired them so, these awkward beings who were almost completely oblivious to the marvelous powers evolving in the secret depths of their own spirits.

She took the first volume of Aidan's many bound journals down from the shelf and felt a stab of grief when she saw the sketch of herself and her brother on the initial page. She recalled their human beginnings, in eighteenth-century Ireland, when they'd been born to a bawdy but very beautiful tavern wench, with a rich English merchant for a sire.

Alexander Tremayne had taken good care of his by-blows, Maeve had to confess, considering that he had another family, a legitimate one, back in Liverpool. His great sin, the one Maeve would always despise him for, had been in separating the twins when they were just seven years old.

Just prior to that fateful parting, Aidan and Maeve's flighty, superstitious mother had taken them to an old gypsy fortune-teller. The crone had studied their small palms and then rasped, "Cursed! Cursed for all eternity, and beyond!"

At that, the ancient creature had risen from the steps of her colorful wagon and tottered inside. Moments later she had returned with duplicate medals, rosebuds shaped of gold and suspended from sturdy chains. With great ceremony she had hung a pendant around each child's neck.

"These cannot save your souls," she'd said, but they will remind you to uphold the qualities of mercy and faith, no matter what befalls you. From those will come your strength and your power."

Maeve had kept the gypsy's gift ever since, taken comfort from it after she was sent away from her mother and brother.

From an upstairs room in an Irish tavern, Maeve had gone to a nunnery where she'd been taught to sew, weave, and embroider, as well as to read and write. Aidan had been sent to an expensive school for boys far away in England, and he, too, had kept his pendant close.

The two children had soon discovered an eerie ability to communicate via images held in their minds, and that contact had been Maeve's consolation during dark, lonely hours.

Then, when Aidan had reached young manhood, he'd met Lisette, the most powerful of all female vampires, and had mistaken her for a mortal woman. In the end Lisette had murdered Aidan, and then

restored him as a nightwalker by giving him back his own blood, altered.

When Maeve had discovered the truth, through the offices of an exasperating, impudent, and unbelievably handsome immortal called Valerian, she, was shattered. From then on, she knew, all eternity would lie between herself and Aidan, for he would live forever, while she was destined to grow old and die.

Valerian had graciously explained the benefits of becoming a vampire, as well as the obvious drawbacks.

On the one hand, an immortal could do virtually anything he or she wished, on the strength of a single clearly focused thought. The world, even the universe, was their playground, But on the other, Valerian had said with a shiver, there was no doubt that if the fundamentals of religion were true, all vampires would surely be damned. There would be no help for them, and certainly no mercy; if they were judged before the courts of heaven, they'd be cast into the Great Pit as well.

Raised in a convent, Maeve had heard plenty about hell and been taught to fear it with her whole soul, but she was also irrepressibly adventurous. Moreover, she could not bear for Aidan to leave her behind, and, in the last analysis, the consumption of blood seemed a small price to pay for the privileges vampires knew.

After all, she wouldn't have to kill her victims if she didn't choose to, and even in her innocence she knew there were plenty of scoundrels in the world to take nourishment from. She needn't pick on anyone with an honest heart.

When all these matters had been carefully reviewed, Maeve made her decision and asked Valerian to make her a vampire, since she knew Aidan would never consent to do it himself. At first, Valerian had refused, but he'd been attracted to Maeve, too, and she'd used the fact to her advantage.

Eventually Valerian had changed her, and it was not at all the unpleasant experience Aidan had described. In fact, Maeve had known unbounded ecstasy that night.

Aidan had been enraged when he discovered that his sister had followed in his footsteps; he'd called her all sorts of a fool and cursed Valerian to rot under a desert sun, and then he'd simply vanished.

For a time Maeve had been Valerian's lover, as well as his apprentice. He had introduced her to the pleasures of vampire sex, a mostly mental pursuit vastly superior to the comical wrestling humans seemed to enjoy with such abandon. Since Maeve had been a virgin when Valerian transformed her, she'd been spared the indignity of sweating and straining and thrashing under some man's thrusting hips the way mortal women did.

Valerian had introduced her to many other things besides the intense delights of mating, of course. She'd learned all the nightstalker's tricks and learned them well. One night, when she caught Valerian playing vampire games with a beautiful fledgling named Pamela, Maeve had decided to strike out on her own.

She'd done well, too, eventually reconciling with a still-vexed Aidan and hurling herself into one wonderful adventure after another.

Now, as Maeve stood in the deserted room that had once been her brother's favorite retreat, holding the golden rose pendant between two fingers, she struggled to accept another reality, another turning in the road.

She must leave Aidan to his humanity, though the temptation to seek him out was almost irresistible. It was to be hoped that he'd made a happy life for himself.

Maeve figured she would never know; Aidan was dead to her, and she to him, and there could be no returning to their old bonds.

There was nothing to do now but feed and retire to the attic studio of her home in London, where she liked to go when she was sad or injured. There she would sit at her loom, letting her thoughts drift while she worked the shuttle, allowing her deeper mind to dictate the image that would appear, as if by magic, on the resultant tapestry.

*Gettysburg, Pennsylvania*

*July 14, 1863*

When Calder Holbrook slept—a rare event in itself—his dreams were haunted by the bone-jarring thunder of cannon fire and the screams of schoolboys-turned-soldier. Not a moment passed, sleeping or waking, when he didn't want to lay down his surgical instruments and go home to Philadelphia, but he couldn't leave the wounded. The color of their tattered uniforms meant nothing to him, though some of the other doctors refused to treat "the enemy."

That particular summer night was hot, weighted with the metallic scent of blood and the more pungent stench of urine and vomit. After operating for twenty hours straight, Calder had stretched out gratefully on the soft, cool grass covering an old grave, there in the sideyard of the small clapboard church, and plunged headlong into a fitful slumber. In the early hours, well before dawn, something awakened him, something far more subtle than the cries and moans of the injured boys inside, sprawled end to end on the pews.

Aching with despair and fatigue, Calder lifted himself onto an elbow and scanned the churchyard. There were so many wounded, such an impossible number, that they spilled out on the crude sanctuary to lie in neat rows on the grass. Even so, this was only one of many improvised hospitals, all overburdened, overwhelmed.

Some of the patients shivered or sobbed in their inadequate bedrolls—if they were lucky enough to have a blanket in the first place. Some moaned, and some had suffered only minor injuries and were just marking time, waiting to be sent home or to rejoin the Union troops at the front. The Confederates, of course, would be marched to some prison camp, or hauled there in whatever rickety wagon could be spared.

Calder came back from his musings and squinted. Something was different; he had an eerie, fluttery feeling in the pit of his stomach, made up partly of excitement and partly of fear. He dragged himself upright, his back against the cool marble headstone, ran blood-stained fingers through his dark hair, and strained his tired eyes.

And then he saw her.

She was a creature made of moonlight, moving so gracefully between the rows of fallen soldiers that she seemed to float. Her gown was pale, sewn of some shimmering, gauzy fabric, and her ebony hair tumbled down her back in a lush cascade.

Calder rubbed his eyes, then the back of his neck, mystified, certain that he must be hallucinating, or at least dreaming. This was not one of the good women of the town, who had been assisting so tirelessly with the injured of both sides since the terrible battle earlier in the month; none of them would have worn something so impractical as a white frock into the midst of such filth and overwhelming gore.

An angel, then? Calder wondered. Some of the stricken boys had spoken of a beautiful guardian spirit who came in the night and gave nurture and comfort to those who were the nearest to death. Of course, they'd been seeing what they wanted to see, being so far from their mothers, wives, and sweethearts.

Calder narrowed his eyes again, trusting neither his vision nor his reason. The woman did not vanish, as he had expected, but instead knelt beside a sorely wounded lad and drew him against her bosom with such tenderness that Calder's throat tightened over a wrenching cry.

Her glorious hair, seemingly spun from the night itself, was like a veil, hiding the lad's head and shoulders from view.

Calder finally gathered enough of his senses to scramble awkwardly to his feet. "You, there," he said in a low but forceful voice. "What are you doing?"

The creature raised her head, her exquisite face pale and glowing like an alabaster statue in the silvery wash of the moon. The boy lay in her arms, his head back in utter abandon, an expression of sublime jubilation plain in his features. Even from that distance, Calder knew the soldier was dead.

The doctor scrambled to his feet, swayed slightly from weariness and hunger, and started toward the woman. She laid the boy on the ground with infinite gentleness, bent to kiss his forehead, and then rose gracefully to her full height. Just as Calder drew near enough to see her clearly, she raised her arms and clasped her hands together, high above her head. She favored the physician with one brief, pitying smile, and vanished like so much vapor.

Calder gasped, shaken, terrified that he was at last and indeed losing his mind, and oddly joyous, all of a piece. After a moment or so he composed himself and crouched beside the boy the woman had held so lovingly, searching with practiced fingers for a pulse.

There was none, as he had expected, but Calder felt the familiar mixture of rage and grief all the same. The soldier had obviously been trying to grow a beard, and he'd produced peach fuzz instead. His features were more those of a child than a man.

Damn this war, Calder thought bitterly, and damn the politicians on both sides for sending mere children into the fray. He was about to straighten the boy's head, and cover him so that the overworked orderlies would know to carry him away in the morning, when he noticed the odd marks at the base of the lad's throat—two neat puncture wounds, just over two inches apart.

"What the hell?" Calder whispered.

Tom Sugarheel, an earnest but largely incompetent fellow who had been dragged out of some second-rate medical college and pressed into government service, suddenly appeared, squatting at Calder's side. "That'll be one less to bawl and snuffle for his mama," the other man said.

Calder reminded himself that he was here to attend the sick and injured, not to kill, then glared at Sugarheel. It galled him to ask an opinion of this oaf, but sometimes even idiots possessed insights that escaped other minds. "Look at these marks," he said, pointing to the boy's throat. "Have you seen



anything like this before?"

Sugarheel shrugged, reaching into the torn, bloodstained pocket of the dead lad's dark blue tunic. "Not as I recollect." He found a small tintype, probably intended for the soldier's mother or young bride, and ran a dirty thumb over the cracked glass while he pondered the already fading throat wounds. "Looks almost like something a snake would do."

"You're the only snake in the immediate vicinity," Calder pointed out impatiently, snatching the photograph in its blood-speckled leather case from Sugarheel's grubby grasp. "Rustle up a couple of orderlies, and don't touch this boy's personal belongings again."

Sugarheel's expression was wry and defiant. "Most of these lads carry a paper with the name of their folks and such. I just wanted to make sure his kin got any valuables he might have."

Calder felt a crushing weariness, deeper than physical exhaustion, something that lamed the spirit. "That's the chaplain's duty, not yours. Make no mistake, *Doctor*—if I catch you stealing, be it from the quick or from the dead, I'll cut you open like a bloated cow and fill your guts with kerosene. Is that clear enough, or were there too many syllables for you?"

Hatred replaced the amusement in Sugarheel's narrow, pockmarked face, but he didn't respond. Instead he got to his feet and ambled off to fetch the requested orderly.

Calder rose a moment later, after silently bidding the fallen soldier Godspeed, and stumbled back to the soft mound, hoping to sleep again, knowing with despairing certainty that he would not.

Maeve reached her new lair, a long-abandoned wine cellar in an old villa in nineteenth-century Italy, just moments before the light of the morning sun came flooding over the low hills to blaze in the olive groves and vineyards and dance, sparkling, on the sea. The inevitable sleep overtook her, and she sank into utter unconsciousness. All levels of her mind were blank, as usual, empty of the random images and fragmentary dreams some vampires experienced.

When she awakened, however, hours later, at the precise moment of sunset, a man had taken up residence in her thoughts—*amortal* man, no less. He was very handsome, in a patrician sort of way, with dark hair, good teeth, and broad shoulders, but Maeve still resented the intrusion. Why, she wondered pettishly, should she find herself pondering the likes of a beleaguered army surgeon like Calder Holbrook?

Maeve rose from her improvised bed of dusty crates and smoothed her hair, feeling even more irritated at the realization that she'd taken the trouble to ferret out his name before leaving the Civil War field hospital for more pleasant surroundings. She had no particular fascination with human beings—beyond feeding on them when the need arose, that is.

In a flash, much of the doctor's history flooded, unbidden, into Maeve's mind. Calder Holbrook was the second son of a wealthy Philadelphia banker. He'd graduated from Harvard Medical School with honors and taken further training in Europe. He'd been married once, to a selfish socialite who had deserted her husband and their small daughter to run away with a lover. Holbrook had endured this betrayal with admirable equanimity, but when his beloved child had perished of spinal meningitis a year later, he'd turned bitter and cold, devoting himself to his work. His father had begged him to spend the war years in Europe, advancing his studies, but Holbrook had accepted a commission and left his comfortable life in Philadelphia without so much as a backward glance...



Maeve put her palms to her temples and closed her eyes, trying to stop the onslaught of images and emotions, wanting to know nothing more about Dr. Calder Holbrook. All the same, she was well aware that she would see him again, whether she wished it so or not.

Exasperated, Maeve formed a picture of her grand house in London, with myriad comforts of the twentieth century, and centered all her inner forces on the desire to be there. In an instant she found herself standing in her own lush suite of rooms.

Moving rapidly, as if to shake persistent images of a doctor from her mind, thoughts of a man as sorely wounded as any of his patients, Maeve exchanged her white dress for a comfortable gown of red velvet. It was a simple creation, really, loosely fitted at the waist, with wide sleeves tapering into cuffs that buttoned with jet. After brushing her hair, she left her private apartments, walked along the wide hallway, and climbed the attic stairs to her studio.

She must feed soon. Maeve was not one for starving herself, knowing as she did that her powers, rare even among vampires, as well as her unflagging strength, came from the blood she took each night. Besides, she looked forward to the sweeping, thunderous joy that always overtook her during that intimate communion.

When she opened the door to the studio, however, and saw her loom awaiting her there, Maeve was drawn to it. During those early, wildly painful nights when she'd first known that her brother had either ceased to exist or somehow been restored to all the faults and frailties of humanity, weaving had been her only solace. She had not seen Valerian during that time—for all she knew or cared, her former lover and mentor was rotting in some crypt with a stake through his heart—nor had she encountered her acquaintances, the Havermails, or any of the members of the Brotherhood. Indeed, Maeve had taken care to avoid all other vampires, fearing they would sense her unusual vulnerability and close in on her like so many frenzied sharks.

Maeve had no illusions about blood-drinkers; except for Valerian's odd fascination with Aidan, and the deep bond that had once existed between her brother and herself, she had never known one to harbor true affection for another.

The pull of the loom was strong, stronger even than the unholy thirst.

She found the long box that contained her many spools of colored floss, then seated herself on the stool facing the primitive mechanism. Soon the shuttle was making its comfortingly familiar, rhythmic sound, and Maeve lost track of time, sublimating even the ravenous hunger she felt.

When a form suddenly towered opposite her, she cried out, startled. In the next instant, she was furious, for Maeve had not been caught off guard in such a fashion in nearly two centuries.

Valerian was examining the growing tapestry, a frown creasing his handsome brow. The scars from his graveyard encounter with Lisette, the one from which Aidan had so nobly attempted to save him, were now almost fully healed. His lush mane of chestnut hair had grown back, thicker than ever. The old mischief flashed in his blue eyes, though this was tempered by a certain quiet sorrow.

"You really ought to be more vigilant, my dear," the seasoned vampire said, leaving off his former thoughtful inspection of the half-finished tapestry to round the loom and stand at Maeve's side. "Suppose I had been Lisette, or some wandering warlock?"

Maeve was embarrassed, and that made her angry, for her besetting sin had always been pride. "Had

you been Lisette," she said, seething, "or 'some wandering warlock,' instead of your pompous and arrogant self, you probably would have had the decency to knock at the door."

Valerian arched one eyebrow and studied her with a wry expression, though the sadness in his gaze did not lessen. He had suffered, and in spite of herself, Maeve felt a twinge of pity for him.

"I see no reason to continue this nonsensical debate," he said. "The point is, I am here."

"You'll pardon me if I don't touch my forehead to the floor three times or kill the fatted calf," Maeve retorted with slightly more charity in her tone.

Valerian laughed, but despair rang in the sound, as well as mirth. "What a relief to find that you haven't changed—you're still the same saucy, peevish chit I transformed these many years ago."

Maeve narrowed her dark blue eyes. When Valerian reminded her of her making, it was usually an indication that he wanted something. "Next you'll be pointing out that you taught me everything I know," she accused.

"Didn't I?" he asked lightly.

"No!" Maeve cried. "I can't count the number of times you nearly got me burned, beheaded, or staked through the heart in my sleep." She paused, calming herself slightly. "Come, Valerian—no more hedging. What do you want?"

He sighed dramatically—pure affectation, since vampires do not breathe. "I'm surprised you haven't asked about Aidan," he said softly.

Maeve felt dizzy, as if she'd taken a blow. "I know he gave up his immortality," she replied. "Nothing matters beyond that."

"Oh, no?"

Maeve lifted her eyes, met Valerian's penetrating and somewhat hypnotic gaze. "He is well?" she asked, quickly and in a low voice. At the other vampire's slight hesitation, she whispered in a furious rush, "*Damn you, Valerian, is he well!*"

Valerian engaged in a slow scowl. "He and that Neely creature are married now, and they're expecting a child." He stopped for a moment, bristling with distaste. "They're actually living in *amotorhome*," he went on, "like a pair of latter-day gypsies!"

Maeve laughed, amused at Valerian's snobbery, but the sound was a bitter one because she had realized the danger. Her expression turned deadly serious. "You've been following Aidan about, haven't you? You idiot—you've probably set half the ghouls in creation on his trail!"

The accusation made Valerian draw himself up in an imperial swell of annoyance. As usual, he wore tailored evening clothes and a cape, and in one hand he held a very expensive top hat. The attire served to accentuate his natural majesty of countenance.

"I veiled myself," Valerian said scathingly, glowering down his nose at a thoroughly undaunted Maeve. "No other vampire, not you or even Lisette herself, would have sensed my presence." He seemed to deflate a little then, though the change was nearly imperceptible, and Maeve could not be certain whether

she'd seen or just imagined it. He examined his perfectly manicured and buffed fingernails. "The truth is, I was bored to distraction within a week," he finally allowed in a moderate tone of voice. "I'd forgotten what mundane lives humans lead."

Maeve was frowning and, being unusually adept at such things, even for a vampire, Valerian read her thoughts. He smiled gently and reached out to raise her chin with an index finger.

"There, now," he said. "Don't be worrying about your foolish brother, my sweet. Only Lisette has reason to quarrel with our Aidan, and I've stolen all memory of him from her mind."

"However did you manage?" Maeve asked, surprised. "Don't tell me you actually approached her again, after she staked you out in that graveyard to be destroyed by the sun!"

"It was easy," Valerian scoffed. "When her plan backfired and she herself was nearly caught by the light of day, she was badly disfigured. Being a vain creature, Lisette has secreted herself away. Most nights she does not even rise to feed."

Maeve left the stool and went to the tall leaded windows that looked out over London. "Lisette is dormant?" she asked casually, knowing all the while that she wasn't deceiving Valerian; that was virtually impossible.

"For the most part," Valerian replied, moving silently and swiftly to her side and pretending an interest in the lights of the city.

"So that's why you've come," Maeve said. "You hope to destroy her, and you want my help."

Valerian didn't reply immediately. When he did speak some moments later, his voice was oddly hoarse and grim with determination. "Lisette is a scourge on mortals and immortals alike," he said. "When she rallies—and believe me, Maeve, she *will* find her old strength—she will be more dangerous, more unreasoningly greedy, than ever before. I have seen her return from one of her monumental sulks innumerable times. She goes on rampages, feeding on innocents, changing most of her victims into vampires, and killing those who are too weak to make the transition. It must not be permitted to happen again."

"Why do you want me to help? There are others who are older and more powerful."

"You know very well why I want you," Valerian replied tersely. "Lisette is the undisputed queen of all vampires, and you, my difficult darling, are her logical successor."

## CHAPTER 2

Maeve was particularly hungry and rather weak, having missed her feeding that night, and she was impatient with Valerian and his penchant for high drama. She turned to look up at him, there by the towering windows in the studio of her London house, and folded her arms. "Suppose I tell you I have no desire to be the vampire queen? What if I simply want to go on living strictly for myself, the way I always have?"

Valerian's smile was almost—but not quite—a smirk. Even he would not have dared that, for he knew better than anyone that she was his equal, in power and in skill. "I would not believe a word of it—there

is something of your heroic brother in you. Besides, you have no choice in the matter, darling. It seems to be fated."

"*Fated*," Maeve scoffed quietly, but she felt troubled on some deep level of her being. "Nothing is fated for vampires—we are not a natural creation, remember. We have no place in the grand scheme of things."

"Alas," Valerian said, with another of his theatrical sighs, "you are right, my darling, but you are wrong, as well. Some thousand years after the first vampires came into being on Atlantis, other supernatural creatures waged war against our kind. Blood-drinkers were forced into hiding, and still we were nearly destroyed. Then, in meditation, one of the elders saw a vision—a battle between Lisette and a new queen, blessed—if that's the proper word—with powers more formidable than any vampire has ever possessed."

"What does that have to do with me?" Maeve snapped, fearing sorely that greatness would be thrust upon her, whether she desired it or not. She liked her existence just the way it was, though she would have preferred to be spared the grief Aidan had caused her, of course. "There are other strong female vampires, you know. Your friend Pamela, for instance. And then there is Dimity—"

"Do not waste my time," Valerian snapped, interrupting Maeve with an imperious wave of one hand. "Pamela loves her own pleasure too much, and it is rumored that Dimity consorts with angels. There is no one but you, Maeve. You must help me destroy Lisette before she regains her former strength and wreaks havoc on the natural and supernatural worlds alike."

Maeve was honestly baffled. "Why do you care?" she asked. "Pardon my saying so, Valerian, but you aren't known for your generosity and self-sacrifice—especially on behalf of human beings."

Valerian turned his head for a moment, but Maeve saw nearly fathomless grief in his magnificent profile all the same. *Saints in heaven*, she thought, *he misses Aidan even more than I do*.

"I've changed," he said finally. He looked at her again then, with a mischievous, slanted, and slightly haunted grin. "Somewhat."

Maeve felt a small rush of affection for her old friend and erstwhile adversary but offered no response to his statement. Instead, after a few poignant moments had passed, she sighed and said, "I must feed—the sun will be up soon."

"You'll think about what I've said?" Valerian asked.

Maeve gave a reluctant nod and watched with grudging admiration as the other vampire drew back, swirled his expensive cape, and vanished into a shifting vapor. She'd never known another nightwalker with Valerian's flair for showmanship.

Maeve's temptation to return to the American Civil War, and thus to Dr. Calder Holbrook, was monumental. As an exercise in self-discipline, and because she would be damned and double-damned before stooping to consort with a mortal the way Aidan had, Maeve turned her thoughts in another direction.

She blinked and found herself in her suite, on the floor below. The housekeeper, Mrs. Fullywub, a chronic insomniac, was there, neatly folding the jumble of silky lingerie in one of the bureau drawers.

The pleasant woman started at Maeve's appearance. "Dear me," she fussed, "I wish you wouldn't do that. I don't believe I'll ever get used to it."

Maeve smiled, went into her walk-in closet, which had been a dressing room in earlier times, and selected a pair of tight blue jeans, a black leather jacket with studs, and a tank top that resembled a man's undershirt. Scuffed boots completed the ensemble.

Mrs. Fullywub shook her gray head. "Don't tell me you're going about with one of those American motorcycle gangs now," she said. "They're mostly bad company, those people."

Maeve changed hastily. "For my purposes," she answered, "bad company suits best."

"I suppose you're right." The housekeeper sighed with motherly regret. "Still, I hope you'll pay close attention to whatever is going on around you. You remember what happened to your brother, when he mistook a warlock for one of us poor, hapless mortals."

Maeve applied mousse to her hair and combed it through with splayed fingers, giving the formerly smooth tresses a wild, spiky look. She ignored the mirror above the dressing table, since it would not reflect her image anyway. "I'm nothing like Aidan," she said, somewhat testily. "And you needn't worry about me."

"You're more like him than you think," Mrs. Fullywub insisted, "and not a moment goes by that I don't fret for your safety. You have powerful enemies, don't forget."

Maeve raised her hands over her head, palms touching, fingers interlocked. "Good night," she said, and disappeared.

Moments later Maeve reassembled in a place Valerian had introduced her to long before, a bar called the Last Ditch. The term suited the filthy dive; "hell" would have been a more apt name, but that one was taken.

Smoke filled the crowded bar, tinting the air a greasy blue, and the singular smells of unwashed humanity were more pungent than ever. Maeve twitched her nose, revolted, engaging in a brief and wholly idle wish that vampire senses were not quite so keen.

She noted a warlock near the jukebox and nodded to let him know she was aware of his presence. He returned the courtesy and added a smile and a jaunty salute.

*Go to hell*, Maeve told him. It was easier, with all the noise of the bar, to speak mentally.

The warlock's smile enlarged a little. *If I get there before you*, he replied, *I'll save you a seat*.

Maeve shuddered slightly in spite of herself. Long ago, in the eighteenth-century nunnery where she'd spent most of her childhood, the good sisters had taught her to fear the devil's hearth to the very center of her being. It was a fixation that she, like Valerian, who had been human in medieval times, had never quite been able to shake.

She said nothing more to the warlock, but instead scanned the crowd for a deserving victim.

She passed over the ones who were merely misguided, and those who suffered from some hidden wound of the mind or spirit, looking for someone who relished evil and practiced it willingly.

She was in luck, for there was a noted politician present, though he'd taken care to keep a low profile. He sat at a corner table, pawing a vacuous young girl who wore too much makeup and too few clothes.

Maeve made a low, purring sound in her throat and sashayed toward the senator's table, slim, rounded hips swaying, thumbs hooked saucily in the pockets of her leather jacket. "Dance?" she said.

The girl stuck out her lower lip, and tears brimmed in her eyes as the politician clambered to his feet, upsetting his chair in his eagerness to accept Maeve's invitation. Seconds later he was in her arms, and they were moving slowly to the music, swirls of smoke eddying around them, drifting even closer to the deep shadows next to the bandstand.

The senator never stood a chance.

"Don't you think you're cutting it a bit close?" Tobias demanded when Maeve popped into her special chamber underneath the London house, soon after her feeding. "The sun will be up in five minutes."

"What are you doing here?" Maeve countered, pulling off her jacket and tossing it aside. "Don't you have a satin-lined coffin waiting for you someplace?"

Tobias shook his head. He looked young, with his slender frame and eternally boyish features, but in fact he was a founding member of the Brotherhood of the Vampyre. He had been among the first blood-drinkers created, long ago on the lost continent, during a series of medical experiments.

"Such a bold creature," he said. "You remind me of your brother, Maeve—you seem to have no sense of what is appropriate, and that fact may well be your undoing."

Maeve tossed her hair, wishing she could brush out the sticky mousse, but there was no time. Soon the consuming need to sleep would drag her down into the darkest depths of her own mind. "It's beginning to get on my nerves," she confided, sitting down on the row of crates to kick off her motorcycle boots, "the way everybody keeps comparing me to Aidan."

Tobias, apparently in no hurry to return to his own lair, wherever it was, leaned against the dank brick walls and folded his arms. He was clad in a plain tunic, colorless leggings, and soft leather shoes. "It's natural, I think—you are his twin, after all."

Maeve tried to be polite to her uninvited guest, though she could not quite bring herself to smile. She'd just dumped a state senator in a crumpled heap behind the Last Ditch, seriously anemic but alive, and his blood had left her feeling a little ill.

"*I was* his twin," she corrected her elder. After that she paused and then made an effort to be polite. "Please forgive my tart manner, Tobias—it must be the costume."

Tobias took in her tough-chick getup with quiet amusement. "Indeed," he agreed. His expression turned serious in the next instant, however, and he went on. "Word has reached the Brotherhood that Valerian has been attempting to incite some kind of rebellion against Lisette. Is this true?"

Maeve felt uncomfortable; for all her quarrels with Valerian, she was no snitch. Besides, she owed the other vampire a debt, since he'd given her immortality in the first place. "What if it is?" she asked moderately. Even respectfully.



Tobias might have sighed then, had he been human, or even a little inclined toward feigning their singular traits. Instead, he just looked resigned and weary. "Valerian has been a nuisance since his making," he said. "Still, I personally find him entertaining, and therefore I tend to overlook his... foibles." The elder paused, regarding Maeve with a searching stare for a long moment before continuing. "Did he ask you to lead some kind of campaign against Lisette, as we suspect?"

Maeve hesitated, then remembered that it would be absolutely useless to lie to an elder. Her thoughts were probably as clear to him as if they were goods on display in a shop window. "Yes. For some reason I cannot quite grasp, Valerian sees me as the next queen. But don't worry—I'm not interested in a political career." Exhaustion swamped her, tugged at her consciousness, and she marveled because Tobias seemed unaffected by the vampire's need to lie dormant during the daylight hours. "I hope you're—not planning to—sleep here," she struggled to say. "I have a—reputation to consider—you know."

He bent over her. "You must not confront Lisette," he said clearly. "She is more powerful than you can ever imagine, and we will all suffer if she is angered. Besides, it is not ours to protect humans—that is the task of angels."

"Angels," Maeve repeated softly. And then she drifted into the dreamless place where vampires slumber.

### *Gettysburg, 1863*

The battle had ended days before, Calder reflected as he moved among the wounded. The little church on the outskirts of town still brimmed with them, as did the whole of Gettysburg, and the graveyard had long since been filled. In many ways the aftermath was worse than the fighting itself, for there were no surges of adrenaline now, no stirring drumbeats and certainly no talk of glory. This carnage around him, the crushed or sundered limbs, the blinded eyes and deafened ears, the putrid infections and the dysentery, *this* was the true nature of war.

A boy dying of gangrene clutched at Calder's wrinkled shirt as he passed, grinding out a single word. "Doctor—"

Calder braced himself, knowing the child-soldier was about to plead for something to kill the pain, and there was nothing. The supply of morphine, inadequate in the first place, had been exhausted long before. "Yes, son," he said gruffly. "What is it?"

"I reckon the Lady will come for me tonight, as she came for those others I heard about," the lad said. Instead of desperation, Calder saw hope in the youthful face, along with agony. "She'll take me home to heaven."

Several moments passed before Calder's suddenly constricted throat opened up again so he could speak. A week had passed since he'd seen the beautiful specter, and every moment of that time he'd been telling himself she'd been a figment of his imagination. "The Lady," he said, somewhat stupidly.

The boy released his hold on Calder's shirt. "You ever see her?"

Calder sighed. He was on the verge of collapse as it was, and he didn't have the strength to lie. "I thought I did," he admitted. "What's your name, lad?"

"Phillips, sir. Private Michael Phillips, Twentieth Maine. I fell when the Rebs tried to take Little Round Top." Again the boy grasped at Calder, this time closing grubby fingers around his wrist. "You get them



to take me outside and lay me in the sweet grass," he rasped. "They say she won't come inside the church—that's mighty strange, for an angel, don't you figure?—and I want her to take me."

Tears stung Calder's eyes, and he looked away for a moment. Damn, but it still galled him that he couldn't save them all; every last one, instead of just a few lucky ones here and there. After all this time in medicine, first as a civilian and then as an Army surgeon, he continued to find the reality nearly unbearable. "You seem to know a lot about this Lady," he said.

"She's about all anybody talks about," Phillips replied weakly. It was plain that he was barely holding on, and the stench of his infection came near to choking Calder. "Will you get me outside, Doctor, so's she can find me?"

Calder raised a hand and signaled for a pair of orderlies. They were actually ambulatory patients, these ready helpers, one of them hailing from Richmond, Virginia, the other from somewhere in the New Hampshire countryside. For them, the fighting was over; one would be sent home, with a permanently lame leg to remind him continually of his brush with glory, and one to a prison camp.

"This is Private Michael Phillips." Calder performed the introductions with proper dignity, once the orderlies had reached him. "He wants to see the blue sky when he looks up. Get a stretcher and find a place for him outside."

"Yes, sir," said the boy from Richmond.

As gently as they could, the Yankee and the Confederate shifted Phillips onto a canvas stretcher stiff with dried blood and hauled him through the open doorway and down the steps. Calder followed as far as the church porch and stood watching them, gripping the rail.

He should have been thinking about home, he supposed, or about those peaceful, idyllic days before war had torn the nation into two bleeding parts. Instead his mind was full of the mysterious woman he'd seen moving among the fallen soldiers that night a week before. Had she been real? he wondered yet again. After all, he hadn't been the only one to see her—she was the hope and comfort of many of the wounded, and their description of her matched the vision Calder himself had glimpsed.

His hands tightened over the railing until the knuckles ached. The reasoning, scientific part of him said she could not be an angel or a ghost as the others believed. No, as beautiful and real as the Lady was, she was merely a projection of all their tormented brains—his, those of the other doctors and orderlies, and, most of all, those of the patients themselves. The power generated by such grief and suffering had to be formidable.

Calder watched as Phillips was carefully laid out on the grass, in a space left by a boy who'd passed on that morning, and found himself wishing with his whole heart that the Lady was real. Just then, he very much needed to believe in some benevolent force, however strange and inexplicable.

He got through the rest of that day by rote, and at sunset a messenger rode in, painted with dust and so weary he could barely sit his horse, bringing word that four doctors would arrive within the week to relieve Calder and the others.

The news filled him with both relief and despair. He was mentally and physically exhausted, soon he would be of little or no use to the fallen soldiers around him. Still, he hated to leave them, and, even more, he feared that he would never see the Lady again.

That night, while Calder sat waiting, his back to a birch tree, she returned. It was about two in the morning, he reckoned, though he did not take out his pocket watch, and she went straight to Phillips.

Calder was fascinated, stricken by her beauty and her magic, unable to move from his post by the tree and approach her as he'd hoped to do. Instead, he simply watched, powerless and silent, while she smoothed back the dying child's rumped, dirty hair and spoke softly to him.

As Calder looked on, the lad raised his arms to her, like a babe reaching for its mother. She drew him close and held him tenderly, and for a moment Calder believed she truly was an angel.

She rocked the boy against her bosom for a sweet, seemingly endless interval, then bared his fragile neck and buried her face there. Phillips shuddered in her arms and then went still, with that same trusting abandon in his bearing that Calder had seen in the other soldier, the one she'd taken on her last visit. The Lady seemed to nuzzle him, and when she lifted her head, her gaze met Calder's.

He felt some kind of quaking, deep in his being, but even then he knew it stemmed from excitement, not fear. He willed her to come to him, and she did, drifting along with steps so smooth that she appeared to be floating.

When she stood only a few feet from him, her dark tresses tossing in the slow summer breeze, her pale skin bathed in moonlight, he believed in whatever she was, believed with the whole of his spirit.

"Who are you?" he managed to whisper after a long time. His voice was a raspy sound, scraping painfully at his throat.

She drew nearer, knelt beside him, and touched his hair. At first he thought she wasn't going to speak, because she was just a vision, after all, and therefore without a voice. Then she smiled, and Calder felt a pinch in his defeated heart as she said, "What does it matter who—or what—I am?"

"It matters," he confirmed.

"Perhaps it does," she said. She removed the pendant she was wearing, an exquisitely wrought golden rose on a long chain, and put it around Calder's neck. "Very well, then. I am quite real, and this shall be your proof."

"You truly are an angel," Calder marveled hoarsely.

She laughed softly. "No," she said. "My name is Maeve, and I am quite another kind of specter." She searched his eyes for a long moment, an expression of infinite sadness in her face, and then lightly kissed his mouth.

He felt a surge of sensation, both physical and emotional, and was completely lost to her in the space of a single heartbeat. He groaned and closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, she was gone.

Calder was paralyzed for a time, full of confusion and wonder and a peculiar, spiraling joy, but when he could move, he groped for the pendant. It was there around his neck, real and solid to the touch.

"Maeve," he repeated, in a whisper, as though the name itself had the power to work magic in a world sorely in need of just that. "Maeve."

Maeve was distracted as she worked at her loom that same night, her mind full of Calder Holbrook. She

had been foolish to approach him and worse, to speak to him and leave her precious pendant, like some smitten maiden in a troubadour's song.

She felt a surge of emotion that would have caused her to blush, had she been human. For all practical intents and purposes, she thought, she *was* a virgin. While she and Valerian had often engaged in torrid bouts of mental sex after her making, no man had ever touched her before that. Now, no man ever would.

The idea was oddly painful, and that made Maeve furious with herself. She had, after all, vowed never to become involved with a mortal, and she wasn't the least bit like the legendary Lisette, who enjoyed bedding human lads at the height of their physical prowess.

Maeve murmured a curse, trying to shake the images that suddenly filled her mind, images of herself, coupling with Calder Holbrook. The effort was futile.

"It would be dangerous," she said aloud, at once irritated and dizzy with desire, working her shuttle so forcefully that it was in danger of snapping. "Such a thing must never be allowed to happen!"

But Maeve still felt the hot, powerful yearning, stronger even than the need for blood. Knowing that at the height of her savage passion she might well lose control and actually kill her lover did nothing to ease the wanting.

She had always been so pragmatic, oblivious to the charms of humans—beyond drawing sustenance from them, of course. What was happening to her?

"Whatever it is," a voice intruded, "you'd better put a stop to it before you end up mortal, living in a motor-home and making babies."

Valerian. For once Maeve was glad to see him.

"Thank you for announcing yourself," she said coldly. "And for rifling through my thoughts like a pile of rummage in a market stall!"

Her visitor was dressed in unusually ordinary clothes, for him. He wore blue jeans and a sweatshirt with a picture of a wolf on the front.

"Tsk-tsk," he scolded. "You have much greater problems than my abrupt entrances. Lisette is prowling, Maeve. It is happening."

The news wrenched Maeve out of her self-absorption without delay. "What do you mean, she's 'prowling'?"

"Just that. Lisette is not merely taking blood, as the rest of us do, she's creating new vampires. Indiscriminately. And they are ugly, mindless creatures, with no more discretion than army ants."

Maeve abandoned all pretense of working at her weaving, and slipped off her stool to approach Valerian. "Does the Brotherhood know of this?"

Valerian's expression conveyed both amusement and well-controlled fury. "They choose to ignore it."

Maeve recalled her visit from Tobias. "Then perhaps you should follow their lead, Valerian. I've already

been instructed not to interfere with Lisette."

For a moment it seemed that Valerian would explode with frustration. "Don't you see what will happen if she isn't stopped?" he demanded when he'd composed himself again. "The world will be overrun with these monsters, and if that's allowed to continue, there will soon be no humans to sustain us." He gripped Maeve's shoulders in strong hands and looked deep into her eyes. "But it will never come to that, Maeve," he went on, "because Nemesis will be forced to step in. He will mobilize armies of angels and destroy not just Lisette, but every vampire on earth. He's been itching to do just that for centuries, and this may be all the excuse he needs. Remember—as a warrior, it is his charge to protect the mortals his Master so cherishes!"

Maeve felt cold. "Surely the Brotherhood has considered—"

"Please!" Valerian scoffed furiously. "What has happened to your brain, Maeve—are you thinking with only a tiny portion as mortals do? The Brotherhood is a group of doddering old fools who have long since lost touch with the true state of affairs."

Maeve raised the fingertips of her right hand to her mouth, taken aback. Valerian's words had been bold, even for him. "Be careful," she warned after a moment of recovery. "It may not be Lisette our Brothers rise against, but you. As it is, they think you're rash and hot-headed, and they've warned me not to listen to your wild ideas."

Valerian's brow furrowed as he frowned. "Since when does anyone—the Brotherhood included—tell the illustrious Maeve Tremayne what to think and whose words to heed?"

She did not reply, for Valerian's question had struck its mark. Maeve valued her right to choose her own path and make decisions for herself above everything but her singular vampire powers.

The older blood-drinker smiled now and cupped his hands on either side of her face. "All I ask," he said quietly, "is that you look at what Lisette is doing. Once you've seen, you can make your own judgment."

Maeve started to argue, but the words stopped in her throat. Instead she simply nodded.

Valerian wrapped his arms around her, and the embrace became a nebula, spinning faster and faster. Maeve clung to the front of his shirt with both hands and devoutly hoped he knew what he was doing.

When the whirling stopped and they were still, Maeve was ruffled, and she pushed herself out of Valerian's arms with slightly more force than necessary.

"Why do you always have to be such a show-off?" she demanded. "Why can't you just will yourself from one place to another, the way the rest of us do?"

Valerian's eyes laughed, though his mouth was solemn. He raised a long finger to his lips. "Shhh," he whispered.

Maeve looked about and realized they were in a hospital, and judging by the high-tech equipment, she determined the time was the late twentieth century.

A nurse rounded the corner and stopped cold in the dimly lit corridor, clutching a medical chart to her chest. She was staring at Valerian and Maeve with her mouth open.

"You don't see us," Valerian said cordially, approaching the poor startled creature, who was now as immobile as a small animal blinded by a bright light. He rested the back of one hand against her forehead and repeated his words, this time gently, like a parent comforting a distraught child.

The young nurse stiffened for a moment, as if a charge had gone through her slender form, then proceeded down the hall, her conscious mind clear of impossible creatures knitted of shadows.

Valerian watched her go, a sort of affectionate concentration evident in his handsome face, and then gestured for Maeve to follow him. She did and found herself in a cold, sterile room with metal cabinets lining the walls. There was a human in attendance, but Valerian rendered him unconscious with a touch to the nape of the neck.

Barely a moment later a metal drawer slid open, seemingly of its own power. Maeve watched in disbelief as a bluish-gray corpse sat up and swung down from its storage place as nimbly as an athlete, though the body was that of a very old man.

The sight made Maeve shudder, though she'd seen many macabre things in her time; the thing was a vampire, and yet it seemed unaware of itself, unaware that two other blood-drinkers were nearby. It crept slowly toward the sleeping mortal, fangs glinting horribly in the fluorescent night.

"Do something," Maeve whispered, for the moment too repulsed to move.

Valerian stood still, his arms folded, his manner thoughtful and unhurried. "There—a specimen of Lisette's work," he said. "And this is only the beginning of the nightmare."

### CHAPTER 3

The hospital morgue was utterly still.

Maeve started as the living corpse reached the mortal attendant, who had awoken and was now catatonic with terror, and closed waxen fingers over his shoulders.

After casting a contemptuous glance at Valerian, who was watching the process with a mixture of clinical interest and smugness, Maeve finally shook off her own morbid fascination and stepped forward.

She had never, since the night of her making, consumed the blood of an innocent, and she would not stand by and watch while another vampire did so.

"Stop," she said clearly, her voice charged with warning.

The freak looked at her stupidly, clearly confounded, but its hold on the mortal did not slacken. Its face was all the more hideous, it seemed to Maeve, for the ragged vestiges of humanity that still showed in its features.

Maeve knew that reasoning would not reach the creature, nor would the threat of greater powers, for it was conscious of nothing but its own mindless, unceasing hunger. Feeling a strange, disconsolate pity even as she moved to destroy, she reached out and closed her fingers over the creature's clammy throat.

"Be careful," Valerian coached dispassionately, sounding a little like a university professor overseeing a

flock of mediocre students. "Its bite may be venomous. We don't know much about these aberrations, you know."

"Thank you so much for your input," Maeve replied, her gaze never shifting from her prey. She gave the ghoul a hard shake, and its grasp on the human, now blathering, was broken. The mortal scrambled to safety, making a low and wholly pitiful whimpering sound as he went.

Maeve did not pause to watch the attendant's flight, but instead concentrated on forcing the lesser vampire onto a shining steel autopsy table. She hissed an order, and Valerian finally troubled himself to stir, handing her a pair of scissors.

Maeve subdued the demon when it struggled, dared to murmur a prayer for its true soul, and drove the long, narrow blades of the scissors through the beast's chest wall and straight into a heart that had long since stopped beating.

The monster would not rise again.

A clamor stirred in the outer hallway; clearly the terrified attendant had been carrying tales about the strange and fearful goings-on in that eerie way station for the dead.

Valerian sighed. "We'd best get out of here," he said.

"In a few seconds a horde of panicky mortals will come bursting through the doorway, and I would rather not deal with the poor wretches at the moment."

Maeve glared at him, even as she raised her hands over her head for a swift departure.

To Maeve's frustration, when she reassembled herself in the center of an ancient stone formation in the English countryside, the place where rumor had it that Aidan had been found, months before, Valerian was already there.

"Well," he began, in that imperious tone that came so naturally to him, "do you believe me now?"

Maeve was still shaken and not a little disgruntled, for she had felt a potential strength stirring in the being she had destroyed, a primitive agility that would be terrible if it were ever properly channeled.

Still, she did not want Valerian to be right.

About anything.

"Any vampire could have made that—that thing," she said. "We have no proof that Lisette was responsible."

Valerian gave a raspy, tormented cry, full of profound exasperation. "Very well," he snapped. "Let us suppose, for a moment, that Lisette is not the culprit. The fact would remain that we are dealing with a renegade of some sort—one that must be stopped."

Maeve felt a chill, even though the night was warm, and a painful sense of desolation settled behind her heart, leeching her strength. She missed Aidan more sorely in those moments than she ever had, and yearned for his counsel.

She spoke patiently. "It could have been a random episode, an act of passion or revenge. We have no reason to believe it will be repeated."

Valerian gazed deeply into her eyes. "You are fooling yourself," he told her, touching a deep, well-hidden nerve with his words. He knew her so well and often taught her things about herself that she would rather have ignored. "This is no time to bury your head in the sand, Maeve—the existence of all vampires may depend on the choices you make."

She turned from him, let her forehead rest against one of the cool, towering stones that had witnessed her brother's transformation from blood-drinker to mortal. Weariness swept over her, and for the first time in over two hundred years she wanted to retreat, as Valerian and others had done through the centuries, to lie dormant in some hidden tomb until the challenges facing her now had passed.

"Perhaps," she finally said after a long while, still not looking at Valerian, "vampires should not be saved. It could be that our time has ended—"

Valerian gripped her shoulders and wrenched her around to face him. "You cannot stand back and allow this to happen," he growled, showing his fine white teeth, including the sharp incisors that were only slightly longer than their counterparts. "The rest of us have sacrificed much—indeed, our very souls—for our immortality and our singular powers. Do you think that would be the end, if we all perished, that we would lie peacefully in our graves, oblivious to the universe around us? You must know that we would be sent into the pit, multitudes of us, to suffer agony for all eternity. Will you condemn us to such a fate, Maeve? We who have been your friends—your lovers?"

Maeve felt a stab of conscience, a certain annoyance, and no small amount of fear. "I have had only one lover," she was compelled to point out, even though the fact had no relevancy to the dilemma she faced.

Valerian narrowed his magnificent, mesmerizing eyes.

"Vampires are not creatures of conscience or charity," he admitted softly, "but we are living beings who feel sadness and pain, as well as pleasure—and far more keenly than mortals do. Will you not fight for us? Will you not defend us, your sisters and brothers?"

"Why me?" Maeve cried in an agony almost as great as the one she'd endured when Aidan abandoned her. "Why not you? Or Tobias?"

The vampire laid his hands on either side of her face. "Deep inside, in the center of your mind and heart, you know the answer, Maeve," he said, his voice soft and grave. "Some unconscious consensus of the species has appointed you to take up the sword in our behalf."

Maeve was silent for a time, considering. She hesitated so long, in fact, that the first pinkish-gold light of dawn was tracing the horizon before she replied. "I will find out what is happening, but that is all I am willing to promise."

Valerian, to her weary annoyance, was smiling as she locked her hands together high over her head and vanished.

Calder Holbrook sat glumly in his father's august study, an overfull snifter of brandy close at hand, gazing out one of the windows overlooking the formal rose garden that had been his mother's pride. In one hand he fingered the necklace the Lady had given him, as though it were a rosary instead of a simple pendant on a chain.



Only a few feet away, in the carefully cultivated soil of the garden, the roses conducted a silent riot of color, their reds and pinks and yellows gaudy and rich in the afternoon sunlight. It seemed ironic to Calder that such shameless beauty could exist in a world where young boys played soldier, blowing each other to shreds at the behest of politicians and merchants and bankers.

"You needn't go back, you know." The voice came from the broad archway behind Calder, the doorway leading into the main part of the house, and, though it was unexpected, it did not startle him.

He did not turn to face his father, but instead closed his fingers tightly around the strange, simple pendant. His inner organs seemed to stiffen as he bolstered himself against this quiet, ruthless man who had sired him.

"Do not suggest buying my way out of the Army again," he warned. "I volunteered and I will serve my time."

Calder could imagine Bernard Holbrook's rage, as fathomless and cold as a well lined in slippery stones. "When will I understand you?" Bernard asked, and the clink of crystal meeting crystal echoed in the muggy, ponderous room as he poured a drink of his own.

Calder sighed but did not turn his attention from the lush roses, which seemed to frolic even in the still air, like trollops in gaudy dresses. "Perhaps never," he replied. "We are too different from each other."

"Nonsense," blustered Bernard, who preferred not to entertain realities that weren't to his liking. William, Bernard's elder son and Calder's half brother, looked and thought like their father and was a fawning sycophant in the bargain, but that apparently did not satisfy the old man. "Nonsense," Bernard said again. "You are flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone. We are more alike than you want to believe."

Suppressing a shudder at such a prospect, Calder dropped the pendant into the pocket of his starched linen shirt—he had long since tossed aside his suit coat—and summoned up a somewhat brittle smile. "Think what you wish, Father—as you always do."

Bernard was a portly man, with a wealth of white hair, a ruddy complexion, and shrewd blue eyes that were often narrowed to slits in concentration. Whatever his other faults, and they were many, his mental powers were formidable, and he could discern much that would escape a lesser mind.

"Surely you won't try to convince me that you—even you, with your curious ideas of mercy—actually *want* to go back to another of those damnable field hospitals. Good God, Calder, the places have got to be horrible beyond comprehension."

Calder's broad shoulders sagged slightly. "They are," he confessed in a tone that betrayed more than he would have revealed by choice. He rubbed his temples with a thumb and forefinger, remembering the incessant screaming, the sound of saws gnawing at bone, the vile, smothering stench.

Bernard took a pensive sip of his brandy, looking out at his late wife's roses as though in fascination. Calder knew the expression was deceptive; he would have wagered the last decade of his life that the older man didn't even see the blossoms. Finally, when he was damn good and ready, he spoke again.

"Why, then, do you insist on going back?" he asked, and for a moment the question seemed reasonable to Calder, and he did not know how to answer. "Well?" Bernard prompted when an interval had passed. "Is it because you want so badly to spite me?"

Calder sprang from his chair, invigorated by a sudden rush of fury, and turned his back on the man who had sired him to gaze up at the woman in the portrait displayed above the mantelpiece. "Damn it, Father," he bit out after several seconds when he did not trust himself to speak, "when are you going to realize that the sun and the planets do not revolve around you?"

"When," Bernard countered quietly, "are you going to realize that in throwing your life away like this you injure yourself far more grievously than you could ever hurt me?"

Slowly Calder turned to face the other man. "I am not 'throwing my life away,'" he said coldly in measured tones. "I am *adoctor*, Father. Is there a more logical place for me to be than in the midst of suffering and pain?"

"Yes," Bernard said with a patient sigh. "You could be a society doctor, like many of your schoolmates, and treat rich ladies with the vapors."

Again Calder felt such contempt that he dared not speak. Instead he moved close enough to the place where he'd been sitting to retrieve his half-finished brandy. He tossed back the contents of his snifter and felt the fire spread through his veins, the sudden, almost painful slackening of the muscles in his neck and shoulders.

"Calder," Bernard went ruthlessly on, his voice level and sensible like that of a snake charmer. "Listen to reason. I have friends who can arrange an honorable discharge. You can spend the rest of the war in Europe if that's what you want, learning those new surgical techniques you're forever yammering about."

Calder closed his eyes, shaken and shamed. A part of him wanted to do as his father urged, to flee the carnage plaguing his own continent and lose himself in the knowledge he craved, to pretend there was no unnecessary pain in the world, no savagery.

"No one would blame you," Bernard pressed, probably sensing his advantage.

Calder came back to himself in a flash of conviction and hurled his empty snifter against the polished black marble of the fireplace. The crystal shattered into thousands of glittering shards, and he wondered if that was not how God must see His creation: as broken, shining bits of something originally meant to be beautiful. "I would blame me," he said softly.

Bernard sighed again. "Would that your sainted mother, God rest her soul, had taken her stubbornness to the grave with her," he said, "rather than leaving it in your keeping."

Calder said nothing. He was, in fact, already looking toward the doorway, yearning to be away.

As had ever been, Bernard did not seem to know when to quit. "If you will not put the war behind you for your own sake," he said, "then do so for mine. I need you here, under this roof."

"You have William," Calder replied, unmoved.

Bernard offered no comment on that statement; he could not fault his elder son without faulting himself, for they shared the same thoughts and feelings and opinions. "Why in the name of heaven do you hate me so much?" he asked. "You have never been abused, and you have lacked for nothing. I saw that you had the finest possible education, even when you insisted on wasting that marvelous mind of yours on ordinary medicine. Tell me—I think I deserve to know—why is it that you have chafed and strained

against me from the time you learned to grip the rail of your baby bed and hold yourself upright?"

Calder raised his eyes to the lovely, guileless face in the portrait over the mantel, the face of his mother. Somewhere deep in his mind her sweet voice echoed, shaping the words of some silly lullaby.

Finally he turned to Bernard. "I don't hate you," he said. "I cannot spare the energy hatred demands."

"But you do not love me, either. You never have."

"Wrong," Calder said in a low, insolent voice. "She loved you once"—he gestured toward the painting that dominated the room—"and so did I. Until I saw that you were destroying her with your polite cruelties and gentle betrayals."

Bernard threw up his hands, then let them slap to his sides in frustration. His face was redder than usual, and the white line edging his mouth gave evidence that he was shocked as well as infuriated.

"Great Scot," he whispered. "After all this time, are you telling me that you have scorned my every effort to be a father to you because of a few fancy women?"

"She thought you loved her," Calder said, looking up at his mother's face, feeling again the terrible helplessness and despair he'd known as a small child. She'd wept over her errant husband, the beautiful, naive Marie Calder Holbrook, until Calder had thought his own heart would break. And in the end her abiding grief had caused her death.

"Marie was weak," came a third voice from the inner doorway.

Calder's gaze shot to his half brother, who was fifteen years his senior. William might have been a comfort to Marie, even a friend, for he'd been quite near her own age; instead, he had tormented her for taking his dead mother's place in that yawning tomb of a house.

A charge moved in the room, a silent crackling, nearly visible for its sheer strength.

"Do not tempt me to do you harm, brother," Calder said to William. "The pleasure of the prospect is very nearly more than I can resist."

William, who would look exactly like Bernard in another thirty years, started to speak and then wisely restrained himself.

Calder pushed past him to enter the wide hallway just beyond.

Bernard shouted his name, but Calder did not turn back. Instead he kept walking, his strides long, until he was far from the great house and the others who lived beneath its heavy slate roof.

Benecia and Canaan Havermail were having one of their ludicrous tea parties when Maeve appeared in the ancient graveyard behind their family castle.

Benecia, a gold-haired wisp of a girl, and Canaan, her younger sister, who was dark of coloring, appeared at first glance to be children. They were in fact vampires, with some four centuries of grisly escapades behind them, and all the more terrible for their doll-like beauty.

Seeing Maeve, Canaan clapped her tiny, porcelain-white hands. Her nails were delicate pink ovals,

microscopic in size and smooth as the interior of a sea shell.

"You've come to have tea with us!" she cried in childish delight.

Maeve felt a pang, looking upon this exquisite monstrosity, and wondered again if she hadn't been right, during her last encounter with Valerian, when she'd suggested that it might be better to let all vampires perish.

"Sit down," Benecia trilled, drawing back a dusty chair. Her golden sausage curls bounced in her eagerness to welcome the unexpected guest.

Maeve took in the scene without speaking or moving. The tea table was a dusty monument, smudged with moss and draped with the weavings of spiders, but it was the other guests that gave her pause.

The sisters had disinterred two corpses and a skeleton, no doubt from graves in other parts of the cemetery, and arranged them around the tombstone-table in a hideous parody of a favorite human tradition. One body, mummified by some strange subterranean process to a hard brown thing, mouth open wide as if to scream, had been neatly broken at the waist so that it would sit like a proper guest. The other was a gray, dirty thing, with rags hanging from its frame, its bony, long-dead fingers curled around a pretty china cup. The skeleton was perhaps the least ludicrous of the party, for it was clean of grave-dust, and no atrophied muscles clung to its ivory smoothness.

Maeve shook her head, marveling, not bothering to decline the invitation to join in the festivities. Before she could speak, a fourth creature lumbered into view, and she gave a little cry of amazement when she recognized what it was.

The grayish corpse, only recently dead, had been changed, like the poor creature Maeve had destroyed in the hospital morgue, into a low-grade vampire.

"Where did you find this beast?" Maeve demanded of the ancient children as the blood-drinker went from one horrible guest to another. It bared its long fangs as it wrenched one after the other to its mouth, then tossed each aside in blind frustration when there was no blood to drink.

Benecia, the elder of the two most terrifying fiends in the lot, batted her enormous china blue eyes in feigned innocence. "We stumbled across him when we were out feeding," she said in a sweet voice underlaid with vicious determination. "He's perfectly dreadful, isn't he?"

Canaan had plagued the wretched thing into chasing her, and she giggled with all the merriment of a human child frolicking with a kitten. In that moment Maeve understood her brother Aidan's revulsion for the ways of vampires as she never had before.

"We've named him Charlie," Benecia said cheerfully.

Maeve tried again. "Where did you find him?" A suspicion dawned in her mind, ugly and totally feasible. "Or did you make this abomination yourselves?"

Canaan stopped her happy dance to stare at Maeve, and Benecia was still as well.

"Tell me," Maeve ordered.

Hatred flashed in Benecia's cornflower-blue eyes, with their thick, fringelike lashes. She answered in a

respectful tone, though her words were flip.

"Of course we didn't make him ourselves, Auntie Maeve," she said with acid goodwill. "We only *drink* from mortals, we don't change them."

The corpse had stopped scrambling after Canaan to stare at Maeve, round-eyed and slavering. She suppressed a shudder.

"Then where did he come from?" she insisted.

"We told you," wailed Canaan, stamping one impossibly small, velvet-slipped foot. "We *found* him. He was wandering outside All Souls' Cathedral in London."

"Were there others like him?" Maeve asked distractedly. With the formidable power of her mind, she reached into the skull of the pitiful creature before her and found no consciousness there, no vestige of a mortal soul.

Benecia shrugged, then bustled to put the tattered fragments of humanity Charlie had disturbed back into their chairs, "*If* there are more, we didn't see them."

Canaan was glaring at Maeve, her small arms folded across the ruffled bodice of her pink taffeta dress. "Mummy's still hunting, if you wished to see her."

"Get me a sharp stick," Maeve ordered, drawing the hapless, unresisting creature toward her by the strength of her thoughts.

"You're going to stake him?" Benecia and Canaan cried in eerie unison, their voices ringing with mingled horror and eager anticipation.

"Just do as I tell you," Maeve snapped, mentally pressing poor Charlie to the rocky ground.

Canaan brought a piece of half-rotted wood that had probably served as a marker for one of the graves, in some long-ago time.

Maeve centered the stake over the beast's cold chest with one hand and took up a rock with the other. Destroying the other creature had been relatively easy, if horrible, but this instance proved more difficult. When she pounded the wooden point past skin and tissue and bone, however atrophied, the thing shrieked in rage and pain. Maeve felt sick as she struck wood and stone together, over and over, until the screaming ceased and the monster was truly dead.

When she looked up from her task, Benecia and Canaan were looking on, faces white as moonglow, eyes gleaming with pleasure. They reminded Maeve of wolves held at bay by firelight, yearning to spring, to tear and plunder with sharp teeth.

"Be gone!" Maeve cried in disgust, trembling slightly as she rose to her feet. She did not wish to be other than what she was, a practicing vampire, even after what she had just experienced, but she did long for a confidante, a mate, a kindred spirit who would lessen the horror.

Yet again, her thoughts strayed to Calder Holbrook, the American doctor. There was something in him, some combination of talents and foibles, that grasped at her heart and would not let go.

Instead of seeking him, however, Maeve focused her attention on Valerian, leaving Charlie's still body to the ravenous hunger of the dawn.

She found her erstwhile mentor in a harem, clad only in a loincloth and a blue silk turban trimmed in pearls and sporting a magnificent emerald for a clasp. The scantily clad dancing girls surrounding Valerian scattered with little cries when Maeve took shape in their midst.

"I might have known you'd be someplace like this," Maeve huffed, looking around her in contempt while Valerian raised himself gracefully to his feet and dismissed the dancers with a clap of his hands and a few indulgent, smoky words.

Valerian chuckled, folding his beautifully sculpted arms over an equally well-shaped chest, and arched one eyebrow. "Are you jealous?" he drawled.

The very suggestion made Maeve dizzy with fury. "Most certainly not," she snapped.

Valerian removed his turban and set it carefully aside, then, with a sweeping gesture of his hands, magically clothed himself in his usual formal garb, cape included. He'd been on a Dracula kick for some time now, and Maeve wished he'd get over it.

He smiled at her thoughts. "If you'd like," he said, "I could dress as a sultan. I rather like the way I look in that jeweled turban."

Maeve sighed. "You would," she muttered. "Listen to me, Valerian—I encountered another of those creatures tonight. Benecia and Canaan found it wandering around All Souls' and brought it to one of their infernal tea parties."

Valerian winced. "What reprehensible creatures they are." A mischievous look shimmered in his eyes. "Have you ever noticed what a tacky lot vampires can be?"

"I wouldn't talk if I were you," Maeve replied, tossing a telling glance toward the discarded turban. She put her hands on her hips to let Valerian know she would countenance no more nonsense. "We must do something," she said.

The other vampire spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. "I seem to remember telling you exactly that," he said, as if saddened that modern manners had degenerated to a pitiable state.

"You might well have been wrong in suspecting Lisette," Maeve insisted. "All the same, the situation bears looking into. Where do you suggest we start?"

"We?" Valerian echoed, giving the word a rich and resonant tone.

"Damn you, Valerian, do not try my patience. It has already reached the breaking point!"

He swept his cloak around her in a patronizing gesture and crooned his answer into her ear. "Relax, darling," he said. "Valerian will protect you."

Maeve was still kicking and struggling when the two of them landed in a tumbling heap on the stone sidewalk outside London's All Souls' Cathedral. Maeve quickly discerned that it was the late twentieth century, and her fury at Valerian was tempered with a great sadness rooted in the fact that, in this time and place at least, Calder Holbrook did not exist. Except, perhaps, as a pile of moldering remains as ugly

as the guests at Benecia and Canaan's tea party.

Valerian got to his feet first and offered a hand to Maeve. She slapped it away and stood under her own power, ignoring the curious glances of the few passers-by abroad at that hour.

Valerian started after one of the stragglers, in fact, and Maeve was forced to pull him back by his cloak.

"I haven't fed," he complained. It was a wonder to Maeve how he could look and sound imperious even when he whined.

"You should have thought of that before you squandered half the night playing sultan," Maeve snapped, dusting off her long dress and hooded velvet cape. She needed sustenance herself, but she could delay it for a while.

"Come," Valerian said, suddenly serious, taking her hand. "Let us see what other fiends wander the earth besides ourselves."

#### CHAPTER 4

Maeve was rapidly becoming an obsession.

Calder thought of her constantly, the woman he knew only by her given name. He wondered who and where and, indeed, *what* she was, and agonized over the distinct possibility that he would never see her again. Despite years of scientific training and a purely practical turn of mind, he felt certain she was not a mortal woman.

He fingered the pendant she'd left in his keeping; he wore it around his neck now, as faithfully as small children and elderly women wore religious medals. No, the mysterious Maeve was not an ordinary human, but she had not been born in Calder's imagination, either, as he had once feared. She was quite real, as real as this talisman she'd given him.

He stretched in his hammock, which he'd suspended between two birch trees behind the summerhouse on his father's estate, out of sight of the great house. Hands cupped behind his head, Calder reflected that it would be a mercy if he could just return to his work—the local hospitals were overflowing with wounded soldiers and victims of the current typhoid epidemic—but he had already pushed his normally sturdy body beyond its considerable limits. If he did not rest, he risked physical collapse, a state that would put him completely at his father's mercy.

Despite the leaden heat of that summer afternoon, Calder shivered. He would get through his confinement, and that horrific war awaiting him just beyond the gates of the magnificent house like a sleek and violent beast, simply by living from one moment to the next.

And perhaps, if he'd done anything right in his life, anything deserving of reward, he would see Maeve again and begin to learn her secrets.

Maeve looked up at the shadowy spires of the great cathedral with trepidation. It would be morning soon, she had not fed, and just being in that place brought all her fears of divine punishment surging to the fore.



"Where do we begin?" she asked in an unusually small voice.

Valerian was silent for a moment, thinking, then replied, "Lisette has to have some place to hide these revolting creations of hers during daylight. Surely they can't tolerate the sun any more than we can. If I were her, I would keep them in the old tombs beneath the cathedral—there's a nice irony in that, if she hasn't gone too mad to notice it."

Maeve glanced nervously toward the sky. She'd had a brush with the dawn herself once and wasn't anxious to repeat the experience. "Let's hurry," she said, tugging Valerian toward the nearest entrance to the great church.

Valerian balked, suddenly tense. "Not so fast," he rasped. "I sense something. Lisette may be lying in wait for us."

Deliberately Maeve calmed herself. Valerian might be right; it would be like Lisette to bait them. Narrowing the blazing light of her consciousness to a pinpoint of concentration, she assessed the general atmosphere; yes, there was danger, but the vampire queen was nowhere about.

"Something else," Maeve said thoughtfully. "It's waiting for us in the tombs."

Valerian nodded. "Forewarned is forearmed," he said and proceeded toward the entrance.

With a trick of his facile mind, he sprung the lock on the heavy wooden door, shaped from oak trees that had probably towered in some dark northern forest well before his human birth. They entered, hesitated in the shadows, sensing the lurking danger.

Together the vampires proceeded through passageways and corridors until they found the inner door leading down filthy stone steps to the catacombs. The lock was forged of iron, rusted through, and the key had been lost so long that even the oldest priest would have no recollection of it.

Again, Valerian maneuvered the mechanism by his own brand of sorcery, but the task was more difficult this time. He was clearly tiring; like Maeve, he had not fed, and as the dawn neared, the deep sleep of all vampires surely tugged at the underside of his consciousness. For all that, he was insufferably bold.

"Do you think we don't know you're there?" he called irritably, his voice echoing through the dark, dank chamber where only the moldering dead and the scurrying rats belonged.

Maeve braced herself as the door swung open on hinges that shrieked in protest. This was not just one thing lying in wait for them, but many, and the danger was immense. Still, she felt angry challenge, rather than fear, and made ready for any sort of battle.

"Come," Valerian snapped. "Show yourselves."

Although the enormous chamber was utterly void of light, Maeve saw clearly and knew Valerian did as well, for vampires functioned best in darkness. There was nothing to see, except for crypts and tombs and marble monuments of the sort Benecia and Canaan used for tables at their infamous tea parties.

The cavernous, dusty place, with its great curtains of spiderwebs, seemed suddenly to echo with tension, and Maeve focused all her being on the powers she'd honed since the night of her making.

A humming silence throbbed and rushed throughout the chamber, encircling Maeve and Valerian like

invisible floodwaters, and in the next instant the attack began.

Their assailants were not the lumbering, corpse-like vampires they'd encountered before, but great, raucous creatures, ravenlike beasts the size of humans.

Valerian had set himself to fight and began to flail against the things, when Maeve reached out to stop him, touching her fingers lightly to his forearm.

"Illusions," she said.

In that instant the fluttering, noisy onslaught ceased.

"Of course," Valerian confirmed in a rather sheepish tone. "Warlocks. How many?"

Maeve considered briefly. "Ten or twelve."

Valerian sighed. "Damn." He turned away from Maeve, and she pressed her own back to his, preparing for the true battle. "If we end up in hell together," he went on, "please accept my apology for getting you admitted."

A soft, mocking laugh escaped Maeve. "Your apology," she marveled. "A rare gift indeed. And what a comfort it will be during an eternity of suffering."

The warlocks came at them then, from behind tombs and out of crypts, shrieking and clawing and assaulting both Maeve and Valerian with their greatest weapons, their minds.

Back to back, the two vampires fought for their lives, both well aware that if the warlocks overcame them, they would not leave them to recover on the cool stone floor of the mausoleum. No, if they lost the battle, Valerian and Maeve would be taken to some very public place and left there to smolder in the sun, as a gruesome warning to all other vampires.

Once, Valerian slipped to his knees—Maeve felt him slide gracefully down the length of her back and thighs—but he fought just as valiantly as a knight defending his queen.

"We should have fed first!" he sputtered.

Like her friend, Maeve fought on two fronts; she flailed her arms and kicked mightily, at the same time forming a mental shield to protect her mind from the assault of many others.

"Yes, yes," she answered Valerian impatiently. "I know. You *told* me so!"

It had been a mistake, shifting even a small part of her concentration from the warlocks to Valerian. One of the enemy got through at that precise moment; Maeve felt a tear in her consciousness, followed by a dizzying sickness.

In the next instant blunt teeth sank themselves into the side of her neck, and agony flashed from the wound into every part of Maeve's body.

"Be ye cursed, Vampire!" one of the would-be slayers shrieked.

Maeve had not experienced physical pain of this magnitude before, even while mortal, and the force of it

stunned her, weakened her knees. She swayed, but felt Valerian surge upward to stand back to back with her again, to virtually support her with his own strength.

*Hold on*, he told her mentally.

In the next moment the attack suddenly ceased, and the abruptness of it was somehow like an added blow. Valerian whirled and took Maeve into his arms, holding her up.

One of the warlocks came slowly toward them, pushing back the hood of his black cloak to reveal the handsome, ingenuous face that was so typical of his breed.

"It grows late," he said with a smile. Neither he nor his companions were human practitioners of the old religion; they, like the vampires, had been born of some ancient curse, some misbegotten magic, and they too were immortal. "Soon the dawn will come."

"What is your business with us?" Valerian demanded, his embrace tightening around Maeve.

The warlock's dazzling smile intensified, and he spread his arms, in their drapery of black, wide of his body. "We wanted only to get your attention, Vampire—obviously, we could have destroyed you both if we'd wished it so." He paused, splaying his fingers and touching the tips together in a prayerlike fashion. All in all, he made a disturbing caricature of a holy man, with his reverent stance and flowing robes. "Hold your arguments," he told Valerian, thus proving that he was perceptive as well as theatrical. "There is no time. Carry our message to the Brotherhood of the Vampyre."

Maeve felt adrift in a deeper darkness than she'd ever known before; she could barely comprehend the warlock's words and would have fallen if Valerian hadn't been supporting her.

"There is a renegade among you," the creature went on calmly, "the female, Lisette. She makes vampires indiscriminately; mindless, bumbling ghouls who wander the earth murdering children."

Maeve could not be sure whether she actually heard Valerian's reply or only sensed it. Dawn was close; the need to sleep was pulling her downward, as was the injury.

"Since when do you mourn slaughtered humans, Warlock, be they children or the oldest of the old?"

"Your assessment is quite right—we don't give the proverbial damn about mortals, except for the amusement they provide. But the Warrior Angel cherishes them, as does his Master. Even now, Nemesis implores the highest courts of heaven to let him wage war on *all* unnatural creatures, not only vampires, but werewolves and witches and faeries and warlocks—all of us. He's been waiting centuries—nay, eons—for an excuse to wipe the earth clean of all immortals except his own angels, and your Lisette may well have given it to him!"

Valerian was weary, too; Maeve heard it in his voice, felt it in his large frame. "What do you want of us?" he asked.

"That is simple," the warlock replied. "Stop the female, Lisette, immediately. If you do not, then our kind will declare war upon yours, in the hope that by destroying every last one of you, we can win mercy from Nemesis. Do not forget, Vampire, that we have an advantage over you—we can venture out into the daylight."

A vision entered Maeve's fevered mind; she saw black-cloaked figures moving through sunshine from

one vampire lair to another, while the blood-drinkers lay helpless, systematically driving stakes through their hearts.

Valerian was undaunted, or at least he appeared so to Maeve. "Do not threaten us," he retorted. "We are not without superior powers of our own, and if you are wise you will remember that."

There was a general rustling, and Maeve fought the darkness even as she saw the first faint tinge of dawn shining beneath the ancient oaken door.

"They're gone." These two words, spoken by Valerian, were the last things Maeve heard before she sank into utter oblivion.

The warlocks vanished as quickly as they had appeared, for, although their leader had boasted of their ability to move about in the light of day, they were essentially creatures of darkness, like vampires.

Valerian had no time to consider them further, however, for dawn was imminent and he could already feel its molten fingers groping for him and for Maeve. He swept her up into his arms and hastened into the blackest regions of the crypt, found a chamber with a door, and dodged inside.

The sleep took him before he could set Maeve down, or even assess their surroundings—all Valerian knew, as he lost consciousness, was that he had found a place where the light would not penetrate.

Maeve awakened on a cold stone floor scattered with bones and crumbling mortar from the ancient walls, her head in Valerian's lap. The wound to her neck, inflicted by a warlock during the battle the preceding night, had already begun to heal, but she was weak with the need for blood.

Valerian woke up just as she was raising herself from his thighs. "So," he said and shrugged. "We shall live to hunt another night. Frankly I wasn't entirely sure the warlocks wouldn't come back while we were sleeping, armed with stakes and mallets."

Maeve's head spun; she wondered if she had the strength to hunt. "Think, Valerian," she said, somewhat peevish in her discomfort. "They want us to carry the message to the Brotherhood. Destroying us now would have defeated their purpose."

The magnificent vampire thrust himself to his feet and pulled a shaky Maeve after him. "We are not the only blood-drinkers who could spread the word," he pointed out with weary reason. "Come, let's find nourishment before we perish."

Fortunately for both Maeve and Valerian, All Souls' Cathedral was in an area of London that had degenerated into crowded squalor, teeming with small-time hoods, drug dealers, and pimps.

Spotting a smarmy-looking man in a cheap striped suit, leaning against a lamppost, Maeve raised the collar of her cloak higher, in order to hide the mark on her neck, and elbowed Valerian aside.

"You're on your own," she said. "This one is mine."

Valerian shuddered. "Yuk," he said.

"Beggars can't be choosers," Maeve retorted and sashayed toward the pimp. She saw, in the recesses of the man's mind, that he made a habit of picking up scared runaways in bus and subway stations, winning their confidence and then introducing them to prostitution.

As she approached, she felt an inexplicable need to see Calder Holbrook again; he was proof that decency and honor still existed in the world.

For now, however, Maeve had to play a part, for if she did not feed, she would perish.

She formed her mouth into a saucy smile, and the pimp straightened and looked her over with a practiced eye.

"You ain't no workin' girl," he said in a thick cockney accent.

Maeve laid her hands on his shoulders—he was wearing a worn drum major's coat, burgundy velvet with gold piping—and looked deeply into his eyes, his mind, his spirit. By the mental equivalent of flipping a switch, she shut down his brain.

He followed her mutely into the nearest alleyway, and there Maeve drank. For the first time since her making, she was tempted to take her victim beyond the point of death, and the realization worried her. While she felt none of her brother Aidan's sentimentality toward humankind—indeed, she was contemptuous of such attitudes—Maeve was not vicious; she took blood only to sustain her powers and remain immortal.

Restored and strengthened, Maeve left the procurer sitting in the alleyway, vacant and staring, with the seed of a moral awakening sprouting in his brain. Come the bright light of morning, this particular deviant would forsake the life of sin, move in with his poor mother in Manchester, and spend the rest of his days clerking in a series of small shops.

Valerian was waiting impatiently on the sidewalk when she reached it, pacing back and forth, his cape flowing behind him. His color was high, which meant that he, too, had fed.

"It's about time you came back," he snapped, stopping in the center of the walk, arms folded, glaring down at Maeve. He was, typically, completely unaware of what a spectacle he made, with his imposing size, his cape, and his haughty manner. Nor did he seem aware of the flow of pedestrian traffic moving around him.

"You shouldn't have waited," Maeve said, refusing to be intimidated. Valerian might be able to dominate other vampires, but she was different.

"We have to speak to the Brotherhood," he told her huffily. "Or has it slipped your mind that the warlocks are threatening to make war on all of us?"

"Of course it hasn't," Maeve replied pleasantly but in a firm tone. "It's just that there is something else I want to do first." She glanced at the starry sky with its tracings of clouds, for this was the vampire's way of measuring time. "I'll meet you at the stone monument where Aidan disappeared—two hours before sunrise."

"Maeve—" Valerian protested.

She did not give him time to finish speaking before she interlocked her fingers above her head and vanished, for there was a sort of sustenance her spirit needed as badly as her body needed the blood of mortals.

Maeve returned to the nineteenth century, her favorite for all its trials and shortcomings, and found herself on the steps of a summerhouse behind the Holbrook mansion in Philadelphia. There was a soft, warm rain falling, and Calder was standing with his back to her, his hands gripping the rail that encompassed the open structure.

He sensed her presence immediately, although Maeve had not made even the intimation of a sound, and whirled to face her.

He said her name as though it were holy, and in that moment Maeve did what she had sworn she would never do. She lost her heart to a mortal.

The realization left her stricken, for, even now, in the face of a love she knew was unceasing and eternal, she did not want to become human again, as Aidan had done for his beloved Neely.

For Maeve, then, this grandest and most powerful of all emotions was a sentence to loneliness without end. Overcome, she turned, there on the steps that glimmered with rain, and would have vanished if Calder had not grasped her shoulders from behind.

"Don't go," he pleaded hoarsely. "Please—stay. Just for a few minutes—just long enough to tell me who you are."

She faced him then, for she hadn't the heart to disappear from his embrace, and looked up at him, knowing that all her suffering was visible in her eyes. "Who do you think I am, Calder Holbrook?" she asked gently.

He had stepped out from under the summerhouse roof, and the rain wet his dark hair and turned his fine linen shirt transparent against his skin. "An illusion? An angel? Or perhaps a beautiful devil?" he mused gruffly. "I don't know, God help me. Nothing in my medical training, or in all my life before that, could have prepared me for this. All I know is that I think of you, and nothing and no one else, through every day and every night." He paused, pushed back his dripping hair in a gesture that was touchingly boyish, and then whispered, "Tell me what is happening here, before I go mad. I beg of you—*help me understand.*"

She wanted to weep. The truth was a crushing burden, and she knew he would not believe her. As a doctor, a man of science, Calder would find even the existence of blood-drinkers impossible to accept.

Nevertheless, she could not deny him an answer, or anything else for that matter, because he was too precious to her. "I am a vampire," she said, her voice soft but matter-of-fact.

Calder stared at her, and she saw that the color had drained from his strong face. "A drinker of blood?" he marveled, and the words were hardly more than bursts of breath.

Maeve nodded, while parts of her spirit trembled and collapsed beneath the weight of Calder's horror. "Vampires are immortal," she explained, all the while wishing she'd never let herself begin to care for a human being. "Without blood, however, we would perish in a way far more terrible than even you, with all your knowledge of battlefields, could ever imagine. We must avoid daylight at all costs, and we have special powers—the ability to travel through time, for instance."

Calder seemed unaware of the rain, which was coming down much harder now. "What do you mean, you can travel through time?"



She felt a stirring of hope because Calder had not bolted in revulsion or terror, but she was far too wise to let herself think he believed her. He was probably humoring her, as he might a mad person.

Only then did it strike Maeve that Calder's mind was closed to her; she could not divine his thoughts or feelings.

"I just came from the late twentieth century," she said, amazed, prodding gently with her thoughts and meeting with an impenetrable block.

To her surprise, Calder clasped her hand, led her into the summerhouse, and sat her down on a wrought-iron bench tucked into the cool folds of shadows. "Tell me—what sort of world exists—in that other place and time, I mean? Do they still make war? What advances have been made in medicine?"

For a long moment Maeve was too taken aback by his ready belief to speak. Then she whispered, "You don't think I'm insane or a liar?"

"You are not a mortal woman," Calder answered. "That much was clear from the moment I first saw you." He was wearing the pendant she'd given him during their last encounter, and he held it out for her to see. "It was only this medal, solid proof of your existence, that kept me from having myself admitted to the nearest asylum," he said. "Now—please—tell me about medicine and warfare in your century."

Maeve checked the sky, only too aware of her commitment to meet Valerian at the stone monument in the English countryside. When she gazed into Calder's eyes again, however, she wondered if she would ever be able to look away. "There have been tremendous advances in medicine—they can cure or control a lot of diseases that are fatal in your time. It is possible to immunize children against measles and diphtheria and many of the other illnesses that almost always end in death here. Surgeons are performing successful organ transplants there, and the infant mortality rate is a fraction of yours.

"War is very much a part of the modern world unfortunately. There are weapons capable of destroying the earth, and while the largest and most powerful nations are trying hard to get along, there are a number of small, fanatical factions that are not so willing to cooperate."

Calder absorbed her words for a long interval, one of his hands clasping hers. "Can you take me there?" he asked, finally, catching Maeve off guard with the last question she would have expected him to ask.

She shook her head regretfully. "Mortals cannot travel through time as yet, though you do have the propensity for it locked away somewhere in your brain. It is an ability that must evolve over many, many generations."

He looked so disappointed that Maeve's heart ached, but a moment later his countenance brightened again. "Can you bring me things from the future, Maeve—like medicine, or books about surgery and diagnosis?"

Maeve considered, knowing she should leave this man's side, once and for all, and never return and, at the same time, feeling infinitely grateful for an excuse to see him again. "I suppose there would be no harm in that. There's just one thing, however—it isn't wise to change the course of history, because one can never predict all the ramifications of even the simplest act. You could use the things you discover in twentieth-century books, but you must not teach them to others." She stood, unable to ignore the hour any longer, and Calder rose with her. She put her hands on the warm, supple flesh of his face. "I cannot stay any longer—there are matters that must be attended to."



"Will you be back?"

Maeve felt a pang, for she could not discern whether he wanted to see her again because he cared for her just a little, or because he wanted the books and wonder drugs she could bring from the future. "Yes," she said. "If I can return, I will."

Calder bent his head then and touched Maeve's lips with his own, and as brief and innocent as it was, the contact rocked her to the very center of her being.

Her gaze flew to his, searching for the revulsion she so dreaded, seeking Calder's horrified reaction to kissing a cold mouth. Instead of those things, however, she saw a certain reverence, unmasked affection, and, yes, a disturbing sort of curiosity—that of a scientist studying a unique specimen.

Filled with sadness and bliss, she reached up and touched his lips with three fingers.

"Good-bye," she said.

One moment Maeve was there, standing before him, pale and ethereally beautiful in the darkness, and the next she was gone.

Calder felt a bleakness unequalled in his memory; he wanted to be with Maeve, now and forever, but that was clearly impossible. He would wait, he told himself, as patiently as he could, and one night soon she would return to him.

He stood in the rain for a long time, remembering. Then he dropped the pendant down inside his wet shirt, to hide it from the curious gazes of his father and half brother in the same way he had always hidden his heart from the world.

Until Maeve.

The pattering shower turned to a downpour, but still Calder remained where he was, marveling, telling himself that Maeve could not exist, could not be what he knew she was. An immortal.

Finally Calder broke his stunned inertia and strode toward the house, where he was met by Prudence, the family's longtime housekeeper.

"Lord have mercy," that good woman fussed, seeing Calder's wet clothes and distracted expression. "I thought you had better sense than to be runnin' around in a cold rain! You want to die of the pneumonia, you foolish chile?"

Calder paid no attention to Prudence's ire, for the affection between them was old and deep. "Send Perkins around for the carriage," he said, entering the big kitchen and heading straight for the rear stairway. "Tell him we're going to the Army hospital on Union Street."

Prudence followed her erstwhile charge as far as the newel post, her sizable body quivering with disapproval. The glow of the gaslights flickered over her beautiful coffee-colored skin, and her jaw was set at a stubborn angle. "You ain't goin' to no hospital at this hour," she ranted. "I swear this war of Mr. Lincoln's done somethin' to your brain..."

The war had "done something" to Calder's brain, all right, and it had nearly broken his spirit and his physical strength in the bargain. Now, however, knowing there was a future, a time when miracles would

occur in the realm of medical science, gave him new hope.

"Tell Perkins to bring along a slicker," he called back over one shoulder as he gained the upper hallway. "It might be a long night, and this rain isn't likely to let up."

"Mr. Calder!" Prudence bellowed after him. "You get back here—you hear me? You ain't well!"

Calder opened the door to his room, already stripping off his wet shirt when he crossed the threshold, thinking to himself that, contrary to Prudence's assessment, he was feeling better than he had in years.

## CHAPTER 5

Maeve passed the following day not in her favorite lair beneath the London house, as usual, but in a dusty crevice behind the foundation of the Union Hospital. She'd known Calder was going there after their meeting in the summerhouse, and she had wanted to be near him.

Normally Maeve's slumber was untroubled by dreams, be they pleasant or unpleasant, but that time was different. The wards and even the passages of the old hospital were filled with the wounded and the dying. They were only boys, these soldiers, most of them so young that they'd never been away from home at all before marching off to battle.

Maeve did not hear their screams of physical pain, for suffering, however intense, is a temporal thing, meaning little in the face of eternity. No, it was their soul-cries Maeve discerned, the agonized protests of their spirits.

When she awakened at sunset, she was instantly aware of her mistake in coming to that particular place. With so many mortals in torment, it was only logical that the premises would be crawling with angels.

A surge of terror moved through Maeve as she raised herself, dusted off her clothes, and pressed her back against the wall of the foundation. What had possessed her to make such a dangerous error in judgment?

She listened, and waited. Now, with all her senses on the alert, she could feel the presences of companion angels, hundreds of them. Fortunately—and this fact, she thought, might well save her from certain destruction—they were not warriors, these winged messengers from heaven, but comforters. Their full attention was fixed on their charges.

For all of that, Maeve was trembling when she closed her eyes and willed herself away from that hospital and far into the future, where other challenges awaited her.

She fed on a mean drunk, who'd been on his way home from the pub with every intention of beating his wife for his own sins, as well as a bevy of imagined infidelities, and left him whimpering on a heap of trash.

Maeve found Valerian at the circle of stones, sitting patiently on a fallen pillar and blowing a haunting, airy tune on a small pipe.

"Well, then," the great vampire said with good-natured sarcasm, "you have at last decided to honor me with an appearance." He bowed deeply. "Welcome."

Maeve was still agitated by the foolish carelessness she had exhibited back in Calder's Pennsylvania. She'd never made such a mistake before, since the night of her making.

Valerian climbed gracefully down from his perch and approached. For the first time since her arrival, Maeve noticed that he was dressed as a seventeenth-century gentleman. He wore a waistcoat of the finest silk, along with kid-skin breeches, leggings, and buckle-shoes. His hair was tied back with a dark ribbon and lightly powdered.

"Going to a costume party?" Maeve asked with the merest hint of disdain in her voice.

Valerian smiled indulgently, using only one side of his sensual mouth, and dropped the musical pipe into a pocket of his coat. "I was indeed attending a festivity, of sorts, but since this is the way the French aristocracy always dressed during those glorious pre-Revolutionary days, I did not stand out from the other guests."

Maeve sighed. Valerian would always stand out from the other guests, no matter how carefully he chose his clothing, in her opinion, but to say so would only inflate his already monumental ego, and she wasn't about to do that.

"Where is the lecture?" she asked instead, sounding weary and dispirited even to herself. "Surely you expected me before this?"

Valerian shrugged. "I kept myself occupied in your absence," he said. "What were you doing—mooning over that mortal of yours? What is his attraction, Maeve—is it the fact that he spends most of his days drenched in blood?"

Maeve was instantly angry, though in truth, had she been in Valerian's place, she might have offered much the same question. She whirled away from the other vampire, restraining her temper, and then, after a few moments, turned back to face him again. "Calder is accustomed to blood," she admitted softly. "He's a doctor, a scientist, and it isn't revolting to him, the way it is to most mortals. Indeed, I imagine he knows, on some level, what a magical substance blood really is."

Valerian arched one eyebrow. "After all your grumblings about Aidan and his penchant for that human woman, Neely Wallace, I would never have expected this of you. You're smitten with a mortal, just as your brother was." He paused and touched her face lightly with curled fingers. "Nothing can come of this affection of yours, Maeve. Not, that is, unless you're willing to make the fascinating Dr. Holbrook into a blood-drinker."

Maeve gave her head a quick and slightly wild shake. "I won't risk that—you know how many vampires come to despise their makers. An eternity of Calder's hatred would be worse than Dante's version of hell."

"Do you hate me?" he asked with uncommon gentleness.

She looked at him for a long moment, then shook her head.

Valerian made a soft sound of exclamation. "Ah, well, that is a relief." He raised an eyebrow. "Still, the situation is dire indeed. I needn't tell you what a rare instance it is when a nightwalker puts the welfare of another before its own wants and pleasures—particularly when that other is mortal."

Trembling, Maeve nonetheless drew herself up and glared at Valerian in her most aristocratic fashion. "Enough talk of my personal affairs," she said, her voice icy with authority. "What of Lisette? Have you learned anything new? Has she made more of her deviant vampires?"

Valerian's smile was slow and insolent, and he had the audacity to touch the tip of Maeve's nose with a forefinger. "All vampires are deviant, my darling—don't ever forget that. Now, to the business at hand. Lisette is ranging far and wide, but from what I can discern, she has made her vampires only in this time period. Still, we must find her, before she strews the beasts throughout history. Surely you know without my telling you how the warlocks, not to mention Nemesis and his army of angels, would react *to that* ."

"We'll start by approaching the Brotherhood," Maeve said in a tone that invited no disagreement. "Then, with or without their approval, we will hunt Lisette down and destroy her."

Valerian affected a sigh; it was one of his favorite forms of expression, especially when he was feeling martyred. "At last," he said. "You have grasped what I was trying to tell you all along—that both the mortal and immortal worlds are in desperate trouble."

Maeve could not disagree. The warlocks would not stand idly by while Lisette filled the earth with zombie-like vampires, and Nemesis was surely lobbying the highest courts of heaven for permission to make war. Should the battle actually break out, it would make the ancient tales of Armageddon sound like cheerful whimsy.

"I must change into something more fitting for an audience with the Brotherhood," Maeve said, looking down at her dusty gown and cloak and then focusing a critical gaze on Valerian's garb. "Although no costume could possibly be more in character for you, I do hope you aren't planning to approach the Vampyre Court dressed as a French aristocrat."

Valerian sighed again, and all the sufferings of the ages echoed in the sound. He splayed the fingers of one hand over the place where his heart should have been. "You wound me," he said, but there was a broad grin on his face. At Maeve's scowl he gave another sigh. "Very well," he agreed. "I'll meet you in the south garden on the Havermail estate. The Brotherhood's headquarters isn't far from there."

Maeve frowned. "Why not go directly to the secret chamber?"

"You don't just pop into the place," Valerian replied indignantly, tugging at one elaborately trimmed cuff and then the other. "These are the oldest vampires on earth, and we must use a degree of protocol."

"We could bypass them completely and handle the problem ourselves, I suppose," Maeve mused, resting her hands on her hips.

"Perish the thought!" Valerian said, and for once in his immortal life, he sounded sincere. "They'd never tolerate such disrespect!" There was a pause, then he leaned toward Maeve and peered into her eyes, narrowing his own. "You have fed, haven't you? You'll need your strength to deal with the old ones."

Maeve simply gave her companion a scathing look, raised her arms, and vanished.

She materialized in her suite in the London house, where she shed her rumpled, dust-splotched garments, washed her alabaster skin, and brushed dust and tiny stones from her hair. Finally Maeve donned a beautiful dress, made of shimmering red silk, with Irish lace trimming the cuffs and yoke, along with a matching cape.

Moments later she stood in the Havermails' south garden, where a long-forgotten marble fountain presided, nearly hidden under blackberry vines and wild roses. The statue in the center had once been lovely, an exquisite sculpture of a young Greek boy with a vessel in his arms, but now it was spotted with moss and bird scat, and a knee and elbow had been chipped away.

"Couldn't you have found a more dismal place for us to meet?" Maeve snapped when Valerian joined her in the garden. He stood upon a low stone fence, practically invisible for the brambles and scrub brush that had grown up around it.

He looked like the conductor of a great orchestra, or perhaps a movie vampire, in his rustling black cape and impeccably tailored tuxedo. "The whole of the Havermail estate is dismal," he said irritably. "They wouldn't have it any other way. Now, might we stop this quibbling, please—at least long enough to deal with the difficulties at hand?"

Maeve felt a degree of chagrin, though she would not have admitted as much. Because of her past relationship with Valerian, and the pain he had caused her with his cavalier ways, she invariably sought to rattle him. He was right, however—this was no time for childish jibes. There were true perils that must be overcome.

"Take me to the Brotherhood," she said quietly.

Valerian closed his cape around her, and, momentarily at least, she put aside her own powers and surrendered to his.

With dizzying quickness the two of them disintegrated, shot through space like a single beam of light, and reclaimed their normal forms inside a cave far beneath the surface of the earth.

"This is the place where Aidan became human again," Maeve said in a stricken whisper. She saw clearly in the dense blackness, and took note of the paintings of animals and primitive gods and goddesses on the walls.

"Yes," Valerian said hoarsely. He, too, seemed shaken. "The resurrection ritual was carried out here, in the central chamber." He took Maeve's hand and began leading her along the edge of an icy subterranean stream.

"If you've having any thoughts about becoming mortal so that you can live happily—not ever after, as in the fairy tales, but merely for the length of a heartbeat—you'd best reconsider. The Brotherhood has decided that no more vampires will be allowed to cross over after this—they've destroyed all written records of the rite and cleansed their minds of any memory of the chemical formula."

There were more paintings on the walls along both sides of the stream, and Maeve marveled at their pure definition and richness of color. The artists had been dead in the neighborhood of thirty thousand years, at her best guess, and yet their handiwork looked as fresh as if it had been completed that morning.

"I wasn't thinking of becoming mortal," Maeve bristled a few seconds after the fact. "I've told you before, I'm not interested in giving up my powers to sit and darn stockings in some man's parlor."

"Things have changed a bit since your time as a mortal, Maeve," Valerian pointed out dryly as they proceeded along the narrow path. "Modern women don't mend stockings, to my knowledge, much less gather or wash them. They work at their own careers and guard their independence."

"I would not wish to live in the twentieth century were I human again," Maeve said, sounding just a bit defensive even in her own ears. "I prefer the nineteenth, as you know. It's more gracious and elegant."

"And Calder Holbrook is there," Valerian said.

Before Maeve had to answer, a brilliant wall of sunlight appeared ahead, and both she and Valerian stopped, keeping to the shadows. Maeve stared in wonder and no little fear, for she had not looked upon such light in two hundred years and, had she stepped into it, it would have consumed her in invisible flames.

"Don't be afraid," Valerian said quietly, squeezing Maeve's hand. "It's only an illusion—the Brotherhood's way of guarding the innermost cave."

"What makes you so certain it's an illusion?" Maeve snapped. "There could be a crevice on the surface..."

"Think," Valerian scolded with gentle exasperation. "The sun set less than an hour ago. How could that be daylight?"

Maeve felt foolish for the second time since she'd awakened in Calder's hospital and realized that it was full of angels, a vampire's most dangerous enemies, and her impatience with herself made her prickly.

"Do they know we're here?" she asked in a peevish tone.

Valerian glanced back at her over one broad shoulder. "Don't be a ninny," he said. "Of course they know. We'll wait here until they send someone out to meet us."

Maeve gazed upon the false sunlight, both fascinated and repelled. She did not miss the limitations of human life, the aches and pains and superficial joys that were always so quickly gone. She sometimes yearned for bright spring days, however, for azure skies, and fields of wildflowers and sweet grass rippling beneath a golden sun...

Only moments had passed before Tobias appeared, walking straight through the light, smiling and unharmed. He was one of the elders, a member of the ancient Brotherhood, and yet he looked no more than seventeen years old, with his slender, ladlike figure and youthful features.

"This way," he said. "The others await you."

Valerian started toward the light, but Maeve drew back, afraid. Illusion or no illusion, sunshine was a terror to all vampires, as agonizing as the flames of hell itself, and she was wary.

"Did you see this—this barrier of sunlight, when you were here before?" she whispered to Valerian.

"No," he said, sounding mildly impatient. "What's the matter with you, Maeve? I've already told you the light isn't real—Tobias probably projected it from his mind."

"He's right," said the latter, standing only a few feet away now. "I manufactured the barricade in my imagination. Isn't it splendid?"

Maeve would not have described it so charitably, but of course she wasn't about to voice her

observation aloud. "Lead the way," she said, determined to bring her fear under control. If she and Valerian were to succeed in their quest and stop Lisette, then she, Maeve, would have to face many more challenges. This was no time to allow her courage to fail.

She stood at Valerian's side, instead of cowering behind him, as she had done for the space of several humiliating moments. "That's a marvelous trick," she said, swallowing the desire to turn and flee. "Will you show me how to do it?"

Tobias shrugged. "Perhaps," he said. Then he turned and strolled back through the shimmering golden curtain.

Maeve rushed past Valerian, in a burst of bravado, and hurled herself through the barrier. Even though she knew the veil was an illusion, she was still surprised that there was no burning as she passed, and she was dizzy with terrified relief to find herself safe.

Valerian was next to her in an instant, a half-smile curving his mouth.

Annoyed at his smugness, Maeve drew herself up and then turned to look back at the golden curtain. It dissolved into a magical fog of shining dust and finally vanished entirely.

Maeve was impressed, and her mind was busy as she and Valerian followed Tobias through the twists and turns of the natural passageway alongside the stream. If Tobias could do such magnificent things as make walls of sunlight appear, then she, too, must possess at least the seed of that ability...

What wonders might she be able to perform if only she knew the trick?

She was still pursuing that intriguing idea when suddenly the passageway widened into a cathedral-size chamber, filled with the light of burning torches. The stream meandered off in another direction, into the depths of the earth.

The Brotherhood was gathered, and they were an imposing lot, seated along the length of a long, exquisitely carved table as they were. They did not wear black capes or somber hooded robes, as Maeve had expected, but instead were clad in garb typical of various periods of human history.

The spokesman, a giant with a red beard and piercing blue eyes, seemed to be a Viking. As Tobias took a seat behind the table, the vampire with the fiery hair stood and rounded one end to face Valerian and Maeve squarely.

He merely nodded at Valerian, but studied Maeve with such concentration in his features that she began to grow uncomfortable. "You are the one," he said at last. "The one spoken of in our legends."

Maeve said nothing, for she was still not at all certain that she was "the one," nor was she sure she wanted to be.

"Our next queen," Valerian said smoothly with a grand nod in Maeve's direction. His eyes twinkled as he registered her carefully concealed irritation.

Still, though she was simmering with denials, Maeve did not speak.

Valerian, as usual, was not at a loss for words. "We've come about another matter," he said formally, taking in the other members of the vampire counsel with a polite sweep of his eyes. "As you probably



know, Lisette, in her madness, is making an undue number of blood-drinkers. They are substandard creatures, insensible and indiscriminate."

Maeve was listening, but she was also looking around the enormous cavern and wondering what thoughts had been in her brother Aidan's mind when he was here, undergoing the terrible transformation from vampire to mortal. Surely he had been afraid and, at the same time, full of hope.

The Viking brought her attention back to the matter at hand with surprising ease. "We despair of what Lisette is doing, of course," he said. "But we are weary, and we do not wish to govern any longer."

Valerian leaned slightly forward, as he always did when he was trying to make a point. "You cannot abdicate your authority now!" he hissed furiously. "Don't you understand? The warlocks are ready to wage war against all vampires if Lisette is not stopped, and even at this moment Nemesis impugns the highest authorities in the heavenly realm to let him unleash his angels upon all of us! If this happens, the suffering, both human and immortal, will be incalculable!"

The Viking spread his hands as if to say he could offer no solution, and turned to walk away.

Impulsively Valerian reached out and grasped the ancient vampire's shoulder in an effort to make him listen.

The old one whirled, icy blue eyes shining with fire. "It is your battle, Arrogant One," he said, and then his gaze shifted to Maeve with all the sharpness of a fine-edged sword. "And yours. As for us, we want only to rest. Eternity has gone on too long for us as it is!"

Maeve shrank back a little, startled, as Valerian obviously was, that any living thing would actually yearn for death. Perhaps, she thought, she would feel that way herself after a few thousand years, but at the moment the idea made her shudder inwardly.

"If you refuse to help us," she said with dignity, "at least promise that you will not hinder us, either." Her gaze sought and found Tobias's face. "So be it," Maeve finished, when no member of the Brotherhood spoke up.

She wanted to go to Calder, to have what might be her last look at him before she found Lisette and engaged her in battle, but she brought her emotions under stern control.

The old ones stood and bowed—except for Tobias, who regarded her with an expression of curious concern.

Maeve turned and walked regally to the center of the chamber, well aware that only one choice was left to her.

For the sake of all other vampires, for her own sake and that of Calder and of Aidan, the two mortals in all creation that she loved, she must take charge, with Valerian, and find a way to stop Lisette. If she failed, the most savage and terrible war since the expulsion of Lucifer would break out.

Perhaps even then it was too late.

She regarded each of the old ones in turn, then clasped her hands together and vanished.

A moment later she was far away, as she had wished to be. A cool night breeze ruffled the heather of a

Scottish moor, and in the distance Maeve heard the crashing of the surf against rocks that had been part of some earlier earth.

Valerian was beside her, but before either of them could speak, Tobias arrived.

His voice was infinitely sad. "They plan to destroy themselves," he said, speaking, of course, of his friends in the Brotherhood. "They are so tired, and this modern time is foreign and confusing to them. They do not wish to survive."

Maeve caught hold of Tobias's sleeve; he was wearing a flowing white shirt, reminiscent of a pirate captain's, along with leggings and soft leather shoes. "What about you, Tobias? Do you want to die, too?"

He shook his head. "No, but I, too, am weary. I will lie dormant, for a century or so, and recover my strength. I'm afraid the battle does indeed fall to you, my friends."

Valerian made an angry sound, but Maeve had tender feelings towards Tobias. He had saved all their lives, once upon a time, her own, Aidan's, and especially Valerian's, and she owed him a tremendous debt.

"Rest easy," she said gently, taking his upper arms in her hands. "And when you awaken, please seek us out."

Tobias nodded, looking out of his young face with ancient eyes, and then he disappeared.

"Who would have thought they'd abandon us like this?" Valerian demanded when they were alone. "Great Zeus, Maeve—where do we begin?"

Again Maeve thought of Calder, and of Aidan and Neely, and her beloved housekeeper, Mrs. Fullywub. All their lives depended upon her, and upon Valerian, and Maeve would perish herself before she let any harm come to them.

"At the beginning, of course," she said with a bright carelessness she most certainly did not feel. "We must find Lisette and confront her."

Valerian was pacing back and forth in a patch of moonlit heather. He had been the instigator of the campaign against the queen, and now he was plainly terrified.

Which only went to prove that he was as smart as Maeve had always believed him to be.

"I last saw her the night before Aidan and Neely were married," he said.

Maeve was stunned; Valerian had not mentioned that encounter with Aidan, let alone with Lisette. "What?"

He stopped his pacing and tilted his magnificent head back, silhouetted against the bright, enormous moon. "I wanted to see Aidan once more, to say good-bye to him, so to speak, though of course he didn't know I was there. He was sleeping." Valerian's voice became choked and raspy. "He was so beautiful, and I loved him so much. And then she appeared—Lisette, I mean. She planned to make Aidan into a vampire all over again."

Maeve hugged herself, seeing the horrible vision in her mind's eye. Such an occurrence would have utterly destroyed Aidan—he would almost certainly have laid himself down in some open place and waited for the sun to rise and devour him.

"Lisette was strong," Valerian went on, his voice still sounding strangled, when Maeve didn't speak. "I tried to fight her, but she overcame me easily."

"What happened?" Maeve managed to ask after a long silence had stretched between them.

Valerian was weeping quietly at the memory, and Maeve wanted to touch him, to offer some small comfort, but she restrained herself. "She was about to change Aidan, Lisette was. I cannot describe the agony I felt watching that, unable to help him. . ."

"Go on," Maeve urged.

"It seems that all mortals do indeed have an angel assigned to them," he finally said, after regaining his composure, "though I must say I wondered where the creature was when Lisette met Aidan the first time and changed him against his will."

"You saw an angel?"

Valerian nodded. "Yes—it was a spectacular being, full of light and power. Lisette fled in terror."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" Maeve demanded, though her tone was still quiet and even.

"You were upset about Aidan's transformation as it was. Since the knowledge wouldn't have done you any good, I decided to make the accounting another time, when you were stronger."

Maeve turned her back to Valerian, arms folded, and stood regarding the gigantic moon for some minutes, dealing with a riot of conflicting thoughts and emotions. Finally she faced him again. "Aidan is gone from me," she said. "And the important thing is that he is safe, for the time being at least, and happy. The only point that should concern you and me is that Lisette has regained her strength, and is perhaps more powerful than ever because of her madness."

"Together," Valerian said, with a brazen confidence that was typical of him, "we have the power to destroy Lisette."

"I hope you're right," Maeve reflected. Lisette's age made her a formidable enemy, for with the passing of centuries came unpredictable abilities, traits that were not common to all vampires, but often wholly unique. It was rumored that one member of the Brotherhood, for instance, could walk freely in the light of day, and Maeve had heard of vampires who did not need to drink blood, and even of some who could travel between dimensions as well as centuries. The possibilities were disturbingly infinite.

Valerian was in full control of his dignity again. "What choice do we have," he reasoned, "but to try?"

"None," Maeve answered. "Do you know where Lisette is?"

He shook his head. "Others have told me that she strikes at random, and that she is able to veil herself from ordinary vampires."

"But we are not ordinary vampires," Maeve reminded him.

Valerian smiled. "No, my darling, we are not." He paused, and his countenance darkened again. "Still, we have expended considerable energy this night. In my opinion, it would be unwise to face Lisette now, though we might certainly seek her out."

Maeve nodded in agreement. "We will concentrate on her majesty, then," she said with quiet sarcasm, "and see where our thoughts take us."

"Yes," Valerian said. "But remember—be cautious. This is no time to show off."

Maeve gave the other vampire a wry look even as she raised her hands high and interlocked her fingers. "You're a fine one to lecture me about showing off," she said, but as she vanished, she was glad to know Valerian was with her.

## CHAPTER 6

Valerian assembled himself a split second before Maeve managed the same feat, and he immediately uttered a curse.

Maeve looked around anxiously, getting her bearings. They were in the common room of an elite boy's school, she soon realized, tucked away in the quiet of the English countryside. One of the instructors, recently human but now a walking corpse, with bluish-gray skin and protruding eyes, came snarling from the shadows.

Flanking him were two smaller vampires, with fangs bared. Before their making, they had been ordinary schoolboys.

"Children," Maeve whispered in stunned despair. "Valerian, she's changed mere *children*."

"Have a care. Lisette may still be here somewhere," Valerian replied in a taut voice, "and there could well be other creatures like these prowling about." He stopped, strengthening his resolve, and then went on. "We'll have to destroy them, Maeve."

"I know that," she murmured as the erstwhile teacher and his now-vicious pupils encircled them.

"Great Zeus," Valerian muttered, "they're too stupid to know they're no match for us. Look at them—circling like sharks around a shipwreck."

Maeve shuddered. She had not anticipated having to kill child-vampires, and the prospect filled her with grief and fury. When she could, she would settle this grim debt with Lisette, but in the meantime there could be no question of her duty.

The schoolmaster lunged at Valerian with an earsplitting, unearthly shriek, and Valerian's responding shout of anger was far more terrifying.

"Bloody wretch!" he cried, after flinging the lesser creature hard against the nearest wall.

The two boys were staring hungrily at Maeve and making dreadful, slavering sounds. She felt no pity for these monsters, for they were beyond such tender emotions now, but she did despair for the parents and

siblings who had loved them. They would never know, of course, what had really happened on this horrible night.

Valerian had, by this time, overcome his attacker and forced him down onto the cluttered surface of an antique mahogany desk, one hand clamped around the beast's throat. With another swearword, this one only murmured, he raised a sterling letter opener and plunged it into the other vampire's heart.

"Handy item, that," Valerian remarked, jerking the blade out of the creature's chest wall again and staring at it. It was bloody. "Do you suppose it's the equivalent of a silver bullet?"

Maeve had her hands full, what with two agile boy-fiends hurling themselves at her, and she snapped, "Oh, for heaven's sake, Valerian, will you stop babbling about the letter opener and help me?"

"Since heaven does nothing for my sake," Valerian replied, catching one of Maeve's assailants by the back of his collar and curving one arm around to stab him, all in a single swift motion, "I will do nothing for heaven's."

Maeve was distracted, though only for a moment, but in that time the other creature was upon her, biting and clawing, fierce as a winter-starved wolf. She flung him off and, since Valerian did not offer the sleek blade he'd used on the others, grabbed a decorative sword from its place on the wall and pinioned her mindless enemy in one ferocious thrust.

The corpse was now truly dead. Maeve withdrew the sword and watched as the thing's knees folded, and it toppled to the floor.

"We'd better see if there are others," Valerian said gently, putting an arm around her shoulders and turning her away from the scene. As they left the common room, he warned, "Remember—be on your guard, my friend. Lisette may still be about, veiling herself from our awareness."

There were no more victims, as it happened. Apparently the carnage of that night had been meant as a message—perhaps even a challenge.

Maeve and Valerian proceeded carefully through the school, room by room. They found a great many sleeping boys, warm and blessedly human, and several teachers, also unharmed. There was no sign of Lisette, but that meant nothing; she was the most treacherous of creatures and might loom up before them at any moment.

Eventually they returned to the common room where they collected the bodies of the vampires they'd destroyed earlier. The things were already shriveling, their flesh crumbling to dry, gray dust; the morning sun would reduce them to fine grains that would blow away in the first brisk wind.

"How will their disappearances be explained?" Maeve asked when she and Valerian had laid the unholy and now harmless trio out on the green grass bordering a rose garden.

Valerian shrugged. "Who cares?" he asked. "Let them broadcast the horror on every television and radio station in the world. Let the local police wonder. Such things make no difference to us."

"I care," Maeve insisted, nodding toward the school buildings. "One of those children is bound to stumble across these things and be marked forever by the discovery."

The great vampire lifted one eyebrow. "There it is again," he said in a tone of playful warning, "that

Aidan-like tendency to worry too much about the affairs of mortals."

"Valerian, these are *children* we're discussing here. Surely even you have some shred of compassion for them."

He affected one of his sighs. "Very well—if we bum them, there'll be no trace of their bodies or clothes by sunrise. Wait here."

"I wasn't going anywhere," Maeve said peevishly. It had been a hellish night for her, and she wanted only to find a safe lair somewhere near Calder and sleep.

Valerian entered the nearest building through a pair of French doors, returning momentarily with lighter fluid and matches. With uncanny calm, he doused the horrid evidence of Lisette's rampage and lit the dead creatures afire.

Within seconds there was nothing left of the vampires themselves or of their clothes, except for a few curling ashes. Neither the police nor the teaching staff nor the children would be able to discern that bodies had been burned here.

Maeve turned away, scanning the star-spangled sky, trying to take comfort from its constancy and beauty but instead feeling weary, and sick at heart over the events of that night. At last Maeve spoke aloud, but she was not addressing Valerian. "Where are you, Lisette?" she whispered, her voice taut with rage. "Show yourself."

There was a great rustling sound, like the wings of many enormous birds, and a sudden, high wind scattered the last few ashes over the grass and the flower beds.

"You might have consulted me," Valerian hissed angrily through the din, "before you issued a challenge!"

Lisette was at first a swirling blackness before them, an unreasoning hurricane of fury, bending the rosebushes close to the ground with her force. Then she solidified into a dark angel, at once breathtakingly beautiful and horribly unnatural. Her long auburn hair moved softly, as the furious wind died down, and she looked at Maeve with glittering, curious eyes.

"Who are you?" she demanded, holding herself with all the regality befitting her position as the oldest and most powerful female vampire on earth. "You resemble Aidan Tremayne."

What Maeve felt was not fear, exactly, but an excited sort of awareness. She was an equal to this creature, she sensed that, but at the same time she must be alert to every nuance, every shift of Lisette's body and mind.

"I am—or was—his twin sister," Maeve allowed. She took a step toward Lisette, and Valerian grasped her arm, tried in vain to pull her back.

Lisette laughed, and the sound was high and musical and utterly chilling. "Do you imagine that you can protect her from me, Valerian?" she demanded. "When last we met, at Aidan's bedside, I dealt with you as easily as one of these schoolboys." She gestured toward the still-dark and silent buildings. "Or have you acquired an angel to guard you, like Aidan?"

Maeve interceded before Valerian could reply, certain that he would have chosen brash and foolish words to do so. "I don't need Valerian or anyone else to look after me," she said. She narrowed her

eyes, studying the vampire queen's perfect features and cloud-white skin. "I think I know the answer to this question, Lisette," she said, "but I'm going to ask it anyway. Did you change this schoolmaster and the two students?"

Lisette laughed again, and the sound must have soured the sweet dreams of a hundred boys, turning them to nightmares. "Yes," she said defiantly after a brief interval of studying Maeve, sizing her up. "I made the others, too."

"Why?" Maeve wanted to know. "It makes no sense."

Suddenly a storm raged around Lisette again, a tempest of her own making. "Do not try my patience!" she shouted. "I am the queen of all blood-drinkers, and I answer to no one, mortal or immortal!"

Maeve took another step forward. "You must stop this," she said, even though she knew there was no hope of persuading this most daunting of all vampires to show mercy. "The warlocks have threatened open warfare on all of the dark kingdom if you persist in creating these unreasoning creatures, and it is said that Nemesis will unleash his armies of angels at any moment. "

For the merest flicker of an instant, Lisette looked uncertain, even afraid. Then she drew herself up and lifted her arms from her sides, and the breeze caught her voluminous black sleeves and made them look like wings.

"Stop me if you can," she said. She looked Maeve up and down with mad, beautiful eyes. "I look forward to the challenge."

With that, the legendary Lisette glanced toward the lightening sky, laughed again, and vanished into nothingness.

Valerian spat an exclamation, gripped Maeve by the arms, and turned her to face him. "Do you know how lucky you are that she didn't bind you to the ground and leave you to broil in the light of tomorrow's sun?" he rasped. "How could you be so stupid, so rash?"

Maeve drew back out of the other vampire's grasp, straightening her sleeves. "She tried," she said. "She tried to overcome me—I felt it—and I resisted her."

For a long moment Valerian searched Maeve's face, his own expression solemn. Then, finally, he smiled and said, "I was right. *You are* fated to be the new queen."

Maeve was in no mood for Valerian's self-congratulations and I-told-you-so's. She knew the full extent of the ordeal she faced now, for she had felt the first tentative tugs of Lisette's power, and she was afraid.

"I must go—I will need to feed and fortify myself before I do battle with the likes of Lisette," she said.

Valerian clasped her hands and looked deeply into her eyes. "We're all depending on you, Maeve," he said hoarsely. "And there is little time to lose."

Maeve only nodded. Then, after one last sad glance at the school buildings, she interlocked her fingers over her head and vanished.

She gathered herself into solid form briefly in London's Fleet Street, just long enough to purloin three newly published medical textbooks and a selection of drug samples from a surgeon's office.



She ended her journey in the wine cellar beneath Calder's family home in nineteenth-century Philadelphia, with the booty held close in her arms. After a few minutes of searching, she found a long-forgotten hidden passageway that probably dated back to the American Revolution and took refuge there.

The place was cold and dank, populated by spiders and skittering mice, but it would shelter Maeve from the coming sunrise and the bumbling discoveries of mortals, and it was close to Calder. Close enough, in fact, that she could feel the strong, steady beat of his heart in her own spirit. She set her treasures on top of an old whisky barrel and stretched out on the floor to let the vampire sleep overtake her.

At sunset Maeve awakened immediately, and she knew Calder was there, somewhere in the reaches of the great house towering above her, but she did not go to him straight away. First, she went to one of the scores of field hospitals near a battleground and fed, taking nourishment from dying soldiers and giving comfort and ecstasy in return.

She stopped to reclaim the medical books and drug samples before centering her thoughts on Calder and transporting herself to his presence.

He was standing at one of the windows in his spacious bedroom, the lace curtains billowing on either side of him as a rain-scented breeze blew in. While Maeve watched him, marveling at the perfection and strength of his strong arms, his powerful legs, and broad shoulders, she felt again that most treacherous of emotions—unconditional, unreasoning love.

"Calder." Even his name was sweet on her tongue, like the chocolates her father's solicitor had often brought when visiting her, as a human child, in that faraway convent.

He turned, his expression bleak, and silently held his arms out to her. It was an entreaty, as well as an offer of comfort, of sanctuary.

She thrust the things she carried into a leather chair and moved into Calder's embrace.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"I had pushed my emotions away," Calder answered, his breath brushing her temple, "into the farthest recesses of my soul, and you made me face them again. You brought them back, Maeve, and some of them hurt like hell."

She drew back a little way and looked up into his wonderful eyes. "So, then," she said softly, "you too were only pretending to live. Inside, where no one could see, you were really dead."

He nodded, pulled her close again very gently, and kissed her forehead, her temple, the hollow beneath her ear. "It's rather like freezing a hand or a foot—the numbness masks the pain for a time, but the healing process is agonizing."

Maeve felt a rising excitement as Calder held and caressed her, and that surprised her, even though she'd had tender feelings toward him from the first. As a rule, vampires mated only with other vampires, and then it was always a detached, mental sort of intercourse.

Now, to her amazement, Maeve wanted a different kind of loving. She wanted to lie naked in Calder's bed while he touched and kissed her everywhere, and then give herself to him just as a mortal woman

would.

She was instantly terrified, for, although such things had happened before—Lisette, for instance, had made love with Aidan while he was still a mortal—it was wildly dangerous. Other vampires Maeve had heard of, male and female alike, had become frenzied in lovemaking with humans, and had quite literally torn their lovers apart. She moved to pull away, but Calder did not release her.

"What are you afraid of?" he asked huskily. "Tell me."

"Myself," Maeve whispered, lowering her eyes. "I'm afraid of myself and—and of the revulsion you might feel if you touch me. I'm—I'm not like the women you've known, Calder—"

He curved a finger under her chin and lifted it so that she had to look at him. "I'm feeling a lot of things toward you right now, God help me, and revulsion isn't one of them." He bent his head slightly and touched his lips to hers. In the next moment, instead of withdrawing in disgust as she'd feared he might, he intensified the kiss, deepened it until Maeve's entire body was throbbing with sensation.

Nothing, not even her wild exploits with Valerian in the early years following her transformation, had prepared her for this onslaught of passion and pounding, relentless pleasure. As a vampire, Maeve felt everything a human woman would have, multiplied a hundred-fold.

It was terrifying.

Again she pushed away from Calder. He waited without speaking, letting his eyes ask the questions.

Maeve hugged herself. "Suppose I'm not—suppose *I can't* make love the way you expect? I'm not a woman, Calder, I'm a vampire."

He smiled that heartbreakingly gentle smile of his. "I have no expectations, Maeve, and I'm not about to make judgments. Have you ever been intimate with a man before?"

She shook her head. "I was a virgin when Valerian changed me into an immortal." She looked away again, then forced herself to meet Calder's tender but steady gaze. "Vampires mate—even physically sometimes—but most often their lovemaking is mental. For all I know, I won't be able to respond the way a woman would."

Calder reached out and traced the outline of her jaw with one curved finger. "If that kiss was anything to go by, my love, you'll have no trouble responding. Tell me the truth—you're afraid of hurting me, aren't you?"

She felt the unvampirelike tears spring to her eyes even before they blurred her vision. "Yes—Calder, I'm far stronger than you are, simply because of what I am. I could lose control."

"You love me, don't you? As I love you?"

Maeve couldn't speak; she merely nodded. No man had ever told her he loved her before, and no vampire, either—except, of course, for Aidan. That was a different sort of love, since he was her brother.

Calder stroked her dark, silken hair with his hands, and she felt his gentleness seep into her, through her skin, where it melted the last of her resolve. "You would never do me harm," he said. "Never."

She went into his arms again and gripped the front of his fine linen shirt in her fingers, just to hold him close. "Kiss me again," she whispered, and he did.

This contact was even more electrifying than the first, and Maeve was dazed by the extent of her yearning—it was a primitive and elemental thing, older than Stardust. To prevent an intrusion by Valerian, or any other immortal, she cast a mental shield around that quiet room. After that, Maeve and Calder might as well have been alone on the planet.

When Maeve was bedazzled by kisses, and certain she could bear no more of the ecstasy they gave her, he withdrew gently and began removing her clothes. As those garments fell away, so did all Maeve's private heartaches and horrors. Nothing else existed except for the two of them, that room, and the passion they felt for each other.

By the time Maeve stood naked before Calder, and his clothes had joined hers, she had forgotten that she wasn't a flesh-and-blood woman, but an immortal.

Calder arranged her in the center of his bed and then lay beside her, admiring her, caressing her, murmuring soft words that made her long to be joined to him.

She knew a moment of fear when Calder bent his head to her breast, but as he tongued her nipple and took it into his mouth to suckle, all her self-doubts were lost in a pleasure so fierce, so keen, that it was nearly painful.

For a long while Calder simply loved Maeve, introducing her to a new universe of sensation. Then, when she was clearly ready, indeed nearly delirious with the wanting of him, he parted her legs with a gentle motion of one hand and mounted her.

Again she was afraid and was certain she would die if she could not take this man inside her in the same way a mortal woman would do.

He touched an index finger to her full lips to quiet her and whispered, "Shhh. It's all right." Then, slowly, cautiously, Calder entered Maeve's body in a single, gliding stroke.

There was no problem in receiving him, only in restraining her passion, which escalated to a feverish pitch as he began to move upon her. She cried out and clutched at his shoulders with her hands, and then, fearing to cause him pain, spread her fingers over his back.

"Move with me, Maeve," Calder said in a tender rasp. "It will be even better for both of us if you do."

She was breathless, even though she had had no need of her lungs in more than two hundred years, and she felt certain that if she'd had an actual, living heart, it would have burst in her chest. Obediently, with all the trust she had to offer, she began to return his thrusts.

The ecstasy was intolerable, consuming, and she shouted with it, aware even in her fever that it was an animal sound, wild, untempered by any constraint of humanity, but she could not keep herself silent. The noises she made, the small groans and whimpers and pleas, as well as the lusty cries, were all part of what was happening, interwoven with the loving itself.

Nor was Calder silent, as he approached some soul-sundering completion of his own. He moaned Maeve's name and, just when her body and indeed her soul exploded in a burst of glorious, brutal

passion, he stiffened upon her and rasped some senseless plea to heaven.

Maeve continued to react helplessly beneath him for some time, her body seemingly independent of her mind, trembling and flexing in a downward spiral of pure joy. Even while this was happening, however, she watched Calder's face and feared that she'd killed him, for his eyes rolled back, and he was still and rigid as his warm seed emptied into her.

He finally collapsed beside Maeve, his head resting on her bosom, and she wept with relief because he was breathing, and she could feel his heartbeat through her own flesh.

She wound a finger in his soft, glossy hair as he slept. At last she understood why her brother had been willing to risk the very fires of hell to be with the woman he loved, to exchange his immortality for a short span of human years.

It wasn't just the physical joining—it was the vast universe of emotion that underlaid that need to be of one body, of one flesh, with the man she loved.

Dawn was beginning to light the sky when Maeve gently removed herself from beneath the weight of Calder's sprawling arms and legs and climbed out of bed. She dressed without waking him, knowing he would find the books and medicines she had brought for him, and bent over him to lay a kiss as soft as a fairy's whisper on his forehead.

Then, regretting the necessity of leaving as she had never regretted anything, Maeve took herself to her favorite lair, the one beneath the London house, and stretched out on the stone slab that awaited her there.

She had only moments to think, before the day-sleep of all blood-drinkers captured her and dragged her under, but it was long enough. She had done something irrevocable this night, something that might bring doom, but she had no remorse.

If she perished that very night and spent the rest of eternity among the damned, the glories Calder had fostered in her spirit, the joys he had taught her in his bed, would sustain her throughout.

Calder awakened slowly, groping toward the surface of consciousness, fairly drowning in the deep sense of well-being his lovemaking with Maeve had engendered in him. In the next instant he wondered if he'd imagined the entire encounter.

"You have a woman in here last night?" Prudence boomed, sending the door crashing inward with a motion of one large hip. She was carrying a breakfast tray, and her round face was full of wary disapproval. "I heard plenty of carryin' on, and me way down on the second floor, too. It's a wonder your daddy didn't march right in here with a horsewhip!"

Calder raised himself to a sitting position, the sheets covering him to the waist, and grinned groggily at the beloved housekeeper. "You've been in this house a lot of years, Pru," he teased. "You must know by now that my daddy is no moral giant himself. Any crusade he might mount on the side of virtue would probably collapse under the weight of its own hypocrisy."

Prudence set the tray down in Calder's lap with unnecessary force. "I don't see why you can't talk in plain and simple words like anybody else!" she fussed.

He chuckled as he lifted the silver lid of a serving plate and saw his favorite fried potatoes and onions

beneath it, along with several strips of bacon and some toasted bread. "And here I thought you were my greatest admirer."

The housekeeper stopped herself from smiling, but just barely. "Go on with you," she huffed, waving a scornful hand at Calder. She lingered a few moments, perhaps hoping he would say more about his night visitor, but, of course, he did not. At long last Prudence heaved a great and martyrly sigh and left the room.

Calder's banter with the housekeeper had been mostly superficial; inwardly he was reliving the events of the night, pondering them in his heart, wondering if he wasn't insane.

He might have believed that if Maeve's pendant didn't still rest against his bare chest.

Just as he was finishing his breakfast—for the first time in weeks he ate ravenously—Calder noticed a stack of books and other, less recognizable items in a nearby chair. Excitement possessed him—Maeve had remembered her promise to bring medical texts back from the latter part of the next century.

He nearly sent his tray flying in his eagerness to bound out of the bed and cross the room. Reaching the chair, he simply stood there, naked and transfixed by the books and by the strange medicines. They were pressed into tablets, these drugs, and packaged with stiff paper on one side and some hard, clear substance he didn't recognize on the other.

Calder felt wonder as he studied those strange packets and no small amount of frustration with his own lack of knowledge. In the end he was able to identify only one of the compounds—morphine, the painkiller that was in such tragically short supply on the warfront.

Reverently he picked up one of the books and opened it to the copyright page. The publisher was William B. Finley and Sons, and the publication date was 1993.

*1993.*

Even though he knew the volume was real—it had weight and substance in his hands—Calder was still shaken. It had been—*would be?*—printed one hundred and thirty years in the future. He dressed, never taking his eyes off the book for more than a few moments, and kept it open on the washstand while he shaved. Unable to restrain his curiosity and his desire to learn, Calder stopped now and then to read a sentence or two.

By the time he was through grooming himself, he'd cut his chin and right cheek with the razor, but he didn't care, for he was in a state of quiet ecstasy. Maeve had brought him not just one medical book, but several, along with some of the miraculous concoctions of twentieth-century chemists, and he was greedy for their wisdom.

Bending close to his mirror, Calder touched one of the spots where he'd nicked himself, then stared curiously at the bead of blood on his fingertip. As he did so, he thought of Maeve, and of her wonderful powers, and began to speculate...

## CHAPTER 7

Maeve ached to go to Calder, to warm herself by the gentle fire burning in his soul, but her practical

instincts warned her to be wary. It would be only too easy to bring him to the attention of other fiends—most notably, Lisette, though Maeve was by no means certain she could trust even Valerian.

Instead she fed in the seamiest part of London, near the docks, and tried to content herself with the fact that she and Calder were at least in the same century. Because she was building her strength and attempting to hone her skills, she took blood often. As always, Maeve was careful to prey only upon the deliberately evil, not on the merely misguided.

On her third night among seagoing rats, of both the two-legged and four-legged varieties, Maeve encountered another vampire—one she had only heard of before, but never actually met.

The female was from the fourteenth century, like Valerian, and that made her old. She was, despite her great age, as beautiful as an angel, with waist-length blond hair, enormous eyes the color of spring violets, and a sweet, heart-shaped mouth.

She took shape at the end of an alleyway as Maeve was leaving another victim to sleep off his blood loss, and she was a vision in a blue velvet gown trimmed in exquisite handmade lace.

"You are Maeve Tremayne," she said in a voice like the merest brush of fingers over the strings of a harp.

Maeve gave a cordial, if guarded, nod, for she recognized Dimity from Valerian's description, and she recalled that the beautiful vampire was rumored to consort with angels. In some quarters of the dark realm, this was considered mildly suspicious behavior; in others, it was outright treason.

"Dimity," she said by way of acknowledgment and greeting.

The other nightwalker tilted gracefully to one side, in order to peer around Maeve and have a look at the victim. "You chose well," Dimity said thoughtfully. "This one is so foul-natured that even the devil would not wish to keep him company."

Again Maeve nodded. She had, of course, assessed the man before feeding from the vein in his throat. "Do you have some business with me?"

Dimity smiled, clasped the rich velvet of her skirts in both hands, and executed a half-curtsy. "Yes, indeed, my queen," she said, and though she was plainly teasing, there was a note of awe in her voice as well.

"Save your curtsies," Maeve said, approaching Dimity. She was cautious and full of amazement, for the other vampire seemed to glow with some inner light, the way creatures of heaven did. It was possible that this ethereal beauty was not a blood-drinker at all, but an angel. "I am not yet queen. Perhaps I never will be."

Dimity's delicate mouth curved again, into another, softer smile. "Oh, but you will," she said with certainty. "And you are wrong in what you're thinking about me. I am a vampire like you." She stepped forward and linked her arm with Maeve's. "Come," she said, her expression serious now. "We must talk."

Dimity led Maeve along the street, into another alleyway, and far back into the complexity of that London slum. Finally they came to a pair of cellar doors, beneath a place that seemed to be a second-rate mortuary, and even though Maeve was used to death, she shuddered.



The other vampire's laugh chimed like music, and she raised the heavy wooden doors as most immortals would—by a trick of her mind.

Dimity started down the stone steps, glancing back at Maeve over one shoulder. "Does it trouble you to know the dead rest here?" she asked, indicating the mortuary with a slight motion of her glorious head. "Who would understand better than you, the queen of nightwalkers, that they are mere husks, incapable of harm?"

Maeve didn't speak, though she was well aware that that didn't matter. Dimity could discern at least the shadow of her thoughts, as Maeve could hers. Dimity wanted to tender a warning, and it didn't take a genius to guess what it was.

For Maeve's part, she was recalling her brother Aidan's account of his making as a vampire, in the eighteenth century, when he'd lain in such a place as that morgue, cold as a corpse and unable to move the tiniest muscle. Those who had attended him had believed him dead, and though he had struggled to convey the fact that he was, despite all outward indications, very much alive, they had prepared him for burial.

Maeve, being Aidan's twin, as close to him as his heartbeat and his breath, had felt the ordeal herself, even as it occurred, and even after all that time, she had not forgotten the inexplicable, smothering terror. When Aidan had given an account of the experience, some weeks later, she had relived it with him. For that reason Maeve longed to be far away from this disturbingly familiar place.

Dimity continued into the cellar and then into another chamber, below that, a place lighted by the glow of scores of candles and quite comfortably furnished. There was an elegant Roman couch, where Dimity undoubtedly slept during the day beyond the reach of the sunlight, along with several comfortable settees and velvet-upholstered chairs.

There was even a painting on the wall, and it brought a sad smile to Maeve's lips, for it was a portrait of two elegant vampires, waltzing together. She knew without looking at the signature that this was Aidan's work, done many decades ago, when he was struggling to come to terms with what he was.

"Did you know my brother?" Maeve asked, her voice unusually thick.

"Only by reputation," Dimity answered, taking a seat in one of the beautifully upholstered chairs, kicking off her delicate velvet slippers and wriggling her toes. "He became a legend, understandably, when he traded vampirism for mortality." She winced prettily at the thought. "Can you imagine it?"

"No," Maeve admitted readily. The image of Calder nearly came to her mind, but she managed to keep it hidden. Or so she hoped. "But the life of a blood-drinker was torment to Aidan. He'd reached the point where he was ready to perish—even to risk the Judgment—rather than go on as he was."

"And he loved a mortal woman."

Again Maeve struggled to suppress thoughts of Calder, but this time she wasn't quite so certain of her success. "Yes," she said, staring at the portrait.

"And now you love a mortal man," Dimity pressed.

Maeve turned her back on the painting with rather a lot of difficulty, since it represented a connection



with her lost brother, however indirect.

Dimity laughed and raised a finger to stop Maeve from speaking. "Do not worry," she said. "Your human lover is safe from me. Like you, I feed only upon the lowest of the low. Child molesters are my particular favorite, though I enjoy the sort of ham-fisted, drunken louts who like to beat their wives as well."

Only moderately reassured—for vampires were not, as a rule, creatures of their word—Maeve took a seat on a settee. "You are very good at veiling your thoughts," she said, "but I have discerned that you want to warn me about something. Please, tell me, although I believe I know."

Dimity arched one pale gold eyebrow. "*You are* powerful," she said. "I am an old vampire, and shielding my mind is one of my most distinctive skills."

Maeve leaned forward slightly. "Please."

Dimity folded her hands gracefully in her lap, and the candlelight flickered and danced in her fair hair. "I am acquainted with certain angels," she said after a few moments of deliberate silence. "They tell me that war is imminent—vampires will be purged from the earth, along with warlocks and werewolves—all immortals, in fact, except for those who belong in the ranks of Nemesis's army."

Maeve was not surprised, but she felt a tremor of terror all the same. "Because of Lisette?" she asked, although she knew the answer.

Dimity nodded.

Maeve thought frantically of Calder in this century and Aidan in the next. Even she, with all her gifts and powers, could not be in two places at once and protect both of them at the same time. "Where will this war be fought?" she asked.

"In all times and dimensions," Dimity replied. "Although every effort will be made to preserve mortals—as you know, the angels bear them unceasing affection—many will be wounded or killed in the fray."

Rising from the settee, Maeve went back to the painting, touched it gently with the palm of her right hand, and spoke very quietly. "Can it be stopped?"

"Yes," Dimity said doubtfully, and that single word flooded Maeve with relief. "But only if Lisette is destroyed within a fortnight. At the end of that time Nemesis will be given free rein."

Maeve turned to face Dimity again. Before, the threat of war had been only rumor, but now she had to accept it as fact. She knew with all the certainty of her being that Dimity was telling the terrible, unvarnished truth.

"How do you know these things?" Maeve did not wait for a reply. "Is it true what they say—that you keep company with angels?"

Dimity smiled, unruffled. "The answer to the second question is also the answer to the first—I do have a special friend from that quarter. His name is Gideon, and he is indeed an angel. He told me."

Maeve had been shaken by Dimity's earlier warning, but she was also curious. "How can such a thing happen? I have always been told that angels are the most fearsome of all our enemies."

The golden-haired vampire raised one shoulder in a shrug. "Nothing is absolute," she said. "Gideon, like many angels, despises the vile creatures you and I feed upon, especially since the women and children who suffer are so often their particular charges. Angels, however, are not free to wreak vengeance, no matter how justified it may be—as you have seen, even Nemesis, the greatest of all warriors, must have the sanction of the highest realms before he can make war."

"That is probably as it should be," Maeve observed quietly. "If it were not so, you and I and a great many other beings would have been destroyed long ago."

Dimity's expression was one of mild agreement. "Perhaps."

A thought struck Maeve. "Would they take our side against Nemesis, these sympathetic angels?"

"Never," Dimity answered with gentle certainty. "They are loyal to heaven, first and always. When the line is drawn, they will stand with the uncounted legions who are their brothers and sisters."

Maeve might have sighed then, had she been human. "They couldn't save us anyway," she said.

Dimity shook her head. "No, it is true, they could not. Even if each of Nemesis's warriors stood touching another angel on all sides, over the face of the whole earth and upon the surfaces of all the seas, there would not be room for even a fraction of their true number."

The image practically overwhelmed Maeve, and the most dreadful thing was that she knew she hadn't even begun to picture the full size of the opposing army. If such a conflict came about, Calder and Aidan would both be wiped out in their separate centuries, and if that happened, even Maeve herself would yearn for death.

No, more than death. Oblivion.

"I have to stop her," she whispered, thinking aloud, feeling the truth of the situation for the first time. It was like some acid, eating away the marrow of her bones, working its way slowly, relentlessly, toward her soul. "I cannot allow this to happen."

Dimity's hand came to rest on Maeve's shoulder; until then, she had not been aware that the other vampire had risen and crossed the candlelit chamber to stand beside her.

Maeve raised her gaze to the shadowy ceiling. "Perhaps they are to be envied after all," she said in a hoarse whisper.

Again Dimity lifted an eyebrow. "And perhaps not. Remember, we don't know what actually becomes of them, after they shed those weak and pitiful bodies of theirs."

Standing, gathering her strength and her resolve for all that faced her, Maeve allowed a touch of sarcasm to creep into her voice. "Couldn't your friend Gideon enlighten you about that?"

Dimity was unruffled. "He knows the truth, of course, but to speak of it is forbidden—especially to us."

Maeve started toward the door, which was a high archway of stone. One would never have guessed, from the ringing silence of that place, that busy, raucous London lay above it. "Thank you for the warning," she said, pausing at the bottom step to look back. "I trust I will see you again?"

"I am your servant," Dimity said with another nod and a twinkle in her purple eyes. Then she sat down, calmly took an embroidery basket from a table next to her chair, and brought out her stitchery.

For a long moment Maeve hesitated. Then, knowing she had no choice, she turned and climbed the stairs, toward the ugliness and the glory, the love and the treachery, that awaited her.

She half expected Valerian to be there, on the surface, pacing impatiently, but there was no sign of him. Both disappointed and relieved, she stood in the passing crush of sailors and prostitutes, missionaries and thieves, staring up at the starry heavens and wondering why this terrifying, impossible task had fallen to her.

Maeve awakened with sudden violence, like a submerged buoy rushing to the surface, at sunset of the following day. She was filled with the sense of being watched, and looked wildly about for Valerian or Tobias, but she was alone in the chamber beneath her London house.

Her second thought was of Calder and all the horrors he would see and suffer if angels actually made war on vampires and other creatures. She had to protect him; she would not be able to think clearly, to track and destroy Lisette, if Calder wasn't at least reasonably safe.

She went upstairs, by normal means, drawing no more attention from her nineteenth-century servants than she ever had. Just then, a little sympathetic notice would have been welcome, and Maeve found herself missing Mrs. Fullywub, her housekeeper in the nineteen-nineties, who hadn't been born yet. Mrs. F. knew when and how to fuss over her mistress.

After grooming herself and donning a simple gown of royal-blue sateen, Maeve immediately took herself across the ocean to Pennsylvania.

She materialized just inside the great double doorway of the Holbrook mansion's main parlor and immediately regretted her impulsive entrance. Calder was there, standing next to the fire and brooding, but so was another man, thinner and shorter than Calder, perhaps a decade older. This second person was looking right at Maeve when she took shape, and his glass fell to the floor with a clink, spreading whiskey over the Persian rug.

The dropping of the glass made Calder turn, and when he looked at Maeve, the light in his eyes stopped all other thoughts. He came toward her, took her hands in his, and bent to kiss her gently on one cheek.

"My darling," was all he said, but those two words might have been an epic love poem, given the effect they had on Maeve.

"Who the devil are you?" the other man demanded, breaking the spell and causing Calder and Maeve to draw apart slightly. "And where did you come from?"

"Maeve," Calder said, his voice weighted with quiet irony, "may I introduce my half brother, William."

She smiled at William, even though he was bad-tempered and petulant, and gently closed down a major part of his brain. He sagged to the floor in a faint, and Calder, ever the doctor, was about to stoop to the other man's aid when Maeve stopped him.

"Your brother is neither ill nor injured," she said. "He will be all right in a few minutes, though he'll never have more than the foggiest memory of meeting me."

"He's *myhalf* brother," Calder stressed, smiling.

"William is a mean-spirited little jellyfish, quite deserving of whatever ill fate might befall him, but tonight I actually pity him. He has met you, only to forget the experience in the next instant. How sad that is."

Maeve remembered the reason for her mission, and the smile faded from her lips. "You must come with me, Calder—now, without asking questions."

She had not expected him to balk—Maeve was used to getting her own way—but Calder did resist, however gently. "I can't leave my patients," he said. "Or, for that matter, the experiments I've been performing in the laboratory at Union Hospital."

Maeve was exasperated. "I have no time to explain this to you now," she said imperiously. "After I have fed—"

"I'm not going anywhere," Calder interrupted stubbornly. He looked puzzled as well as recalcitrant. "What is this all about, Maeve? You've never behaved this way before."

She might have left him there, to face his fate, except that she loved him too much. While Nemesis could not attack for nearly two weeks, the warlocks were under no such compunction, and neither was Lisette, who might think it a great joke to make Calder into one of her witless monsters. It was absolutely vital that he be hidden away somewhere, at least until she'd had a chance to decide on a precise course of action.

Being in no mood to argue, Maeve laid a hand to Calder's forehead and caught his strong, solid frame in her arms when he sagged against her, temporarily unconscious. She saw William Holbrook raise himself from the floor and gape in horrified amazement as both she and Calder vanished into thin air, but she didn't worry, knowing he would forget.

Within moments, of course, the two of them were in Maeve's London house. It was still the nineteenth century, for mortals had yet to develop the faculties for traveling between time periods, and Calder had not yet regained his wits.

She laid him on the bed in her suite, smoothed his hair, and felt a mixture of sympathy and amusement as she imagined his reactions when he realized he was in England and not Pennsylvania. Unfortunately she needed to feed, and that meant there was no time to wait for him to come around and try to cushion the shock a little.

Maeve bent, kissed Calder's forehead, and disappeared from the room as quickly as she had arrived there moments before.

Soon she was on the waterfront, stalking the night's prey. She fed once, twice, a third time, feeling her powers grow with each infusion of fresh, vital blood. All the while, she waited for Lisette and wondered where Valerian was.

Several nights had passed since she had seen him and, under normal circumstances, Maeve would not only have been unconcerned by this, but relieved in the bargain. Valerian was a hopeless hedonist, totally devoted to his own pleasures and interests. Therefore it was not unusual for *years* to pass between their encounters, not to mention a few scant turns of the moon, while he indulged one or more of his complicated fantasies in some far-off and very exotic place.

This was different, however, for Valerian was well aware of the danger and urgency of the situation—indeed, he had been the one to bring it to Maeve's notice—so it seemed unlikely that he would have gone off on one of his tangents...

Maeve slipped into an alleyway, closed her eyes, and concentrated on Valerian. Within a moment an image formed in her mind: She saw the other vampire in the depths of some sort of pit.

The image came clearer as she focused her thoughts... the pit was an abandoned coal mine, somewhere in Wales. Slowly the story unfolded in her mind.

Three nights past, Valerian had been set upon by warlocks, outnumbered by the sneaking blackguards. They'd beaten him, torn his flesh with their talons and their teeth, and carelessly cast him aside, to be consumed by the next day's sunlight. Somehow, the legendary vampire had dragged himself to that forgotten mine, and found sanctuary in the cool darkness.

Heartsore, Maeve went to Valerian immediately, in that rat-infested hole in the stony, unforgiving Welsh ground, and gathered him up into her arms. He felt as light as a child, and she did not know, or care, whether that was because of his weakness or her increased strength.

Holding him, in quite the same way she had held Calder earlier, Maeve took her mentor to London, and the chamber beneath her house. There, she laid him on the stone slab where she so often slept, then took a blade from the pocket of her skirt and drew it across her wrist.

When the blood flowed, she held her flesh to Valerian's mouth, and slowly, tentatively, he took sustenance from her.

"What in the name of God—?"

Maeve started at the sound of that voice, for she had not sensed anyone's approach, and she was genuinely shocked when she looked up from Valerian's prone form and saw Calder standing only a few feet away. He was holding a lamp high over his head, and his face was white with horror.

"Calder," she said, stricken. But she did not take her wrist from Valerian's lips.

"What devilment is this?" Calder demanded. "First you bring me to this place against my will, and now I find you—I find you—" He stepped closer, his physician's curiosity beginning to take precedence over his shock. "What in *hell* are you doing?"

"This is my friend, Valerian," Maeve said evenly. "He is a vampire, like me, and as you can see, he has been sorely wounded. Blood is the only thing that will restore him, though I think it may already be too late."

Calder set the lamp down on a ledge nearby and took Valerian's right wrist into his hand, searching for a pulse. Of course, he didn't find one. He raised questioning eyes to Maeve's face. "What happened to him?"

"He was attacked by warlocks," Maeve answered, almost defiantly, because she knew only too well how outrageous the story would sound to a mortal. She sensed that Valerian had taken all the blood he could assimilate in his weakened condition, and she withdrew her hand and turned it palm up so that Calder could see it clearly in the light of the lamp.

He watched, obviously stunned, as the wound in Maeve's wrist closed before his eyes, leaving only a trace of a scar. That, too, would disappear with the passing of another sunset.

She waited while Calder absorbed the things he had just seen, and tried to deal with them in his mortal, if formidable, mind. No doubt the events of this night had been too much for him to take in.

When he met Maeve's eyes, however, she took heart, for the pallor had left his face, and he was breathing at a normal rate instead of in fast, shallow gasps.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" he asked.

Even though Calder was visibly calmer, Maeve was still taken aback by his question. In his place most mortals—even the bravest—would have been thinking mostly of escape, of their own survival. "Valerian is not human," she said after a long pause. "He is a vampire. We are different anatomically from you."

Calder's gaze touched her, gently and with remembrance. "Not so different," he said softly.

Even in that dark place, with tragedy present, Maeve felt a tender stirring inside. Calder had done more than make love to her a few nights before—he had changed the shape and substance of her soul.

It was Calder who was the first to speak again. "Let's have a look," he said, stepping closer to the slab where Valerian lay and handing the lamp to Maeve. "Hold this for me, please. Although I suspect *you* can see in the dark, I can't."

Maeve accepted the lantern and did as Calder had asked.

Without taking his gaze from the unconscious Valerian, Calder pulled off his rumpled suit coat and tossed it aside. "The next time you kidnap me, madam," he said to Maeve, still not looking at her, "I hope you will do me the favor of letting me fetch my medical bag first."

"Instruments will do no good," Maeve said, feeling an overwhelming sadness as she looked down at Valerian. Although he often annoyed and even enraged her, she bore certain tender sentiments toward him, and it did her injury that he had been the first real casualty of the coming war. "I told you before. Vampires don't have what you doctors call vital signs—we have hearts that do not beat and lungs that do not breathe .

"Hmmm," said Calder, obviously not listening. He had opened Valerian's shirt and was examining the wounds thereupon. "Remarkable," he reflected, excitement rising in his voice. "He's healing so rapidly that I can see it happening—just as you did."

Maeve closed her eyes for a moment as relief rushed through her. So they hadn't killed Valerian after all, those rampaging warlocks. He was coming back, getting stronger—his healing faculties were indeed remarkable, as Calder had termed them. Even for a vampire.

"You really thought he was going to die?" Calder asked, lifting one of Valerian's eyelids with a practiced thumb and peering into the glassy depths. "I thought members of your—species were immortal."

Valerian stirred slightly and made a muttering sound.

The word "species" had roused Maeve's temper just a little, but she stopped herself from indulging it.

After all, it was true that vampires and mortals were not of the same genus. "Vampires can be destroyed," she said quietly, laying a hand on Valerian's forehead to soothe him as he struggled to regain consciousness. "Some of the lore is true, you see. A stake through the heart will finish us, and so will fire and the light of the sun." Her voice caught. "The blood of a warlock is a lethal poison, often fatal for us, and Valerian's wounds tell me he was infused with the stuff."

Calder shuddered. "What else?"

Maeve shrugged, but she felt despondent. Now he would begin to feel repulsed by her, and by the world she lived in Calder had seen too many of the realities of life as a vampire. "There is nothing else, as far as I know."

Valerian had at last gained the surface of awareness, and with a shake of his head, he raised himself onto his elbows and narrowed his eyes at Calder.

Calder stared back at him, with interest but not fear.

"Who the deuce is this?" Valerian demanded, in the booming and imperious voice of old. His gaze shifted, flashing with accusation and ill temper, to Maeve. "Are you mad, bringing a mortal here?"

"Incredible," Calder muttered, surely seeing, as Maeve did, that the last of Valerian's wounds had knit themselves together.

"Explain!" Valerian thundered, turning to Maeve again.

Maeve would not be intimidated—especially by Valerian. "Your manners are insufferable," she said, and although her tone was lower than Valerian's had been and much more moderate, it carried an unmistakable warning. "Kindly remember that I am not required to explain anything to you."

Valerian subsided a little, but he still looked petulant. "This is the mortal lover," he said with a theatrical sigh of realization. "I should have known from the first."

Calder watched Valerian with amazed fascination and said nothing.

Maeve had long since set the lantern aside, but now she grasped its curved handle and handed it to Calder. More misgivings stirred in her as she considered the possible meanings for the doctor's fascination—the most alarming of which was that Calder might see her, and Valerian, as specimens to be studied. "We have things to do," she said to Valerian. "Are you well enough to wage war?"

## CHAPTER 8

Calder followed Maeve and her strange friend slowly up the winding stone staircase that led to the main part of the house. The place was as dark as a deep well, and if not for the flimsy light of the lantern he carried, he would have been completely blind.

Maeve and the other vampire were silent, and yet Calder knew they were communicating; he could feel their unspoken words flowing like a river, just beyond the edge of his understanding, rapid and urgent and angry.



He supposed at least some of the discussion concerned him, but at that point Calder didn't care. He was still struggling to come to terms with what had happened to him during the course of that evening.

He'd been standing in his father's parlor, he clearly remembered that, thinking about the war that was tearing his country apart, and William had been there, too, hectoring him about something. Then Maeve had appeared, in that dramatic way of hers, and Calder had been so glad to see her that he hadn't really thought beyond his joy.

After that she had transported him here, to this vast, elegant and vaguely spooky house, where he suspected she meant to hold him prisoner.

Calder objected to that on principle, even though he was sure she believed she was protecting him from some mysterious peril. He wasn't an inanimate object, and he wouldn't be swept up and whisked off to faraway places on Maeve's whim.

Yes, he decided, as they gained the main floor of the dark, empty house, Maeve would have to take him back to his real life straightaway. He had patients to look after, wards full of them, thanks to the war, and then there were the medical books she'd brought him from the twentieth century. Practically every spare moment had been spent poring over those volumes, though free time was rare in his life, and on some level of his being he'd been sorting and assimilating the knowledge the whole time, waking and sleeping.

Maeve's friend turned his leonine head to glare at Calder in brazen assessment. For the first time since the three of them had left the cellar, the vampire spoke in audible language. "I say he'll be nothing but trouble," he told Maeve. "Furthermore, as you might expect, I'm long overdue for a feeding."

Maeve glided between them, and Calder's feelings about that were immediate and mixed. On the one hand, he was insulted that any female should think he needed physical protection, and conversely, he was relieved because he knew Valerian would probably have devoured him had Maeve not been there to intervene.

"Lay a hand on him," she said evenly, her backbone rigid, "and I will kill you for it, Valerian. I swear that by the heart that beats in my brother's breast."

There was a short, thunderous silence, during which the two vampires glared at each other in unspoken challenge.

Then, with a contemptuous sweep of his eyes and a dismissive and patently arrogant gesture of one hand, Valerian subsided. "He's probably anemic anyway," he said. An instant later he simply vanished, leaving not so much as a wisp of vapor in his wake.

Calder immediately turned Maeve to face him. "Time for some explanations, my love," he said, his hands still resting on her shoulders. "First of all, why did you bring me here?"

The expression in her eyes, which were alight with fierce pride, implored him to understand, to trust. "You are in the gravest of danger—we all are. I must keep you safe, within these walls, until it is past. For the time being, I can say no more than that."

Calder drew in a great breath, thrust it out again in a raspy, exasperated sigh. "You didn't seem to think I was particularly safe a moment ago, when you stepped between me and your friend."

"You weren't," she conceded. "You needn't worry, however—Valerian won't do you any harm now. He

knows I meant what I said about killing him."

Calder shook his head, and a grim chuckle escaped him. "I've never been defended by a woman before—at least, not in that way. It's going to take some getting used to."

Maeve straightened her shoulders and raised her chin a degree. "I am not a woman," she reminded him. "I am a vampire, and whether you like it or not, I am far stronger than you."

In truth, Calder didn't know whether he "liked it or not"—he was attempting to digest an already complicated reality. "I want to go back to my own life, Maeve. The change was too abrupt, and there are things there that need doing."

She shook her head, and an infinite sorrow showed in her wide eyes. "I can't oblige, my darling," she said. She raised one cool, graceful hand and laid it against his cheek. "I love you so that it grieves me to refuse you anything, but I cannot do what you ask. You will simply have to occupy yourself here and trust me until I can take the time to explain fully."

They were in the kitchen, and, despite the strangeness of the situation, Calder was suddenly hungry. He went to a wooden icebox, worked the brass latch, and opened the door. There was a platter of cold chicken inside.

He was devouring his second piece when he spoke again. "All right," he said, amused at himself because he sounded as though he thought he had a choice in the matter, which he plainly did not. "I do indeed love you, Maeve Tremayne, and I will trust you. All the same, I am a man, with a life and responsibilities, and you cannot simply pick me up and haul me from continent to continent the way a child drags a rag doll from one room to another. You have twenty-four hours to convince me that I belong here, and at the end of that time I want to go back. I will book passage on a ship if you refuse to take me there by means of your hocus-pocus. Agreed?"

She regarded him with those sorrowful eyes, taking a long time before she replied. "I can promise you nothing, Calder, except that I will perish myself before I will see harm come to you." She came a step nearer, and this time it was she who laid her hands on his shoulders. "I must go. Amuse yourself as best you can—there will be plenty of food because the servants are all human—but please don't venture outside this house, no matter what the temptation."

Calder lifted a drumstick and started to wave it in protest, but in the space of an instant Maeve was gone, and he was alone in that enormous, echoing kitchen. Even with the gaslights burning, the place seemed bleak and dark without her.

He sat down at a long trestle table, where there were benches instead of chairs, and tried to steady himself, to catch up with reality. Calder might have thought he was hallucinating, but the experience was undeniably solid, and the proof of that was all around him.

After an interval of gathering his strength, as well as yearning for a double shot of brandy, he raised himself to his feet. If he couldn't get an explanation from Maeve, then perhaps he could find one by exploring.

Calder found the brandy he wanted in a cabinet in the main parlor and poured a generous portion into a cut-glass snifter. Then, carrying the drink in one hand and a small kerosene lamp in the other, he set out on his private expedition.

The first floor alone was vast. There was a ballroom with floors of gray marble, three massive chandeliers, and mirrors for walls, as well as a formidable library, a gallery, two parlors, servants' quarters, and various nooks and crannies where perfectly ordinary things were stored. On the second level of the house was Maeve's bedchamber, where Calder had awakened earlier in the evening, completely bewildered and suffering from the headache of a lifetime. He'd wondered wildly where he was and how he'd come to be there, connected it all to Maeve, and then gone in search of her.

That was when he'd found her in the cellar, with one seemingly fragile wrist pressed to Valerian's lips.

Calder decided to think about that later, and continued his tour of the house.

It was on the third floor, in a huge chamber with high slanted ceilings and towering mullioned windows, that Calder found what he believed to be the heart of Maeve's home. There, in that solitary place, stood an ancient weaver's loom, with a half-finished tapestry spilling from one end.

The light of the moon flowed unobstructed through the great arched windows, and Calder set aside the lamp, having no need of it. He examined the loom first, and then the weaving itself.

It showed a woman's delicate slippered feet, the skirts of her gauzy dress, a scattering of pale rose petals and autumn leaves on the ground. Behind the figure of the woman was a low stone wall, but Calder could make out nothing more because the rest of the image had not yet been woven.

He stood for a long time, looking at the partial scene, feeling a strange urgency to understand. He knew the work was Maeve's and that it was important to her, but the meaning of the thing, like so much of her life, was a mystery.

Calder finally turned away from the tapestry and crossed the bare wooden floor to the windows. Beyond them lay London, a scattered tangle of light and darkness, good and evil, joy and sorrow.

London.

He took out the watch his mother had given him, one long-ago Christmas, flipped open the case, and narrowed his eyes to read the numerals. The watch had stopped, and he was too distracted and too tired to work out the difference between American time and British; it was enough just to comprehend that he'd been taken from that place to this one in minutes or even moments.

It was incredible.

Terrifying.

*Fabulous.*

Calder finished the brandy and turned the snifter thoughtfully in one hand. What would it be like to possess such powers? To travel through time and space so easily as ordinary mortals moved from their front parlors to the post office or the grocer's?

Was it possible to go backward in time, as well as forward? To the terrible period preceding his daughter Amalie's death, for instance? Could that tragedy be undone somehow, or even prevented?

Uncomfortable with the turn his thoughts had taken, Calder reined in his imagination, picked up the lamp he had set down just inside the door of Maeve's private refuge, and left the room.

The brandy was taking effect, and he was weary. He returned to the second floor, entered one of the guest suites, and collapsed, fully clothed, on the bed.

Calder immediately tumbled headlong into a fathomless sleep, but after a little while he began to dream of Amalie. He saw the five-year-old chasing butterflies in a sun-spangled meadow, her laughter riding softly on the breeze.

He called to his child, shouted her name over and over again, but she couldn't hear him. It was as though an invisible wall stood between them, transparent, eternal and utterly insurmountable.

Calder sat bolt upright, prodded awake by a stabbing sense of grief, and felt the wetness of tears on his face. "Amalie," he whispered hoarsely.

"Your child?" Maeve's soft voice did not startle him, even though he hadn't known she was there. She stepped out of the shadows to lay a cool hand on his forehead.

Calder nodded, full of a misery that was at once ancient and brand-new, and even though he suspected that Maeve knew all about Amalie, despite her question, he answered readily. "She was five."

Maeve sat down on the bed beside him and gathered him close in her arms. He realized in that moment of bittersweet tenderness that she was everything to him—goddess and lover and comforter—and the weight of the love he bore her was terrifying.

"What happened?" she asked, although she knew all the secrets of his heart, and although dawn, her most vicious enemy, was already tingeing the darkness with the first faint strains of apricot and crimson. Calder was well aware that Maeve had tendered the question only because she knew he needed to answer it, and he loved her all the more for her charity of spirit.

"My wife, Theresa, fell in love with an old friend of mine and left Amalie and me behind. Secretly I blessed the bastard for stealing the woman before she drove me mad with her sniveling and her petty concerns, but Amalie was a child, hardly more than a baby, and she missed her mother." A memory came back to haunt Calder then; he saw Amalie standing at one of the windows on either side of the door of the town house they'd rented in Philadelphia, her face pressed to the glass, waiting for Theresa to come back. "She was listless, Amalie was, as though her spirit was dying. She fell sick about the time of the first snow, and by Christmas she was consumed by fever. She developed spinal meningitis, and when the new year came, she was gone."

Maeve pressed her dry cheek against his damp, beard-roughened one. She didn't speak—indeed, there was no need for that, for Calder knew her feelings as though they were his own.

He put his hands on either side of her smooth and unbearably beautiful face. "Go now," he said. "The sun will be up soon."

She turned her head slightly, kissed the palm of his right hand, and nodded. Then, without another word, she rose and left the room, her movements graceful and unhurried, and when she was gone, Calder believed for a few moments that she wasn't real at all, that he had only dreamed her.

Valerian lay in bed beside Isabella, a saucy mortal who was one of his favorite companions, and marveled.

*It was morning.* All his instincts told him this was so, even though the light could not reach into that hidden place, tucked away beneath the oldest part of Madrid.

He waited for the trancelike sleep to suck him under, just as it had at dawn every morning for nearly six hundred years, but nothing happened. He was wide awake, full of energy and ideas and questions.

Could he stand daylight, for instance? He considered testing the theory, then decided not to push his luck. This was no time for impulsive moves.

Wait until Maeve heard about this, he thought, settling back against the pillows with a self-satisfied smile. Even she, with all her power, had never managed such a feat.

Isabella stirred, rustling the sheets, and opened one of her lovely dark eyes to peer up at him. She knew Valerian was not made of flesh and blood as she was, though he had never, in the course of their long association, explained the exact specifics. They had met often, always at night and always in places where the rays of the sun could not reach. In the past, however, Valerian had invariably awakened her well before dawn and escorted her back to the world she knew.

She reached out and made a twirling motion on his belly with the tip of one index finger. "It is morning," she observed in soft Spanish. "And you have not sent me away."

Valerian wanted to shout with joy, but at the same time he was frustrated because he couldn't tell another vampire about the miracle. Not until nightfall, at least, for all but a select few were asleep in their lairs.

"*Si*," Valerian responded with a smug smile. "It is morning, and you are still here." When night came, he would stand with Maeve against the warlocks and the unpredictable Lisette, but for now he would remain where he was—safe in the bowels of the great Spanish city, under layers of brick cobblestones, dirt, and rocks.

She smiled mischievously. "You do not wish me to hurry away?"

"No," he said, turning onto his side to look deeply into her eyes. He could almost hear her warm, rich, vital blood coursing beneath the flawless surface of her flesh, and he felt a wounding thirst. He bent his head, kissing her throat, and she gave a crooning whimper, never guessing how she tempted him. Her pulse throbbed beneath his lips, a sweet torment, and Valerian relished it, as he always relished the forbidden.

Perhaps just a taste...

"Valerian." The feminine voice jolted him; he whirled to see Lisette standing at the foot of the ruffled bed. She looked like a beautiful witch, fresh from the pages of a storybook, in her high-necked satin gown, with her rich auburn hair tumbling almost to her waist. "Did you think you were the only vampire who could be abroad while the sun was up?"

"Go," Valerian whispered to Isabella in a hoarse voice, all but shoving her from the bed.

Lisette watched with amusement as the naked woman scrambled for her clothes, trembling and casting quick, frightened glances in Valerian's direction.

Miraculously Lisette allowed Isabella to escape, but when she turned her attention on Valerian again, he

saw the hatred in her eyes and remembered the last time he'd seen the other vampire.

They had stood face to face on either side of Aidan Tremayne's bed, while he slept, unknowing and vulnerable, between them. At that time Aidan had been newly human—he had risked everything, even his immortal soul, to be changed back into a man—and Lisette had meant to transform him again, to rob Aidan of his hard-won humanity. The idea had been all the more ironic for the fact that she had been the one to condemn Aidan to a life he hated in the first place.

Valerian had moved to defend Aidan, one of only two mortals he had ever loved with honor and purity of heart, but Lisette had been much stronger and rendered him virtually powerless. Had it not been for the intercession of another, she would have succeeded in making Aidan into a vampire again.

It was the ease with which she'd overcome him that Valerian recalled most vividly at that moment. He was indeed afraid, but he wasn't foolish enough to show that. He would deal with Lisette in the same way an old snake charmer in India had taught his students to deal with cobras—by keeping calm and making no sudden moves.

"We meet again," he said, rising slowly from the bed, making no effort to hide his nakedness. He reached for his clothes—doeskin breeches and a loose silk shirt with no buttons—and donned the trousers unhurriedly.

Lisette was watching him with a troubled, curious expression. "I will not destroy you immediately," she mused aloud. "I have uses for you, as it happens."

"I'm delighted to hear it," Valerian responded in the most cordial of tones, pulling the shirt on over his head. "Did you know there may be a war because of you and those damned brainless creatures you've been making?"

"War? With whom?"

Valerian pretended to sigh. "None other than Nemesis himself, I'm afraid. Then there are the warlocks—"

"I don't care about angels or warlocks!" Lisette interrupted, spitting like a cat.

"That's because you're quite mad," Valerian answered as pleasantly as if he'd been chatting with a pretty prospect in some elegant vampire's drawing room. He ran the fingers of both hands through his love-mussed hair and smiled indulgently. "You really ought to put yourself out of all this misery, poor darling. I'd be happy to oblige by driving a stake through your shriveled little heart."

Lisette glowered at him for a long, tense moment, then erupted in a burst of musical laughter. It was not a melodious sound, of course, but something better equated with a funeral dirge. "Great Zeus," she said. "You've never lacked for balls, Valerian, I'll say that for you, even if you *are* the most self-indulgent, arrogant, and impulsive vampire on the face of the earth."

He executed a mocking half-bow. "At your service," he said. Then, in the desperate hope that his other powers had gotten stronger when the mysterious change had occurred that made him able to function during the daylight hours, he fixed his thoughts and energies on a place far away.

It was rather like flinging himself at a rock, wall with all his strength, he discovered in the next instant, when the impact of Lisette's opposing wishes slammed into him from every direction.



Valerian slipped to one knee, dazed by the intangible blow she'd struck, but soon raised himself back to his feet.

"No more of your foolish tricks," Lisette scolded coyly, almost crooning the words. She came to stand before Valerian and wound a lock of his hair around one index finger. "You are a splendid creature. How sad I will be to destroy you." Her whole countenance darkened as her mood and expression changed. "Make no mistake, Valerian. This time no one will save your miserable hide. This time you will perish, as you should have months ago, when I bound you to the earth in that old cemetery behind that beloved abbey of yours to await the sunrise."

Valerian did not allow himself the shudder that threatened as he entertained *that* memory. Lisette had caught him in a state of great weakness, and staked him out in a neglected graveyard. Aidan, still a vampire then, had been her real prey; Valerian had been little more than bait. Had it not been for Maeve's timely arrival, and that of Tobias, both he and Aidan would have been roasted like pigs at Easter.

"If you think you can draw Maeve into a trap by holding me prisoner," he said in tones of contemptuous reason, "you are misguided as well as mad. She has no great love for me, and even if she bore me the utmost tenderness, she is entirely too cunning to fall for such a silly trick."

Lisette looked and sounded disturbingly sane, which was, no doubt, only another indication that her mind was as diseased as her spirit. "You are right—Maeve Tremayne loves another, a mortal, and most devotedly, too. She came to help you after your little episode with the warlocks, however, and she will appear again."

For once Valerian was not thinking of his own difficult position, but of the singular vulnerability of Maeve's cherished mortal. He still didn't really care what happened to Dr. Calder Holbrook, late of Philadelphia and Gettysburg, but Maeve's happiness mattered to him. In fact, it mattered far more than he would ever have guessed.

"Tread carefully, Lisette," he warned in his soft, smooth snake-charmer's voice. "Maeve is no ordinary vampire." He smiled in his most irritating fashion. "Don't say I didn't warn you, darling. Your day is over. You're out of your league with her."

"Enough," Lisette snarled, raising her arms from her sides. In the next instant Valerian lost all conscious awareness.

"Damn that vampire," Maeve murmured, tapping one foot. "Where is he?" She'd tried focusing her mind on Valerian, a technique that had always worked before, but this time no image came into her head, no whispered warning or cry for help.

"Aren't all vampires damned?" Calder asked dryly. They were in Maeve's front parlor, where gaslights flickered and popped, and night was thick at the windows.

"That isn't funny," Maeve snapped, pacing now.

Calder leaned against the huge mahogany desk that served Maeve in that century and the succeeding one as well, his arms folded across his chest. He needed a shave, and his dark hair was ruffled from repeated combings with his fingers.



"Twenty-four hours have passed, my love," he said with gentle solemnity. "As delightful as I find your company—and rare though it is—I still want to go home."

Maeve looked at him and ached. "I'm sorry, that's impossible."

What he said next rocked her to the center of her being. "Then make me a vampire, Maeve," he suggested quietly. "Give me the powers you enjoy, and the immortality."

She stood still, staring at him, stunned and brimming with conflicting emotions. On the one hand, she wanted to make Calder a blood-drinker, like herself, and keep him at her side forever. On the other, she recollected only too well how Aidan had hated Lisette for changing him. In Calder's case, after all, the alteration would be irrevocable.

"I couldn't bear it if you despised me," she whispered.

Calder approached her, looking honestly puzzled, and laid his hands lightly on her shoulders. "I could never do that," he said. He sounded sincere, but he didn't really understand what he was facing.

"Before, when you said all vampires were damned," she began miserably, "you were very close to the truth. Becoming an immortal means wagering your soul against an eternity in a fiery hell, Calder. It means that you can never walk in the sunlight again, and that many years would pass before you could get through even a single night without taking blood." In fact, my darling, being a vampire means living forever—and forever is a very long time."

He bent his head and touched his mouth to hers. "Would you watch me get old and die instead?" he asked, after giving her a kiss so gentle that it nearly broke her heart. "Damn it, I don't care how long eternity is—and I don't mind the other things, either—not if I can be with you."

She studied him uncertainly, weighing his words in her mind. She had never changed a human into a vampire before, and the decision was not one she could make easily—especially when someone she loved so desperately was involved.

She recalled his great love for his lost daughter and felt a new level of sadness. "There would never be any children," she said. "Vampires mate, but they do not reproduce."

Calder curved a finger under her chin, and Maeve tried to probe his thoughts, but as before, she had no success. The love she bore this man seemed to function as a barrier between his mind and her own.

"I would have liked having another child," he said quietly. "I won't deny that. But given the choice between marriage to a mortal woman and all that entails, and the adventure of living with you, there is no contest. I love you, Maeve, and it's you I want."

His words warmed Maeve's heart and at the same time wrung it painfully. For the first time in her two centuries as a vampire, she missed mortality and all its sweet, if temporal, joys.

"I must go," she told him after a moment of struggling with her emotions. "Please, darling—trust me, and do as I ask. Stay here until I come back."

He nibbled at her lips, tempting her to stay, and she decided to punish him with a very special kind of pleasure. "All right," he conceded, with a heavy sigh. "I'll wait. But don't be long, because I want to make love to you."

She smiled mysteriously and straightened his collar. "When I return tomorrow night, I will show you more of my magic."

A twinkle lit his eyes, though there was frustration there as well, and sorrow. "What sort of magic?"

Maeve ran her fingers lightly down his chest and made a circle around his belt buckle. "You'll see," she said. Then she stood on tiptoe, kissed the slight cleft in Calder's chin, and vanished.

## CHAPTER 9

Maeve did not like leaving Calder unguarded, for even in that house, where few vampires and even fewer warlocks would dare to venture uninvited, he was a target. Still, the day of Nemesis's revenge was drawing nearer with each passing moment, and her instincts told her that skirmishes between vampires and warlocks were breaking out all over the planet. On top of that, every night when the moon rose there were more of Lisette's creatures to contend with.

Powerful as she and Valerian were, Maeve reasoned, they wouldn't be able to handle the entire situation alone. They might go after Lisette personally, but other vampires and even warlocks, if they could be enlisted, would have to be sent out to battle the corpse-like wretches she continued to create.

Maeve fed twice, within the space of an hour, near the London docks, and still there was no sign of Valerian. Her irritation with him began to turn to concern. Normally, of course, she would have been able to track the other vampire's thoughts, or at least pick up on his whereabouts, but things were far from normal.

She hurried distractedly along a crowded roadside, pondering. Likely as not, Valerian was simply being his usual thoughtless and undependable self, playing sultan in a harem or pretending to be a gunslinger in some saloon in the American West. She was probably worrying needlessly.

Still, Maeve couldn't shake the uneasy feeling that Valerian was in trouble again. After all, the last time he'd disappeared, she'd found him lying at the bottom of a mine shaft, half dead of a warlock attack.

One way or the other, she must find the unpredictable vampire or tackle the job of destroying Lisette on her own.

"I wouldn't if I were you," a feminine voice said.

Maeve turned her head and saw that Dimity had fallen into step beside her. She was carrying a dulcimer, and Maeve could hear the faint hum of the strings in the night breeze.

"You wouldn't go after Lisette if you were me?" Maeve retorted with grim impatience. "Well, then, can you offer a better suggestion? In less than two weeks Nemesis and his legions of angels will be turned loose, and the situation with the warlocks and Lisette's vampires gets worse every night."

"You'll need Valerian's help—as well as mine and that of every other vampire you can manage to recruit."

"I can't find Valerian," Maeve said in frustration. Drunken sailors, men who hadn't been within a furlong

of a bathtub in months, were stopping in the street to stare at Dimity and Maeve, their eyes glittering with lust and speculation. "Concentrate, Dimity. See if you can pick up an image or something. I've tried, but there's nothing."

Dimity stepped into an alleyway, and, of course, Maeve followed. While she watched, the angelic blond vampire closed her blue eyes and fixed her thoughts on Valerian.

More sailors gathered at the mouth of the alley, leering, plainly getting ideas. Neither Maeve nor Dimity paid them any attention for, as mortals, they were no threat.

"I see a dark-haired woman with beautiful brown eyes," Dimity said after several moments. "She's in Spain—Madrid, I think. I'm sorry, that's all I can determine."

"Isabella," Maeve murmured. Usually she didn't keep track of Valerian's many and varied playmates, but she knew about this particular mortal because he had told her once in a moment of candor. The woman was a simple soul, he'd said, though beautiful and possessed of a fiery spirit; she worked in a cantina, serving wine and ale.

Dimity cast a glance toward the growing crowd of sailors, and her sweet mouth formed a smile. "It would seem that we have admirers, you and I," she said.

Maeve curled her lip in contempt. "You can have the lot of them," she replied. "I'm going to find Isabella and ask if she's seen Valerian. In the meantime, I would appreciate your help."

"Anything," Dimity answered as the little cluster of men started toward them. She smoothed her hair and skirts, as though intending to waltz with each one in turn, instead of feeding on their life-blood and then tossing them aside like chicken bones.

"Spread the word to as many vampires as you can that there will be a ball at my house tomorrow night, immediately after sunset."

Dimity inclined her lovely head in agreement. "As you wish," she said.

Maeve hesitated for a few moments, watching as the first misguided sailor reached out a grubby fist to grab a handful of Dimity's silky blond hair.

The magnificent vampire made a snarling sound and tore into her would-be assailant like a tigress. The man screamed, probably more from terror than pain, and his companions turned to scramble toward the relative safety of the street.

It did them no good, trying to flee, Maeve noted with a certain grim satisfaction. Dimity had worked some mental trick, thickening the air around them until it was like invisible quicksand, and though they ran, their efforts took them nowhere. They had surely planned a savage rape, but they had expected to be the hunters, not the prey.

By Maeve's reckoning, having to deal with Dimity was no less than the blackguards deserved; she clasped her hands together and vanished without giving the matter another thought.

She found Isabella alone in the back room at the cantina, polishing copper mugs. The woman started violently at Maeve's sudden appearance, crossed herself, and murmured a rapid petition to the Holy Mother.

"Don't be afraid," Maeve said in unhesitating Spanish. One of the talents she'd acquired upon becoming a vampire was an ability to learn languages and indeed memorize the histories of whole societies, simply by paging through books on those subjects. "I mean you no harm. I'm Valerian's friend and I want to know if you've seen him."

Tears brimmed in Isabella's dark, thickly lashed eyes. Maeve could glean no real information from the woman's brain because the poor creature's emotions were in absolute chaos.

"He was killed by a witch!" Isabella sobbed after several false starts and so much blubbering that Maeve wanted to shake her. "We were—together, Valerian and I. *She* came—" Again the mortal paused and made the sign of the cross with a swift, practiced motion of one hand. "She appeared out of nowhere, just as you did. Valerian told me to go quickly—*Madre de Dios*, I ran for my life—and I did not look back." Isabella stopped to draw in a great, snuffling breath, then lifted her apron to her face and wailed, "He is dead! I know he is dead!"

"Stop it!" Maeve said firmly, her mind already racing. It wasn't hard to figure out who the "witch" had been. The question was, what had Lisette done with Valerian? "I want you to take me to the place where all this happened. Right now."

Isabella mopped her face, now puffy and tear-streaked, on the apron. "I c-cannot," she said balefully, interspersing her words with hiccoughs. "It was a secret. Valerian worked some spell to take me there."

"But you must know where it is, if Valerian sent you away on your own when the witch came," Maeve insisted, speaking more moderately this time. She was worried about Valerian, of course, but beneath her fear ran an undercurrent of pure annoyance. If the vain creature hadn't been so occupied with his pleasures, he might have sensed trouble in time to protect himself.

Instead, he'd quite literally been caught with his pants down.

If Valerian managed to survive this latest escapade, Maeve thought furiously, she would probably kill him herself.

"It was dark," Isabella said, shaking her head. "I was afraid. I remember only that it was the oldest part of the city, and that there was a cemetery nearby, a forgotten place where all the stones were crumbling."

Maeve gave a soft exclamation of frustration, composed herself, and spoke again. "If you see Valerian before I do, please tell him that Maeve Tremayne is looking for him. This is important, Isabella, so make certain it doesn't slip your mind."

"I will remember," Isabella said with an indignant snuffle. "This is not the sort of experience one forgets."

Maeve smiled. "I suppose not," she agreed. Once again she vanished, arriving moments later in the heart of Los Cementerio de Los Santos y Los Angeles, the graveyard Isabella had mentioned.

A cool wind tossed Maeve's dark hair as she stepped up onto one of the ancient, sinking crypts and scanned her surroundings. *Valerian!* she called in the silent language that could be heard in other times as well as other places, but, as before, there was no answer.

She was concentrating on finding the love nest where Lisette had surprised Valerian—it was almost surely underground—when the sound of hoarse, wordless whispers began all around her. The noise

came from behind every crypt, every broken headstone, growing louder and louder.

Maeve kept her composure, even when the warlocks began to appear, one by one, seeming to take shape from the shadows themselves. They wore hooded cloaks that hid their faces and rustled as they made a large circle around her, these ancient and deadly enemies.

She might have fled, for she had the power to transport herself anywhere in the known universe, but her pride would not allow it. Besides, instinct would have taken her straight to Calder, and the warlocks would surely follow.

"What do you want?" she shouted, in order to be heard over the incessant, thunderous whispering.

It stopped, that grating sound, as suddenly as it had begun. One of the warlocks stepped forward to look up at Maeve, who stood regally atop the old headstone, like a queen on a dais.

The creature pushed back his hood, revealing a head of brown hair and a face as fetching as any angel's. The beast looked human, even to the discerning eye of a vampire.

He inclined his head in a polite gesture of greeting and actually smiled. "Allow me to introduce myself, Your Majesty," he said, and to Maeve's surprise there wasn't so much as a hint of derision in his tone or expression. "My name is Dathan, and I speak for the covens."

Maeve did not ask how many covens; she knew this being was a leader among his kind, with much power. "I am no one's queen," she said coolly. "There is no need to address me so formally." She narrowed her blue eyes and folded her arms. "But perhaps you were mocking me?"

"Never," Dathan replied with watchful geniality. His hair and eyes were brown, and his face had a look of impossible innocence. It was as if he were really an altar boy, turned warlock only an instant before by the spell of some evil magician. "A counsel was held, and we have decided to ask for an alliance between vampires and warlocks—albeit a temporary one."

Maeve was suspicious, and she could discern little from the friend's mind because he was uncommonly powerful in his own right. "An alliance? Why should we trust you, we who do not trust our own kind?"

"Our mutual survival depends upon it," Dathan reasoned. "There are already warrior angels moving among the mortals—scouts and spies preparing the way for war. Need I tell you, gracious queen, that we cannot win against such enemies?"

Precisely because her courage was flagging a little, Maeve raised her chin. "I am well aware of that," she said.

"Our only hope lies in destroying the vampire called Lisette," Dathan went on moderately. "We left this task to you and your heedless friend, Valerian, and—please excuse my directness—we have not been pleased with the results."

Maeve's considerable pride was nettled. "Perhaps if Valerian had not been set upon by warlocks, poisoned and then left for dead, we might have succeeded sooner." The large, rustling circle of cloaked figures drew tighter as each one stepped forward a pace. "I warn you"—she paused and then raised her voice so that it would carry—"all of you—that I will be taken only at great cost to you. The first to fall will be your leader, Dathan."

There was an angry murmuring in the ranks, but Dathan silenced his followers almost immediately, simply by raising one hand into the air.

"I have told you, my queen," he said to Maeve a moment later, "we mean you no harm. We want only to ally ourselves with you, with all reasonable vampires, until the danger is past."

Maeve raised an eyebrow. "And then?"

Dathan smiled his endearing, altar-boy smile. "Should we be fortunate enough to survive, I'm certain our separate factions will return to their old enmity. Our differences are deep-seated, after all, and our feud is so ancient that no one seems to remember how it began. It is time for a meeting between vampires and warlocks."

"I will consider your proposal," she conceded warily. She swept the circle of cloaked creatures up in a single eloquent glance. "Come alone to my house in London, at midnight tomorrow, and I will give you my decision."

The warlocks began to mutter and stir again, and Maeve knew the consensus of the crowd would have been to take their chances and make an attempt at tearing her apart, had Dathan not been there.

"Enough," that warlock said sharply, and his eyes glittered with fury as he assessed his minions. "Go now and do not trouble this or any other vampire before the agreed time has come!"

They vanished, moving noisily into the night, like a pack of crows flapping their wings, but Dathan lingered.

He reached up to offer Maeve his hand, and after only the briefest hesitation, she accepted it and let him help her down from her perch on the headstone of some long-dead and probably forgotten Spaniard.

"Until midnight tomorrow," Dathan said smoothly. Then he lifted Maeve's hand to his lips, brushed her knuckles with the lightest of kisses, turned, and walked away to become a part of the darkness that claimed his soul.

And her own, Maeve thought glumly. Again Calder's image filled her mind, and again she despaired because he had no glimmer of what it meant to be an immortal.

She would return to him, she decided, for the night was almost over and she had no choice but to seek shelter. She was discouraged that she had made no more progress in finding Valerian.

Perhaps, just as the mortal, Isabella, had said, that august vampire had finally met his end. It wasn't impossible that he'd gotten himself destroyed, considering the foolish risks he undertook in his constant pursuit of pleasurable adventure. And that would certainly account for the fact that she was unable to link her mind with his as she had always done before.

Glumly Maeve lifted her hands above her head and took herself home to London and to Calder.

She found him in the library, surrounded by stacks of books and voluminous notes. He started when she appeared before him, and a heavy tome tumbled to the floor.

He rose, his grin revealing irritation as well as genuine welcome. "I wish you wouldn't just pop in out of nowhere like that. It's unnerving."



"What would you have me do?" Maeve inquired, short-tempered because she could not find Valerian and because a devastating war was imminent. "Arrange for someone to blow a trumpet announcing my arrival?"

Calder sighed. "We can't go on like this, Maeve. I'm a doctor, and back home the hospitals are brimming with wounded soldiers. I cannot hide here any longer, no matter how much danger I might be in."

Had she been a mortal woman, Maeve might have given way to tears at that moment, so great was the pressure she was under. The paradoxical nature of their situation threatened to tear her apart; she loved Calder entirely too much to hold him prisoner in that house and too much to let him go out and face perils he couldn't begin to comprehend.

He saw that she was wavering. "Make me a vampire," he said quietly.

She stared up into his eyes, searching his very soul, seeking some shred of understanding. The dawn was near; she could not tarry much longer or she would be badly burned, perhaps even devoured, by the first apricot-gold light of the sun.

"Why?" she whispered, tormented. "Why do you want this?"

Calder didn't hesitate; she knew he'd given the matter a great deal of thought. He'd had a lot of solitude since coming to Maeve's house, after all. "I want the power," he said plainly. His thumbs moved on her shoulders, caressing, reassuring her. "Even more, I want to be with you always. I want to sleep when you sleep, and for your battles to be my battles, too."

Maeve rested her forehead against his strong shoulder for a few moments before gazing up at him again. He looked gaunt, tormented, and more earnest than she'd ever seen him. "You don't know what you're saying," she told him sadly after a few moments had passed. "There is going to be a war, and Valerian is missing, and tomorrow night I must meet with the leader of the warlocks—"

"I'm no stranger to war," Calder broke in. He'd sensed the coming of the sun, too, and taking Maeve's elbow, he began escorting her through the house, toward the cellar door. "I've been up to my elbows in bleeding, dying soldiers for three years. As for Valerian—"

"Never mind him," Maeve said impatiently. "I know your American war is a terrible one: I would not presume to minimize the suffering or the significance of such a thing. But the conflict I'm speaking of would destroy the world as you know it, Calder. Though the battles would take place between angels and those who move in darkness, like vampires and warlocks, human beings would necessarily be caught up in the fray. It would make your war of states look like a playground scuffle between children."

They had gained the cellar, and Calder moved unerringly toward the door of the hidden chamber, the place that had once been a secret from all mortals, even those who had lived and worked in Maeve's house for years. "If this apocalypse comes about," he said reasonably, "then I'll not escape it anyway. I might as well be at your side, with at least a chance of being some help to you."

Maeve lighted a candle, for Calder's sake. She, as always, could see plainly in the dense darkness. "That is a noble, if foolish, argument," she said wearily, seating herself on the edge of the stone slab where she would sleep in the same way a mortal woman might sit on the side of a bed. "There are still other considerations, however." Her words were coming more slowly now, and they were slightly slurred.



"Once you make this decision, you will never be able to undo it and go back to being a man. You might come to hate me for changing you."

Calder laid her down, as gently as if she were a tired child, and took one of her hands into both his own. "That's what you really fear, isn't it? That I'll grow discontented with the life of a vampire and then despise you for making me into a nightwalker in the first place. It won't happen, Maeve. I'm not an impulsive man. I've thought this through. For our sakes, yours and mine, and that of a great many suffering mortals, I want to be changed."

Maeve could no longer keep her eyes open. She tightened her fingers around Calder's for a moment, then sank into the fathomless sleep that awaited her.

Calder sat with Maeve for a long time, until the candle flickered wildly and guttered out, in fact. During that bittersweet interval, he held her seemingly lifeless hand and wept for all that might have been, all that would never be.

Then, partly by groping and partly by memory, he found his way back to the main part of the cellar, where thin London sunlight came in through narrow windows at the ceiling level.

Leaving Maeve would be the hardest thing he had ever done, but if he could not be what she was, if he could not serve and protect her, and share her life to the fullest extent, then leave her he would. He'd book passage on a ship—even though he had no money, his family's credit was good in virtually any part of the world—and God help him, once he left, he'd never look back.

But what agony he would feel, remembering her, missing her, cherishing her. He had not dreamed, even in the poetic passion of his youth, that it was possible to love another as deeply as he loved Maeve.

Still, he was a doctor, first and foremost, and to him life was a sacred thing. To waste that most precious of all gifts was the greatest sin a mortal could commit. And this was no life he was living now; he was cowering, like some hunted creature, while the minutes and hours allotted to him were passing by, unused.

In the meantime, patients were suffering and dying. *His* patients.

He would wait no longer; he must *do* something, he must stop the waste.

Having spent several days in the Tremayne house, Calder had gotten to know the servants a little. They all regarded him with bafflement and no small amount of fear, and he thought he detected a smidgeon of pity as well. Obviously they were not used to having members of the household underfoot during the daylight hours, either.

"I'll need the carriage, if there is one," Calder said to the butler, Pillings, a beanpole of a man who said as little as possible but always made sure the newspapers were brought in and the fires lighted.

"You'll want to shave and change your clothing, sir," Pillings replied. "I believe Mr. Aidan Tremayne's garments would fit you. And I daresay he wouldn't mind making you the loan of a razor as well."

Calder knew Pillings was referring to Maeve's brother, the vampire of legend, the only blood-drinker in history to have turned mortal again. It was a safe bet, however, that Pillings didn't know Tremayne in quite the same context as that.

"Thank you," Calder said, looking ruefully down at his own rumpled garments. "I came away from home rather quickly, not to mention unexpectedly, and had no chance to pack a valise before I left."

"Quite," said Pillings in a noncommittal tone, giving a little bow before starting up the main staircase. "I will see that the appropriate items are brought to your rooms, sir."

Half an hour later Calder was freshly groomed, and a sleek black carriage drawn by four matching gray horses awaited his bidding. The driver greeted him by touching the handle of his driving whip to the brim of his hat, and Pillings insisted on opening the door for Calder and lifting down the portable step inside.

"The offices of the London-New York Bank, please."

Calder said to the driver before climbing into the carriage.

The driver nodded and touched his hat.

"The mistress won't like this, you know," Pillings confided at last, so tall that he could look straight in through the carriage window. One of his temples was throbbing, and Calder deduced from the man's state of controlled agitation that he'd been wanting to protest the idea from the first and had only now worked up the courage to do so. "She gave express orders, she did, that you were not to leave the house for any reason."

Calder hoped his smile was reassuring, and that it didn't reflect the annoyance he felt at being cosseted and caged like some exotic bird, or the terrible, clawing grief that bruised his heart. "Don't fret, Pillings. I'll be happy to bear the brunt of Miss Tremayne's fury—if indeed she ever finds out that we conspired to ignore her instructions."

At that, the driver cracked his whip in the moist, cool air, and the carriage moved forward, wheels rattling over the cobblestones, leather fittings creaking.

Reaching the bank, Calder arranged for a transfer of funds from one of his own accounts in Philadelphia. Even there, an ocean away from his own country, the Holbrook name was influential enough that strangers would advance pound notes against it.

Leaving that establishment, he went to the wharf, where he booked passage on a ship leaving for New York the following morning. If he and Maeve could not agree on a course of action when they spoke that evening, he fully intended to be aboard the vessel.

After that Calder visited a shop where men's clothing was sold ready-made, and purchased enough garments for the journey, which would take ten days to two weeks.

Provided, of course, that Maeve didn't give in and change him into an immortal, as he wanted her to do.

Eventually Calder returned to the Tremayne house, where he was greeted with no little relief by Pillings. He enjoyed a lengthy luncheon in the library, while Pillings and the footman carried his purchases upstairs and stowed them away in his rooms.

When he'd finished his meal, Calder paced, impatient. It would be hours before Maeve awakened, and even then he might not see her. She was an unpredictable creature and might start off on one of her adventures without bothering to speak with him first.

The thought filled him with frustration and loneliness. Every moment, every hour away from her side, was like a wound to his spirit.

He could go to the chamber belowstairs and wait there, holding her hand, until she opened those beautiful, impossibly blue eyes of hers, but he was afraid of drawing attention to her. Calder knew little about vampires, but he had gleaned, both from things Maeve had said and from an obscure book on the subject that he'd found on one of the library shelves, the worrisome fact that a blood-drinker was never more vulnerable than when it lay sleeping.

At that point Maeve was utterly unable to defend herself. He could not risk having one of the servants follow him, or worse, some supernatural being. He had no idea who—or what—might be watching with interest the events taking place in this household.

The thought only deepened his wish to be a vampire himself, to share Maeve's fate, be it damnation or an eternity of walking the earth. He didn't care, as long as he could be with her.

At sunset, while Calder was having tea beside the fire in the sitting room off his bedchamber, Maeve appeared before him, her form seeming to knit itself from the very ether.

She took in the boxes of new clothes with a sweep of her eyes, then stood frowning down at him, her arms folded.

Calder rose from his chair, out of good manners, yes, but also because he'd felt like an errant schoolboy sitting down, looking up at her, awaiting his fate. "What have you decided?" he asked quietly.

He saw an infinite sorrow in her eyes and knew her answer before she spoke. "I will not be the one to damn you, Calder. I cannot sever the invisible cords that bind you to your Creator."

He did not attempt to argue, for he could see that she'd made up her mind. He was sick at his soul—his very heart seemed to crumble within his chest—and he would not allow himself to think of being parted from her, inevitable though it was, because he could not bear the knowledge.

"Tonight," she said before Calder found the strength to speak, "you will see other vampires firsthand. I will show you what dreadful creatures they can be."

Calder was shattered, but he was also intrigued, for he was first and foremost a scientist, and he was more than curious, he was greedy for whatever knowledge of vampires he could garner. "How?" he asked simply.

Maeve smiled, but her eyes were liquid with mourning, for she knew he would not stay and await her brief appearances, warming himself on the hearth like a lapdog. "There will be a vampire ball," she said. "Right here, in this house, this very night. Will you be my escort, Dr. Calder Holbrook?"

## CHAPTER 10

Maeve's guests began arriving at approximately ten-thirty that night. Most were vampires, ruddy from recent feedings, but Calder noticed a surprising number of mortals, too. These brave, or perhaps reckless, souls were artists mostly, and writers; curious people, like himself, fascinated by the nightwalkers.

All were ushered into the great ballroom, where gaslights flickered softly, their glow dancing golden in the polished mirrors that lined the walls. At the far end, on a dais, a small orchestra played Mozart.

Glancing at the butler, Pillings, who was unruffled by this grand and innately horrible affair, Calder realized that he'd been wrong, thinking the other man didn't know that there was something very different about the mistress of this house. Pillings obviously understood that the majority of that night's visitors were not human.

"Why didn't you tell me you knew?" Calder said in a low voice after making his way to the butler's side.

Pillings's manner was smooth and rather smug. "Because I couldn't be certain that *you* did, sir."

Calder smiled, though he felt raw inside, and broken. Maeve had made her decision; she would not turn him into a vampire, and since she wanted him to stay in London, where she could protect him, she probably wouldn't agree to transport him home by means of her strange magic, either. All of which meant that he would be traveling back to America by ship and leaving Maeve behind forever.

The prospect of being parted from her filled Calder with a grief the like of which he had not felt since those torturous days, weeks, and months following his daughter's death. All the same, there was no question of staying. He would have died for Maeve but, ironic as it was, he could not live for her—not if it meant enduring an insipid, sheltered existence. As it was, he felt like a tame mouse, caged, running round and round inside a wheel.

Just then Maeve came to his side. She looked magnificent in a voluminous gown of purple velvet, the skirt decorated with crystal beads that glimmered like frost over clean snow. She might have been mortal, except for the pale, extraordinary perfection of her skin and the restrained energy she exuded with every movement.

Calder looked down into her eyes and felt himself tumble, then free-fall, headlong into her very soul, where he would doubtless be a prisoner forever, even if he never saw her again. "How can I leave you?" he whispered raggedly.

Maeve laid one slender, elegant hand to his cheek, and her touch sent a charge through his system. Then, silently, she linked her arm with his and led him the length of the ballroom and out through a set of French doors. They stood then on a terrace, under a glittering arbor of stars.

"Perhaps it's better if you go away," she said coolly, but Calder wasn't fooled. He heard the sorrow in her voice and felt it throbbing in her soul, the counterpart of his own mourning. "Better if you have no memory of me, or of what we've shared together—"

"Wait a minute," Calder snapped, unable to hide the note of desperation that reverberated through his whole being. "What do you mean, 'if I have no memory of you'? Surely you can't—" He paused, realizing that Maeve could do virtually anything she wished. "You wouldn't—take that, the most precious gift I've ever been given!"

She looked away for a moment, then faced him squarely again. "One night soon, when I can bear it," she began evenly, "I will return to the precise instant when you first saw me, outside that church at Gettysburg. I will adjust that moment, make myself invisible to you, and all that came after will be undone."

Calder felt his eyes go wide. "No!" he protested in a hoarse cry.

Maeve nodded sadly. "I should have done it days ago."

He shoved one hand through his hair and turned away to stand at the stone railing of the terrace, looking out over the rooftops of London. "I can't endure it," he said.

He felt her hands come to rest on his shoulders. "It's for the best, darling," she said.

Calder whirled, putting his arms around her slender waist, pulling her close to him. "What about you?" he demanded, and although he sounded angry, what he really felt was wild, raging despair. "Will you remember?"

She regarded him for a long moment. "Briefly," she replied. "Then, after a while, our time together will seem like a lovely dream, the kind that comes just as one is waking from a pleasant sleep."

"You can't do this," Calder rasped. "You can't!"

Maeve's gaze was steady. She tugged at the chain around his neck, brought the pendant from beneath his collar, lifted the necklace over his head, and dropped it into her bodice. "I can, my darling," she said gently. "And I will. For your sake, as well as my own. Perhaps, by the grace of the One who cherishes all mortals, you will be protected from the evils that surround you now." She took his hand. "Come now—let us dance together while we can. Then I will take you home to Philadelphia and your wounded soldiers."

He swallowed hard, knowing it would be useless to argue the point, that night at least, and finally nodded. Even so, he could not, would not accept Maeve's decision without a fight.

Inside, among the pallorous, beautiful ghouls, they danced, two lovers doomed to be parted so completely that soon, too soon, they would not even remember each other.

Midway through the evening a family of vampires arrived. Maeve explained that they were the Havermails, Avery and Roxanne and their offspring, Canaan and Benecia. The smaller pair were, in some ways, the most chilling of all the fiends Calder had seen that night, for although their eyes were ancient, they were trapped forever in the bodies of little girls.

Calder shuddered in Maeve's embrace as they waltzed.

"And you were aggrieved that we'd never have children," Maeve jested. Although she was plainly teasing him and her eyes were mirthful, Calder knew her sorrow was as fathomless as his own.

At eleven-thirty Maeve called a halt to the dancing and stood on the dais, in front of the orchestra, to address her guests.

Her voice was at once gentle and full of authority. She told the crowd about a vampire called Lisette, who had been creating blood-drinkers at random. They were mindless, inferior creatures, she said, and because of them the angels were ready to make war on all night-walkers, not only vampires, but every supernatural being.

Calder listened in fascination as Maeve went on to say that the warlocks were outraged over this situation. Either the vampires would have to join forces with their age-old enemies, to destroy Lisette and

defeat her growing army of ghouls, or the warlocks would make war on all blood-drinkers. Their hope was that, by wiping out vampires, the warlocks could appease the warrior angels and their commander, Nemesis, and thus avert their own destruction.

A stir rose in the gathering, and then one of the macabre child-vampires stepped forward. She was small and blond; Benecia Havermail, Maeve had called her.

"Where is Valerian?" she asked in a clear voice. "Can we not depend on him to lead us? He is the oldest and most cunning vampire of us all."

Maeve seemed to grow before Calder's weary eyes, to loom taller and more imposing. She was terrifying to see, in her beauty and her power, and yet he knew he'd never loved her more than he did at that moment, when he first realized that she truly was royalty.

"Valerian has disappeared," she answered without hesitation. "And even you, Benecia, should know better than to expect leadership from him. Furthermore, he *is not* the oldest blood-drinker—Lisette and the members of the Brotherhood of the Vampyre are ancient compared to him."

Benecia subsided a little, though she didn't look happy about it. Calder imagined encountering such a creature on a dark sidewalk some evening, in the thin light of a gas-powered street lamp, and shivered.

"Tonight," Maeve went on, "Dathan, a warlock, will come to this house. He seeks a pact between our kind and his, a temporary truce. His suggestion is that we band together, blood-drinker and warlock, long enough to destroy our common enemy."

An elegant-looking male vampire with dark hair and eyes stepped forward. Like the other guests, he wore formal clothes, but there was an air of refinement about him that went deeper than appearances. "Are you suggesting that we trust those creatures?" he asked of Maeve. "Warlocks have been our greatest foes from the beginning. What is our assurance that they won't turn on us, that this isn't some sort of trick?"

Murmurs of agreement rose from the crowd, but Maeve silenced the lot with a single sweep of her eyes.

"Your question is a reasonable one, Artemus," she said to the elegant male, "but this is a desperate time and it calls for desperate measures. Keep in mind, all of you, that we have more fearsome enemies than warlocks—angels. And they will descend on us in legions, these beings, unless we stop Lisette and destroy her minions. It will take all our strength to accomplish such a task, and that of the warlocks as well."

Calder was mesmerized, having forgotten his own despair for the moment. Maeve had spoken of the approaching cataclysm and stressed that all their circumstances were dire indeed, but he had not guessed the true scope of the situation. Incongruous though it seemed, the matter was one of life and death for immortals.

Roxanne Havermail stepped forward, to stand next to Artemus. She, too, was beautiful, but, like her daughters, she made Calder's skin crawl. "If Lisette is sent to face the Judgment, there will be no queen. Is that not so?"

A collective groan followed her words.

Roxanne bristled. "Well, if there's going to be an election or something, I think I should be considered."



She cast an accusing glance in Maeve's direction. "I am eminently suited to be queen, it seems to me, since I've been around much longer than certain upstarts I could mention."

"Yes," muttered a short, squat male vampire in a bottle-green waistcoat, breeches, and a ruffled shirt, who stood within range of Calder's hearing. "Roxanne has been around, all right. Around the block."

The female's gaze sliced to her critic's face in an instant; she had heard him plainly, even though a considerable distance lay between them. "You may keep your fusty old opinions to your fusty old self, Clarence Doormeyer," she said, and Doormeyer actually quailed.

Having dispensed with her detractor, Roxanne turned back to Maeve, hands resting on her hips. "Well? Will I be queen or not?"

"There will be no dominion for you to reign over," Maeve responded reasonably, "if we do not stop Lisette in time to appease Nemesis and his armies."

"We have something to say about who is queen, it seems to me," put in a male dressed in the garb of a seagoing brigand. The remark started another uproar.

Maeve raised both her hands in a graceful command that there be silence. There was. "Such matters need not be decided now," she said.

Roxanne went back to stand beside her vampire husband, looking disgruntled and unhappy. Apparently she'd expected a coronation on the spot.

"What will I tell the warlock, Dathan, when he comes to me tonight to ask for our decision?" Maeve went on, and even though she didn't raise her voice, there was a note of steel in it that brooked no further nonsense. "Do we stand together against this threat, or do we scatter like frightened hens and perish at the hands of angels?"

For a moment the room seemed to rock with a sort of silent thunder. Then Artemus spoke again.

"I say we have nothing to lose by allying ourselves with Dathan's followers, and our very lives to gain. What other choice do we have? Shall we allow angels to take us, and find out firsthand what special hells their Master has set aside for the doubly damned?"

Silence reigned again, then Canaan Havermail spoke up in her sweet, horrid, piping voice. "Suppose it's all a lie?" she offered, glaring at Maeve. "Why should we trust this one? Perhaps she is weak, like her brother." Her unholy eyes sought and found Calder in the crowd, and he felt his spirit shrink before the magnitude of her evil. "Here is the proof. Maeve Tremayne consorts with mortals!"

Maeve's fury, though contained, was nearly tangible. Calder feared that she would explode and that when she did, the mirrored walls would shatter and the marble floor would undulate with the force of it.

"Look around you, Canaan. There are any number of mortals here," she said. "I am not alone in finding them diverting."

*Diverting.* The word sliced into Calder, sharp as a scalpel. Was that what he was to Maeve—a plaything, a curiosity, a diversion? He pushed the feeling aside to consider later.

Just then, the doors to the terrace burst open, as though they'd been struck by some great, silent wind,



and all heads turned.

Calder felt his heart pound in a combination of excitement and fear.

In the next instant a creature as lovely as any angel of the highest realms appeared in the opening. She was female, with flowing golden hair, eyes the color of bluebells, and a sweetness of countenance that was truly remarkable.

Calder glanced at Maeve and saw that she was watching him, a pensive expression on her face. It gave him hope, though precious little, to think she might be jealous of his attentions.

"It's Dimity," someone whispered close behind Calder. With reluctance he shifted his gaze from Maeve, who was more poignantly beautiful to him than any angel could ever be, to watch this new drama unfold.

Dimity did not speak, but instead stepped aside to make room for a second entrant. This creature was male, and he seemed to blaze with some fire of the soul. He was so tall that he had to lean down as he stepped through the doorway from the terrace, and when he lifted his head again, Calder saw that his eyes were as black as polished onyx. His hair was fair, like Dimity's, and he wore medieval garb, leggings and a tunic. He carried a magnificent sword with a jeweled hilt.

Calder was drawn toward him, and the wild thought crossed his mind that this was the legendary Arthur, King of Camelot, founder of the Knights of the Round Table.

He soon realized, however, that everyone else in the room, with the exception of Maeve and the vision called Dimity, had retreated.

"Do not be afraid," the lovely female said in a voice as soft as a summer shower. "Gideon has not come to do harm to any of you, but to relay a message."

Calder saw Maeve move to approach the giant, Gideon, and he followed, wanting to be at her side whether the outcome of the confrontation be good or ill.

"What are you?" he asked baldly. Gideon's person shone so brightly that Calder had to squint.

Gideon smiled. "I am a Comforter," he said. "A Guardian." His wondrous features became solemn. "What are you doing here, Mortal, with these blood-drinkers?"

Calder stepped a little closer to Maeve. An angel. God in heaven, this creature was an *angel*, albeit without wings, robes, harps, or halos. The experience was remarkable, even after encountering vampires. He tried to answer, but no words came to his mind, and no sound to his lips.

Dimity linked her arm with the angel's. "Do not try the poor human, Gideon," she said in a tone of good-natured scolding. "He has the gift of free will, just like the rest of us."

Calder found his voice; he had to answer, for his own sake and for Maeve's. "I'm here because I love Maeve Tremayne."

"You must indeed love her," Gideon replied. "More than your own soul, in fact."

"Yes," Calder answered.

Maeve laid a hand on his arm in an unspoken command that he be silent. "What is your business with us?" she asked Gideon.

"I've come to warn you all," he said in a clear voice, "for I feared that you would not believe Dimity if I sent her in my stead." The angel paused, perhaps formulating his thoughts, perhaps translating them into words lesser beings like humans and vampires could understand.

"Why would you, an angel, an *enemy*, want to help us?" Benecia Havermail demanded.

It was Dimity who answered. "You heard what Gideon said. He is a Comforter and a Guardian—it is his task to look after one particular mortal. That mortal, a child, has been sorely abused by people who should nurture and protect him. I, and some other vampires, feed on the likes of that little one's tormentors, and certain of the angels appreciate that. They, you see, are not permitted to take vengeance on human beings, no matter how grievous the offense."

Finally Gideon spoke up. "Mind you, one and all, that I have no sympathy with those among you who feed on the blood of innocents." He laid one great hand to the hilt of his sword, and Calder saw his muscles tighten as he gripped it. "Such vampires should be shown no more mercy than their victims have known!"

"What message do you bring?" Maeve asked, and although there was no fear in her voice, Calder had seen her glance quickly at a small timepiece hidden beneath a ruffle on the bodice of her gown.

"Listen well, one and all," Gideon began, and though he spoke quietly, the words reached into every corner of that enormous room. "I come at the order of my commander, Nemesis. He bid me tell you that if the renegade vampire, Lisette, is not stopped, he will destroy each and every one of you, with pleasure, and that even the darkest corners and crevices of hell itself will not hide you from his wrath."

Calder felt a communal shudder move through the room, and he was afraid himself, but his fascination had not lessened. Had anyone told him that such creatures as these actually existed, he would have dismissed that person as mad. Now, here he stood, watching as the light and the darkness confronted each other.

Having spoken, the great angel turned and walked away, bending low again as he passed through the doorway onto the terrace, and, after a quick nod to Maeve, Dimity followed him. The doors closed with a crash behind them.

A moment later Maeve's ballroom erupted with the terrified chatter of vampires who faced an enemy they could not hope to defeat.

"Silence!" Maeve shouted, and, reluctantly, the others obeyed her, though it seemed to Calder that the air fairly crackled with the force of their fear, outrage, and frustration. "What else must happen before you are convinced that our only hope is to rally our forces, join ourselves with the warlocks, and bring Lisette down like the rabid animal she is?"

No one spoke or even moved. Even Pillings, or perhaps *especially* Pillings, stood motionless and stricken, watching Maeve.

"If you stand with us, come forward," she said, stepping up onto the dais again and indicating an area in front of it. "If you do not, leave now."

Still, for what seemed like the longest time, no one moved. Then all the mortals, except for Pillings and Calder himself, headed toward the door, followed by a few sullen vampires. The others gathered, as Maeve had bid them to do, looking up at her with expressions that ranged all the way from fearful reluctance to unbounded admiration.

Calder watched in wonder as she dispatched groups of vampires to other parts of the world, where they were to do all in their power to find and destroy Lisette's creations. When the long-case clock in the entryway chimed twelve times, however, she left her followers and strode toward the front door.

Calder was right behind her, even though he knew instinctively that she didn't want him there.

Reaching the massive door, she swung it open, and on the step stood another visitor. He wore a black cloak and pushed back the garment's yawning hood to reveal a head of shining brown hair and an innocent, boyish face.

This, Calder knew, was Dathan, the warlock Maeve had spoken of earlier, and the newcomer greeted her with a single word.

"Well?"

"We will join forces with you," Maeve said in a cool, reserved tone. It was plain that she didn't relish the prospect of dealing with warlocks any more than her colleagues did, despite the fact that she had offered the suggestion herself.

Dathan inclined his head in a cordial nod. "Very well," he said. "All that remains is for you and I to plan our strategy."

Maeve looked back at Calder over one slender shoulder, and he saw a fathomless grief in her eyes. "Yes," she answered distractedly. "That is all that remains."

Calder felt a chasm open between them, a vast, eternal one, and some part of him died in that instant.

Dathan spoke again, and his words wrenched Maeve's attention back from Calder. "We have word of your friend, Valerian."

At that, Calder turned away, for there was no love lost between him and Valerian, and he frankly didn't care what predicament that vampire might be in. His mind was full of the terrible, splendid things he'd seen and heard that night, while at one and the same time his heart was breaking.

In his rooms he gathered his things together and began packing them neatly into the trunk he'd purchased that day. He wanted to weep, but that release, which would have been so welcome, was denied him by his own long-standing habit of stoicism.

Although he waited, Maeve did not come to him that night.

Maeve spent the remainder of the dark hours with Dathan, laying plans to find and destroy Lisette. She did not allow herself to think of Calder, indeed, she could not afford the indulgence, for there were so many things to be decided.

According to Dathan, Valerian was alive, though he was indeed a captive. Lisette almost certainly planned to use him as a weapon or a pawn, and for the moment there was nothing Maeve could do

about that.

Just minutes before sunrise, she went to Calder's rooms and found him sprawled across his bed in his clothes, sleeping as deeply as a child. Maeve lay down beside him, wrapped her arms around him, and thought of the great house in Philadelphia.

In moments they were there, on Calder's bed, and he was still asleep, though his rest was fitful now and probably haunted by dreams.

Maeve kissed his forehead and then, with only seconds to spare, vanished, assembling herself inside a small space a dozen feet beneath the surface of the earth. There she settled, in that gravelike place, into the vampire sleep.

Calder awakened suddenly, his body drenched in sweat, and sat bolt upright. He was stunned to find himself in his own bedroom in the Philadelphia house, bathed in the light of a late-summer sun.

He blinked, terrified that his time in London, and Maeve, and the vampire ball, were all just fragments of some feverish dream. He was still trying to discern between reality and illusion when the door of his room flew open and William burst in.

"Where the hell have you been?" his brother snarled, storming over to the side of the bed and gripping Calder's shirtfront in clenched fists.

Calder threw William's hands off and stood up. "What the devil do you care?" he countered, just as furiously. He groped for the pendant Maeve had given him and found it gone.

William paled, but with fury not fear. He knew, in some part of his withered little soul, that Calder would never do him actual physical harm, because it would have been a violation of his personal code of honor.

"It's Father," William said. "He's taken sick, and the doctor says he's dying. He's been asking for you, though I can't think why he'd make the effort. He must know, as I do, that you don't give a damn about him now any more than you ever have!"

Calder had believed himself to be utterly without sentiment where his father was concerned, but this news shook him, distracted him from the mysteries Maeve had brought into his life. "Is he here, or did you have him taken to the hospital?" he snapped, already halfway to the door.

"Father would never set foot in a hospital," William snapped. "Besides, there isn't a bed to be had because of this damn war. You ought to know that better than anyone."

Calder ignored his half brother, wrenched open the door, and strode down the hallway to his father's bedroom. He found the old man sitting up, though he looked smaller, as the dying often do, as if his body were crumbling in upon itself.

Bernard held out one hand imploringly and croaked Calder's name.

Calder realized, with shattering suddenness, that the little boy who had loved and idolized his father still lived, tucked away in some part of his psyche. His own caring struck him with the force of a meteor, and tears sprang to his eyes.

"Papa," he said, clasping the offered hand in both his own and brushing his lips once across the knuckles.

He started to pull away. "I'll get my bag—"

"No," Bernard protested. "Don't—go. I want you to listen. I'm sorry, Calder, so sorry—for all the things I did and—all the things I should have done—and didn't. I loved you, and—I loved your mother. But I didn't have your strength—none of us did. Not your mother—not Theresa or Amalie—not William. You were always so—impatient, so in-intolerant."

Calder's shoulders heaved as grief assailed him for the second time in twenty-four hours. A sob tore itself from his throat. He could not speak.

"Rest, Papa," William said from the other side of the bed. It seemed to Calder that his half brother's voice came through a pipe or tunnel, from somewhere far off. "Don't try to talk."

"I've made my peace with you, William," Bernard said quite clearly. "Go now, and let me do the same with your brother."

Calder sat down on the edge of Bernard's deathbed, still too overcome to utter any of the words that crowded his heart and throbbed in his throat.

His father spread one surprisingly strong hand behind his son's head and pressed him close, into his shoulder. "Forgive me," he pleaded again. "Forgive me for not being the man you are."

In the next moment Calder felt the old man's spirit leave his body like warm vapor rising into the air. It was as simple, and as complex, as that, and having witnessed the phenomenon a hundred times before did nothing to lessen its impact.

He drew back, looked into the familiar face, and saw empty, staring eyes. Gently, with practiced fingers, Calder lowered his father's eyelids.

Regret filled him, regret that he had waited so long to face and accept the love he'd always borne for this man. He sat there for a long while, keeping a lonely vigil, and only when Prudence came in, sometime later, did Calder stand and move to the window where he stood staring out at the sunlit courtyard below.

"He's gone," he said quietly.

Prudence wept and wailed and began to pray, and it seemed to Calder that, for all her noisy suffering, she was better off than he was. She knew how to release her emotions, at least, while he'd carried his own around like the carcass of an albatross.

It was really no wonder, Calder thought numbly, that he'd lost everything and everyone who had ever mattered to him. He did not know how to love.

## CHAPTER 11

"You made his life miserable, you know," William said in a wooden voice as he and Calder stood in the formal parlor that afternoon. The undertaker and his assistant were upstairs, in their father's room, preparing the old man for viewing and subsequent burial.

Calder was still dazed, by his experiences in London with Maeve, by the death of his sire, and by the realization that he had indeed loved Bernard Holbrook, faults and all, despite his own utter conviction to the contrary. He squeezed the bridge of his nose between his thumb and index finger. "Spare me the discourse on my shortcomings as a son," he said wearily, looking out the window. "I'm well aware, believe me, that I might have been a little more tolerant."

"*A little more tolerant*?" William repeated furiously. The last time Calder had glanced in his direction, his half brother had been standing next to the mantel, brooding over a glass of bourbon. "You crucified him daily with your damnable contempt, your self-righteous assumption that he didn't want to be better than he was. The man craved your respect and affection, God help him, every day of your life, and you withheld those very things!"

Calder closed his eyes tightly, for nothing possessed the power to wound quite so deeply as the truth. While he regretted some of the choices he'd made, and bitterly, he'd dance with the devil before apologizing to William.

"Are you through?" he inquired with biting politeness.

He heard the musical explosion of glass shattering against stone and turned at last to see that William had flung his drink onto the hearth. "No, *God damn you*, I am not through! My father is dead, and his suffering was compounded by your arrogance and insensitivity!"

"What do you expect me to do?" Calder asked reasonably, his voice as cold as his manner. "Resurrect him? Turn back the clock to the time he was driving my mother to despair, perhaps, and decide that it was all right for him to break her heart with his women? Declare that, after all, 'boys will be boys'?"

William's handsome if faintly ineffectual face went ruddy with anger. "You bastard! I want you to say you're sorry."

"Apologize to you?" Calder rubbed his chin, which was stubbly with a day's beard-growth. "Never. I've done you no wrong, William."

William's features contorted. "Haven't you? That's my father lying up there with embalming fluid in his veins! If it hadn't been for you, he might still be alive!"

"I won't take the blame for his death," Calder replied. "He came down with pneumonia and couldn't rally his strength. I had no part in that."

"*You robbed* him of his strength!" William insisted, and Calder began to fear that if his half brother did not contain his temper, he would burst a blood vessel. "Papa expended all of it, worrying that you had finally vanished forever. He might have used that fervor to cling to life!"

Calder shook his head and sighed, too weary and too stricken to be diplomatic. "Damn it, William, open your eyes—you just accused Father of wasting energy, yet your hatred for me and your petty jealousy are eating you alive!"

William turned away then, lowered his head onto the arm he'd braced against the mantel, and gave a choked sob.

Calder started toward him, realized there was nothing he could say that would give the other man comfort, and stopped himself. Nothing less than his younger brother's complete humiliation would satisfy

William, and Calder wasn't willing to supply that.

Prudence rushed in just then, eyes swollen from weeping, carrying a broom and dustpan. She glared accusingly at Calder and William in turn, and bent to sweep up the shards of glass littering the hearth. "Land sakes," she huffed. "A body'd think you two could keep civil tongues in your heads at a time like this, but no—here you are, bellowin' at each other—and with a dead man in the house, too."

William lifted his head, seething with abhorrence, and flung a scalding stare in Calder's direction, at the same time straightening his perfectly tailored coat. If he'd heard Prudence's admonition, or even taken note of her presence, he gave no indication. "You've destroyed this entire family," he said. "How I wish your whore of a mother had died before ever giving birth to you!"

Calder took a step toward his brother, his voice deceptively quiet. "I know you're suffering, William, and I'll abide your insults because of that. If you value your hide, however, you will not refer to my mother again, except in the politest of terms. Do you understand me?"

Prudence stepped between the two of them, her great, warm girth quivering with outrage, a dustpan full of broken crystal in one hand and a broom in the other. "If I has to take a buggy whip to the both of you so's you'll behave respectful-like, that's just what I'll do! This ain't no time to be workin' out your brother troubles."

Despite Prudence's words, which made a great deal of sense, Calder still wanted to slam his fist into William's smug, haughty face, and he expected that his half brother was thinking similar thoughts about him. He breathed deeply, purposely relaxed his hands, and turned away, intending to return to the window and his private musings.

William made that impossible by spitting defiantly, "Stay out of this, old woman. This is my house now, and I'll speak to this bitch's whelp in any way I choose."

Calder crossed the space that separated him from his sibling in two strides. Ignoring Prudence's fluttering fury, he grasped the lapels of William's suit coat and hoisted him onto the balls of his feet. "Nothing will appease you but an opportunity to draw my blood, it would seem," he hissed. "Well, then, so be it." He flung his brother free, and William scrambled, his face purple with anger, to keep from losing his balance. "We'll settle this out back," Calder finished.

William nodded, spun on his heel, and headed for the door. Calder was right behind him, but Prudence waylaid him by gripping his elbow, with surprising strength, in one large black hand.

"That man up there didn't deserve to have his only sons brawlin' in the backyard like a pair of drunken field hands, no matter what his failin's might have been!"

Calder's head felt light, and he saw the familiar parlor and the woman who had comforted him from childhood through a shifting haze of red. "On the contrary," he rasped, "my father pitted William and me against each other from the first." He wrenched his elbow free of Prudence's grasp. "This is *exactly* what dear Papa always wanted, to see the two of us fight like roosters until one left the other bleeding in the dust. And you know it as well as I do."

Great tears welled in Prudence's eyes. "Don't do this," she pleaded. "William's hurtin' something terrible, him bein' so close to your papa, and he ain't right in the head."

Calder shoved splayed fingers through his rumpled hair. "I'm sorry, Pru," he said gruffly. "I would do



anything in the world for you, anything except run from my brother."

He heard Prudence weeping as he moved along the hallway leading to the rear of the house and the yard beyond it.

William was standing in front of the summerhouse, waiting, his jaw hard with conviction, his eyes flashing. He'd already taken off his coat, draping it neatly over the back of a wrought-iron bench, and was in the process of rolling up his sleeves.

"I half expected you to disappear again, little brother," he taunted.

Calder wore no coat, and no gold links bound his cuffs to his wrists. He pushed up his sleeves, one at a time, ashamed of the wicked joy he felt at the prospect of doubling up his fists and pummeling William into a whimpering pulp. "You knew better," he said with a grim smile. "Of course, you can still save your worthless ass by taking back every rotten thing you've ever said about my mother. If you don't, I'm going to stuff parts of you down every gopher hole on this property."

William faltered slightly, but he didn't relent. On the contrary, he poured salt into raw, gaping wounds. "Did you know she ran away with another man, the night she died, your sainted mama, just the way your wife did years later?"

Calder felt cold and sick, as though some evil creature, some dragon of the invisible realms, had opened its mouth and spewed forth its vile, frigid breath. "Enough," he said, all but strangling on that single word.

His half brother smiled, resting his pale clerk's hands on his hips. "Oh, no, Calder," he said. "That wasn't nearly enough. You're going to hear the truth about your mother, the beautiful Marie, at long last. She was leaving Papa the night she died in that carriage accident, running away with a lover, just the way your wife left you. And, like Theresa, Marie was abandoning her child as well. She didn't want you, Calder."

Calder laughed, actually laughed, though bile scalded the back of his throat and he really believed, in that moment, that he could kill his half brother without compunction. "You're lying, about all of it," he said. "My mother died of a fever. And she would never have abandoned me—never. If you're looking for a way to make my blood boil, brother, you'll have to do better than that."

William made a contemptuous sound. "Fool. They brought Marie home after the accident, and she never regained consciousness. Papa only told you she was suffering from a fever to save your precious feelings—ask old Dr. Blanchard if you don't believe me. She'd broken every fragile bone in her body in the wreck, and they carried her here to die. The truth was, she'd been whoring with some second cousin of hers. They'd conceived a bastard, Marie and her sweetheart—she lost the poor little creature, of course, only hours before she passed on." He sighed philosophically. "That was for the best, no doubt."

Calder's knees felt weak. In his mind he heard Marie Holbrook's lilting voice singing a lullaby, felt her hands tucking the blankets in around him, knew again the brush of her lips across his forehead. "You're a liar," he said.

William went on as though Calder hadn't spoken. "Personally I've always wondered if *you* weren't the by-blow of one of Marie's many admirers," he said. "Papa was in his late forties when you came along, remember, and he hadn't sired a second child by my mother or, to my knowledge, any of the paramours that came later."

Because William's assertions challenged some of his most basic beliefs about himself, because he sensed

a grain of truth in them, Calder was shattered. "Suppose you're right," he said in a low, raw tone of voice. "Let's assume my mother was indeed a tramp, and I was sired by one of her lovers. Why did you wait until now to say these things, when you've obviously hated me for so many years?"

William indulged in a slow smile, even though he had to know he was about to take a trouncing from a younger, stronger man. "Papa wanted to pretend you were his. You were everything he would have asked for in a son, you see. Isn't that ironic? You, Calder, were the prodigal, always running off to some far country, or landing yourself in the middle of this damnable war. You tormented him, and he loved you for it, *cherished* you for it." He paused, took a deep breath, and tilted his head back to search the azure sky for a few moments. "Obviously I couldn't tell you the truth. I would have been disinherited for my trouble."

Calder ran a hand over his face. The fight had not even begun, and William had already defeated him, already broken him. "Can you prove any of this?"

"Of course I can—if I hadn't, you would be able to discount everything I've said on grounds of petty jealousy and spite. I have letters addressed to the lovely Marie, as well as some she'd written herself but never had a chance to post."

"I want to see them," Calder said. He was reeling inwardly, fighting for balance. He turned and moved away, toward the house.

William would not leave matters at that. Instead he came after Calder, grabbed him by one shoulder, whirled him around so that they stood face to face.

"You've already won," Calder said grimly, shoving a hand through his hair again. "What more do you want?"

William didn't bother to answer, he just flung his right fist at Calder, who saw the blow coming and blocked it by raising one arm. He was baffled, for a few moments at least, by his brother's insistence on provoking him, for *this* was truly a fight William couldn't win. Then, in a blaze of revelation, Calder realized that William *wanted* the pain, needed it to expunge demons of his own.

Closing his hand, Calder brought his knuckles up hard under William's chin. The punch connected; William's teeth slammed together, and a tiny bubble of blood appeared at the corner of his mouth.

"Is that enough?" Calder demanded, clenching his teeth. He almost missed the uncontainable anger he'd felt only minutes before; now he was numb. There was no fury inside him, no joy or sorrow. Nothing. "Or do I have to beat you senseless?"

William threw another punch, and this one was more accurate. He caught Calder square in the center of his solar plexus, forcing the air from his lungs.

Adrenaline surged through Calder's system, though his emotions were as dead as the man who had sired him. He hurtled into William headfirst, as he'd done many times as a boy, when his brother had tormented him until he lost control. The difference was, William was no longer bigger and stronger than Calder.

The conflict continued from there, fairly equal at first, and Calder reveled in it. He got as much pleasure, in fact, from taking punches as he did from throwing them. While the battle raged, he did not have to think about the impossible, fantastical situation with Maeve, the loss of a father he had not known he loved, and now this second, and somehow more wrenching, forfeiture of a mother he had adored.

Finally, his own face bloody and his knuckles bruised, Calder sent William to the ground with a right cross, and William did not rise. He half lay, half sat, one shoulder braced against the edge of a garden bench, breathing hard and deep. His eyes were blackened and nearly swollen shut, and yet there was an expression of redemptive bliss on his face that made Calder want to tie into him all over again.

He turned and stumbled toward the house.

The undertaker and his helpers had brought Bernard's body downstairs by that time; he was to lie in state until the next morning, when there would be a formal ceremony, followed, of course, by burial.

Capshaw, the mortician, assessed Calder's rumped, grass-stained clothes and bleeding face with undisguised disdain. He and the old man had played poker together, among other things, and there had been a certain grudging friendship between them.

"You haven't changed," the undertaker said, reaching into the fancy mahogany coffin his helpers had brought in to straighten Bernard's ascot.

Calder forced himself to the side of the long library table that had been moved into the parlor to support the casket and the sizable man reposing inside. He curled his fingers around the side of the coffin, heedless of the small bloodstains he left on the white satin lining, and stared down into the pale, still face of his father.

Or the man he had always believed was his father.

"Was my mother leaving him, the night she died?" he asked, mindful of the words only after they had left his mouth. It was a question Capshaw might well have the answer to, since he was close to the family and had probably prepared Marie Holbrook's broken body for the grave.

The undertaker cleared his throat. "This is no time to be discussing—"

Calder raised his eyes, locked his gaze with the other man's. "Damn you, *just tell me*," he rasped.

"Yes." Capshaw sighed the word, sending it out of his mouth on a rush of air. "Yes, Marie was leaving Bernard. And don't devil me about it, Calder, because that's all I'm going to say. Perhaps you don't have any respect for the dead—perhaps you've become hardened to it, seeing so much destruction on the battlefields—but I do. Bernard was a good friend to me, and I won't see his death turned into a parlor theatrical!"

Calder studied his father's cold, marblelike face, as if expecting to see some answer written there. Then he turned and moved away, walking slowly, like a man entranced, toward the main staircase.

He took refuge not in his room, but in the nursery where he had slept and played as a child. It had been kept much as it was, in the hope, Calder supposed, that there would be other children after the disastrous loss of Amalie.

One of her dolls was still seated in a miniature rocker next to the fireplace, as if waiting for the little girl to come back and claim it. Calder touched the toy as reverently as if it were some holy object, a belonging of Saint Paul or even Christ, then wrenched his hand back.

He'd lost everything, he realized. His life with Maeve—soon, even the memory of her would be gone,

thanks to her macabre magic—his child, his father, his illusions that there had been one person in his life—Marie—who had loved him selflessly, even his own identity. Calder no longer knew who he was.

It would have been a mercy if he'd been able to weep then, or curse the heavens, but he was still without feeling. His was a dead soul, entombed in living flesh.

Presently Calder returned to his own room.

He wasn't surprised to find a packet of letters resting on his bedside table, tied with faded ribbon. Beneath them were a few miscellaneous pages of expensive vellum, still faintly scented with his mother's perfume, their edges crumbling with age.

He left them long enough to go to the washstand and cleanse the blood and dirt from his face and hands. Then he carried the letters to a chair near the window and hunched there, stretching out his long legs, to read.

The loose pages told him all he needed to know; Marie Holbrook had indeed been leaving her husband for a lover, and she made no mention of her son.

Doubtless, he'd been nothing more to her than an inconvenience, despite the soft lullabies he remembered, the gentle nurturing, the tender words. Had Marie lived, then he, Calder, would have been as bereft as his own child was, years later, when Theresa abandoned her.

He laid the letters aside, closing his eyes, willing Maeve to come to him, willing her to be real.

In her cool, dark burrow, deep beneath the surface of the ground, Maeve stirred in her vampire sleep, but she did not awaken until sunset. She was aware of Calder's desperate summons the moment she opened her eyes, but she paused before going to him. She and all blood-drinkers were at war, and she could no longer follow every whim.

Lisette was clever, and she would like nothing better than to take Maeve prisoner. The ancient vampire was mad, but she wasn't stupid; she surely knew that the rebellion would fall apart without its central players, and she had already taken Valerian.

So Maeve waited, there in her hidden pit, until full consciousness returned. She felt a terrible thirst and knew that it must be slaked first thing. She could not risk weakness now, any more than she dared take impulsive chances.

She assembled herself in a faraway field hospital and fed on a dying soldier, obliterating his agony and his fear, making his passing one of ecstasy. Like the others, he mistook her for an angel of mercy, and blessed her, and Maeve wondered who the true monsters were—creatures like herself, or the mortals who orchestrated war.

After that, Maeve's head was clear, and she felt strong. Before setting out to search for Valerian, and thus, Lisette, she took herself to Calder's room in the family mansion.

He was slouched in a chair, unshaven, his hair and clothes mussed, drunker than a lord. Maeve went to his side, sensing the presence of death in the house, as well as rage and sorrow and, worst of all, hopelessness.

She touched his hair. "Calder."

He opened his eyes and looked at her, and even in that very disheveled state he was so beautiful to Maeve that she wondered how she could ever wipe out all memory of the love that had grown between them. She only knew that she must.

He groped for her, drew her down onto his lap. "I was beginning to think even you were a lie," he murmured, burying his battered face in her hair, which fell loose around the shoulders of her blue woolen cape.

"Tell me what's happened," Maeve said gently, placing light kisses on each of his bruised cheekbones. "Please."

Calder released the story in agonized increments, telling how he'd adored his mother, and believed in her, and found out only today that she'd deceived him, that her devotion had been nothing more than pretty pretense. He produced the crumbling pages, penned by her own hand, and Maeve felt his grief move in her spirit, like a child in a womb, as she read the telling words.

She thought, too, of her own mortal mother, a laughing, beautiful, and completely scatterbrained tavern maid. She'd lived in the eighteenth century, had Callie O'Toole, and gotten herself pregnant during a flirtation with a wealthy English merchant named Tremayne. Maeve and her twin brother, Aidan, had been the result of that liaison.

Maeve tilted Calder's head gently back and examined his wounds. "I could find out," she said, the idea coming to her only as she voiced it.

"Find out what?" Calder asked. He was more sober now, more focused.

She smoothed his hair. "About your mother. I could go back to that night, Calder. I cannot change history, that's entirely too dangerous, but I can find out whether she really meant to leave you. The question is, can you deal with the truth?"

He considered for a moment, his arms around her waist, drawing her closer. "There's no need of that, Maeve. I'm a grown man—I'll learn to accept that I've mourned a fantasy mother all these years. God knows, I've had enough practice at learning to accept unpleasant realities."

Maeve knew that he was right, but she also knew that emotions weren't governed by logic. Understanding what had happened to him, accepting it, would not spare Calder the pain of disillusionment. And there was always the chance that his suffering was based on a lie.

She rose from his lap and stood straight and tall. "When did it happen, your mother's accident?"

Calder murmured a date, his reactions slowed by the liquor he'd consumed earlier, then thrust himself to his feet, groping for her. "Maeve, wait—"

She closed her eyes and concentrated, ignoring Calder's protests, and when she opened them, she was standing on a sidewalk in front of that same house, but it was nearly thirty years earlier.

A storm was brewing; the wind was high and the sky dark. Maeve wrapped her cloak more closely around her, even though she did not feel the chill. She focused on the woman she sought, and was transported inside the great house, into a nursery.

There candlelight flickered, and a low fire burned on the hearth. A slender dark-haired woman sat on the side of a child's small bed, her narrow shoulders slumped. She was dressed in traveling garb, a simple dress, bonnet, and cloak, and as Maeve drew nearer, she realized that Marie Holbrook was weeping.

It was the sight of the child, however, that stunned Maeve to the core of her being. This was Calder, her love, the one man she would have considered spending all eternity with, as a little boy.

He was sound asleep, his dark hair tumbled over his forehead, his thick lashes brushing cheeks still plump with youth and innocence.

As Maeve watched, Marie bent and kissed the boy Calder's forehead lightly. He stirred and murmured something, but did not awaken.

"My baby," Marie whispered brokenly. She rose from the edge of the mattress with reluctance, and Maeve saw her in profile, saw the gleam of tears on her cheek, catching the light of the struggling fire. "Good-bye."

*No, Maeve thought, closing her eyes for a moment. Don't let it have happened this way, please .*

Lightning blazed beyond the leaded windows of Calder's room, and thunder threatened to burst the sky, but still he did not awaken.

Marie turned, half-blinded by obvious grief, unaware of Maeve's presence because Maeve had willed it so.

Maeve was confused; the woman didn't appear to be leaving her child willingly, and yet she did not bundle him up and carry him away with her, as a thousand, nay a million, other women would have done in a like situation.

She followed Marie into the hallway, where a young, thin, eager-looking lad awaited. Maeve guessed accurately that this was William, the difficult half brother Calder had mentioned, and she felt a surge of fury even before the youth spoke.

He flung himself away from the wainscoted wall to stand behind Marie, and his very being seemed to bristle with hatred. "Leaving so soon, Marie? Why don't you take your brat with you?"

She whirled, the fiery Marie, and slapped William hard across the face. "You know," she whispered. "Damn you, *you know* why I have to leave him—because no matter where we went, your father would hunt us down and tear Calder from my arms. I would die before I'd see that happen!"

Strangely prophetic words, Maeve thought sadly, watching from a little distance away. Marie Holbrook would indeed die, and soon; her accident was probably only minutes away.

It was a mercy, then, that the doomed woman had been forced to abandon her child. If she hadn't, Calder would surely have been killed, too, or at least crippled.

Maeve was still dealing with the mental images that idea produced when suddenly William grabbed at Marie, wild-eyed, shaking with some unholy passion. "Why did you waste yourself on that old man?" he rasped, speaking, no doubt, of his own father. "What do you see in this lover, this cousin of yours? Don't you understand that *I* can love you as no one else ever could?"



Marie struggled in the youth's grasp, her eyes bright with fury, despair, and fear. "William, let me go! This instant!"

At that moment a door closed heavily downstairs, and then a younger Bernard Holbrook started up the stairs. His handsome face was contorted with angry confusion.

"What in the name of hell and all its demons is going on here?" he demanded.

Marie was still fighting to free herself, and it was all Maeve could do to keep from interceding. No matter what transpired this night, she must not meddle, for the ramifications would creep into the years ahead like vines, dividing and dividing again, changing the future in myriad unpredictable ways.

William raised his voice to an unnaturally high, thin pitch, and his fingers bit into Marie's shoulders as he tightened his grip on her. "She was leaving you, Papa!" he cried. "Your *wife* was running away, but I stopped her!"

The expression on the elder Holbrook's face was one of wounded bewilderment. "Release your stepmother, William," he ordered, hurrying up the stairs. "Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"*Bitch*," William whispered, and then he flung Marie from him. She struggled to regain her balance, a look of startled horror on her face, and then tumbled not down the stairs, but over the railing that edged the uppermost landing. She did not scream as she fell, and there was no sound after her body struck the marble floor below, except for William's rapid breathing and the tick of the long-case clock on the first landing.

Bernard broke the silence first, with a choked sigh. "Good God," he cried, scrambling, groping his way back down the stairs, like a man blinded. "Marie! Oh, dear God help us, *Marie* !"

## CHAPTER 12

"Oh, Marie," Bernard Holbrook whispered brokenly, kneeling beside his wife's motionless body, there on the marble floor of the entryway. He took her limp hand and smoothed the knuckles with a circular motion of his thumb. "Marie—"

Maeve followed, still invisible to both William and his father, as the former moved slowly down the stairs. Above, in the nursery, the youthful Calder slept, heedless of the fact that his life had just been altered forever.

"Will she die?" William rasped when at last he'd reached his father and the stepmother he had clearly both loved and despised.

"I hope not," Bernard said in an agonized whisper. "Dear God in heaven, I hope not." Tears gleamed in his eyes. "All the servants are out, so you'll have to go for help. Get Dr. Blanchard, quickly!"

William lingered, clenching and unclenching his fists, his collar wet with perspiration. "But what if she dies?" he asked. "They'll say I killed her. I'll hang or spend the rest of my life in prison—"

Bernard stroked Marie's pale forehead with a tender motion as she stirred and murmured, trapped beneath a crushing burden of pain. The older man spoke with quiet determination. "I know you didn't



mean for this to happen, William. And you are, after all, my son. I will do whatever I must to protect you."

William's look was hot with contempt and totally void of pity as he glared down at the unconscious Marie. "She was nothing but a whore," he said. "She even tried to lure me to her bed—"

The elder Holbrook closed his eyes tightly for a moment, and a crimson flush climbed his neck to throb in his face. "Enough," he growled. "Get the doctor before I change my mind and hang you myself!"

At last William turned and hurried toward the door, but the expression on his face was hard with a hatred terrible to see, even for a vampire.

Maeve drew nearer, soothing Marie's internal suffering as much as she could by means of her thoughts, but she dared not show herself.

Bernard was weeping quietly, pressing Marie's small hand to his mouth. "Oh, darling," he pleaded. "Forgive me."

Marie stirred again and moaned softly. "Calder," she said in the merest shadow of a whisper. "Help him—William will—kill him—"

A ragged sob escaped Bernard. "No, my darling—I promise you, Calder will be safe. Please, Marie—were you truly leaving me?"

"Yes," Marie said. Her eyes were open now, though there was a faraway light in them, as though she looked beyond Bernard, beyond the walls of that grand house, beyond the stormy night sky. She felt no pain, for Maeve had mentally deadened those places inside Marie that measured suffering.

"Why?" Bernard said, although he must have known.

"I wanted—needed your love—you wouldn't give it." Marie's gaze shifted, then locked with Maeve's. The vampire saw quiet acknowledgment in the woman's eyes.

It didn't surprise Maeve that Marie could see her, while she was invisible to both William and Bernard. The dying could often discern shapes where the living saw only thin shadows, or nothing at all.

After that, Marie closed her eyes and lapsed into the enfolding warmth of a coma, one from which she would never recover.

Bernard kept his vigil at his wife's side, smoothing her hair now and then, or stroking the curve of her cheek. Presently William and the doctor burst into the foyer, along with two men they must have recruited along the way.

The doctor, a diminutive man with a balding pate and blue eyes as fierce as those of a Viking, dropped to one knee to examine Marie. In a soft voice he said, "You'd best prepare yourself for a loss."

Marie was carefully placed on a long panel of mahogany, the extension piece from the huge table in the dining room, and carried upstairs to her deathbed by the two strangers.

When those men had gone, and Dr. Blanchard had joined William and Bernard in the study, Maeve was present, too, a part of the night, listening and watching.

It was there, in Bernard Holbrook's august study, that the story of the carriage accident was concocted. A wrecked coach would be easy enough to produce, they agreed grimly, and from that night forward they would all swear that Marie Holbrook had met with tragedy as she fled her unhappy marriage.

Maeve's feelings were mixed as she left the study for the nursery upstairs, where the boy who would become the man she loved more than life itself lay sleeping. He was beautiful, that child, with his mother's coloring and his father's strength of features, and she stood watching him as long as she dared.

Gazing at him, Maeve mourned her lost humanity bitterly, if briefly. This sleeping child was the mirror image of the little ones she would never be able to give Calder, despite the staggering depth and breadth of her love for him.

It would be difficult to go back to that future time, where her cherished one awaited her now as a grown man, and tell him the whole truth. He was bound to be furious with William for causing Marie's death, even though the act had been committed more by negligence than intent, and he would hate his dead father all over again, for engineering and then perpetuating a lie to protect his elder son.

Maeve crept close to the bed, brushed the slumbering child's tousled hair with the lightest pass of her fingertips, indulged in the futile wish that she could somehow spare him the suffering he faced, and then took herself ahead in time.

Calder was keeping a vigil in the main parlor, where his father lay in state, a pale, solemn figure, grand even in death.

"What happened?" Calder asked when Maeve appeared at his side.

She took his hand and drew him away from the casket and the husk of a man inside, toward the glow of the fire. There was no other light in the room, but for that and the shimmer of the summer moon.

She said the most important thing first, and she said it gently. "Your mother didn't want to leave you, Calder—it broke her heart, in fact. All the same, she couldn't stay with your father, and she knew there was no place she might take you where Bernard wouldn't find you. She wanted to spare you the trauma of being pulled from her arms by some sheriff or detective and taken away again."

Calder closed his eyes, absorbing what Maeve had told him. Then he laid his hands on her shoulders and said hoarsely, "There's more."

She nodded and then, slowly, as tenderly as she could, she explained how Marie had really met her death that night—how William had flung her from him, in a fit of thwarted passion, and she'd fallen over the rail at the top of the staircase. How Bernard had staged a carriage wreck and told everyone that Marie had sustained her fatal injuries in the accident.

Calder's face, already bruised and abraded from the altercation with William earlier in the rear garden, tightened with rage as he listened. Maeve began to fear that he would go straight to William's room, drag his brother from his bed, and kill him with his bare hands.

Maeve's worry did not stem from the possibility that William Holbrook might be the next to lie in a coffin in that very parlor; it was the knowledge that Calder would be hanged for the act that troubled her.

"Let me take you back to England," she pleaded softly when the sorrowful tale had been told and a few

moments of silence had passed. "You'll be away from this place, these people—"

Calder turned from her abruptly and strode toward the center of the house, and Maeve went after him, forgetting to use her vampire powers, hurrying as a mortal woman would.

Instead of climbing the stairs, however, Calder turned up the gaslights in the massive foyer and stood on the exact spot where Marie's shattered body had struck the hard, cold floor. As he looked up at the rail of the highest landing, Maeve knew he was imagining the whole terrible scenario, assimilating the fear his mother must have felt as she fell, the blinding pain that would have assailed her at impact.

"Calder." Maeve said his name quietly, laying calming hands on his broad, tension-corded shoulders. "Let it be over now. Forgive your father and brother and go on."

He whirled, his face as cold and hard as the polished marble beneath his feet. "Forgive them? That would mean saying they were right in what they did!"

Maeve shook her head, very human tears gathering in her eyes because looking upon Calder's torment was far worse than bearing her own had ever been. What treacherous business it was, this loving another being so completely, so hopelessly.

"No, darling—that isn't the case at all. Forgiving won't change what Bernard and William did—it's not something you'd be doing for them, but for yourself. Don't you see? You'd be rolling back the stone that keeps you inside your tomb."

Calder's smile was rueful and bitter, utterly void of tenderness or mirth. "That sounds like an angel's reasoning to me," he said. "Have you been consorting with Gideon, like Dimity?"

She rested her forehead against his shoulder for a moment, coping with the inner tumult of loving this man, then looked up at him, her hands resting on his chest. Beneath her right palm his heart thumped, pumping the substance that sustained them both, though in very different ways, of course.

"Whether spoken by a devil or an angel, the truth is the truth," she said wearily. "Hating your father and brother will serve no purpose but to sap your strength. Now—will you come away with me? Please?"

He averted his gaze for a long moment, then looked directly at Maeve again. "I can't," he said in a voice gruff with desire and regret. "Unless I can share your life—every part of it—then it's better if I stay here. When I was in London, I was hardly more than a house pet. I can't live that way."

Maeve knew he was right, and she nodded woodenly. Although leaving Calder behind was torture, she had no choice—there was a war being fought in her world, as well as his. The night was passing, and she had yet to find Valerian or confront Lisette. "I love you," she said, desperate to retain some link between them.

He leaned forward and kissed the top of her head. "I know," he said. "And I certainly love you. But it appears that we're a star-crossed pair if ever there was one. Even Romeo and Juliet can't equal the tragedy of our romance."

Maeve's heart splintered within her. She wanted to deny his words, wanted it with everything in her, but she couldn't. Again, he was right. "I'll make you forget me soon," she said raggedly. "But just now, during this terrible time, I need for you to love me consciously, willingly."

"It's all right," Calder said. "Kiss me good-bye, darling, and go on about your deadly business."

She shook her head again, stepping back. The temptation to give in to her own selfish desires and make Calder into a blood-drinker, like herself, was overwhelming. She couldn't afford to forget, even for a moment, that if she transformed this man, she would also seal his eternal damnation. From the moment of change, his soul would belong to darkness.

"I don't trust myself to kiss you," she said, feeling as though she would shatter into pieces, crushed between her passion for Calder and the purity of the love she bore him.

He laid his hands to either side of her face, his thumbs stroking her cheekbones. Then he offered a familiar plea. "Make me a vampire, Maeve. Make me like you. Can't you see that there's nothing here for me anymore? That there is no reason for me to go on living as a mortal?"

Maeve's temper flared. "There is every reason!" she cried. "You're a doctor, and there are human beings suffering in hospitals, on battlefields—"

He silenced her by moving the pad of one thumb across her mouth. "I would be able to relieve far more of that suffering if I had powers like yours," he said gently. "As it is, I can do very little, except watch my patients die in agony, or worse, survive, in the kind of pain that can only produce madness."

She hesitated, wavering, swayed by Calder's argument and by the fact that she wanted him near her, now more than ever. Then, however, her prior convictions won out.

What were a few score years spent as a mortal, compared to an eternity of hellfire?

"Good-bye," she said, and then she raised her hands high, closed her eyes, and vanished.

The warlock, Dathan, was pacing when Maeve met him at the agreed place, the stone monument in the English countryside that had figured so prominently in her experiences. Aidan had died to the life of a vampire and been resurrected here as a mortal man, and she and Valerian had met within the druids' circle many times, to argue and confer.

"Where have you been?" the warlock demanded, the night wind catching his dark cloak and causing it to flow behind him.

"I had business to attend to," Maeve said stiffly. "And kindly remember that I don't have to account to you—about anything."

Dathan's strangely beautiful countenance softened, but only slightly. His eyes were still feral and sharp, missing no physical nuance of emotion or intent, no matter how minor. "We will not serve our purposes by arguing," he said finally. "My forces, because they can move about in daylight, have destroyed a vast number of Lisette's vampires with stakes and fire. She herself still eludes us, however."

"We'll find Lisette when she wants us to find her," Maeve said with weary certainty. "What of Valerian? Is there news of him?"

Dathan looked impatient for a moment, as though he'd rather not trouble himself with the likes of that particular, and undeniably controversial, vampire. Then he sighed like a suffering saint and said, "She's taken him to a place we cannot reach."

Maeve stiffened. "Back in time," she mused aloud as the realization struck her. "Back to a period before my death as a human, so that I cannot reach him."

Dathan nodded. "We warlocks cannot travel between decades and centuries, the way you blood-drinkers do, so we can be of no assistance in this matter. Far better if we simply put all thought of the unfortunate Valerian behind us and concentrate on the business at hand. Time is slipping away, remember. The forces of Nemesis will be on us soon."

Turning away, Maeve stepped up onto the curve of a fallen pillar and stood gazing at the dark plain that stretched away to the horizon. She knew well that time was sorely limited, and that the effort to destroy Lisette would neither stand nor fall because of Valerian. Still, he was the one who had given Maeve the dubious yet cherished gift of immortality. It had been he who had shown her her new powers and taught her to use them. He who had loved her once, in his own way, and introduced her to passion.

No matter what came of it, she decided, gazing up at a star-splattered sky, she could not abandon Valerian. She would have to find a way to help him.

When she turned to face Dathan again, she saw that he had divined her thoughts, and he was coldly furious.

"Come," he said in a charged but otherwise even voice. "Let us seek the troublesome Lisette and move to destroy her."

Maeve assessed the sky. "It will be morning soon. I cannot tarry much longer."

Dathan looked violently impatient. "Then shift yourself to the other side of the world, where the light won't reach."

His reasoning was simple, and it wasn't as though the option hadn't occurred to Maeve many times since her making as a vampire. Some blood-drinkers, however, had experimented with the technique and never been seen again.

"It would be logical," she reflected, "for Lisette to do that. It's evident that she can move about during the day, from what Isabella said about Lisette's sudden appearance in her and Valerian's love-nest that morning. But I doubt our queen has progressed to such a point that she can endure the full glare of the sun."

"Exactly," Dathan said. "Let us go there—to China—and search for her."

Maeve turned, looked down into the warlock's handsome face in surprise. "You can do that? Travel so far, simply by the power of your mind?"

"Of course we can," he replied with exaggerated politeness. "Did you think we had no magical powers?"

Maeve went to stand facing him, on the stony, much-trampled ground. The druid stones were obviously a popular meeting point for humans, too, though only the most intrepid would venture there at night. "Let us see what powers you have," she challenged coolly. "Just as dawn arrives, we'll take a little journey together."

They waited, side by side, cloaked in silence and private musings, until the first glow of pink and apricot rimmed the horizon. Then, like a fledgling swimmer plunging into deep water, Maeve thrust herself into

the unknown, the darkness on the opposite side of the globe.

At first, dazed by the swiftness of the trip and the energy it required, Maeve could not discern where she was. She knew only that Dathan was beside her, and that he supported her with a chivalrous arm around her waist.

After a few moments Maeve's head cleared. She had not been stricken by the distance, she knew, but by the avoidance of the vampire sleep that would normally have claimed her just then.

"Fascinating!" Dathan remarked, looking down into a moon-washed pit, where dozens of life-size bronze soldiers marched in formation, accompanied by life-size horses and chariots. The excavation had clearly been abandoned for some time, and Maeve knew intuitively that there were hundreds, perhaps thousands, more of these ancient sculptures buried all over China.

Maeve marveled, but not at the industry of a long-dead civilization. No, it was her own ability to resist that all-encompassing sleep that amazed her. It was probably these reflections, she would conclude later, that prevented her from sensing the impending attack.

They came out from behind every soldier, those terrible, blood-drinking corpses Lisette had made, making a shrill sound that was part shriek and part groan.

Dathan muttered an exclamation and tensed beside Maeve, and she knew that if he'd had a sword, he would have drawn it.

"Great Zeus," he rasped, "there are hundreds of them!"

Maeve nodded, a half-smile forming on her lips at the prospect of challenge. "It would be my guess," she said, "that we have found more than this army of blathering creatures."

"What?" Dathan demanded, bracing himself as the creatures scrambled out of the pit and began lumbering toward them.

"Lisette is here," Maeve said calmly.

In the next instant a geyser of blue-gold light exploded in the center of the pit full of statues, and as the glow solidified into a female shape, looming some twenty feet off the ground, even the mindless army stopped and stared.

Maeve applauded. "Very impressive," she called as the shape became Lisette, dramatic and horrible in a gauzy gown that caught the night wind.

"Are you insane?" Dathan hissed, as the bluish light of Lisette's countenance played over both their faces.

"Perhaps," Maeve said, taking a step forward to stand at the precipice of the pit. "If you can summon your warlocks, you'd better do it now. Otherwise, you and I are doomed to a terrible end that might well have a beginning but no finish."

Dathan shuddered, the way a mortal would have, and whispered back, "Don't be naive. I don't have to send for my armies—I brought them with me."

Maeve did not look over her shoulder; indeed, she did not shift her gaze from Lisette's shimmering form.



Still, she could feel the warlocks now, gathering in the darkness behind her and Dathan.

Their presence, while reassuring, was by no means a reprieve from Lisette's vengeance, however. She was possessed of spectacular powers—that much was obvious—and her army of brainless marvels would fight tirelessly at her command, not out of any such unvampire-like trait as loyalty, of course, but because she controlled them so completely.

"You are bold, Maeve Tremayne," Lisette said in an earsplitting and yet strangely sweet voice, looming there in the darkness like the angel of death.

Oddly, Maeve thought of a movie she had seen once, during one of her reluctant visits to the twentieth century—a tale containing an alleged wizard, who had projected a terrifying image to frighten visitors away. All the time he'd been hiding behind a curtain, pulling levers and twisting dials, a nervous, fretful little man with no magical powers at all.

"Yes," Maeve agreed. "Some would even say brazen. Show me your true self, Vampire. I am not misled by this theatrical trick of yours, though I must say it's memorable."

The creature that Lisette wanted them to believe was herself undulated with furious, beautiful light, and a continuous shriek of rage filled the night, loud enough, piercing enough, to shatter the very stars themselves.

Suddenly the banshee-like cry shaped itself into words. "Kill them!" Lisette screamed, and her troops, mesmerized only a moment before, began their stumbling, awkward advance again.

Battle erupted all around Maeve and Dathan, but they were in the eye of the storm, at least temporarily, for the warlocks came out of the night to meet the vampires and engage them in bitter combat.

Unearthly shrieks rent the air as warlocks were cut down by the vampires' superior strength and, conversely, blood-drinkers were infused with the poisonous blood of their enemies.

Maeve concentrated on Lisette, whose image still hovered above them, shining and huge, and her thoughts transported her to a niche in a sheer cliff overlooking the battleground.

There Maeve found the vampire queen, no bigger or more daunting than she was herself. Lisette looked disconcerted for a moment, but then, with a scream of madness and outrage, she flung herself at Maeve.

They fought, the two vampires, snarling like panthers battling over a kill on some African steppe, tearing at each other. Maeve felt herself weakening, felt the vampire sleep threatening her, and redoubled her efforts, knowing that if she did not win this battle she would be left in the open to face the ravages of the morning sun.

Just when Maeve believed she could not continue, that the disastrous sleep would swallow her, however, Lisette turned to vapor and vanished.

Maeve collapsed against a wall of the shallow cave. She was alone, and gravely weakened, and if she did not feed and rest in a dark, safe place, she would be lost. She tried to transport herself back to her lair in England, but the effort failed. She clutched her middle and slid helplessly down the side of the cave to the ground.

She heard the battle going on and on outside. Evidently, when Lisette had fled—if indeed that had been



her intent—she had not chosen to take her horrid soldiers with her.

Maeve's head lolled, and she thought of Calder, and then of Aidan and Valerian. This was the ironic end of it all, then, she reflected, with a strangled sound that might have been either a laugh or a sob. She was wounded, the dawn was inching slowly, inexorably, toward her, and her only hope of rescue was a band of warlocks—*warlocks*, who six months ago, even six days ago, had been her implacable enemies.

She had almost lost consciousness by the time the din ceased, and she could feel the first light of dawn creeping into the cave, finding her with its acid fingers, tearing at her injured flesh.

Then—surely it was only a dream—strong arms lifted her, and she felt a rushing sensation, and the burning stopped.

Maeve opened her eyes slowly, fearing to find that Lisette had come back for her, and brought her as a captive to some place of temporary safety. She found, instead, that she was inside an old crypt—there was no telling what country she was in—and Dathan was with her.

He smiled, though his blue eyes were as cold as ever, and held a golden goblet to her lips. "Drink," he said.

Maeve knew the chalice contained blood, the substance she most needed and that, at the same time, most repulsed her. She hesitated, quite sensibly, for this supposed gesture of mercy might well be a ruse. Dathan might be offering her the poison that flowed through his own veins, or those of one of his multitude of followers.

"Take it," he ordered gently, reading her mind. "It's low-grade stuff—we stole it from a refrigerator in a nearby hospital—but there's no warlock taint to fret about."

Maeve's choices were limited, since she could not regain her strength, or indeed even survive, without ingesting blood. She decided to take the risk and let the stuff flow in through her fangs, completely bypassing her tongue.

When the chalice was empty, she sank back onto silken pillows and regarded Dathan with questioning eyes. Her wounds had already begun to mend, closed by the cool, healing darkness and her own mystical powers, but she was frightfully weak.

"You saved me," she said with emotion. "Why?"

Dathan narrowed his eyes at her and sighed again. He would have made an excellent martyr, it seemed to Maeve.

"Not out of anything so misguided as mercy," he finally replied with a shrug. "We cannot achieve our objectives without you."

Maeve tried to rise, but Dathan pushed her back down again.

"Wait," he said. "You must have more rest and more blood. You will be of no use to us without your strength and your powers."

"None of that will matter," Maeve argued, "if our time runs out and Nemesis is unleashed with his sword of vengeance."

Dathan did not look quite so desperate or despairing as he had in times past. He shoved a hand through his thick, maple-brown hair. "We can conclude by the events of last night, I think, that Lisette's new lair is somewhere in the region of that excavation."

Maeve nodded in full, if reluctant, agreement. "How did your warlocks fare against those monsters of hers?"

"Like your encounter with the queen," Dathan answered, "it ended in something of a draw. We fought until dawn was imminent, and then the opposing forces fled, of course, to escape the light. That was when I found you on the floor of that cave—until that moment I thought you'd deserted us."

Had Maeve been mortal, she would have flushed with annoyance and outrage. "Do you believe me to be such a coward? Think again, Warlock—I have as much courage *asten* witches!"

Dathan laughed and handed her the chalice again; it had been refilled and brought back by a cloaked creature Maeve had glimpsed out of the corner of her eye. "And as much pride, I vow," he said. "Drink up, Mistress Tremayne. I fear we have many frightful adventures still ahead of us."

## CHAPTER 13

Somehow Calder passed the night without awakening William and throttling him, and with the morning came a drizzling rain and a steady stream of visitors. Like crows in their black garb, the mourners passed by the casket single file, peering inside to see how death suited Bernard Holbrook.

All morning and all afternoon they came, the grieving, the curious, the indifferent, the relieved, and the secretly pleased. They ate hungrily of the food Prudence and her small staff had prepared, and speculated among themselves about Calder and William and the bruised state of their faces.

Calder hated every moment of that interminable day and dreaded the one to follow, for that would bring the funeral, the eulogies, the grim and final business of burial. To him, the world looked dark, and it was difficult to believe that the sun would ever shine again.

After the last of the sorrowful callers had left, Calder and William accidentally found themselves alone in the large dining room. William took a piece of smoked turkey from a platter and bit into it, regarding Calder through swollen eyes.

"We'll have the reading of the will tomorrow, after the ceremonies," the elder brother announced, reaching for another piece of meat.

Calder shrugged. "I don't give a damn about that," he said.

"Good," William replied. "Papa was closeted away for hours one day, just last month, with his lawyers. I recall that he was especially exasperated with you at that time, so don't be surprised if you find yourself in the street, with nothing to live on but that pitiful stipend the army pays you."

Although Calder's stomach rebelled at the very sight of food, he knew only too well that he would not be able to think clearly or function well in an emergency if he did not eat. He went to the long table, against his will, and filled a plate, taking slices of turkey and ham, some potato salad, and a serving of Prudence's

famous fruit compote. Then, by a deft motion of one foot, learned in boyhood, he drew back a chair.

He paused for a few moments, regarding the food he'd taken and envying Maeve because she didn't have to trouble herself with the stuff at all. As he took up his fork, Calder raised his eyes to William's face.

"Take it all," he said, only a little surprised to realize that he meant it. "Take the money, take this goddamned mausoleum of a house, take the illustrious Holbrook name and the power that goes with it."

William blanched, his fingers tightening over the back of a chair. Plainly he hadn't been expecting Calder's acquiescence, but another fight instead. "You can't be serious," he said.

Calder ate a few bites of ham, chewing each one thoroughly, before answering. "You murdered my mother," he said at last. "And that old man lying in there with his eyelids stitched together covered up for you. As far as I'm concerned, if I never see you or this place again, it will be too soon."

Sweat beaded on William's upper lip. "I killed Marie? Where did you get such an idea?" he demanded hoarsely, pulling back a chair of his own and collapsing into it. "And why is it that you can't speak of our father with some semblance of respect, even now?"

"I loved him," Calder conceded. "But respect is another thing. As for my mother's death, well, you might say I have a way of looking into the past."

William's hand trembled visibly as he reached for a carafe of Madeira and then a wineglass. "I didn't lay a hand on her," he said.

"You're a liar," Calder replied, still eating. He knew his calm manner was unnerving his brother, and he was pleased by the fact. "She was going to leave this house, and our esteemed father, and you intercepted her. There was an argument, and you gripped her by the shoulders. She struggled, and you wouldn't release her—until you thrust her away from you in a moment of fury. That was when she tumbled backward over the railing and fell twenty feet to the floor of the foyer."

William had managed to pour wine, but his subsequent attempts to raise the glass to his white lips failed because he was shaking. "Pure fantasy," he said.

Calder stared at him for a long, purposely disconcerting interval. "It happened just that way," he insisted quietly, "and we both know it. Kindly don't insult me with your denials."

After casting a yearning look at his wine, William wiped one forearm across his mouth. "If you really believe this—this delusion, then why haven't you tried to avenge Marie's death?"

Calder smiled grimly. "There has hardly been time for that," he said indulgently. "Still, we're young, you and I," he added with a shrug. "There's no rush."

At last William made a successful grab for his glass and raised it tremulously to his lips. After a few audible gulps, his color began to return, and he was steadier. "Is that a threat?"

Again, Calder shrugged, reaching for a platter and helping himself to some of Prudence's cold rice salad. "It might be. Then again, it might not. To be quite frank, I haven't decided how I'll deal with you." He chewed thoughtfully for a few moments, swallowed, and then gestured at William with an offhanded motion of his fork. "Rest assured, though, that *I will* deal with you."

William swallowed the rest of his wine and reached for the carafe while he could. "You don't scare me," he said, though his manner and the pallor of his complexion gave the lie to his words.

Calder smiled again and continued to eat.

That night he waited for Maeve to come to him, prayed that she would, and finally she appeared. She was as ethereal as a spirit, and throughout the magical encounter that awaited him, he feared he was only dreaming.

Without a word she slipped into bed beside him, encircling him in her soft, strong arms. She kissed the underside of his jaw and sent shivers of forlorn desire rushing through his system.

"Maeve," he whispered.

She touched his lips with an index finger to silence him, then trailed kisses down over his chest and his belly. His manhood surged upright in response, and he drew in a harsh breath when she touched the tip with her tongue.

Calder groaned and arched his back, completely in her power. He whispered a plea, and she granted his wish, consuming him, and he writhed in a fever of passion and need. At the last possible moment, she moved astride him, and took him deep inside her, and rode him while his body buckled beneath hers in the throes of triumph. She muffled his ragged shout of release by laying one cool hand over his mouth.

"I love you," he told her when their encounter was over, and she lay beside him, close and slender and solid. "Please, Maeve—don't leave me. Don't work your sorcery and make us forget each other—I can't bear the prospect of that."

She leaned over him and kissed his mouth, but lightly, brushing his lips with her own. Still she did not speak, but in truth there was no need of it. Everything she was thinking and feeling was plain in her dark blue eyes.

Calder's vision blurred as he looked up at her, and he touched her smooth cheek with an index finger. "So incredibly beautiful," he marveled in a whisper, certain he would perish with the loss of her. He wasn't sure, in fact, that he himself would exist at all, without the knowledge and memory of Maeve Tremayne.

Maeve smiled at him, the expression full of sweetness and sorrow, and then removed herself from his arms, from the warm tangle of the bedsheets. Once again she was wearing the soft, gauzy gown she had shed earlier to enter Calder's embrace.

He gave a low, despairing cry and stretched out a hand to her, but between one heartbeat and the next, she vanished.

Calder wept, though he did not make a sound, well aware that Maeve had made up her mind to destroy their love, to tear it from the universe by its very roots.

For the first time in his life he wanted to die.

Perhaps, he thought later, when he'd composed himself a little, she had already begun the mysterious process that would erase her from his memory, and him from her own. Perhaps he would awaken the

next morning, or the one after that, with no recollection of the beautiful vampire who haunted his soul, as well as his mind and body.

Even though he knew the transition itself would probably be painless, the prospect of it was the purest torture.

Calder tried to reason with himself. Undoubtedly he would simply go on with his life, treating his patients, perhaps meeting another woman, marrying, fathering a houseful of children. The war, God willing, was bound to end soon, and the sundered land would begin to mend itself into some new and better nation.

No, it wouldn't be a bad existence, and he wouldn't know the difference anyway, wouldn't know what he was missing any more than the corpse of his father, still lying in a wash of candlelight in the parlor, could comprehend that life was going on without him.

Still, for all the dangers and all the terrible things he would see and probably do, Calder wanted to be with Maeve. And yes, he wanted to share her fantastic powers, too, but only because they would enable him to help his patients in ways that were impossible then. He could travel into the future, for instance, into the late twentieth century, the era to which the mystery of time had progressed, according to Maeve, and learn even more about the art of medicine than the miraculous textbooks had taught him. He would be able to bring that knowledge back to people who suffered, along with chemicals, pills, and serums that could kill pain without making the heart race the way morphine did. Vaccinations that would protect small children who in his own time were cruelly felled by maladies such as measles, diphtheria, and whooping cough...

He drifted off to sleep, and morning took him by surprise. Confused, uncertain if Maeve had come to him during the night or simply worked some trick of the mind on him and created the illusion of herself.

By rote, Calder washed and dressed and went downstairs to the dining room, but even as he filled his plate at the sideboard and went to the table, his thoughts were muddled. He was not aware of William's presence until his brother spoke.

"Calder."

William had taken a seat at the head of the table, but he wasn't taking breakfast. A hot cup of coffee steamed before him, and he poured rum into the brew as Calder looked at him in cold silence.

William was flushed now, his eyes feverishly bright, like those of an animal approaching the last stages of rabies. "I think you should go away," he said. "To Europe, perhaps, or maybe out West. I'm sure Papa left you enough money to make a new start."

Calder pushed back his chair, dropped his fork to his china plate with a deliberate clatter, and stood. "You've waxed generous, all of a sudden, even reasonable. Why is that, William?"

His brother started to answer, choked on his own words, and began again. "I want to be fair, that's all."

"You want to be fair," Calder repeated softly in a marveling tone. "Of course you do. And General Lee wants to hand all of Dixie over to Mr. Lincoln, tied with Union-blue ribbons." His voice hardened. "Damn it, do you take me for a fool? You'd murder me in my sleep if you thought you could get away with it!"

William closed his eyes tightly for a moment and swayed in his chair. He didn't speak again as Calder turned and strode out of the room.

Valerian sat in the cool, dark dungeon, knees drawn up, back pressed to the dank stone wall behind him. Had his captor been anyone other than Lisette, he'd have escaped easily, but her power was as strong as it had ever been—perhaps stronger, in that peculiar way of diseased minds. It was her magic that held him; the chains and bars and heavy iron doors were just for show.

He sighed, ran one hand through his mane of chestnut-colored hair, and wondered what Maeve and the others were doing, two hundred years into the future in the nineteenth century. It was just possible, he thought with a scowl, that Maeve was glad he was out of the way or, worse, that she hadn't even noticed that he was gone.

Valerian thrust himself to his feet, which were half buried in the fetid straw covering the floor. Rats and mice and a variety of other vermin populated the stuff, rustling and scurrying in the darkness.

"Lisette!" he shouted, his voice echoing in that enormous, lonely tomb of a place. "Damn you, show yourself!"

There was no answer, of course. Lisette had simply dropped him here, sometime in the middle of the seventeenth century, and it was entirely possible that she planned to let him rot. That would probably be a more effective, and more twisted, form of torture than anything else she could have devised.

In the distance he heard a creaking sound and the terrified blathering of a mortal.

Valerian closed his eyes and at the same time tried to shut the sound out of his ears, repulsed and shaken by it, but his efforts were futile. Until that night, he'd been sustained by animal blood, inferior stuff that barely kept him conscious. Now, plainly, Lisette or one of her several lieutenants had apparently decided to serve up a feast.

No doubt he, Valerian, was being fattened up for the kill.

A vampire called Shaleen, a dark-haired minx of a creature Valerian had never encountered before his imprisonment, appeared in the arched doorway of his cell, gripping a half-starved, flea-ridden mortal by one arm.

The boy was dressed in rags, all bones and filthy in the bargain, and he blinked in the darkness, all the more terrified because he could not see the fate that awaited him.

Shaleen, who was beautiful and eminently sane, unlike most of the ludicrous creatures Lisette surrounded herself with, curled her lip contemptuously and flung the unfortunate, blubbering human down at Valerian's feet.

"Here," said the other vampire, quite uncharitably. "Your dinner."

Valerian ignored the pitiful creature groveling in the rancid straw, at least for the moment, and fixed his attention on Shaleen. "Did Lisette make you into a blood-drinker?"

She studied him with insolent brown eyes. Her hair, a lovely caramel color, tumbled to her waist, unbrushed, with a thistle entangled here and there. "No," she answered. "Did she make you?"

Valerian's making was a memory he cherished, and he had never shared the experience with another being, not even Aidan or Maeve. "No," he replied shortly as the mortal clutched at his clothes, begging in

incoherent phrases for mercies that were not forthcoming. "Why do you stay here? Why do you help her?"

Shaleen smiled. "I'm a new vampire. Lisette is teaching me her magic—I'm going to help her rule, after she destroys Maeve Tremayne once and for all."

Valerian laid a hand on the mortal's head, stroking him in consolation, the way he might have done with a whining dog. Using the oldest magic he knew, he numbed the poor wretch's mind, thus calming him. "Surely you're not foolish enough to believe it will be easy to stop Maeve? Her powers are as great as Lisette's—perhaps greater, because she isn't mad. Furthermore, Maeve has fate on her side—she is the blood-drinker of legend, the one who will overthrow Lisette."

Shaleen's lovely face hardened, only for a moment and almost imperceptibly, and yet in that time Valerian discerned that she had fancied herself to be that vampire. In her heart of hearts, she was plotting against Lisette, planning to supplant her.

Valerian smiled. "You are very ambitious indeed," he said. He let the smile fade, for he had not lived so many centuries without learning a few things about dramatic effect. "You are also foolhardy. Lisette will recognize your duplicity, and when that happens, the worst sinner in hell will be better off than you."

She raised her chin in defiance, did the beautiful and treacherous Shaleen, but there was no hiding her fear, not from Valerian.

"Help me get out of here," he said softly in his most persuasive voice, one that had lured many a mortal and not a few vampires into his web. "Your plan cannot succeed, little one. Lisette is too suspicious, and much too powerful, to fall for such bumbling deceptions as yours."

He saw her waver, sensed her indecision, but then she withdrew into the doorway.

"Lisette warned me about you," she said accusingly. "She said you were a better liar than the devil himself, and twice as charming, and she was right. Enjoy your supper, Valerian."

With that, Shaleen went out, shutting the great door behind her, and Valerian looked down at the whimpering, half-conscious, pathetic excuse for a human clinging to his leg. Gently he bent, grasped the lad by his painfully thin shoulders, and drew him to his feet.

"Don't be afraid," he said in the tenderest of tones as he gazed deeply into the terrified blue eyes of his next victim. "I promise you will feel only the keenest pleasure, and no pain at all."

Valerian bared the fragile throat, found the warm, sweet place where a full vein pulsed just beneath the skin, and sank his fangs in deep. Bliss flooded him as he drank, and he felt the specimen tremble in his hands and beneath his lips, not with pain but, just as Valerian had promised him, with an almost unbearable ecstasy.

Maeve was a little distracted; her thoughts kept straying to Calder. She was torn between guilt—she had tricked him, after all—and the hope that, by making him believe she'd been with him earlier in the night, by projecting an image of herself into his mind, she had afforded him a measure of comfort...

She strained to catch hold of what Dathan was saying and pulled herself back into the conversation.

"... as far as we have been able to discern, the time of his captivity is the middle of the seventeenth



century..."

"The seventeenth century?" Maeve echoed, round-eyed, seeing that one of Dathan's warlock spies had brought in a scroll. Closer examination proved that Lisette herself had penned a description of Valerian's exact whereabouts on the crumbling parchment. The message itself, of course, was intended to taunt Maeve, to challenge her. "That's before my birth as a human—and I can go back no farther than my death."

Dathan arched an eyebrow. "Are you so certain? After all, you thought you couldn't escape the vampire sleep, either, but you did exactly that when we traveled to China."

Maeve nodded thoughtfully. More than ever, she wished Valerian was here—he knew about these things. Once, in fact, in an effort to help Aidan find the secret of transforming himself from vampire to mortal, Valerian had actually ventured back beyond his own mortal lifetime. The trouble was, the effort had nearly destroyed him, and he'd been incapacitated by the resultant weakness. Time was running out, and Maeve couldn't afford the long recuperation her friend and mentor had needed.

On the other hand, the war with Lisette was going to be much more difficult, if not impossible, without Valerian's counsel and moral support. Furthermore, if he perished in the skirmish ahead, then any victory, however sweet, would be tarnished by the loss of him.

Dathan paced. "Surely," he snapped, "you are not thinking of gallivanting off into some other century simply to rescue that worthless Valerian!"

"Your opinion of my friend does not concern me," Maeve said coldly.

"Perhaps it will," Dathan retorted, "if I tell you that we are watching your beloved Calder Holbrook, far away as he is. We can and will take him hostage, Maeve, if you do not listen to reason!"

Maeve trembled with both shock and fury. Stupidly perhaps, she had not expected a threat to Calder to come from this quarter but instead from Lisette. "Here and now," she said, and the even meter of her own voice surprised her, "I make this vow. If you lay a hand on Calder, I will flay you alive and serve you to the devil on a dozen different platters."

Dathan drew back slightly and raised both hands, palms out, in a jaunty gesture of conciliation. "That's a very colorful threat," he said. "And I assure you, I'll keep it in mind."

Maeve narrowed her eyes and leaned toward him. "See that you do, Warlock," she replied. "And keep this in mind as well: I make *promises*, not threats."

Although his eyes snapped with rage, Dathan did not press the matter further. Maeve, for her part, was not in the least reassured, for if she should be felled, as had nearly happened in China, Calder would be left completely unprotected.

Rising from the couch where she'd reclined and then sat, Maeve straightened her gown and ran splayed fingers through her long, loose tresses. "I will send Dimity to check on Valerian," she said quietly, and no nuance of the preceding argument showed in her countenance. "She is medieval, like him, and may be able to reach that time in history without danger to herself."

"Fine," Dathan said, his eyes still glittering with controlled fury. "That will free the two of us to seek out Lisette and make yet another attempt to finish her."

Maeve nodded distractedly. She was not thinking of Lisette, or even of Valerian, but of Calder, far away in Philadelphia. She should make another trip back in time, she knew that, to the night when he'd first seen her, in that grisly churchyard at Gettysburg, where the dead and maimed had been laid out in endless rows. Once there, she would blind Calder to her presence, as she should have done in the first place, and in that moment his attachment to her would be undone.

Knowing what needed doing and actually tackling the task were two different things, however, and Maeve was not anxious to destroy Calder's memory of her. Selfish as it was, she needed the certainty that he loved her, that he wanted her, that he would recognize her if she came to him.

None of those things would be true from the instant she changed history and, for all practical intents and purposes, she'd be alone in eternity once again.

She left Dathan, in his underground hiding place somewhere in the French countryside, and sought out the vampire Dimity.

Maeve found the other blood-drinker haunting London's seedy dockside area, as usual, and they fed together on a pair of deserving louts before retiring to Dimity's graciously furnished cellar to confer.

There, seated in comfortable chairs and cheered by the light of a lively fire in the grate, Maeve told Dimity that Dathan's warlocks had learned where Lisette was keeping Valerian. Dimity nodded when the explanation was through and said she'd attempt a visit to his cell. If possible, she promised, she would find a way to release him.

"I could not ask for more," Maeve said, rising. After offering a quiet thanks, she took herself away and met Dathan in another part of London, one where sleek carriages rolled past through the fog, carrying passengers who would never have believed that such creatures as vampires even existed.

"I'm certain Lisette is in China," Dathan said without preamble, falling into step with Maeve as she passed a street lamp glowing with sickly blue-gold light.

Maeve took her time answering. "I've been thinking about that," she said. "It's possible, you know, that she's found herself another, safer lair. She has to be aware that we'll look for her in that same area."

"She is reckless," Dathan argued, and it was a statement Maeve could not refute. Lisette *was* reckless, making dramatic appearances, taking captives, spawning those dreadful creatures in defiance of the entire supernatural world.

"We'll try again," she agreed with dignity.

Dathan nodded, satisfied that he'd swayed Maeve to his way of thinking. "Shall we meet just before dawn, then, at the circle of stones?"

"I will be there," Maeve said, and in the next instant she realized that the warlock was no longer beside her. In fact, he was nowhere in sight.

She shrugged and set out to feed a second time. In the hours to come, she would need all the strength she could muster.

Dathan idled the rest of the night away in a backstreet tavern, nursing a mug of bitter ale, and watched in

detachment as a variety of monsters came and went.

Oh, yes, there were vampires among the revelers, mostly new ones, heedless of the dangers of prowling places they did not know, and one or two warlocks came in as well. Still, it was among the human beings that Dathan found the greatest number of fiends.

He marveled to himself that mortals frightened their children, and each other, with tales of witches and warlocks, vampires and werewolves, while some of the vilest things in all of Creation lived next door to them, or up the street, or just down the road in the next village. And those beasts were not supernatural at all, but other humans, with beating hearts, brains throbbing with mysterious electrical impulses, and, supposedly, souls.

He sighed, lifted the copper mug to his mouth, and drained its contents in one final swallow. Then, suddenly sensing something different in his surroundings, he rose from his bench at one of the trestle tables, tossed a coin down to pay for his refreshment, and went outside into the summer night.

In the street, which was muddy and fouled with spittle and manure, Dathan stopped, sensing rather than hearing the strange, rhythmic chatter of several beings. He smiled, raising the hood of his cape so that his face was hidden in shadow, as well as his hair.

He was being stalked.

Dathan meandered into the nearest alley, drawn there by the vibration in his senses. They awaited him in that dark place, six drooling fiends, newly dead and starved for blood. Any blood.

Lisette's friends were too stupid and too greedy to know of the ancient enmity between their own kind and the warlock.

He pushed back his hood and bared his sleek, white neck to them, and they stumbled toward him, making that odd and frantic murmuring sound he had heard before. He waited, and pretended to flinch when the first one fastened on him.

Infusing a vampire with the venom that flowed through his veins was a ferocious pleasure to Dathan, to all warlocks, and he felt a sweet tightening in his groin as a second monster pushed aside the first to drink.

Dathan allowed that, but ecstasy left him weak and distracted, and those were indulgences he couldn't afford. The poison took effect, and the first two vampires dropped, writhing, to the filth-strewn ground. He killed the other four by a more flamboyant method, one he had not yet exhibited to his reluctant comrade, Maeve Tremayne.

Narrowing his eyes, murmuring an incantation far older than the pillars of Stonehenge, Dathan produced a spontaneous burst of fire. It consumed the vampires, and he watched them twist and flail within the flames, in their gruesome dance of death.

Before the grudging truce, Dathan had consigned many blood-drinkers to the same fate, and he would have destroyed them all if he'd been able; immortals of equal power could, of course, resist his curses. How strange it was to be in league with Mistress Tremayne, when at any other time in history the two of them would have been sworn enemies!

Reaching the street, Dathan raised his hood again, then paused to look back into the alleyway. There

was no light, for the fire he'd ignited was a spiritual one, and no screaming, for the vampires' cries could be heard not by the ear, but only by the most sensitive souls.

Most humans had not reached that level of consciousness, and so it was that the passers-by on that London street did not even pause, let alone rush into the alley to watch in their customary helpless fascination while the vampires burned.

Calder stirred uncomfortably in his sleep, dreaming of a night nearly thirty years before. In that dream, he was six years old again, and his mother was still alive, sitting on the edge of his bed, stroking his hair with a gentle hand, saying her tearful farewells.

The boy he had once been opened his eyes, something Calder had not done in reality, and reached up to wrap his arms around Marie's neck. "Good-bye, Mama," he said into the fragrant softness of her neck.

She embraced him, this other Marie, and he felt her tears on his face. Then she stood and walked toward the open doorway, never looking back, yet not seeming to see the young, dangerously passionate William hovering ahead of her. Waiting.

Calder, still trapped in the dream, thrust himself out of bed and ran into the hallway. He'd screamed a warning, putting all his strength into the effort, but not a sound had come from his throat.

He watched, in horror, as William and Marie argued, saw his half brother grab his mother by the shoulders and shake her, heard his father's stern order to let her go. Then, cold as a corpse, paralyzed with fear, Calder had watched as Marie tumbled over the stair rail.

It was torment enough, seeing that horrid spectacle once, but the scene kept repeating itself, over and over again, with a slow, macabre grace.

Calder thrust himself back to the surface of consciousness, unable to bear it any longer, only to feel his heart lurch at the sight awaiting him.

William was standing at the foot of the bed, hardly more than a shadow in the thick darkness, so still that he might have been part of the furniture. As Calder stared at him, still half-asleep, still half-entangled in his nightmare, the clouds that must have covered the moon moved on, flooding the room with an eerie silver light.

A fragment of that light caught on the nickel-blue barrel of the dueling pistol clasped in William's hands.

"I'll say you were killed by robbers," he said in an odd, strained voice, "rebel deserters who broke in looking for gold and whiskey. Everyone will believe me, just like before."

Calder dared not move, either slowly or suddenly. "Put down the gun," he said in a low, even voice. "They *won't* believe you, William. This is murder, and you'll surely hang for it."

He might not have spoken for all the response he received.

"I hope you burn in hell," William said, and then light blazed from the pistol's barrel. There was an explosion, though Calder couldn't tell whether it had come from within himself or outside, and then there was only darkness.

## CHAPTER 14

William watched dispassionately as Calder sank back against his pillows, a strangled, gurgling sound coming from somewhere deep inside him. In the moonlight William made out the torn place just below Calder's right nipple, and saw the matting of dark chest hair turn slick and crimson with blood.

The elder brother moved to turn up the lights, the dueling pistol dangling from his left hand now, resting hot against his thigh, burning right through his trouser leg.

There were murmurings in the hallway, and sounds of rushing this way and that, but William felt no urgency, no fear. Smiling grimly, he drew up a chair next to Calder's bed and sat down to watch him die.

The world, he told himself, would be better off without the likes of Calder Holbrook—if indeed he was entitled to the surname at all—just as it was better off without tramps like Marie.

Calder was unconscious, but even then he struggled, and a muscle in William's jaw tightened. Perhaps, he reflected coolly, it would be necessary to reload the pistol and fire a second bullet. This time the barrel would be pressed to Calder's throbbing temple.

"Maeve," Calder choked, though he had not roused. "*Maeve*—"

The bedclothes were sodden with blood now, William noted with satisfaction. Surely no one could lose so much and still live.

He settled back in his chair, undisturbed by the continued noise beyond Calder's bedroom door. It might as well have been another country, that hallway. Another world.

William relaxed, stretching out his legs and crossing his booted feet. "I don't suppose anyone will believe that story I made up about robbers," he mused aloud, half to himself and half to Calder.

Just then Prudence burst in, massive in her nightdress and wrapper. "What's happened in here—" she began, but then her eyes found Calder, and she gave a weeping scream and trundled to his bedside. "Sweet Jesus in heaven, you done shot him!" she cried. "You done murdered your own brother—"

William sighed as Prudence tried to staunch Calder's blood-flow with the corner of her wrapper. She was wailing in despair all the while, and when a cluster of other servants jammed into the doorway to gawk, she shouted for someone to get a doctor, and after that a constable.

Meanwhile, a storm was rising outside, and the wind rattled the sturdy leaded windows in their frames.

"I did the right thing by killing him, Prudence," William said calmly. "He's a bad seed—evil, just like his mama was. You'll come to see that, all in good time."

Prudence left her patient long enough to round the bed and snatch the dueling pistol from William's limp grasp. "You gone crazy, that's what," the housekeeper said wetly. "You gone plum out of your mind!"

She stormed back to Calder and laid the dueling pistol on the other nightstand.

"What made you do such a thing, Mr. William? Ain't there been enough grief and sufferin' in this house over the years?"

William didn't mind answering the question. In fact, he was certain that, once he had, no further explanations would be required of him. He looked at Calder, whose flesh was pallorous and gray—except, of course, where the blood soaked him—and could not disguise the hatred he felt.

"I stayed here, all those years, and learned the banking business. I did what Papa wanted, always. I put aside my own wishes, my own dreams, to honor his." William felt his very soul contort within him; it was an ugly pain. "Calder here was the prodigal, fancy free, and his briefest appearance in this house was cause for killing the fatted calf. Still, fool that I was, I believed Papa appreciated my sacrifices, that someday I would be rewarded for my loyalty. And what happened? Papa left everything to Calder—the house, the bank, the fortunes we made together. All of it was Calder's, except, of course, for a pittance of an income earmarked for me."

"Dear Jesus, save us," Prudence muttered. She'd taken off the wrapper now and made a bandage of sorts, but William knew her efforts were hopeless. The white flannel she pressed to the wound was already turning scarlet. "You had no call to do this—Mr. Calder would have done right by you. I don't think he even wanted this old house, nor much money, neither."

William recalled the things Calder had said earlier, in the family dining room. *Hehad* claimed that he didn't want any of their father's bequests, but William hadn't believed it then and he didn't believe it now. How could anyone fail to want all that surrounded him, and with the full measure of his soul at that?

Monumental as it was, his father's final betrayal wasn't the whole reason for what William had done. Somehow Calder had found out the truth about the night Marie died, and he'd sworn revenge. However mild his tone, Calder had meant what he said. He would have dogged William to his very grave, making him wonder, making him sweat.

William offered none of that to Prudence, though, for she had always favored Calder over him, just the way Bernard Holbrook had done.

"You hold on, precious," Prudence was murmuring close to Calder's ear. "You just hold on—don't you go off nowheres. I won't have you dead and hauntin' this place, and always gettin' underfoot when I'm tryin' to get my work done!"

William closed his eyes as the muscles at his nape clenched.

The constable and an army doctor arrived at the same time.

"It was him," William heard Prudence say, and of course he knew without looking that she was pointing a finger in his direction. "He done shot his own brother. And over money, too."

William was hauled, none too ceremoniously, to his feet, by the redheaded, blue-eyed policeman. "Afraid you'll have to come away with me, Mr. Holbrook," the big Irishman said.

The doctor had already torn off his suit coat and begun working over Calder.

"It's hopeless," William told him pleasantly as his hands were wrenched behind him by the Irishman and bound with heavy iron cuffs.

The physician spared him one scathing glance and returned to his futile efforts.



Lisette's lair, a beautifully appointed tomb intended for some ancient and very important Chinese personage, was empty.

Maeve examined everything—the pyre, made entirely of ivory and inlaid with twenty-four-karat gold, the chests brimming with treasure, the many jade carvings. The mummified being for which the crypt had been created was gone, but in an anteroom she found horrible evidence that Lisette had spent time here.

One of the mortal lovers for which she was so noted, a handsome young man, sat upright in a chair, dead. He looked more like a wax statue than a corpse, and on a small table before him rested a cup and an exquisite porcelain teapot.

"It would seem the poor lad died under sociable circumstances, at least," Dathan observed. "I'll wager there isn't a drop of blood left in him."

Maeve shivered as a spider crawled out the spout of the teapot and scurried across the tabletop to perch on one of the corpse's gray fingers. "There's no need to give an accounting," she said. "I have eyes of my own and I can see what's happened here."

Dathan sighed. "At least he didn't get himself turned into one of those vile creatures Lisette has been plaguing us with these past weeks."

It was a small consolation to Maeve. This young man, whoever he was, reminded her of Aidan. He'd had friends and a family, no doubt, and he'd been allotted a share of too-brief, precious years to live and laugh beneath the sun. Lisette had robbed him, carefully and indiscriminately, of a gift stemming from the very heart of the universe.

"He must have displeased her somehow," Maeve said sadly. She laid one hand on the lad's shoulders and was sickened to feel it crumble like dry clay under the fabric of his well-tailored waistcoat.

"Do you think she'll return?" Dathan asked. "Perhaps we have only to wait for her here."

Maeve shook her head. "No—I'm afraid it won't be so easy as that. Lisette is through with this place—she wanted us to find it, find her dead lover, and be frustrated."

"Well." Dathan heaved out a heavy sigh and thrust one hand through his hair. "Her plan certainly worked."

Maeve was looking at the corpse, now leaning ludicrously to one side because of the damage to his shoulder. "She seems to favor these dark-haired, blue-eyed lads, the younger and more good-natured and gullible the better. My brother, Aidan, was her lover for a while, before she turned him into a vampire, and there have been many others. A striking number of whom were of similar appearance, now that I think about it." She stopped and fixed her gaze on Dathan's grim face. "Have you any warlocks in your army who resemble this poor wretch?"

A light went on in Dathan's eyes, one of irritation. "A number of them," he confirmed quietly. "You want to trap Lisette, lure her by placing one of my more winsome followers under her nose. Brilliant, except that she'll undoubtedly recognize him for a warlock at first glance."

Maeve raised an eyebrow and then explained patiently, "Vampires recognize warlocks by reading their minds, so to speak. If the warlock in question can be made to believe he is a man, then blood-drinkers will accept him at his own estimate."



Now Dathan looked intrigued and thoughtful. "You're aware, of course, that you've just given me a powerful tool with which to deceive vampires, once this current calamity has been thwarted and things go back to normal?"

"Which means that you owe me something in return."

"What?" Dathan asked, moving out of the mortal's eternal resting place and into the main part of the tomb. He busied himself pocketing gold bracelets and strings of pearls taken from one of the chests while Maeve framed her reply.

"I want you to teach me the incantation that enables you to start fires," she said finally.

Dathan looked at her over one shoulder. "I would be a fool to do that. You could teach it to your vampires, and could use it against us."

"I would share it with a select few," Maeve countered. And you have my word that it would be used against your kind only in self-defense."

"Your word," Dathan mocked, slamming the lid of the chest he'd been looting. "The word of a vampire is hardly something I hold in esteem."

Maeve could feel her strength fading. She sat down on the edge of the ivory pyre where Lisette had probably passed many days. "I have told you one of our secrets. I have trusted you with my very life—you've had numerous opportunities to drive a stake through my heart while I slept. If I can trust you that much, then you can surely give me the same consideration in return and teach me one small incantation!"

Dathan crossed the room and lifted Maeve into his arms. "No sleeping here, princess," he said with grudging affection. "Our intent is to surprise Lisette, not be surprised by her. Think of someplace in England, someplace dark, and I'll be with you at sunset."

Maeve was exhausted, her head lolling against Dathan's shoulder, but it wasn't England she fixed in her mind, but America. In fact, she focused on Pennsylvania and the dark cellar beneath Calder's house.

Reaching that place, she crouched behind stacks of dusty boxes and crates and closed her eyes.

Only then, when she was helpless, did images of Calder dying come to her mind. She saw him bandaged, lying unconscious in his bed upstairs, his skin bluish from the loss of blood, but there was nothing she could do. She was trapped, mired, in the deepest, darkest part of her own mind.

All during the coming day, immersed in the vampire sleep, vivid pictures came to her, like scenes from a dream, and she heard him calling her name. Calling it over and over again, the voice growing fainter with every passing moment, and more hopeless.

The rain went on throughout the night and the morning, casting an added pall over the circuslike ceremony at Bernard Holbrook's graveside. Word of the shooting in the Holbrook mansion had gotten out fast, and folks had come from every corner of the city, whether they'd known the dear departed or not, to stare and speculate.

God knew, the undertaker thought disgustedly, it would be years before folks stopped chattering about

how one brother had shot the other one in his bed, while their dead father lay downstairs in his coffin, and how William Holbrook had been brought to the funeral in handcuffs.

It was a damn pity, all of it, though there was *one* redeeming element in that ugly situation. Poor Bernard was at peace, and he'd never have to know that he'd spawned a murderer.

Not that Calder Holbrook was the kind of son a man relished having, either. He'd been stubborn his whole life through, that boy, tormented by things inside him that no one else could see, and he'd broken his father's heart on more than one occasion with his cussedness.

The undertaker sighed. Well, Calder was barely clinging to life; that was a fact, for he'd been to the house and seen the young man lying in his bed, unconscious, with half the blood in his body drained away.

Like as not, there'd be another funeral in a few days, and when they hanged William Holbrook, still another.

It made a man wonder, that it did. Bernard Holbrook had worked hard all his life, and if he hadn't always been completely ethical, well, a fellow did what he had to do to make his way. And now it was all gone, blown apart like a house built of matchsticks struck by a high wind.

When sunset came, Maeve bolted upright.

All thoughts of Lisette and the impending disaster of war with the angels were barred from her mind. She cared for nothing and no one but Calder, and she transported herself to his room immediately.

He was indeed dying, just as she had seen in the awful visions while she slept, and his soul had already left his body, bobbing at the far end of the long silver cord that attaches the two, ready to break free. When that happened, Calder would be truly dead, for once the cord is severed, there is no returning.

A heavy woman in simple calico sat next to the bed, weeping quietly, but she did not look up when Maeve approached on the opposite side because she could not see or hear her.

Maeve looked with despair upon her lover and found in the murky shallows of his brain the events that had brought him to such an end. William Holbrook had crept into the room with a dueling pistol, stood at the foot of the bed, and shot his only brother, intending to kill him.

She would go back, she decided, to the night before, when this travesty had taken place, and undo it. She would kill William if she had to, to prevent this from happening.

When Maeve tried to transport herself, however, her efforts were blocked. In a fury of urgency and despair, she tried twice more, and twice more she failed.

She needed no explanation for what had happened, for Valerian had explained such matters to her long since. Sometimes, for unknown reasons, time travel simply wasn't possible.

Maeve gave up on the attempt to change recent history and instead concentrated on turning herself into a mist, pervading Calder's being, lending him strength. For a while she was truly a part of him, as close as the breath in his lungs and the thready beat of his heart. Then, suddenly, the shimmering silver cord contracted, wrenching his spirit back into its prison of flesh and blood. The sheer force of the event drove Maeve outside of him again.

The housekeeper, probably sensing that something was going on in that room that she couldn't see or hear, grew restless, folded her hands, and began to pray under her breath. Her words were like liquid fire, pouring over Maeve in waves, but Maeve did not flee.

No matter what she had to suffer, she wasn't going to leave Calder.

She huddled in a corner of the room, in the shadows, and presently the housekeeper yawned and went away.

Maeve made herself solid again and hurried to Calder's side, taking one unresponsive hand into both her own. His spirit had retreated again, straining at the invisible tether, trying to escape the pain.

The best and most unselfish thing to do was let Calder go, let him return to his Maker and be received in that place where she could never venture, and she loved him enough to do just that.

She raised her hand to her lips and brushed the knuckles with a kiss as light as the pass of a feather. "Good-bye, my darling," she whispered. Then she rose and turned away, and would have departed forever, except that he spoke to her.

Not with his lips, but with his mind.

*Maeve.* The name was an entreaty.

She whirled to stare at him, waiting, her whole being suspended. Her soul cried out silently to his, begging him to stay.

*Help me.*

Maeve was in agony. *I am helping you, darling. Look for the Light, and follow it .*

*You are the light.*

*No! Don't you see? I am the darkness.*

*Don't leave me, Maeve. Don't let me die.*

She took a step closer to Calder, standing at his bedside. Without another word, she lay down beside him, covered him in her cloak, and thought of London.

If there was a way under heaven to save Calder, besides turning him into a fiend, like herself, into a being who would one day hate her for her trouble, Maeve vowed she would find it.

Dimity was out of practice when it came to time travel, and she made several abortive efforts before she landed herself in the middle of Valerian's cell.

The place was rank, and a half dozen frail-boned, ragged humans slept in a pile in the corner, like puppies huddling on a cold night. All of them were alive, but they would need to consume a great deal of calves' liver before their blood could truly serve them again.

"Valerian?" Dimity said, annoyed, placing her hands on her hips. "Show yourself!"

He appeared suddenly, directly in front of her, and made her jump backward with a little cry of fright.

"What the—?"

Valerian's grin was a bit wan, but just as audacious as ever. "Sorry," he said, though he plainly wasn't. "It gets boring, being stuck away in a rat's nest like this one, so I've taken to practicing my magic."

Dimity looked around the gloomy cell. "Well, it's no palace, of course, but it could be worse." She nodded toward the pile of rags and flesh in the corner. "At least Lisette's kept you well fed, and you don't look as if you've been abused—only neglected."

Valerian drew himself up to his full and haughty height at that point and glared down his patrician nose. "She's been fattening me up like a Christmas goose," he said, "and I'll thank you not to minimize my sufferings until you've been through a similar ordeal yourself."

She affected a sigh. "All right," she conceded. "If you want my sympathy, you have it. Now, are you through with your travail, or would you like to enjoy it a little while longer? If you're quite satisfied that you've undergone sufficient agony, then let's discuss getting you out of here."

Valerian flushed, a sign of recent feeding more than anger, and narrowed his eyes at her. "You are a most caustic individual, for one who avails herself to the favors of angels."

Dimity glared. "And you are a hardheaded, arrogant idiot," she retorted, standing her ground. She was not acquainted with Valerian, although she'd often heard of his exploits, but she had encountered plenty of creatures just like him, both human and immortal. She knew only too well that if she allowed it, he'd run roughshod over her. "Do you wish me to rescue you, or leave you here to rot?"

The legendary vampire was plainly furious, and no doubt his pride was injured as well. After all, he'd been captured by a vampire of the feminine gender, and now his only hope of salvation was in the hands of yet another female.

Dimity smiled. A little humility was good for the soul. "Well?" she prompted.

"All right," the great Valerian snarled. "Yes, of course I want to get out of here—I feel like a mouse shut up in a shoe box! But how do you propose to achieve this magnificent feat? Have you grown more powerful than Lisette and failed to mention the fact heretofore?"

Dimity rolled her eyes. "Lisette grows careless. There are weaknesses in the mental barrier she's put up around you, or I wouldn't have been able to get in." She crossed the room to the heavy iron door and fixed her gaze on the ancient, cumbersome lock.

"There's no point in attempting *that* old trick," Valerian said. "I've tried to move that lock a hundred times, and it won't give."

A smile came to Dimity's lips as the works splintered inside the lock under the force of her thoughts. "I guess you just didn't try hard enough," she said sweetly. "Who's guarding you?"

Valerian's exasperation was plain, but so was his relief. "A conniving, back-stabbing little chit named Shaken," he said. "I like her."

Dimity swung open the door and stepped into the stone passageway beyond. "You would," she replied. "Come along. I've found this whole experience a little enervating, frankly, and I'd like to get back to London and my beloved nineteenth century in time for an extra feeding."

"I've found this whole experience a little enervating," Valerian mimicked sourly, following her along the hall. Dimity imagined it would be quite some time before he got over his pique at being saved by a lesser vampire. "You haven't saved me yet," he said aloud, reminding her that he was an old blood-drinker, like herself, and a skilled one.

"You're right," she replied diplomatically. "Let's try to be civil to each other, shall we? After all, we're both up to our necks—if you'll forgive the expression—in trouble."

As if on cue, a shape rose up ahead of them in the corridor, with a soul-splintering shriek.

"Please," Valerian said contemptuously.

For one terrible moment Dimity thought the creature confronting them was Lisette itself, and that Valerian had further sealed their doom by mocking her, but a closer inspection revealed the little spitfire Valerian had mentioned before, the fledgling called Shaleen.

"Step aside," Dimity ordered quietly. "You must know, naive as you are, that you haven't the strength to prevail over two mature vampires."

Shaleen seemed to wilt, until she looked like what she'd been before her making, a scrap of a girl who'd never had enough love or food, enough of anything, in the whole brief span of her mortal life. "I want to go with you," she said. "The queen will stake me out in the courtyard to burn in the daylight if she comes back and finds that her prize captive has escaped."

Valerian nudged Dimity from behind. "She'll make a handy soldier in our present trouble, with that fiery spirit of hers."

"I suppose you want to be her tutor," Dimity said dryly. "I don't think you're going to have the time, though. Maeve seems to think she needs your help to prevail against Lisette."

There was a scabbling sound behind them, and Dimity whirled, as did Valerian, to see the pale boys creeping out of the cell and groping their way along the wall in the other direction.

Shaleen pushed between Valerian and Dimity to stop them, but Valerian caught her arm as she passed. It was then that Dimity got her first glimpse of the peculiar nobility that was as much a part of the fabled vampire beside her as his blatant hedonism and his deft sarcasm.

"Let them go," he said.

Shaleen's face was a study in angry confusion. "But why? Why did you suffer them to live? It's not as though they matter at all—"

"Everything matters," Valerian said, his voice firm but kind as well. "Now, come with us. We blood-drinkers have far weightier things to contend with than a pack of anemic beggars and thieves."

Shaleen cast another greedy glance after the victims she'd no doubt gathered herself for the prisoner she both feared and admired, but then she slipped off in the other direction, leading the way.

"There's a weak place, here," she said finally when they came to a little chamber at the end of a virtual rabbit's warren of twists and turns. "It's how I get in and out with the lads for this one's supper." She nodded her tousled head in Valerian's direction. "Herself didn't want him to have no supper, you know, but I couldn't stand to think of it."

Valerian grinned and reached out with one graceful hand to muss the girl's hair, and she beamed at this attention.

Dimity was impatient. "Come," she snapped, raising her arms. "Lisette might return at any moment, and I for one do not want to be invited into her parlor for tea."

Valerian found Maeve in the echoing chamber on the uppermost floor of her London house, working feverishly at her loom. The tapestry had lengthened considerably since he'd last viewed it, but the vampire took no time to examine it again. Instead he stared, confounded, at the bloodless, near-dead mortal lying on a pallet beside the towering windows, awash in moonlight.

"Calder Holbrook," he muttered, both irritated and confused.

Maeve whirled, for she hadn't sensed his presence, and in looking at her Valerian knew why. She was almost gaunt, and there were enormous shadows under her eyes.

"Valerian," she half sobbed, half whispered, and ran to him.

He enfolded her in his arms, this vampire he had made more than two hundred years ago, and for the first time wished that he'd left her alone that fateful night. At least then she'd have been spared whatever cancerous grief was devouring her now.

"Look at you," she said, her sunken eyes too bright as she took in his splendid tunic of dark gold velvet and the sleek leggings that matched. "You look like a duke or an earl."

"I've been in a sixteenth-century mood of late." The explanation was inane, in light of the suffering he saw in Maeve. "What has happened?" he demanded in an urgent whisper, glancing once again at the mortal still lying senseless on his pallet. "I beg of you—tell me how to help you!"

## CHAPTER 15

"The last thing this world needs is another vampire," Valerian said, the frown he'd worn throughout Maeve's explanation still in place. He glanced thoughtfully at Calder, who stirred on his deathbed, just beneath the surface of consciousness. "On the other hand, the soul in question is his own. If he wants to be a blood-drinker, then it seems to me that he has the right to make that choice."

Maeve had been over the same arguments in her own mind, with tedious attention to detail. In fact, the dilemma had tortured her, sapped her strength and dulled her wits—all this at a time when she most needed all her powers.

She looked at Calder, one hand over her heart, and whispered, "He'll hate me for it someday, just the way Aidan hated Lisette."

Out of the corner of her eye, Maeve saw the great vampire wince—though not, she was sure, at the mention of Lisette, but that of Aidan. He had loved her brother, she knew, with a poetic poignancy that transcended simple sex, vampire or mortal, and it was likely that he still cherished those feelings.

"That's a selfish argument," Valerian observed gruffly. He crouched beside Calder's pallet and touched his waxen face with gentle fingers. "How have you kept him alive this long?"

Maeve hesitated before revealing her terrible secret. "I've been giving him blood—just small infusions of it—in the hope of sustaining him until he rallies from his own strength."

Valerian's magnificent features tightened, and his eyes flashed. "The process is already begun, then," he said in a brusque whisper. "Great Zeus, Maeve, it's a miracle he hasn't become one of those wretched *things* Lisette has been plaguing us with!"

She swayed under the shock of the older vampire's words and gripped the framework of one of the tall windows to steady herself. "*What?*"

Kneeling now, Valerian bared Calder's throat with one hand, all the while gazing up at Maeve with fiery frustration in his violet eyes. "You've never wanted to make a vampire, to my knowledge, so I saw no reason to explain the process." His thumb stroked the fragile skin over Calder's jugular vein gently, almost caressingly, as he spoke. "There is no halfway measure, Maeve. Vampires can give blood to each other, but it is very dangerous with humans. How do you think Lisette made those dreadful creatures of hers? By subjecting them to only part of the process! It's the very reason they have no logic, no individuality, but only unrelenting, terrible hunger."

Maeve covered her mouth with one hand to stifle a cry of pain at what she might have done to Calder. "Why didn't I just let him die?" she pleaded. "Why?"

"There is no time for self-recrimination now, my darling," Valerian scolded, but with the utmost gentleness. "Steps must be taken to rectify what you've done—if not, he'll become an enemy, one we'll have to destroy."

She sank to her knees at the foot of Calder's pallet, watching with both hope and horror as Valerian bent over the love of her immortal life and began the transformation. She wanted to look away a hundred times, nay, a thousand, as the vampire emptied Calder of his blood, but that would have been a form of disloyalty, of cowardice. So she kept her terrible vigil.

Calder was, for all practical intents and purposes, dead during those moments before Valerian sunk his fangs into that fragile flesh again and restored the blood, changed.

At last Valerian thrust himself away from Calder, a gleam of some unholy satisfaction in his eyes, and rose gracefully to his feet. "Now," he said, "if this fledgling wishes to hate anyone for his transfiguration, let him hate me."

Maeve stood and moved around to the side of the pallet to look down into Calder's face. He was still asleep, but the lines of suffering were smoothed away by some inner magic even as she watched. He seemed larger somehow, his body harder and more powerful.

"We'd best move him to a safer place," Valerian suggested with a sigh. "He cannot bear the sunlight any more than we can."



Maeve nodded, closed her arms around Calder, and willed the both of them to the dank gloom of the secret part of the cellar where she herself reposed. Valerian, a showman at heart, was there before them and in the process of lighting the candles.

"What will happen now?" Maeve asked when Calder had been settled comfortably on the slab. She had had no experience with the making of vampires, as Valerian had pointed out earlier, and did not remember anything helpful about her own metamorphosis.

"The transformation has already begun, of course," Valerian said. "He's lying there, wide awake and cognizant of everything we say and do, but unable to communicate in any way." He moved to Calder's side, touched his shoulder with that same tenderness he had exhibited before. "Do not worry, fledgling," he said gently. "Do not struggle. In a day, or perhaps two, you will be completely functional."

After a moment of thoughtful silence, Valerian turned his attention to Maeve. "I would suggest, my love, that you leave your darling in the care of another vampire, one less vital to our cause, and join the rest of us in the effort to save ourselves."

Maeve nodded, though the reluctance she felt at the idea of abandoning Calder, especially now, was a keen sorrow in itself. "Yes, you're right, of course—but who can we trust?"

"Trust?" Valerian smiled grimly and arched one eyebrow. "Why, no one, Your Majesty—perhaps not even each other. Still, I know of a fledgling who is most anxious to endear herself to me—a thought should be sufficient summons." With that, he closed his eyes, and an instant later a young, brown-haired snippet appeared in the room with an unceremonious crash, toppling several crates and boxes.

"What the bloody hell?" she screeched in a voice that made Maeve want to put her hands over her ears. The new arrival focused her spritely brown gaze on Valerian, then a glorious smile spread across her smudged face. "Oh, it's you, then!"

Valerian shook his head. "Yes, it's me. Where are those pretty clothes I gave you, chit? And how do you manage to stay sooty as a chimney pot even after a washing?"

The young vampire looked chagrined and, at the same time, very pleased that Valerian had taken notice of her in any way. She would have blushed splendidly, had she been a mortal creature; instead, she simply turned to Maeve and executed an awkward curtsy.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, mum," she said.

"This is Shaleen," Valerian explained with a smile in his eyes.

Maeve smiled herself, for the first time since before Calder's shooting. Valerian was the most ferocious of vampires and, some said, the most ruthless, and yet he loved playing the mentor. Now that she thought of it, Maeve could not remember a time when he hadn't had some fledgling under tutelage—herself, for instance, and Aidan, and others too numerous to name.

"How do you do?" Maeve said grandly, extending her hand to the feisty little spitfire and hoping she wasn't making a mistake in abandoning Calder to her care.

"Enough of the social refinements," Valerian snapped, suddenly impatient with the whole proceeding. "There is a war on, in case you've both forgotten." He gestured toward Calder. "This one has just been changed. We'll be wanting you to look after him, stand guard, so to speak. You've had experience with

that, now haven't you?"

Shaleen quailed a little under Valerian's fierce glare, but then she made a visible effort to muster her pride and succeeded to a degree. "I'll look after him, all right. Won't no mortals come and stake him, I'll see to it personal—"

Valerian closed his eyes for a moment, a study in impatient grandeur. "We are quite convinced," he said sternly.

His apprentice subsided, chagrined. "Well, then," she murmured, dragging a crate over for use as a chair and taking up her post beside Calder, "I'll just button me lip, then, won't I?"

Maeve's amusement ebbed as she thought of leaving Calder, especially in so fragile a state, but she knew she must not tarry. She went to the other side of the slab where her lover lay, opposite the bristly, determined Shaleen, and bent to kiss his mouth.

"I'll be back soon, darling," she whispered. "Please don't be afraid."

"Great Zeus," Valerian snapped, gesturing wildly with one arm toward the greater world beyond that cellar, "we're about to be overrun by legions of avenging angels! Must we dally in this dusty pit all night?"

Maeve laid her ear to Calder's chest, hearing no heartbeat, feeling no rise and fall of breathing, and knew an infinite sorrow, as well as joy. They would be together for eternity, if they were fortunate, rich with power and full of strength, and yet Calder's soul had been stolen this night, and she'd been a party to the theft.

She felt Valerian's hands come to rest on her shoulders, gentle, elegant, and firm. He spoke quietly.

"There can be no looking back now, Maeve. It'll turn you into a pillar of salt, like Lot's wife, and rob you of all your power."

She turned, looked up into his dark purple eyes, and nodded. "You're right," she said.

Valerian took her hands in his own, and they raised their arms high, in a graceful, simultaneous motion, and then they vanished, Shaleen's parting words echoing in their ears.

"Coo, mate!" she cried, no doubt elbowing Calder in the ribs at the same time. "Did you see that?"

Lisette gave a snarling shriek of outrage when she found Valerian's cell empty, and the new vampire, Shaleen, gone as well.

Fools! Did they truly believe they could escape her so easily? Why, when she found those two she'd bind them to trees and burn them, like Joan of Arc at her stake, as a lesson to all vampires!

She dropped to her knees in the fetid straw, clutching her middle, as the troublesome weakness struck her. It was that rebel Maeve Tremayne's fault that she suffered now—Lisette had not been the same since their battle in that cave, far away in China.

She'd been sorely tried in that confrontation, and injured, and she had had to console herself by lying in her crypt beneath the cellar of her villa on the coast of Spain for several days and nights, with two captive mortal lovers to sustain her.

Even now, curled up in the straw of that miserable castle in the north of Scotland, a bleak spot abandoned even in Bonnie Prince Charlie's day and naught but a ruin in modern times, Lisette smiled at the memory of the pleasures she'd taken.

First, she'd prowled the city in her carriage, finding one luscious boy and then another. She'd taken them to her villa, gotten them drunk on wine bottled before their great-grandfathers were born, and then taught them passion, one by one.

Finally she'd taken them, sated and senseless, to her hiding place deep beneath the floor of the cellar, and slept, waking only long enough to feed off one or the other.

They'd been dead when she left them, both of them, for she hadn't wanted to go to the effort of making the poor lads into vampires.

She frowned, recollecting another experience.

She'd selected Aidan Tremayne for her favors, one night beside a seventeenth-century road, and taught him ecstasy so keen that each of their trysts had left him dazed and drunk with pleasure. Eventually she'd given her cherished Aidan the ultimate gift, immortality, and he'd thanked her by calling her cursed, by hating and reviling her.

Lisette raised herself, both hands braced against the filthy carpet of straw. That, she thought bitterly, was why she'd turned no more of her lovely boys into nightwalkers. They were just too thick to comprehend, those ungrateful creatures, that they'd been translated from mere clay to virtual gods.

A strange exhaustion felled her, and she dropped to the floor again, overcome by the need to sleep. She would find Valerian and the miscreant, Shaleen, later, along with a fine-looking mortal lad to nourish her. In the meantime, though, she'd just rest a little while.

Calder was awake, inside his hardened husk of a body, just as he'd heard Valerian assert earlier, but he could not so much as twitch a muscle or force the weakest murmur past his lips.

He tried to piece together his shattered memories, in an effort to make sense of what was happening, but he remembered only two things at first—William firing the bullet that had in effect killed him, and the terrible, fiery elation he'd known when Valerian had drawn the very blood from his veins and then given it back again, forever changed.

He groped forward mentally, and more came to him. Things were definitely falling into place.

He, the late Calder Holbrook, was now a vampire, an immortal creature with the power to travel through time and space at will. Granted, he wouldn't be able to go backward very far—Maeve had told him once that a blood-drinker could venture only so far as the instant following his own death. Since this had occurred so recently, there was no point in going back.

Still, the future was his. As soon as he was able to move, he would go forward to the final years of the twentieth century and begin soaking up the knowledge he craved. He would soon understand all the newest surgical techniques, know how to mix chemicals into miraculous drugs. Then, *then* he would return to his own century, and save as many of the soldiers, as many of the suffering children, as he could.

Calder's thoughts returned, as he suspected they always would, to Maeve. He knew, even in his

distracted state, that he was somehow tethered to her, and he blessed the fact. She would be the center of his life, the sunshine he must now forswear, the light he warmed himself by, now and forever, world without end, amen and amen.

He tried again to move, and again found the effort to be futile.

Valerian pervaded his mind, that imperious and arrogant vampire whom he had mistrusted and disliked from their first encounter. Like it or not, Calder reflected, with a sigh of the spirit, a bond existed between them now. In a very real sense, Valerian had sired him into the new and exciting life that lay waiting, just ahead.

He struggled, eager to regain consciousness and begin that life, and felt a cool hand come to rest on his forehead, one so small that it might have belonged to a child.

"There now," a youthful, feminine voice chided, "just lie still and don't be so impatient. You'll be prowlin' the night soon enough, I'll wager, and a pretty fellow you is, too."

Calder felt the forces of his changing body trying to overcome him, push him under the dark, glimmering surface into oblivion. They wanted to get on with the business of transformation, those forces, and Calder hadn't the strength or the will to counter them.

He relaxed his roiling emotions, soothed his tempestuous mind, and went under.

The old manse was tucked away in the English countryside, long-deserted, overgrown with vines and ivy, almost certainly purported by the locals to be haunted, and Maeve could see that Valerian loved the place on sight. It would, she supposed, appeal to his macabre sense of humor to make mysterious lights appear in the windows on occasion and send out the odd bone-chilling shriek just for the sake of drama.

Dathan stepped out of a shadowy, cobwebbed corner, seeming to form himself from the particles of dust and darkness that made up the night. He raised his arms, causing his cloak to spread like wings, and grinned.

"Perfect, isn't it?" he asked cordially, though Maeve immediately sensed the chilly wariness that had sprung up between the warlock and Valerian.

Valerian nodded, his jawline unusually taut. "All it needs is a bubbling cauldron and some cackling crones," he said evenly.

Dathan laughed, but the sound had a jagged edge. "Stereotypes," he scolded. "You don't sleep in a casket, do you, Vampire? Nor, I trust, would a necklace of garlic put you to flight."

Maeve interceded, worried by the growing tension. Dathan and Valerian would be no good against Lisette and her forces if they were battling each other. "Stop it," she said, stepping between the pair and laying a calming hand to each of their chests. She gave Valerian a warning glance, then turned to look into Dathan's unreadable eyes. "Why did you summon us here?"

The warlock smiled indulgently, every inch the suave country host, but Maeve was not misled. Dathan was about as warm and welcoming as one of those twentieth-century knives—switchblades, she believed they were called.

"I have something to show you—" he said, shifting his gaze to Valerian's glowering countenance only

after stretching the moment to very uncomfortable lengths. "—both."

Beyond the crumbling stone walls of the manse, in the luxurious, black-velvet darkness of that isolated place, something howled.

Maeve and Valerian exchanged a quick glance as they followed Dathan deeper into the old cottage.

*No owl, that*, Valerian observed in a mental undertone that somehow crept beneath Dathan's level of awareness.

*I know you'll protect me*, Maeve teased in response.

They had entered what had probably been a parlor at one time, and even though they could all see as clearly as cats, Dathan went through the formality of lighting the nubs of tallow spilling messily from an old candelabra.

Maeve took in the chandelier, draped with dust, the worn organ that only the mice played now, the stained and peeling wallpaper, and imagined the ghostly forms of a dozen long-dead vicars moving about, colliding with each other.

"A very colorful thought," Valerian commented with quiet amusement, making no effort to keep the conversation private this time. "Rather like that attraction in Disneyland."

Dathan cast a scathing glance at the clearly unwelcome vampire towering beside Maeve, and then clapped his hands together with brisk authority.

Immediately two warlocks entered the room from deeper inside the house, the dining room probably, escorting a young man between them.

Both Valerian and Maeve cried out, in despairing shock, for this enchanted wretch was their Aidan, the one they had both loved and lost.

Valerian found his voice first. "What have you done to him?" he rasped, springing forward as if to free the poor captive from the warlocks' hold. He whirled on Dathan, grasped his flowing shirt in both hands, and wrenched him onto the balls of his feet. "God damn your black soul, *what have you done?*"

"It's all right, Valerian," Maeve said gently, for after the first shock she'd realized that, however perfect the resemblance, this was not her brother. She ventured close and touched the seemingly frozen, breathtakingly handsome face tentatively. "Aidan is far away and quite safe. This is only someone who looks like him."

Dathan shook himself free of Valerian's grip, his eyes glittering with a suppressed thirst for vengeance, and nodded. "Very astute, Your Majesty. This is Llewellyn, one of our own. We've tampered with his mind a bit, as you suggested, and when he comes out of this stupor we've so mercifully induced, he'll believe with all his treacherous little heart that he's mortal."

Valerian looked confused, and started to speak, but Maeve stopped him by reaching out to grasp his forearm.

"Ingenious," she said.

"What is the purpose of this?" Valerian demanded, exasperated.

Maeve walked around Llewellyn, studying him in amazement. If it hadn't been for the connection between herself and her twin brother, she would have believed this creature, this warlock, to be Aidan—sweet, stubborn, *human* Aidan.

"Smooth your feathers and think for a moment, Vampire," Dathan said. "How do you believe Lisette would react, were she to encounter our brilliant creation?"

Maeve sensed the quickening in Valerian as, at last, he made the connection.

He muttered an amazed exclamation and peered into the exquisitely molded face of the warlock who would, when fully conscious again, wholeheartedly believe himself to be an ordinary man.

"Did he look this much like Aidan Tremayne in the beginning," Valerian wondered aloud, "or did you alter him somehow?"

Dathan sighed, as if weary of silly questions. "There was a resemblance—rather faint really. We accentuated it, knowing of the lovely Lisette's special fancy for Tremayne. Now the question is, how do we draw her notice to our lad here?"

Valerian flung a testy glance at the warlock. "And I was so certain that you'd thought of everything."

Dathan seethed but, with visible effort, managed to control his temper. "If that were so," he replied in a strange, purring growl, "then we'd have no need of you, would we, Vampire?"

Valerian took a step toward Dathan, and again Maeve moved between them.

"Once Lisette has taken the bait and poisoned herself with the blood of this lovely warlock," she said, "the two of you may feel free to ravage each other. In the meantime, everything we hold precious is at stake, and our only hope is to work together!"

"Take the lad to Spain," Valerian said moments later in a hoarse, grudging whisper. He named an obscure village. "Lisette has a villa there, on the coast. Wherever she is, she's attuned to that place, and she'll sense his presence and come to him."

Maeve stared at him. "You knew of this villa, and yet you said nothing?"

Valerian shook his head. "I had forgotten. Seeing Llewellyn here brought back memories."

It was plain enough that the memories in question involved Aidan, but Maeve didn't pursue the subject because it was so obviously personal.

"To Spain, then," Dathan said, clapping his hands again.

After Llewellyn had been led to the entrance of an especially lively cantina, Dathan broke the spell that had rendered him catatonic, using a brief incantation.

"Hello, George," the warlock said, offering his hand to the lad.

The young man blinked, and then his eyes cleared and he smiled. "Hello," he said, shaking Dathan's

hand. "Do I know you?"

The sight of that smile, an eerily exact duplicate of Aidan's, wrenched Maeve on the deepest level of her being, and she suspected Valerian's reaction was quite similar.

"We were acquainted once," Dathan said, stepping back. "Well, I won't keep you—you're obviously bent on meeting friends."

George nodded happily. In their clever, mysterious way the warlocks had evidently provided him not only with a new identity, but a past as well. Furthermore, they had altered the memories of several mortals to include him. "I don't believe I got your name," he said cheerfully.

"Not important," Dathan said, turning away.

George stared after him in bafflement for a moment, and Maeve feared that the trick had not worked after all, that the youth remembered being a warlock. If that were so, Lisette would not be deceived.

Then Maeve shifted her consciousness, the way she generally did instinctively when warlocks were around, and the signal from George's mind came through loud and clear. He believed he was a man, and, therefore, he transmitted that belief to everyone and everything around him.

Valerian gripped her arm and hustled her away into the darkness. "Much as we might like to hang around and watch," he explained rather tersely, "Lisette will pick up on our presence and smell a trap if we do."

He was right, of course.

Maeve turned to him when they were well away from the cantina. Dathan and his companions had already vanished, probably for the same reason Valerian had mentioned. "What do we do now?"

"We wait," Valerian said, plainly as irritated by the prospect as she was. "We wait and hope that Lisette bites into our lovely warlock's jugular and subsequently chokes to death on his blood."

Maeve was frowning, worried. "It might not be fatal, you know," she said. "When Aidan fed on a warlock, he was very ill, but he survived."

"I remember," Valerian said somewhat gruffly. Talk of Aidan always made him either restive or testy, or both. "Even if she does not glut herself with the poison, in her greed Lisette will be seriously weakened. We will close in then, destroy her, and send her ashes to Nemesis along with our most eloquent pleas for mercy."

He glanced up at the starry sky and smiled wanly. "Do you suppose Dathan would mind if I explored that delightful old manse?"

"As if you cared whether he minded or not," Maeve retorted, amused, eager to feed and then return to Calder. She would send Shaleen away, lie beside her beloved on the slab, and join her dreams to his. "Good-bye for now, my friend."

Valerian bent and kissed her forehead lightly. "Farewell," he responded, and then he was gone.

*Damn, but he's good,* Maeve thought, still awed by the other vampire's theatrical flair.



She raised her arms, then, smiling, and took herself to her favorite hunting grounds—the seediest part of London, where the lowest of the low prowled the night, scheming, indulging in their deliberate evils.

She was drawn to a dark, stinking attic of a dockside pub, a place even rats and fleas would hesitate to frequent. There a drunken man had cornered his wife, demanding the few pence she'd been able to scrape together while he'd been at sea.

Maeve knew in a moment that the woman had been beaten half senseless for her trouble, and her wail was pitiful to hear. "Please, Jack—don't 'urt me no more—I needs the money for the babe that's comin'—"

The lout drew back one booted foot to kick his fallen wife, and outrage surged through Maeve, as hot and sour as bile. She gave a snarling shriek, one fit to wake the dead, and flung herself at the brute, who raised meaty hands to shelter himself.

The woman, whimpering with terror, having no way of knowing that she would not be next, scrambled for the ladder at the edge of the loft.

Jack's blubbery, unshaven face was white beneath a layer of filth. "Saints in 'eaven," he rasped, "*what sort of devil are ye?*"

Only an instant later he found out exactly what sort.

When his mates from the pub below came scrambling up the ladder to see what poor Mary had been blathering about, they discovered old Jack in a heap, near dead, and him with two bloody holes in his neck in the bargain.

## CHAPTER 16

The cellar where Maeve had left Calder was empty.

Wild panic seized her. Had Lisette, or some other fiend, found him and stolen him away?

Frantic, Maeve searched the room and found Shaleen dozing behind a crate of antique china.

The little hoyden was barely conscious—dawn was so near—but she looked up at Maeve and blinked.

"What happened?" Maeve demanded, crouching and grasping the child's bony shoulders. "Where is Calder? *Where is he?*"

Shaleen scrambled to her feet, visibly struggling against the inertia that overcame most vampires with the approach of sunrise. "He's gone, mum, that he is—and it's been a long time now, too! I tried to stop him, but he wouldn't be stopped—he's a strong one, he is. Why, he came off that slab like a cannon shot!"

Maeve felt herself succumbing to the catatonic sleep and knew there was no point in resisting it. Her terror and despair increased even as she began to lose consciousness—there were so many things Calder didn't know, so many dangers.

Calder had escaped his keeper easily, for he'd been full of strength when he awakened, half wild with curiosity and excitement.

Five minutes after bolting from Maeve's cellar, he stood on a busy street corner in twentieth-century London, watching in amazement as magnificent horseless carriages rushed past, displacing the night air, making an extraordinary din. There were plenty of people about, too, streaming out of clubs and theaters, strangely dressed and chattering about unfamiliar things.

He was delighted, confounded, awed by his own powers and by the wonderful new world that surrounded him.

A place, he admitted to himself, grimly amused, that he knew absolutely nothing about.

He began to walk, following a high, wrought-iron fence. Beyond it lay a graveyard, the marble stones pristine in the moonlight, the grass well kept. He remembered the sensation of William's bullet entering his chest, and a silent celebration stirred inside him because he was still alive.

Calder smiled as he strode along, reflecting now on the fact that Maeve had evidently come to the house in Philadelphia and collected him, prior to his transfiguration. He wondered what poor Prudence and the others had made of his mysterious disappearance.

Presently Calder began to feel a tightening inside himself, a need for sustenance, but he had no idea how to stalk prey. He knew very little, as it happened, except that he could not survive even the briefest encounter with sunlight.

Calder walked for hours, just looking in wonderment at the strange mix of new and old that was London. He was in the vicinity of Maeve's grand house, which he presumed was still in her possession, when a glance at the sky warned him that it was time to find shelter.

He let himself onto Maeve's property by a side gate, begrudging every moment of awareness he would miss by lapsing into the comalike slumber he could not hope to escape.

He found a narrow cellar window, dislodged the grillwork that covered it with a single wrench of his arm, and crawled through the space, whistling softly under his breath. Perhaps once he got the knack of being a vampire, he would discover a way for blood-drinkers to remain awake in the daytime, or even a means by which they could endure the full glare of the sun.

After all, he speculated, reaching out and pulling the iron grillwork back into place, he was a scientist. He might dissect one of those bumbling creatures Maeve and Valerian were so concerned about, after it was dead, of course, and learn a great deal about the inner workings of all vampires.

The prospect filled him with excitement.

Humming softly to himself, Calder found the very chamber he'd left earlier, and he could see immediately that it had not been in use for some time. Odd, he thought, loosening the collar of the shirt he'd awakened in, well over a hundred years in the past, that Maeve didn't seem to favor this bustling, energetic century. It was like a carnival, rife with noise and color; he wanted to see and do everything, to take it all inside him somehow and possess it.

He stretched out on his slab, the same one he'd abandoned only hours before, and *yet decades* before, to go exploring, and considered the paradox of time. How deliciously ironic to be lying there in the cellar,

in the very place he was missing from in the nineteenth century.

Sleep overtook him before he could make sense of the enigma.

The day must have passed quickly, for when Calder opened his eyes, it was as if he had just closed them. He felt a violent thirst, a growing weakness, and an unrelenting desire to continue his explorations.

He let himself out of Maeve's house by the same method he'd used to enter it—he crawled through the cellar window—and was nonplussed to find Valerian waiting for him, arms folded, his expression dour.

"Do you know," that august vampire began in a deceptively smooth, even voice, "how foolhardy it was to go rushing off into the world on your own like that?"

Calder felt only mild chagrin, and that was because of the worry his abrupt departure might have caused Maeve. He hadn't wanted to hurt her, and yet the drive to try out his new being had been irresistible.

He began to walk away and would have opened the gate and passed through if Valerian hadn't caught him by the back of his coat and brought him up short.

Calder's temper flared; he bristled and opened his mouth to tell Valerian to go to hell, but thought better of it when he looked into those fathomless violet eyes.

"You have much to learn," Valerian said quietly. "We'll start with passing through solid objects, and then you'd better take your first feeding."

Calder swallowed his formidable pride and nodded. He had trained a number of younger doctors during his career, but there were a great many vital things he didn't understand about this new existence. For the first time in years he would have to play the part of the apprentice rather than the master.

Valerian affected a sigh, then began his instruction.

Calder was so taken with the mechanics of dissolving himself and passing through gates and walls and trees that his mentor finally had to remind him that there were other tasks that must be accomplished in the space of that night.

The finer points of stalking and feeding came next, and a lesson on the proper method of time travel as well. Valerian took Calder to a place he couldn't help recognizing—a field hospital—but this was clearly a later conflict than the one he remembered so vividly.

"World War II," Valerian explained as Calder tried to adjust himself to the sights and sounds of suffering so intense, so terrible that he could barely take it in, even after all the practice he'd had in his own century. "These are German soldiers, technically the enemy, since you were an American, but the pain is the same."

They moved, unseen except by those nearest to death, among the rows of canvas cots.

Calder whispered a horrified exclamation as he looked upon some of the wounds. "What happened to these men?"

"I'm afraid warfare has advanced significantly since your time, Doctor—in this particular period, they used a lot of poisonous gasses and, of course, they were capable of dropping bombs from airplanes."

"Airplanes?" Calder hadn't come across the word in his brief exploration of modern London.

"Flying machines," Valerian answered in a distracted tone. "I'll show you later. In the meantime, you must choose one of these poor, suffering louts and draw from him the blood you need to survive."

Calder had been awash in blood since his first day of medical college and he had gotten past the stage of revulsion long ago. It was medical stuff, blood, full of mystery and power—he believed that with his whole heart. Still, the prospect of drawing on a patient in such an intimate way was abhorrent.

Valerian spoke quietly, standing close behind him. "Trust me," he said. "Your—victim, if that is indeed the correct word, will feel no pain. On the contrary, his agonies will cease, if you choose for it to be so, replaced by that same sense of ecstasy you felt when you underwent your own metamorphosis."

Calder glanced back at the other vampire uncomfortably. He didn't like being reminded of the joy his conversion had brought him, because he had yet to sort out its meaning. He certainly felt no physical attraction to this enigmatic creature who had given him everlasting life, but neither could he deny that he had known indescribable bliss during their unholy communion.

The elder vampire smiled—he'd probably discerned Calder's thoughts—and moved past him to stroke the pale forehead of one of the fallen soldiers. The boy opened his eyes, stared up at Valerian in baffled adoration, and murmured something in German.

Calder recognized the word *forangel*, since he'd had some training in the language while studying to become a physician. He recalled, of course, how Maeve had moved among the wounded at Gettysburg, bestowing her strange mercies, and how the dying soldiers had seen her as a creature of heaven.

"Like this," Valerian said gently, his gaze locked with the rapt, too-bright stare of the lad lying on the rickety cot. Then, to demonstrate, he bent over his welcoming prey, punctured the artery with his fangs, and fed.

When he straightened, Calder was stricken by the singular beauty of his tutor's expression; his countenance seemed to glow, his skin appeared translucent. Tenderness shimmered in his eyes, along with the most brazen glint of satisfaction.

The "victim" lay still, plainly dead, his slender young body slightly arched, as if frozen in the first throes of some sweet passion. He stared, peering straight into the very heart of heaven, it seemed, and his flesh was like ivory, backlit by the flame of an inner candle. His smile was beatific and so tranquil that Calder averted his gaze, feeling that he was intruding on some very private moment.

Calder felt a variety of emotions, as well—anger, frustration, pity, awe, and strangely joy. Still, he had never gotten used to death, its peculiar loveliness be damned, and his most basic instincts urged him to fight against it until the last.

Valerian gestured silently toward another cot, where yet another man-child lay, his once splendid body ruined, his mind fogged with the horror of seeing behind the glorious facade to the true nature of war.

By this time Calder was ravenous, and he knew he could put off the sacrilege no longer. He spoke softly to the soldier, smoothing his hair as he had seen Valerian do, as he himself had done with other dying children, in another war, another time, another life.

He wept inwardly as he bent over the bruised throat, found the pulse point, and plunged his fangs through the thin but stubbornly resistant flesh.

Calder tensed, bracing himself for utter revulsion, but to his surprise the nourishing blood did not flow over his tongue, but through the short, needle-sharp teeth that had once been ordinary incisors. As the stuff raced into him, he was electrified with a pleasure so brutally intense that for several moments he feared it would destroy him. He started to withdraw, in fact, then felt Valerian's hand come to rest lightly on his back, urging him to continue.

When it was over, when he'd felt the life force as well as the pain and terror leave the boy, Calder rose and turned away, ashamed. Paradoxically, for he was well aware that he could hide little or nothing from Valerian, he did not want the other vampire to witness his disgust.

Or his rapture.

Graciously Valerian said nothing, but only went on to another cot and fed again.

Calder could not bring himself to follow suit, even though he yearned to experience once more the inexpressible jubilation that was only then receding, a tide of sweet fire raking his soul as it ebbed away. He left the hospital tent by ordinary means and stood gazing up at the stars for a long interval.

Presently Valerian joined him, and by tacit agreement they returned to twentieth-century London and Maeve's grand house.

Much to Calder's delight, she was waiting there in the formal parlor, pacing back and forth along the edge of the marble hearth. Her hair fell free in wild curls, and she wore tight-fitting denim trousers and a black blouse of some stretchy fabric that clung to her curves.

"Where have you been?" she cried furiously when she realized that Calder and Valerian were there.

Wisely Valerian faded into mist and took himself off to some safer and no doubt more cordial place.

Calder made no attempt to hide his admiration or his curiosity. "I'm sorry you were worried," he said in all sincerity, for he truly loved this glorious being, and even the bliss of feeding for the first time could not compare to the splendors he'd known in her arms. "I was impatient to see what it was like to move about as a vampire."

Maeve's temper seemed to subside a little, though her eyes still flashed with sapphire fury. "There are so many dangers," she sputtered, running the fingers of one hand through her lovely tangle of hair. "Warlocks, angels—the sunlight. And sometimes time travel can go wrong, and it's impossible to return—"

He gripped her shoulders. "I'm safe," he said pointedly, touched by her concern. If anything, the transformation had deepened his love for Maeve, and the emotions she stirred in him were almost too splendid to be endured.

She flung herself at him then, wrapping her arms around his neck and murmuring, "I was so afraid—"

Calder stroked her back, warmed by her love, nourished by it. He laughed hoarsely and held her a little away from him. "What about these scandalous clothes of yours, Maeve Tremayne? What manner of devilment is this?"

Her smile was tentative but genuine. "This is how twentieth-century women dress," she said. "If they choose to, that is. They have a lot more to say about a great many things than their ancestors had."

He took her hand, lifted it over her head, and twirled her about as he had seen dancers do. "Trousers," he marveled. Then he held her close again and kissed her. "I must say, I like the way they look on you."

Calder felt Maeve tremble in his arms, and he kissed her again before saying, "I love you."

Her blue eyes glistened with a sentiment equal to his own. "You taught me to mate as humans do," she said softly. "Now let me show you how vampires give each other pleasure."

Calder pretended to be shocked. "What? Do twentieth-century women seduce their men so boldly as that?"

Maeve touched his mouth with one finger, and with that single gesture effectively set him ablaze with the need of her. "Who cares what they do?" Her eyes, tender before, were smoldering with forbidden knowledge now. "I am a vampire, not a mere woman, twentieth century or otherwise. Come with me, and I will show you passion you have not even imagined."

He did not resist her; indeed, Calder doubted that he could have done that, even if he'd wished to do so. He gave her his hand and then felt himself dissolve, felt his very soul plunging through space. Then, just as abruptly, he was whole again, and they were alone in an upstairs chamber, a vast room that he remembered as Maeve's studio.

She'd brought him there after the shooting, and sometimes when she was working at her loom, unaware that he was conscious, he had watched her for a moment or two before slipping under again.

He moved to draw her close and kiss her once more, but she drew back, smiling and shaking her lovely head, like a mischievous nymph bent on luring him into some enchanted place.

"You're thinking of the human way of lovemaking," she scolded softly. "I want to show you how vampires mate."

Had he still had need of his lungs, or of air, Calder would have drawn a deep breath at that moment. As it was, he simply watched Maeve, struck dumb by her terrifying beauty, and by the depth of his love for her.

She kept her distance, watching him with those magical eyes, too far away to touch him, and yet he began to feel the lightest of caresses. It seemed to him that fingertips brushed the sensitive place beneath one of his ears, made circles around his nipples, whisked ever so slightly across his mouth.

He moaned and moved to reach for Maeve, but she kept herself just out of reach. In the next instant he began to feel her touch in more intimate places, across his belly, the small of his back, along the insides of his thighs.

Calder gasped with pleasure, but Maeve silenced him with a soft "Shhh" and proceeded to tease the length of his staff. He was completely in her power then, as effectively restrained by his own desire as he might have been by iron manacles.

His clothes were not physically removed—they seemed to melt away like thin ice under a spring

sun—and not only was Calder's body bared to Maeve's attentions, but his soul as well.

He whispered an exclamation, a plea, and then felt her touching him everywhere, inside and out, even though physically she was still well beyond his reach. Her mouth drew at his nipples, not one, but both, warm and wet and greedy. At the same time, impossible though it was, her tongue traveled the length of his shaft and teased the tip until he cried out in a ragged, glorious, despairing voice.

Maeve showed Calder no quarter that magical night, as she initiated him into yet another vampire mystery. She was a gentle but relentless conqueror, having him thoroughly, again and again, until it all culminated in one cataclysmic, soul-rendering release.

He lay trembling on the cool, hard floor when she'd finished with him, depleted and yet more fantastically alive than ever before. When his emotions would allow him to speak, he whispered, "It's a good thing you didn't do that when I was mortal, love. I might have died of the pleasure."

She laughed softly and came to lie with him, her own body naked and sleek and glowing in the moonlight pouring in through the tall windows. She took him into her arms and kissed the hollow at the base of his throat. "There are more terrible ways to die," she observed, nestling close.

He stroked her breast, in the human way, and draped one of his legs across hers in a possessive gesture. "Why are you tarrying here with me, Maeve?" he asked, his tone gruff with his love for her, and the sudden knowledge that even eternity can be a fleeting thing. "Has the war been won already?"

Maeve raised herself onto one elbow, her hair a silken mantle in the moonlight, and gazed sadly into his face, as if to memorize every feature. "No, my darling," she said, tracing his mouth with the tip of one index finger. "The war hasn't been won."

Calder asked no more questions, sensing that, for Maeve, this was a time out of time, a place of refuge and restoration. "I think I like the human way better," he said.

She looked puzzled. "Of making war?"

He gave a raspy chuckle and held her close against him, his chin resting on the top of her head. "No, sweet—of making love."

Maeve drew back to study his face. "Why?" she asked, sounding stricken. "Don't tell me you didn't feel pleasure, Calder Holbrook, because I know—"

Calder smoothed her tousled hair. "I felt more than pleasure," he assured her gruffly, "more than ecstasy. But when mortals make love, they touch, they become one being, if only for a little while. I want that for us."

Her bewildered expression gave way to one of mischievous delight. "Before I decide that one is better than the other," she purred, "I would want you to take me the way you would take a human woman."

He turned her gently onto her back, this beautiful, complex fiend, and gripped her wrists, pressing her hands gently to the floor, just above her head. Then he mounted her, and she parted her silken thighs slightly, her dark blue eyes glittering in the darkness.

"Observe," he teased in a scholarly tone, and glided inside her with one long stroke. Within moments they were both wild with passion, rolling over the smooth wooden floor, first one taking command, and



then the other.

The finish of their lovemaking was simultaneous, apocalyptic, a collision and a fusion.

Lisette sensed trouble, but she was intrigued rather than fearful and allowed herself to be drawn back to nineteenth-century Spain, back to her villa beside the sea.

She slept through the day, conserving her strength for battles she knew were coming, and had her carriage and horses brought around only moments after the sun had set. She would feed, of course, but for the time being she would make no more vampires, special or otherwise—to do so would be foolhardy, for her powers seemed to be waning. While she was sure the effects were temporary, she certainly didn't want another confrontation with Maeve Tremayne at this juncture.

Just the thought of that treasonous creature filled Lisette with fury—she would destroy the rebellious vampires, all of them, and in ways so horrific that tales of them would be told for millennia—but for now she had more immediate concerns. She must coddle herself, feed well, and engage in her favorite diversion—seducing young, firm-muscled mortals, drawing badly needed strength from their unbridled passion.

The carriage rattled its way through sleepy streets and into the small seaside district, where a cluster of cantinas provided lively entertainment for visiting sailors and young noblemen alike.

One particular place drew Lisette, and while she was wary, it was not a new sensation. Over the centuries she had become expert in locating likely prospects—the scent and heat of their rich, sweet blood invariably drew her, even from great distances.

She signaled the driver to stop by tapping at the roof. Manuel was a slow-witted dolt who had—unknowingly, of course—provided Lisette with sustenance on several occasions, when it was inconvenient to hunt far afield. His saving grace was that he never asked questions, even though a great many strange things took place in the villa.

Lisette alighted without waiting for assistance and, clad in a flowing gown of blue silk and a white mantilla made of the finest lace, swept boldly into the cantina that had drawn her attention from the carriage.

Her entrance caused a gratifying hush among the celebrants—even the flamenco dancers stopped to stare—but Lisette did not offer so much as a nod of acknowledgment. Her gaze swept the crowded tavern, seeking the one who had summoned her back from her travels, however inadvertently.

Lisette uttered a small cry when she found him—

Great Scot, he was the *verypicture* of Aidan Tremayne—studying her speculatively through narrowed blue eyes. He displaced the dancing girl from his lap, and the colorful ruffles of her petticoats swished as she flounced angrily away.

"Aidan," Lisette whispered brokenly, even though she knew quite well that this mortal was not her lost love, but only someone who looked like him. Still, it was a very attractive quality, an unexpected and welcome bonus.

Silently she summoned him, and he rose from his chair, frowning with bewilderment, to obey. No one else in the place moved nor, it seemed to Lisette, whose senses were suddenly hyperalert, even breathed.

She laid one white hand to his face, felt the lovely rush of vibrant blood beneath his flesh, the warm firmness of the muscles. "Come with me," she said. Then she took his hand, as though he were a child, and led him out of the cantina into the balmy, starlit splendor of a Spanish night.

"What is your name?" she asked when they were settled in the carriage and she'd smoothed the lines of bafflement from his wonderful face with a gentle hand. Even as she spoke she cupped his masculine parts through his trousers, to make the terms of the game clear, and to give him a foretaste of the ecstasies ahead.

His breathing was raspy, and a fine sheen of perspiration glimmered on his forehead and upper lip. Lisette was gratified to see and feel that he was aroused, eager for her.

"Jorge," he said in soft Spanish.

Lisette preferred English. "George," she said, dragging her fingers along the soft, thin fabric of his breeches, from the top of his muscular thigh to his knee, then back again.

George moaned as Lisette opened the buttons of his breeches and reached inside to stroke his straining shaft with expert fingers, and she was both pleased and touched by his reaction. It had been much the same that other night, long before, when she'd found Aidan Tremayne walking alongside an English road. He, too, had been a lusty young man, welcoming Lisette's skilled caresses, groaning softly as she attended him in various ways and showed him things he'd yet to experience with a mortal woman.

She maneuvered George so that he lay on his back, draped over her lap in delicious abandon, and then just sat admiring him for several moments, thinking what a splendid creation he was.

He writhed with pleasure, the lovely mortal, while Lisette taught him a few basics. Somewhat to her own surprise, she felt a deep tenderness toward the fragile creature, rather than the greedy lust that was usually at the root of such escapades.

Almost gently, Lisette brought the beautifully sculpted human to a satisfactory release. Then she simply stroked and admired him, from head to toe, for the work of art he was, as the carriage bounced and jostled over cobbled streets.

"She took the bait," Dathan said, rubbing his hands together in triumph and delight, when Maeve and Valerian joined him in that splendidly spooky old manse under its blanket of ivy and various vines. "Even as we speak, Lisette is playing her vampire games with our own beguiling 'George.'"

Maeve's attention was wandering; she was preoccupied with Calder, who had chosen to remain in the twentieth century, where they had made such tempestuous love. He was a new vampire, she reminded herself fitfully; he needed time to explore his powers.

Valerian nudged her. "He's fine, your fledgling lover," he said as directly as he would have if Dathan hadn't been there, listening intently. "Stop worrying."

Maeve glared at him for a moment to let him know she didn't appreciate his lack of sensitivity, then turned to Dathan. The warlock stood with arms folded, smirking a little.

"I want you to teach me that fire-starting trick now," she said.

Dathan only pretended to be taken aback by the request, but his glance at Valerian a moment later was genuinely uncertain. The towering vampire glowered at him in quelling silence.

Finally Dathan relented. "All right," he conceded grudgingly. "I will share the incantation. There is no guarantee whatsoever that the magic will work for vampires, however."

"We'll take our chances," Maeve said firmly. She'd betrayed an important bit of blood-drinker lore in letting Dathan and the others know how vampires recognized other supernatural creatures, knowledge that could be used against her kind, and she wanted something in return.

Dathan repeated the chant—the words were from some ancient language, eerie, and more like music than speech.

Maeve attempted the incantation and the simultaneous shift of consciousness a number of times before she mastered it and set a pile of old newspapers burning on the grate.

Valerian, that inveterate show-off, succeeded on the first try.

## CHAPTER 17

The soul-cries of sick children all over nineteenth-century London seemed to ride on the night breeze and rise from the pavement itself. Overcome, Calder sagged against the brick wall of an ink factory and pressed his hands to his ears to shut out the terrible din. Since he was not hearing the sound, but feeling it instead, the gesture was fruitless.

"Maeve," Calder murmured like a man in delirium. "Valerian. Help me—show me what to do."

There was no reply.

Calder pushed himself away from the wall, wavered, and then gathered all his inner forces. No doubt this was a private ordeal, a rite of passage.

The suffering of the children pressed upon him from all sides, and the helpless feeling that assailed him was not unfamiliar. He had known this same frantic need to be more than he was, to be in a hundred places at once, as a mortal, moving among the wounded Rebels and Union soldiers he had attended in America.

*Focus.* The word came soft and insistent, like a whisper at his shoulder, and Calder had heard it often while Valerian was introducing him to his vampire powers.

Calder started to take a deep breath, realized that his lungs were fossilized within him, having no need of air. He smiled grimly and, as passers-by began to look at him with wary curiosity, straightened his coat. The sorrow of the children was as loud as ever, but he was beginning to cope with it, just as he had coped with the screams and moans of his patients in field hospitals and government wards back home.

*Focus.*

Calder found a single thread in all that tangle of noisy misery and grasped it with his mind. Then he allowed it to lead him down an alleyway, past a graveyard and a park, into a tenement.

There the horrid music of death and pain was so pervasive that Calder could barely withstand it, but he pressed on, whispering Valerian's word to himself like a litany. *Focus, focus, focus* ...

The ribbon of consciousness led Calder to an impossibly small room in the back of an enormous, dark, and filthy building. One pitiful wad of tallow lit the stinking chamber, though of course Calder did not need its light to see the pale, spindly boy lying on a dirty pallet beneath the window. A crust of molded bread lay within the child's reach, and he watched with large, haunted eyes as a rat nibbled delicately at the last of his food.

The boy looked straight at Calder, then without a word turned his attention back to the rat. The lad's history flooded Calder's mind, unbidden; he knew his name was Tommy, that he'd been on the streets alone since he was five years old, surviving by picking pockets and stealing food from trash bins and occasionally from street stalls and shops. His mother, who had loved her baby very much, illegitimate though he was, had been a simple country maid, drawn to London by dreams of going on the stage. Instead she'd had to sell her favors to buy bread and milk, and one night she'd been strangled to death by a client who hadn't wanted to pay.

Calder closed his eyes for a moment, grappling with the horrid images. When he had, he kicked at the rodent; the belligerent creature hesitated, then scampered away.

"What do you want?" the lad asked listlessly in a thick Cockney accent, his eyes narrowed. "You're not from 'round here, now are you—not with those fine clothes of yours."

"I'm a doctor," Calder said thoughtfully. "What's your name?" He asked the unnecessary question in an effort to put the lad at his ease.

"It's Tommy," the child said, trying to raise himself, and failing. "I ain't got no money to pay a doctor, so you'd better just take yourself out of here."

"I have no need of money," Calder answered distractedly, touching the pulse point beneath Tommy's ear. In that instant an image of the child's anatomy exploded into Calder's mind in rich and vibrant color, shining with clarity. Tommy was suffering from a respiratory infection; treating it would be fairly simple, by twentieth-century standards—the prescription was good food, rest, and antibiotics.

Unfortunately Calder's bag, which contained the modern medical supplies Maeve had purloined for him, as well as a few Valerian had collected for sport, was back at the Philadelphia house.

Tommy raised himself onto his painfully thin elbows and with effort demanded, "Why are you lookin' at me that way? You ain't plannin' to saw something off me, are you?"

Calder chuckled and then lifted the child gently into his arms. He could not carry Tommy through time, but space was another matter. He would take him back to Philadelphia and treat his illness. Calder knew a woman there, a widow robbed of three sons by that monstrous War, who would gladly look after the lad.

"No," the doctor answered belatedly, though Tommy had already guessed that he was safe, for he rested lightly in Calder's arms without struggling. "I'm going to take you on a little journey. Hold on tightly now and don't be frightened."

Tommy's eyes widened even farther. "My gawd, governor," he whispered, "you ain't an angel, are you?"

Tell me I ain't dyin'!"

Calder smiled sadly. "I'm no angel," he said. Then he closed his eyes and thought of that gloomy house in Philadelphia, where there had been so much pain and trouble and treachery.

The place was dark when Calder and Tommy arrived, moments later. The stair railing was draped in black bunting, and there were mourning wreaths everywhere.

Tommy was in a state of shock; nothing in his brief and difficult life had prepared him for traveling halfway around the world in the embrace of a vampire.

"Shhh!" Calder said when the child would have cried out in amazement. He didn't want to encounter Prudence or any of the other servants; they would be terrified.

Obediently Tommy nestled close against Calder's coat. He was weak, after all, and very sick, and he soon lost consciousness.

Calder treated him with an injection of penicillin, wrapped the wraithlike body in woolen blankets, and fixed his mind on the presence of Ellen Cartwright, the middle-aged widow he'd met in the hallway of the army hospital.

Mrs. Cartwright was downstairs in the parlor of her small but sturdy house when Calder arrived. He settled the sleeping Tommy in a warm bed, summoned the good-hearted widow upstairs with a thought, and stepped back into the shadows.

The lady appeared within moments. Her face filled with mingled joy and concern when she saw the fragile child resting in the bed of her youngest, Albie, who'd fallen at Vicksburg.

"My gracious!" Mrs. Cartwright cried, taking Tommy's hand, blissfully unaware of the vampire looking on. "Where did you come from? Who are your people? My heavens, look at you—you're nothing but skin and bones!"

Smiling, Calder allowed himself to fade. He would return, of course, to give Tommy doses of the medicine he'd need to recover. Mrs. Cartwright could be counted upon to do the rest.

This one was not nearly as smart as Aidan Tremayne had been, Lisette observed to herself as she studied the beautiful, exhausted mortal sleeping in the tangled sheets of her bed. They'd had little opportunity for conversation, of course, but a quick scan of George's brain had revealed a distressing degree of mediocrity.

He had none of Aidan's talent for art, for one thing, nor did he possess his predecessor's poetic spirit and capacity for all ranges of emotion.

Lisette smiled. As far as she was concerned, all these factors were to George's credit—she had no need of another rebellious, troublesome lover, but an obedient companion, one fair of face and countenance, would be another matter entirely. And this one was certainly able to give her the pleasure she craved; he had a seemingly limitless ability to satisfy her.

It might be a comfort to have someone like George at her side, loyal and pretty and stupid, all of a piece. She could pretend he was Aidan if she wanted—she'd done exactly that while they were engaged in passion—and train him to be the perfect consort.

George stirred in the silken sheets, and Lisette smiled fondly and then glanced toward the window. Dawn was still hours away; there was time to enjoy her new toy thoroughly before submitting to the vampire sleep. The slumber would claim her this day, she knew, for although she was often able to evade it, the effort sapped her powers.

She slipped back into bed beside him, began to stroke his belly, muscled even in slumber, and tease his lovely staff back to life.

Yes, Lisette thought as George awakened, gripping her bare, slender hips and moving her so that she was astraddle of him, this one would do quite nicely. She would make him a vampire, of course, because watching him age was a prospect too dismal to consider, and after she'd destroyed the rebels, they would create other, more tractable blood-drinkers to serve as their court, and reign over the new dominion.

Together.

George plunged into Lisette, and she threw her head back and uttered a sound like the cry of a panther, deliberately forgetting, in her need and her ardor, that part of what had attracted her to this insatiable mortal was a sense of danger.

"It isn't wise," Valerian protested as he and Maeve moved along the dark river, deep beneath the ground, that led to the secret chamber of the Brotherhood of the Vampyre, "arriving uninvited and unannounced like this."

Maeve made a soft sound of exasperation. "Since when have you troubled yourself with such trivia? These are the oldest, most powerful vampires on earth. They were present when Lisette was transformed from a woman to an immortal. We've got to convince them to help us, or at least tell us if she has any weak spots."

Valerian's irritation clearly hadn't waned. He was uncomfortable in that dank, hidden place, Maeve knew, but not because he was afraid of ghosts and goblins, or even the Brotherhood itself. No, the cave unnerved him because it hadn't been his idea to venture there, and because he had kept a helpless vigil in that very place, in the earliest and probably most horrifying stages of Aidan's transformation from vampire to mortal man. "Do you really believe they're going to point out Lisette's Achilles' heel, if indeed she has one? After all, she is *one of them*. In telling you how to destroy the mad queen, they'll also be giving you the prescription for their own destruction!"

They were deep inside the cave now, but no sentinel barred their way, as Tobias had the last time they visited. No illusion of sunlight formed a barrier to protect the inner sanctum.

Maeve's spine prickled with an eerie premonition; some shock awaited them, and she tried to prepare herself.

They proceeded into the great chamber where the Brotherhood had held court since Atlantis itself had crumbled into the sea, both silent, both tense.

"Great Zeus," Valerian whispered when they spotted the remains of those ancient vampires, macabre shapes, part charred flesh and bone, part collapsed into naught but pale gray cinders. Obviously the members of the Brotherhood had submitted willingly to their fate, for they lay in a precise row, most with their horrible ashen parodies of arms crossed over their chests.

Maeve recalled Tobias and the others speaking of the old ones' desire to be at rest, once and for all. She had not really believed him; the idea of wanting death, of seeking it out, was so foreign to her that she'd had no frame of reference.

Now, faced with the reality, she felt overwhelming grief.

"Tobias?" she whispered, looking for him among the ruined bodies, unable to recognize his familiar, lithe shape.

"He's not here," Valerian said calmly. He crouched beside one of the vampire corpses and frowned. "Who could have performed this execution?" he mused aloud. "And how could they have lain so still, and yet tolerated the agonies of burning?"

Maeve stayed back, trembling slightly. She had not known these creatures well, nor even held them in particular esteem, but they were the first of her kind ever to exist—ancestors, in a way. "Perhaps they were *deadbefore* the fire was set," she suggested.

Valerian looked up at her, his violet eyes distant as he pondered Maeve's suggestion. "Perhaps," he finally agreed, rising to his full height.

"Could Lisette have done this?" Maeve asked.

The other vampire shook his head. "Even she would not have dared such a travesty. No, this is the Brotherhood's own work. They wanted oblivion and rest."

Maeve looked again at the horrible figures so neatly arranged on the chamber floor. "Enough to risk the Judgment of Heaven itself? Enough to face the possibility of hellfire?"

"Evidently," Valerian confirmed. "What I wouldn't give to know what they're experiencing right now. Is it nothingness or damnation?" He indulged in one of his pseudo-sighs. "Let's look around a little. There may be scrolls, or treasure."

It was then, as they began the search, that Maeve gave voice to what they were both thinking. "The task of destroying these old ones must have fallen to Tobias," she said. "Isn't it likely that he would have taken any written record of their secrets when he left?"

"We'll find out, won't we?" Valerian asked, sounding a bit impatient.

"Where do you suppose he is? Tobias, I mean?"

Valerian lifted the lid of a tarnished brass and copper chest and peered inside. "He has probably gone underground to rest. I seem to remember that Tobias wasn't quite so enamored with the idea of giving up the proverbial ghost as the others were." He paused. "Come here. I've found something."

Maeve left off opening other chests and casks, all of which had proved to be empty, and joined Valerian on the other side of the chamber.

Inside the chest were a number of parchment scrolls, carefully tied with shriveled, dirty ribbon. When Valerian touched one of the papers, the corner crumbled into dust.



Feeling a strong sense of excitement, along with a niggling, quiet terror, Maeve drew closer and focused her mind on the contents of those rolls of ancient paper. Opening and reading them in the ordinary way would obviously have destroyed them.

At first she couldn't understand the words that flashed into her mind, for they were not only foreign, but archaic in the bargain. When she concentrated, however, the meaning began to come to her.

Recorded there, by some vampire scribe, were the deepest secrets, sufferings, and philosophies of the Brotherhood.

"The truth is ironic," Valerian read aloud, his graceful hands clutching the edge of the chest as he, too, scanned the writings with his mind. "It is mortals who will live forever, while all blood-drinkers and other unnatural creatures must one day pass over into death." He raised himself to his feet and turned to look deep into Maeve's widened eyes. "I guess the joke is on us."

Maeve's attention was drawn back to the treatises inside the chest. "There are other things here," she said in a thoughtful tone. "They lied when they claimed there was no longer a means to change a vampire back into a mortal—the necessary combination of chemicals is recorded here. And they knew, these vampires, how to start fires with their minds, in much the same way Dathan did—"

Valerian stepped back to allow Maeve to move closer to the scrolls, gesturing her forward, his voice gruff with emotion. "Absorb the magic," he said. "You are the true queen."

Maeve hesitated for a few moments, then knelt, as Valerian had done earlier, and spread both her hands out above the parchments, as inscriptions she had already divined instructed her to do. A breath of fire seemed to consume her, and then the knowledge flowed into her like a continuous charge of electricity. She took in secrets and formulas older than the pyramids, and the experience, far from being a sublime one, was shattering. When she had secreted it all away within herself, she used her thoughts to set the dusty scrolls ablaze.

"What the hell—?" Valerian burst out, exasperated, looking wildly about for some way to douse the flames. Of course, there was none. "Why did you do that?!"

Maeve rose slowly, still half entranced. "It was part of the pact," she said, knowing Valerian would not understand—not yet, at least—and unable to fully explain. She had consumed the knowledge of the vampyre, but she had yet to assimilate the majority of it.

Valerian gripped her shoulders, turned her to face him. "We're doomed, aren't we?" he rasped. "Tell me!"

She was still under enchantment, but she sensed the other vampire's desperation and struggled to answer. "Not necessarily," she said in the tone of a mother lulling a frightened child to sleep. "We have choices—more choices than you and I have ever dreamed."

"Go on!" he pressed, giving her a gentle shake.

Maeve shook her head. "Don't plague me about this now, Valerian—I cannot yet speak of it in any sensible fashion, and there are some things I must never say." She turned and looked sorrowfully at the burned remains of the old ones, laid out so neatly, like fallen soldiers gathered from a battlefield. "They perished willingly," she said. "They possessed the power to make themselves burn from the inside, at temperatures so high that the process was over in an instant."

Valerian took her hands in his, gentler now that some of his panic had passed. "What now?" he whispered.

"I must rest," Maeve replied. "It's all like—like a maelstrom inside me—"

A moment later, she collapsed in Valerian's arms.

After he'd left Tommy with Mrs. Cartwright, Calder returned to the grand house where he had died by his brother's hand. There was nothing he wanted from that place or from those people who normally populated it, and yet he needed to put a figurative period to the brief, troubled sentence that had been his mortal life.

He had fed early in the evening, and thus was at the height of his strength when he assembled himself in a shadowy corner of the main parlor of the Holbrook mansion. Before, he had been careful to stay upstairs, out of the flow of normal activity.

Only a few feet from where he stood, a newspaper reporter and the chief of police were conferring over strong coffee laced with brandy. Prudence lingered at a little distance from the two men, taking theatrical swipes at a lamp with her feather duster.

"God knows," the chief of police, and old friend of Calder's father, was saying, "there was no love lost between William and his younger brother, but William couldn't have stolen Calder's body because he was in jail."

Prudence shook her head almost imperceptibly, and in a blinding flash, Calder knew what she was thinking as well as if the thoughts had taken shape in his own mind: These fools were doing a lot of talking, but they were really just covering the same old well-trodden ground. Furthermore, they were no closer to figuring out what had really happened the night Calder disappeared.

*I'm all right, Pru,* Calder told his old friend silently. *Don't worry about me .*

Prudence started as if somebody had poked her lightly with the prongs of a pitchfork and cast a wild look around the dimly lit parlor, but Calder made sure she didn't see him. She was superstitious, he reminded himself, and even a glimpse of him, lurking in the corner where the gaslight didn't quite reach, might keep her awake nights for years afterward.

She looked at the chief and the reporter, who were still making inane attempts at figuring out what was going on in that house, noted that they hadn't sensed or heard anything, and bolted from the room.

Calder watched fondly until she'd vanished, then transported himself to the jail cell where his brother William sat on the edge of a rusted iron cot, despondency evident in every line of his elegantly slender body, his head in his hands.

Veiling himself from his brother's conscious awareness, if not that deeper, more mysterious part of the mind, Calder stood leaning against the bars of the cell, his arms folded.

Each place he visited, he'd recently discovered, had its own nuances and messages and meanings woven right into the ether itself. In London he had felt the pain and despair of the children; here in America it was the suffering of the soldiers and their families. . .

Calder shifted his thoughts to the matter at hand. William would not actually hang, he discerned, since no body would ever be found, and he would not be tried and sent to prison.

The immediate future unfolded before Calder's eyes, like a neatly written letter.

William was to be released on bail, put up by Bernard's faithful attorneys, in just a few days. Before he could ever be taken before a judge, Calder saw as plainly as if the actual events were being played out in front of his eyes, William would consume a scandalous amount of bourbon and fling himself over the very railing Marie had tumbled from years before. He would break his neck in the fall.

Looking upon William while he still lived stirred strange emotions in Calder, not the least of which was pity. His half brother was not evil; he was merely weak. His fatal flaw had been nothing more than an unceasing longing for the very distinction he lacked. He'd craved the notice of others, especially Bernard, but tragically his own mediocre personality had rendered him all but invisible.

Calder laid a hand on William's shoulder, knowing all the while that the poor wretch would not feel his touch, or even sense his presence. As always, William's attention was turned inward, and he was unable to perceive Calder as Prudence had done.

*Good-bye, he said, and may God look upon you with compassion .*

With that, Calder left his murderer, the last living member of his family, to his fate and willed himself back to the beautiful house where so much tragedy and heartbreak had taken place. Not wanting to see the place as he knew it, but as it would be, he moved forward in time to the twentieth century.

He was mildly surprised, standing on the cracked sidewalk in the night and staring at the wreck of that once-grand house, to see its degeneration. Certainly no one in the Holbrook family had survived to live in it and pass it down, but Bernard, having been a far-sighted soul, had made provisions for even that. The mansion would be held in trust indefinitely.

Calder stared, feeling an expected pang of regret as he noted that the roof had caved in in places, and the windows had been broken out as well—including the fine stained-glass one that had once graced a medieval cathedral. The pillars supporting the roof over the veranda had long since fallen and disintegrated. The grounds, once manicured, were a tangle of weeds, the roses had gone wild decades ago, and the marble fountain that had once given a certain Grecian glory to the loop of the grand driveway was a ruin, marred by the lewd lettering of vandals.

He rested his forehead against a rusted iron rail of the fence, forgetting to veil himself as Valerian had taught him to do, too engrossed in his own despair to realize he was not alone.

"Personally, I think they should tear it down," a blustery male voice said. "It's an eyesore—brings down the value of the other estates in this area."

Calder looked over his shoulder and saw an older gentleman with bright blue eyes and an abundance of white hair. He was dressed in the garish fashion of the late twentieth century, his trousers plaid, his shirt open at the throat. With him on a leash was a golden retriever that made a whimpering sound and backed away from Calder until the strip of leather would allow it to go no farther.

"What happened to this place?" Calder asked. "It used to be one of the finest houses in Philadelphia."

"Hush, Goldie!" the mortal scolded, but the dog would not be soothed. It knew Calder was no ordinary

human, even if its master didn't, and began to leap and plunge desperately at the end of her tether, until the old man could barely restrain her. "They say it used to be downright grand," he finally replied. "But there was some kind of trouble here, a long way back. What it all comes down to is, people started saying the place was haunted, and the rumors stuck. Why, when I was a boy, we wouldn't even *look* toward this house, for fear of being sucked right in and gobbled up by the ghoulies!" By this time the dog was going wild; Calder silenced the animal with an elementary mental trick. The beast's owner stared down at it for a moment, confounded, then finished up his discourse with, "You from around here? I .don't recall seeing you before."

Calder smiled sadly. "I've been away for a while." He released Goldie from her spell, and she immediately started barking and pulling at the leash.

"Don't know what's gotten into this mutt," the old man fretted. He nodded in friendly farewell and allowed the dog to pull him on down the sidewalk, calling back with a laugh, "Have a care you don't get yourself bewitched or something!"

"Bewitched," Calder echoed with a somber chuckle. What an understatement.

He looked at the old house for a while longer, remembering—for not all his recollections were unhappy ones, of course—and then turned to walk away.

Valerian was leaning against the nearest lamppost, arms folded, a disapproving expression on his face. "There you are," he said, as if he'd conducted a long and weary search. In truth, Calder knew, the elder vampire had simply fastened his thoughts on his troublesome apprentice and willed himself to his side.

Calder felt a sudden stir of alarm coil itself in his chest, like a snake. "Maeve," he said, stepping closer to Valerian, who still lounged against the modernized lamppost. "Is she all right?"

Valerian arched an eyebrow. "What do you care?" he intoned. "You are hardly an attentive lover, the way you keep rushing off all over time and creation."

The alarm Calder felt intensified and was joined by a dull, pulsing throb of guilt. "Damn you, Valerian, what's happened to her?"

Valerian smiled, but there was a glint of bitterness in the expression, plainly directed at Calder himself and not Maeve. "You are right to be frightened, fledgling," he said coldly. "Maeve truly became the queen of vampires on this very night, when all the knowledge of the old ones was imparted to her, but the weight of it may crush her. She lies dormant, even now."

Calder forgot himself, forgot the other vampire's vastly superior powers, and grasped the lapels of Valerian's beautifully tailored velvet waistcoat in both hands. "*Where?*"

With pointed grace, Valerian freed himself. "For her sake," he said in a low, smooth voice, "and for her sake alone, I will not burn you like a stalk of dry grass for your insolence."

"Where is she?" Calder repeated, subsiding only slightly. Perhaps foolishly, he cared nothing for his own safety, but only Maeve's.

Valerian took his time answering, first straightening his coat and smoothing the lapels Calder had crumpled. "Have you forgotten everything I taught you?" he asked. "Simply think of Maeve and will yourself to be at her side."

Calder *had* forgotten in his anxiety. He scowled defiantly at Valerian, then closed his eyes and permeated himself with Maeve's image.

Moments later Calder found himself, and Maeve, in a vast, echoing chamber that looked like a medieval dungeon. The place was lit by hundreds of flickering candles, and Maeve lay in the center on a long table draped with velvet, like Sleeping Beauty awaiting her prince's kiss.

Her flesh seemed translucent in the candlelight, and the faintest of smiles touched her lips. Calder had seen that serene expression many times—on the faces of mortals who had died with clear consciences, after rising above their pain.

He took up her hand, kissed the knuckles. "Maeve?" ' She did not respond, of course, or even stir.

It was only then that he noticed Benecia and Canaan, those horrible vampire children, sitting nearby in ruffled dresses, hair all in curls, swinging their feet. They smiled at him, in unison, but the glitter in their flat eyes was patently savage.

"If Maeve doesn't wake up," they said simultaneously, chilling Calder on some level far beneath his conscious reach, "then Mama will be queen, and we shall be princesses."

Calder glared at them. "Get out of here, you little demons!"

They leaped off their chairs then, fangs bared, making a hair-raising sound that was at once a snarl and a shriek. Calder braced himself for attack, but before they lunged, Valerian materialized, blocking their way.

"Go dig up a grave or something," that vampire said, waving a hand.

Benecia and Canaan looked sullen, to say the least, but they drew in their fangs and vanished.

Calder glowered at Valerian, even though—or perhaps *because*—his creator had just saved him an ugly experience. "What took you so long?" he asked, only then realizing that he was still grasping Maeve's hand, and that his grip was not only possessive, but desperate.

Valerian sighed, as long-suffering as a martyr about to be burned at the stake. "I had forgotten how trying a fledgling's insolence can be," he said. His gaze fell on Maeve then and turned tender in the face of an instant. "I had hoped she would respond to you. Misguided though she may be, she loves you very much."

Calder felt very human tears burning in his eyes as he looked down at Maeve. He had neglected her in the excitement of discovering and exploring his new powers, and he had never felt more remorse than he did then.

"Forgive me," he whispered, not caring that Valerian could hear.

Valerian stood on the other side of the slab. "Come back to us if you can, Maeve," he said with a strange mixture of gentle urging and sternness. "We need you if we are to survive. Nemesis's angels are nearly upon us."

There was not so much as a flicker of an eyelash from Maeve.

"How did this happen?" Calder demanded, as if knowing could make a difference, or somehow undo whatever it was that had brought Maeve to lie there on that slab, unmoving, unresponsive.

Valerian gave a complicated explanation, speaking of vampire corpses and a natural chamber far beneath the earth and a chest full of crumbling scrolls. Maeve had somehow absorbed the contents of those ancient parchments, all the knowledge the old ones had brought with them from Atlantis and gathered since. He finished with another brisk injunction for Maeve to wake up and resume her duties as leader of the vampires.

"Leave her alone," Calder said distractedly. "Just leave her alone."

He bent and rested his forehead lightly against Maeve's, and that was when he felt the spiritual storm raging in and around her. She was struggling, fighting some internal battle on which everything outward hinged.

Calder raised himself and, clasping both her hands tightly in his, willed his own strength into her, without stint or reservation. He grew weak and swayed on his feet, ignoring Valerian's orders to stop.

Maeve heard Calder's voice above the howling tempest within her own being. She struggled toward him, reaching and straining, and finally letting him lead her.

Then she felt the inrush of vitality, as if she were feeding on the mysterious ambrosia that sustained all vampires. She felt him grasp her somehow, and pull her upward with all his fledgling power.

She opened her eyes just in time to see what price Calder had paid to help her. His face was waxen and strangely gaunt, and as she watched, her joy and relief turning now to horror and regret, his eyes rolled back, and he toppled across her, completely spent. Perhaps even dead.

Maeve screamed a protest as Valerian clasped Calder's shoulders and gently pulled him away. She was still weak, and her efforts to sit up were futile.

"Valerian," she pleaded. "Tell me—I beg of you—is he—gone?"

The other vampire's voice was hollow. "I don't know," he answered. "I can't make a connection—"

Fear shot through Maeve and propelled her off the slab. She stood beside it, trembling, and saw Valerian kneeling on the floor where Calder lay, unmoving. She had never seen that terrible stillness in any other vampire, not even the dormant ones she'd occasionally stumbled across when she was abroad and looking for a temporary lair.

She closed her eyes, trying to link her mind with Calder's, but like Valerian, she failed. She could not sense her lover's spirit or his formidable intelligence.

"He did this for me," she said in despair, dropping to her knees. She took his hand and called to him silently with all the force and substance of her soul. And then she felt it—a spark, then a flicker of life, somewhere inside him.

Maeve bent closer and brushed his still, waxen lips with her own. "Come back to me," she told him. "I love you, and I need you—"



Valerian must have felt Calder's spirit rallying as well, for he gave a soft, joyous exclamation.

Calder grew stronger, and then stronger still. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he opened his eyes, stared blankly for a few moments, and then gave Maeve an insouciant wink.

With a strangled sob, intertwined with a burst of laughter, Maeve leaned down again and kissed him full on the mouth. "Don't you ever do anything like that again!" she said as his lips formed a smile against her own.

She knew when Valerian left them alone, and was grateful.

Still kneeling, Maeve laid one hand to either side of Calder's face, full of exaltation and love and fury that he'd nearly left her forever. "What happened?"

With considerable effort Calder raised himself onto his elbows. "Nothing," he answered thoughtfully. "All I saw was darkness. My awareness kept shrinking until it was only a pinpoint." He reached up, entangled his fingers in her hair, and tugged gently. "Then I heard your voice, and I followed it back."

Maeve's eyes burned with tears. "You were foolish to expend all your strength that way. Why did you do it?"

He strained upward to give her a nibbling kiss. "You know why," he answered hoarsely.

She did know, and it made everything worthwhile—all the suffering that lay behind her, and all the perils waiting ahead.

Calder Holbrook loved her.

## CHAPTER 18

The knowledge that the old ones were gone came to Lisette as she dreamed in her secure chamber beneath the Spanish villa, and although she had long ago parted company with the Brotherhood, she felt their loss. One, Zarek, had been her childhood sweetheart and later her husband, when they were both still mortal, of course. She had left him behind soon after they became vampires, for Zarek had been something of a philosopher, and he had not approved of the way Lisette used her powers.

She stirred on her cool marble slab, vaguely aware of the luscious mortal moving about abovestairs, helping himself to her chocolates, her brandy, and probably her money as well. She felt mild amusement; when George became a vampire, he would no longer have use for such human comforts. Let him enjoy them while he could, for soon she would be introducing him to much keener pleasures.

One of the first things she meant to do, she reflected, floating just beneath the surface of wakefulness, where mortals and vampires alike are awash in dreams, was change George's name. She must choose something less pedestrian and more suitable—Raoul, perhaps, or Julian, or Nikos...

It wasn't unusual for blood-drinkers to eschew their former identities completely, of course. She herself had done just that, shedding her mortal name, Cassandra, and abandoning her profession. Like the other old ones, she had been a doctor and a scientist.



Those ancient memories tugged at her now, pulled her back toward that time lost in mist, like the currents of some vast, unseen river. She reasoned that she was prone to reverie because Zarek and the others were gone, and she was virtually alone in the firmament. In any case, she made no effort to resist but instead allowed herself to drift slowly back, and back, and back...

Atlantis.

The doomed continent was real to Lisette, not the nebulous legend it had become in modern times, a green place with gently rolling hills and a curving mountain range edging its northernmost coasts. There were many lakes and rivers on the great island, and animals peculiar to it, curious and beautiful creatures that were lost in the great cataclysm.

Standing mentally on the stony shore of her homeland, Lisette put aside the certain knowledge that everything she looked upon was mere illusion, every stone and stick of wood, every grave and temple. All of it had fallen into the sea so long ago that there was no one to remember, save herself and possibly one other now-dormant vampire, the untrustworthy Tobias.

Lisette gave herself up to the joy of homecoming and climbed a grassy slope to look out over the impossibly blue seas. A fine, cool mist touched her skin and awakened that winsome mortal girl, the forgotten one who'd lain hidden within her all these thousands of years.

Lisette was no longer Lisette, but Cassandra, or Cassie, as she was called by those who loved her. She was young and beautiful, mortal and free, blessed with one of the finest minds in all Atlantis.

Cassie sat in the fragrant grass, drawing up her slim, strong legs and wrapping her arms around them. She did not fit the classical image of the Atlantean, she knew—she wore no toga or sandals, no wreath of leaves upon her head.

No, Cassie wore cutoff blue jeans and a skimpy summer top. She listened to rock music and lived in a split-level house, and her government was experimenting with weapons of terrifying power—bombs and missiles detonated by a process of turning atoms in upon themselves.

Cassie lay back on the grass, gazing up at the azure sky, her long auburn hair spread out around her. She tried not to worry about the tests her father and his colleagues, all top scientists, were conducting, but she knew too much for comfort.

Looking upon her younger self and at the same time gazing outward through that child's eyes, Lisette felt a terrible grief. Cassie was as lost as if she'd gone under the sea with the rest of Atlantis's population, including her father and mother and sisters and brothers.

Despite the pain of bereavement, Lisette was wont to leave this vision of her doomed homeland. She lingered, watching as Cassie grew into Cassandra and married Zarek, her handsome lover. They had joined the secret society, a group of renegade scientists, young and old, who had stumbled on a formula they believed would slow the aging process.

The potion not only met that objective, but also lent the experimenters incredible powers. They could travel vast distances, even to other continents, on the strength of a thought. They could read the minds of others and veil themselves from the notice of ordinary people and, sometimes, even from each other.

The magic had a dark side, but it wasn't discovered until weeks after the members had imbibed the wonderful medicine that made them as strong and intelligent as gods. They developed a penchant for

human blood—and soon learned, to their unending horror, that they required the mysterious vitality of the stuff to function. What began as a mere aversion to the light of the sun became a violent and extremely painful reaction. Finally the blood-drinkers found themselves succumbing to a deep, comalike sleep during the day.

They had become Fiends, and they named themselves *vampyres* for a terrifying winged creature that existed only in the heart of the continent's southern jungles.

All the other members were alarmed, having foreseen none of these complications despite years of calculation and experimentation—except for Cassandra. She gloried in her newfound powers, honed them, and enjoyed the unspeakable bliss that always swept over her when she consumed the wine of the gods, the ambrosia that was blood.

She and Zarek, happy newlyweds only a few months before, began to argue violently. An antidote to the original potion was concocted, and Essian, the founder of the society, volunteered to sample it.

In return for his bravery, Essian received a horrible death. He aged while his colleagues looked on in fear and revulsion, wrinkling, caving in upon himself, his flesh drying out until it crumbled like dust. Still, he lived, a rotted corpse, as vile as something dug up from a grave, his eyes peering out of a skull, his screams of terror shrill and echoing.

After witnessing such an atrocity, volunteers for other experiments were not forthcoming. The Brotherhood of the Vampyre was formed, and Cassandra, who had taken to ranging over the whole of that hemisphere in search of victims and playmates, was tolerated but not, as the name of the fellowship indicated, really included.

She was not on Atlantis the night the accident happened, but in a village that would become Athens, battling with Zarek, who wanted to live quietly as a scholar, instead of wandering the earth with her, while the two of them explored their magnificent powers.

While these vampires argued their cases, the land of their birth trembled on the brink of disaster.

A power station had been built over a fault line, the vampire Tobias reported later. When the first explosion occurred, it set off a chain reaction of other blasts, violent enough to shift vast geological plates far beneath the surface of the land. There were quakes, and great fissures formed, snaking out in every direction. Tidal waves lashed the continent from every side, and volcanoes, long believed extinct, erupted all over the once beautiful land. In a matter of days Atlantis had cracked like an eggshell and literally fallen to pieces.

The people and the visible continent were gone, swallowed. The earthquakes continued for weeks, however, and great walls of sea water struck lands thousands of miles away, wiping out other civilizations as well.

Zarek and the others had been grief-stricken, holing up in a cave with primitive paintings of animals and birds on the walls, lying dormant for centuries. Cassandra, unwilling to waste a moment mourning a time and place that no longer existed and would never exist again, except in fairy tales, changed her name to Lisette and set about forgetting all that had gone before.

Now, lying prone and dreaming in her villa on the coast of Spain, the ancient vampire wept—for Zarek and the others, for Atlantis, and, most of all, for herself. Only now, when it was too late to stop the Brotherhood from choosing death, did Lisette realize that they'd all been interconnected in some mystical,

inexplicable way. With the passing of her colleagues, Lisette had been diminished and perhaps had even died a little herself.

Far away, in a different land and century, in a vault beneath a forgotten grave, another ancient one lay slumbering. His was a deeper trance than Lisette's, dark and rich and vital, meant to last for months or even years.

Tobias also dreamed and remembered and grieved for his lost brothers. There were times when he regretted his decision to choose the healing sleep instead of death, but there were still too many mysteries on this plane of existence, troubled as it was, too many puzzles and possibilities he could not bring himself to abandon.

One night, in five years, or fifty, or three hundred—he was so old that he no longer needed blood to survive—he would stir, leave his burrow beneath the moldering bones of some English dowager, and venture abroad. When that time came, he hoped to encounter the magnificent Maeve Tremayne again, and Dimity, the enigmatic blood-drinker who consorted with angels, and even that most exasperating of vampires, Valerian.

Ah, Valerian. Fascinating creature, even if he *was* irritating. Tobias knew much more about him than anyone else did, including, perhaps, Valerian himself. Yes, indeed, that vampire's story was rich and complex, crying to be told.

Tobias settled himself deeper into his private enchantment and turned his thoughts to his own happy mortal youth, spent long ago and far away, in a verdant land overlooking a sapphire sea.

Maeve found Calder in the late twentieth century, a time she despised for its busyness and crass, materialistic orientation, just an hour before dawn. She was weary from warfare, for Lisette's creatures were spawning others like themselves, helter-skelter, and for every ten she and Dathan and Valerian and the others managed to destroy, it seemed a hundred others cropped up. Although there had been no further communication with Nemesis's forces, the deadline was mere days away, and the Warrior Angel, seeing the mindless vampires multiply, absorbing innocent mortals into their ranks, was surely straining to fight.

For a few minutes Maeve just stood there in the shadows of the famous medical college's library, watching as Calder took volume after volume from the shelves, absorbing the material as quickly as he could flip through the pages. He was greedy for knowledge, the way most vampires were greedy for blood, and that troubled Maeve.

Despite Calder's declarations of love, and his heroic sharing of strength when she'd needed it so badly, Maeve still had her doubts about his motives. She wasn't sure, in fact, that Calder himself truly understood them.

At last he sensed her presence and turned to smile at her in the comforting darkness, at its richest now that dawn approached. He slid the volume he'd just scanned back into its place and came toward her.

"I'm sorry," he said, taking her hands, bending slightly to kiss her cheek. "I was supposed to meet you in the circle of stones—"

Maeve smiled and touched his face tenderly, wanting to memorize it with the tips of her fingers as well as her eyes. "But you became so engrossed in your studies that you forgot." she finished for him in tender exasperation. "Did you even remember to feed?"

Calder kissed her lightly on the mouth, and Maeve felt the same pleasant shock she always did. "Oh, yes," he answered finally. "I am at the height of my powers, fledgling though I am. Would you like me to show you?"

She nodded, almost shyly, and, by tacit agreement, they took themselves to their new secret lair, the wine cellar of the now rundown Holbrook mansion in Philadelphia. There they made love in the vampire way, with Calder putting Maeve through the same demanding paces she had so often required of him, and again in the mortal fashion. This time Maeve was the aggressor, kneeling astride Calder's hips, riding him hard, taking him deep inside her and holding him there until he cried out and arched beneath her.

At last they slept, limbs entangled, on the old, scratched trestle table that was their vampire bed.

"I want to give you a new name, my darling," Lisette purred to her mortal lover only minutes after sunset.

They were on the terrace of her villa, overlooking the warm, star-splashed Spanish sea.

George enjoyed a hearty dinner of roast pheasant and new potatoes, among other delicacies, while Lisette perched on the stone rail, letting the soft breeze dance in her hair and in the delicate folds of her gown.

"I like my own name," George said, licking his fingers.

Lisette felt a surge of temper, but brought it quickly under control. There was no need to worry about this one; he wasn't clever enough to give more than the occasional amusing ripple of trouble.

"It doesn't suit you," she told him moderately, reaching out to touch his lovely ebony hair. Like silk it was, fine and glossy, sliding smoothly between her fingers.

He looked up at her with impudent blue eyes, Aidan's eyes, and Lisette's heart tumbled a few times before catching itself. "What would suit me?" he asked in Spanish, chewing as he spoke.

His manners were atrocious, Lisette reflected, but she didn't care about that, either. He would suit her purposes just fine, poor manners and vacuous brain notwithstanding.

She gazed upon him thoughtfully for a few moments, a finger to her chin, even though she'd long since decided that he would be called Nikos. "Have you noticed anything—well—*different* about me, darling?"

Nikos, formerly George, settled back, draining a glass of the finest Madeira in Europe before answering, "You are always gone when I awaken in the morning."

Lisette smiled to herself. "Is there nothing else?"

Nikos frowned beguilingly. "You are unusually strong for a woman, and your skin is like iridescent stone when the moonlight strikes you."

She leaned to trace the underside of his jawline with one fingertip, then slid it slowly down the length of his throat and into the dense, dark hair matting his chest. It was pleasant and diverting to watch him squirm in his chair, already wanting her.

"Would you like to live forever?" she asked, unbuttoning his silk shirt to the waist.

Nikos made a throaty sound of surrender as she worked his belt buckle easily and opened his trousers. "Yes," he rasped.

Using her mind and not her hands, she began to stroke and tease Nikos, until he was bucking in his chair and, at the same time, groping for her.

She withheld herself, although she wanted to be ravished by the eager young brigand as much as he wanted to ravish her, at the same time intensifying his arousal with ruthless skill. "Would you like to be just as you are tonight—young and hard and full of fire—for the rest of eternity?" she whispered close to his ear.

He groaned, and Lisette knew what he was feeling because she was inducing those sensations that made him so feverish and fretful. "Yes—*damnyou*, Lisette—what are you doing to me? I feel your hands cupping me—I feel your lips, your teeth, and it's as if I'm about to be swallowed—" His words fell away as he gave an involuntary cry of savage need. "By the saints, I beg of you, give me mercy—"

But Lisette was not inclined toward mercy. She compounded the battery of sensations, toying with his nipples, laying a wreath of kisses on his hard belly, squeezing his powerful buttocks and lifting him, driving him deeper and deeper into his own senses.

The one thing she denied him was satisfaction.

Finally she pushed him to the point of madness; he rose from his chair and overpowered her—or at least, she let him think that was what he'd done. He tore her clothes away, cleared the table with a sweep of one arm, and hurled her down onto the surface, taking her with deep, angry thrusts.

Lisette's release was instantaneous and violent. She pitched beneath Nikos's plunging hips, arching her back and crying out in animal ecstasy as he punished her for her teasing.

He was not satisfied with once, however—that was one of the things Lisette loved about Aidan—no, she must remember, this was *Nikos* —he was insatiable, just as she was. Thus, he turned her on the table, so that her buttocks touched his groin, and put himself only a little way inside her, just far enough to drive her wild with wanting him.

He fondled her breasts as she begged, denying her in a low, murmuring voice, telling her that she was his and his alone, that he would have her when he was ready, and no sooner than that. He told her that she was a beautiful whore, pinching her nipples lightly and giving her another inch of his staff when she pleaded, and said what she needed was a proper hiding, and he had a good mind to give it to her.

Lisette moaned, desperate, despairing, delighted. It was this explosive pleasure that gave her such tremendous power.

"What do you want, little whore?" Nikos whispered, caressing her breasts, weighing them in his palms, chafing the nipples with his thumbs. "Tell me what you want."

She gripped the edge of the table. "You," she wept. "I want all of you—oh, please—I want it all..."

Nikos teased her some more, venturing a little farther inside her—but only a little—then withdrawing until he had almost left her completely. While he subjected her to this sweet torment, he pretended to ponder her request.

Lisette was certain she would perish, she wanted him so badly, and when he suddenly thrust deep inside her, she shouted with avaricious lust.

Nikos told her what a brazen wench she was, behaving in such a way, actually begging to be taken, making her whimper and whine, grasping her hips and holding her when she would have increased the tempo by thrusting herself against him. Finally, however, he lost control of his own need and pounded against her with greater and greater urgency, greater and greater violence, until they were fused by the heat of their fury, completely joined, each jerking against the other in instinctive surrender.

"You are a very naughty boy," Lisette said minutes later, when she had gotten down from the table and collected her shredded gown.

Nikos pulled her close and bent to kiss her lightly on the side of the neck. "I think I'll take you that way from now on," he said in a husky whisper. "Like a stallion, mounting his mare."

Lisette was weak with satisfaction, and yet she felt her intimate places heating again as he talked on and on about all the sweet, sinful things he wanted to do to her, weaving his lover's spell.

Only when Nikos had draped her roughly over the wide stone railing of the terrace and put her through all the same exquisite little torments again, only when she was buckling against him in the throes of brutal pleasure, did she wonder—just fleetingly—how a mere man could so bewitch a great vampire like herself.

Dimity was waiting when Maeve and Calder came up from the cellar at the setting of the sun and into the kitchen where Calder had eaten as a boy, well over a hundred years in the past.

Maeve was slightly troubled that the other vampire had found them so easily; she had made every effort to veil herself and Calder in the hope that they would sleep in safe anonymity.

"What is it?" Maeve asked.

"The angels have come," Dimity said. "They are encamped everywhere, waiting to attack us. Gideon says that Nemesis himself has come from the higher world to participate in the greatest purge since the war in heaven!"

Maeve felt chilled and cast a quick glance toward Calder. He was strong and brave and most willing to fight, but he was a fledgling, his powers were new to him, and he was unskilled at wielding weapons of the mind. If he tried to aid in the cause, the results were likely to be disastrous, for himself and for other vampires.

"There is more," she said, looking Dimity straight in the eye once again.

The angelic nightwalker nodded. "Yes. Nemesis wants to see you, Maeve. He's issued an order that you are to come to him this very night."

Even as a mortal child Maeve had been intrepid, walking the high crumbling walls of the convent where she grew up, running away with a caravan of gypsies on one occasion. She'd battled Lisette herself and lived through the terrible pain of losing her brother, but this was by far the greatest challenge she had ever faced.



"What is my assurance that I won't be taken prisoner?" she asked quietly, raising her chin.

Calder erupted in sudden protest, leaving the falling mantel he'd been attempting to right and rushing to her side. "You can't seriously *beconsidering* such a thing—"

Maeve used her superior powers to render Calder mute, though only temporarily, knowing that reason would not reach him.

Dimity answered Maeve's question as if Calder hadn't spoken at all. "You have Nemesis's word. The promise of the high angels cannot be false, you know that."

"Yes," Maeve said as Calder struggled to speak, glowering at her, knowing she had somehow frozen his vocal cords. "Where is Nemesis to be found?"

"Gideon said you are to go to All Souls' Cathedral in London and wait. You will be contacted."

Maeve nodded as Calder made furious strangling sounds and grasped her arm as if to restrain her. She turned her gaze to Dimity. "Look after him," she said, meaning Calder, and the other vampire nodded, her lovely eyes wide with sympathy.

Forming an image of the cathedral where she and Valerian had been attacked by warlocks, Maeve raised her hands slowly over her head and vanished. Calder could not cry out to her, it was true, nor could he follow with Dimity using her considerable might to restrain him, but Maeve felt his protest in the center of her soul all the same.

He would not soon forgive her for restricting his freedom again.

Maeve kept to the twentieth century, knowing that angels preferred the current moment to all the past combined.

The graveyard of All Souls' was not empty—here and there a derelict slept, curled up behind some headstone or monument, and all the benches were occupied as well.

Maeve scanned the place with a quick sweep of her thoughts, finding naught but mortals who would sleep until morning, and more mortals who would sleep until Gabriel sounded his trumpet. A Dante-like picture came to her mind of wavering, vaporous souls rising from all the graves to be judged by their Maker, and she shivered.

"Quite a dramatic image," a male voice said.

Maeve spun, taken by surprise, and looked upon the countenance of a tall, powerfully built angel. He was dressed in modern clothes, a tailored suit, an overcoat of the finest wool, a white cashmere scarf.

"Nemesis," she said, half in greeting, half in awe.

He actually smiled, and Maeve noted that he wasn't handsome in the standard sense, though if she managed to survive this night, she knew she would never forget a single detail of his features. He had brown hair, attractively shaggy, and green eyes; like Gideon, he shimmered with the light of a kingdom that could only be reached by traveling inward.

"At your service," he said with a slight bow of his head.



Maeve's awe began to give way to suspicion, annoyance, and plain ordinary fear. "I didn't expect you to be quite so courtly," she said.

"And I didn't expect you to be beautiful," Nemesis replied smoothly. He sighed. "Unfortunately, neither my manners nor your loveliness has anything whatsoever to do with the business at hand."

He began to stroll along a stone pathway, and Maeve kept pace. The mortals around them slept on, unaware that their fate, as well as that of vampires and warlocks and all other immortals, was being decided.

"What do you want?" Maeve finally dared to ask.

Nemesis seemed amused by her bravado, even a little taken with it. "Surrender," he answered in a cordial tone. "Nothing less than the complete surrender of every evil creature walking the night."

The idea was foreign to Maeve, but she had others to consider besides herself. "What would happen then? If we gave ourselves up, I mean?"

"You would be cast into the pit, where you could do no more harm," Nemesis answered, as calmly as if they were two humans deciding whether to have biscuits with their tea or scones with jelly.

Maeve shuddered.

"You'll end up there either way, you see," Nemesis went on with quiet, terrible reason. "Surely you realize that you cannot resist legion upon legion of angels."

She nodded but was careful to hold her head high. "Of course we know that," she replied. "Our hope is to stop Lisette and bring her to you. She is the guilty one, after all."

"Every last one of you is guilty," Nemesis argued pleasantly. "Even if you do destroy this devil's spawn, this Lisette, why should I let you go on?"

Maeve thought fast. "Because if there is to be a kingdom of light," she said, "there must be a kingdom of darkness to balance it. You protect your Master's beloved mortals, you guide and teach them, but it is the so-called evil creatures who make them strong by giving them adversity to resist."

Nemesis was quiet for a moment, thoughtful. Then he gave a low, bone-shaking burst of laughter. "You are smart, Vampire—like your father, Lucifer."

She stopped, furious. "I'll thank you not to credit Lucifer with siring me—I've never met him, let alone sat at his feet to learn evil magic as you seem to be implying. Before I became a vampire, I was *created*—by the same God who made you."

The great angel glared at her for a moment, but then it seemed to Maeve that something in his bearing softened ever so slightly. "There is no time to argue semantics, child. I urge you again—surrender, and bring your dark followers with you."

Maeve shook her head, wondering if she was being brave or just foolhardy. "No, Nemesis," she said. "I will bring you Lisette, and then I will storm heaven itself with pleas for mercy. If you do not grant us clemency, perhaps your Master will."

"Such a waste," the warrior said, his eyes sad as he looked down into Maeve's upturned face. "You would have been a fine angel." With that, he shook his head once in apparent sorrow, turned, and walked away into the night.

## CHAPTER 19

Cobwebs swayed in gray scallops from the great chandelier in the entryway, but for the time being, Calder was not concerned with the condition of his erstwhile home. Although his voice had been restored, he was still as much a prisoner as if he'd worn chains and manacles, and the fact outraged him.

"Maeve is only trying to protect you," Dimity, his jailer, remarked distractedly when he'd joined her in the parlor. She was standing beside the time-ruined harpsichord, running one finger over the keys.

Damn, but he hated the way they could look straight into his mind, Maeve and Valerian and Dimity. Was he to have no private thoughts at all?

"Not until you learn to veil them," Dimity replied as if he'd spoken, smiling that angelic smile.

Calder made yet another futile attempt to crash through the unseen barrier Maeve had erected around him, around this memory-haunted house, and it left him feeling as though he'd been struck by a train.

He collapsed into a dusty chair, rubbing his temples with a thumb and forefinger.

"Stubborn," Dimity said, turning back to the harpsichord, drawing eerie music from it. If the sound was heard by mortals, there would soon be a new spate of rumors about the spooky old mansion.

"I am Maeve's mate," he muttered. "I belong at her side—*especially* when she's in danger."

Dimity drew back the spindly-legged bench and sat down to experiment further with the harpsichord. "You would only be a liability to her at this point," she said, her attention mostly focused on that mouse-eaten old instrument. "Perhaps later, when you've learned to use your powers more proficiently—"

"Damn!" Calder bellowed, bolting from his chair and startling Dimity, who jumped and then turned to look at him over one beautifully shaped shoulder. "No one, not even Maeve, will rob me of my personal liberties—I will not endure it!"

"It seems to me," Dimity observed diplomatically, smoothing her brown silk skirts, "that you haven't much choice in the matter, at least for the moment."

Calder went to the warped, filthy mantel, which had once shimmered and smelled pleasantly of the oil Prudence used to polish it, and gripped it with both hands. His head was lowered, and his pride, like the exquisitely expensive mirror that had once hung over that fireplace, was in shards at his feet.

"You're right," he said hoarsely after a long pause. "I have no choice—now. But tomorrow night, or the next one, or the one after that, I will be free. And love Maeve though I do, with every grain and fiber, with everything that makes me who I am, I will not sacrifice my freedom of choice to her whims." Calder turned, knowing his bleak decision lay naked in his eyes, unable to hide the torment he felt. "I'm going to

leave her, Dimity, if we survive this present trouble. I'm going to venture out on my own and learn the things I need to know, and work out just what sort of a vampire I mean to be."

Dimity's lovely face reflected both misery and understanding. "It will kill Maeve to lose you," she said softly. "She does love you, you know. Her passion is a part of her, as much so as her powers, even her soul."

"I feel exactly the same way about her," Calder replied grimly, "but that isn't enough. I need my right of choice, and Maeve's trust, as well, and she needs those same things from me." He paused, shoving a hand through his rumpled hair. "I don't think either of us is capable of giving them—not willing."

Slowly, gracefully. Dimity rose from the harpsichord bench and came toward him. "Maeve would give you anything," she whispered. "Anything."

"Except the holy right of deciding my own fate for myself," Calder replied. He escorted Dimity to a round table where his father and William had once played games of chess, the winning of which had been inordinately important to both of them, and drew back a chair for her.

When she was seated, Calder sat across from her and folded his hands on the rain-warped, dirt-covered tabletop.

"Since we apparently have considerable time at our disposal," he said, "tell me about yourself. How were you made, and when? Were you changed against your will, or did you give your consent?"

Dimity laughed good-naturedly. "I see you haven't studied vampire etiquette yet," she said. "It is very rude to ask a blood-drinker about her making—the topic is a sore spot with so many of us."

Calder was undaunted. He had never worried much about protocol in his human life, and he didn't plan on doing so as an immortal. "Is it a sore spot with you?"

Dimity shook her head, as if amazed and a little scandalized by the bluntness of the question, but there was a mischievous light in her blue eyes. "No, actually—it isn't. I became a vampire by my own choosing, in the late fourteenth century..."

It was silly, Lisette decided, as she watched Nikos parading back and forth in front of her, showing off his expensive new velvet coat and doeskin breeches, to deny herself the pleasure of creating a prince consort for even one more night.

She thought of the process of changing a mortal into a blood-drinker and felt a rush of dark desire, almost as compelling as the passion Nikos could so easily stir in her. With him, she would bring the full extent of her powers to bear, and the experience would be exquisite for both of them—no more of those clammy corpses, quickly made and left to their own devices.

Lisette shuddered and then put the vile creatures out of her mind.

Oh, yes, she would take her time with Nikos. She would give him the powers and the prowess of a pagan god and teach the little scoundrel all—make *that some*—of the glorious skills and tricks she'd acquired throughout century upon century of adventuring.

She rose a little unsteadily, for she'd been feeling a strange sensation since the Brotherhood had perished, as if she were being pulled down and down into some black morass of the spirit.

"Come, darling," she said, holding out one alabaster-white hand. "It is time to give you the gift."

Nikos arched an eyebrow, but he understood the word *gift* only too well and was plainly intrigued by it. He came to her, in his lovely tight breeches and his fitted coat, and it was all Lisette could do not to gobble the delicious creature up the way some mortal women did chocolate.

She told herself there would be time for that later—all of eternity, in fact—and raised her hands to his sturdy shoulders.

"Do you trust me?" she asked softly.

He laughed, a delightful scamp of a lad, so hard and warm and beautiful, and for the briefest moment Lisette doubted her own plans.

"Of course I do not trust you," Nikos replied, grinning, so engaging and sweet that Lisette's heart threatened to crumble within her. "You are like me—you think only of your own wishes, your own pleasures. When you find another lover that you like better, you will abandon me."

Lisette smoothed his hair and spoke softly, hypnotically. "Oh, but that is not true, Nikos," she said. "I will never leave you, and you will never leave me. Not ever."

He looked puzzled; his grin faltered a little, and a shadow of bewilderment moved in his Aidan-blue eyes. "How is this possible?" he asked. "We are flesh and blood. We must grow old, we must die."

She took enormous delight in contradicting him, in heightening that delectable confusion in his eyes. She shook her head and murmured, "We can live forever."

He seemed troubled now and moved to step back from her, but she took his shoulders in a grip calculated to be inescapable but also without pain, and would not let him go.

"What madness is this?" he whispered, and the flush of emotion under his warm, pliant skin made Lisette half wild with hunger and blood-lust. "No one lives forever!"

She calmed herself, made soothing, murmuring sounds, as a mortal mother might do for a child, pushed Nikos into a chair, and perched lightly on his lap. "Vampires do," she said, inwardly tensed for his reaction.

Instead of flying into a temper, Nikos laughed. He was scoffing at her, and that was worse, in some ways, than a storm of petulance would have been. "Vampires!" he mocked.

Lisette showed her fangs, both delighted in his recoil and despaired because of it.

He tried to throw her off then and escape her, but Lisette, by her own reckoning at least, had indulged him long enough. She took his head in her hands, as she had done so often before, but this time she was not gentle. No, this time a slight, quick motion of her wrists would have broken his neck.

"Do not resist me," she said in a crooning voice. "I will destroy you if you do."

The sound of Nikos's heartbeat seemed to fill the whole room with a pounding, steady *thumpety-thump*, *thumpety-thump*, and his beautiful eyes were wide with horror and, even then, disbelief.

The rushing of his blood, audible now, drove Lisette into madness. Her control was gone, and she bared Nikos's delicate throat and sunk her fangs into the vein, drawing on him greedily, nearly swooning with the ecstasy of their intimate communion.

Nikos cried out when she took him, stiffened slightly, then went utterly limp beneath her.

Lisette was moaning inwardly as his blood flooded her own empty veins, and she began to rock against Nikos, the pleasure so savage she almost couldn't bear it. She nearly forgot that if Nikos died in her arms, she would not be able to complete the transformation. Should that happen, he would be lost to her forever.

It was actually painful to draw back from that continuous, buckling euphoria. She expected Nikos to be waxen—she'd so nearly drained him—and certainly unconscious. Instead he was gazing at her with eyes too old and too wise for the face of a lad of some twenty years...

At that moment the suffering began. It was as though there were small, vicious fish inside her, tearing at her vampire flesh, at the atrophied organs that should not have been sensitive to pain.

Lisette shrieked in rage at Nikos's betrayal as well as in the agony of being poisoned; this was no mortal lad, no innocent lover and playmate, but a warlock!

Even as she screamed and clutched at her middle, she saw the knowledge of his own identity returning to him, the awareness. That was how he had fooled her, her pretty Nikos—he himself had not known who or what he was!

Now his foul blood was burning Lisette's insides like acid; she fell to her knees, still shrieking like a wild jungle cat caught in a trap, and, clutching the rungs of a ladder-back chair, pulled herself upright again. Through a red fog of misery and the most primitive fury, she saw Manuel, her mortal carriage driver, loom uncertainly in the doorway for a moment.

She reached out to him, desperate; he crossed himself and fled.

Nikos, for his part, had risen to his feet, and he was backing away from her, not fearful, but repulsed. There was even a hint of mockery in his eyes, the blackguard. If it was the last thing she ever did, she would see him suffer for that effrontery, as well as for his efforts to murder her.

Lisette struggled to remain conscious; the sun would rise soon, and in her weakened state she knew she could not survive its rays. Then, like a distant bell pealing somewhere far off in the Spanish countryside, she heard Maeve Tremayne's voice.

*Come to me. Let us finish this.*

Maeve, the enemy. The usurper. This was her doing, this betrayal, this physical and spiritual torment. A surge of hatred raced through Lisette's system, strengthening her.

She saw Nikos, laughing at her now, taunting her, but she could not hear his voice. No, all she heard was Maeve calling to her, calling and calling.

She could not tolerate the humiliation of looking upon her betrayer another moment, and she wanted Maeve Tremayne to suffer. Oh, how she wanted that traitor, that Judas, to suffer!

Gathering all her strength, which was greater than it might have been because of her rage, Lisette closed her eyes and willed herself to Maeve's presence.

Lisette took shape on the low rise behind the circle of stones, framed by the light of the moon, and Maeve readied herself for the battle of a lifetime. Unlike Valerian and Dathan and the others, she did not believe that the ancient one was already defeated.

"She is magnificent," Valerian whispered, clearly awed, as they all watched Lisette raise her arms gracefully against the dark sky, a shimmering angel of hell, to summon her multitude of followers.

They began appearing, those dreadful walking corpses, a score here, a hundred there, stumbling and stupid and deadly in their unheeding obedience.

Dathan, who had been prepared for this confrontation, called to his own warriors, and they came out of the thin shadows, silent and ominous, anonymous in their hooded cloaks.

The vampires, Maeve noted with nervous irritation, were seriously underrepresented. It would serve them all right, she reflected, Benecia and Canaan and the other cowardly ones, if she left them to Nemesis without *eventrying* to defend them.

Maeve looked up into Valerian's eyes, seeing sorrow there, and fear, and then into Dathan's. He smiled at her and nodded his encouragement.

"Maeve Tremayne!" Lisette called in her hollow, unholy voice. She loomed on the hillside like a living flame, her pain palpable in the cool night air.

Taking up her skirts, Maeve answered the summons, and the two of them stood facing each other on the line of the hill.

"Why have you done this to me?" Lisette rasped, more dangerous in her suffering, rather than less. Her eyes were enormous in her gaunt face, and sunken. "Why? To save a lot of ungrateful blood-drinkers from the just vengeance of heaven?"

Maeve felt a strange urge to reach out to the other vampire, even though it would be like trying to touch a she-wolf caught in a trap, and wisely resisted it. "I have not done this to you, Lisette," she said reasonably. "It is by your own recklessness, your own treachery, that you've come to this end."

Lisette swayed, but at the same time Maeve could feel power emanating from the creature, pulsing and throbbing like another entity, an ominous reflex that might function even after the wounded vampire had died.

She gave a snarling shriek and stumbled toward Maeve, who stood her ground even though she was mortally afraid.

Then she heard Valerian, just a few feet behind her, his voice as smooth and even as velvet. "You are the rightful queen, Maeve," he reminded her.

Calder's voice joined Valerian's and, although Maeve dared not turn to look, she knew that he, too, had come to her somehow, and she blessed him for it, and drew strength from his presence.

"I love you," he said gruffly, and it seemed to Maeve that there was a certain sorrow in the tone and texture of those precious words. "Be strong, beautiful Maeve."

Dimity spoke next. "We are depending on you," she said softly but firmly. "The weak and the strong, the good and the evil, all of us."

Lisette screamed again and started past Maeve, delirious now, like a wild animal in the last stages of hydrophobia. Her thoughts were clear; before she collapsed, she would kill as many of the rebels as possible.

Maeve stepped in front of her then, and the mental struggle that had been brewing for centuries finally began.

There was a great, ferocious sweep of invisible fire, encompassing Maeve, smothering her with its heat, singeing her marble-like flesh. She endured, and called upon all the things she'd learned from the scrolls of the Brotherhood, and the sky itself thundered with the power of her command.

Lisette dropped to her knees, then struggled back to her feet again. At her back Maeve heard the chilling sounds of combat as the warlocks and the handful of courageous vampires engaged the sharklike beasts formed and shaped from madness itself.

Maeve did not wait for Lisette to attack again, but struck ruthlessly herself, crushing the other blood-drinker to the soft, fragrant ground, bringing the weight of all the stones in the circle to bear upon that one ill-fated creature.

Lisette wept—it was a frantic, mindless sound—and, rolling onto her back, raised herself up onto her elbows.

Again Maeve was moved toward foolish mercy, but again she resisted. Never taking her eyes from Lisette, holding the wounded one to the ground with the power of her mind, Maeve raised a hand in the agreed signal, and Valerian came forward.

He gave Maeve the stake and mallet they'd brought for this very purpose.

"You mustn't lose your courage now," he said, reading her mind again, seeing the pity she felt for Lisette. "And you must not turn from this task."

Maeve hesitated for a moment, then nodded and accepted the instruments of death. She took a step toward Lisette, who made a whimpering sound and tried to crawl away.

"Do not be deceived," Valerian warned, staying close. "She is a beast, fit only for the bowels of hell. If your positions were reversed, she would not hesitate to finish you!"

It was all true, Maeve knew that, but knowing did not make the duty before her any less distasteful. She trembled a little as she advanced on Lisette, thinking of Calder, of Valerian, of Aidan and his lovely mortal, Neely—all their fates were in her hands, and she must not falter.

Maeve dropped to one knee in the dew-laced grass, placed the point of the spike directly over Lisette's heart, and raised the mallet. After only a moment's hesitation she struck the first blow.

The stake pierced Lisette's papery flesh, and she shrieked in pain and in fury, and Maeve trembled, but



she raised the mallet again. And again.

Lisette screeched and struggled, and Maeve watched in horror as the dying queen's beautiful face went gaunt, then turned to dust and crumbled. Finally only a skull remained, but with Lisette's blue eyes peering out of the charred bone, glowing with unholy fire.

The screams echoed through the night long after the staring eyes had turned to cinders and dissolved.

Maeve knew triumph, but she was shaken and sick as well. She knelt in the grass, still clasping the mallet, chilled to the center of her soul.

After some time had passed, Calder gripped her shoulders from behind—she would have known his touch anywhere, for it always reverberated through her like the toll of a great bell—and drew her to her feet and away.

Maeve watched, spellbound and horrified, until Lisette, half corpse and half skeleton, had disintegrated into a pile of ashes, a ludicrous parody of the human shape. The stake protruded from between those discolored ribs, and the mallet fell, forgotten, from Maeve's fingers.

A shout of victory made her turn at last and look first into Calder's solemn eyes, then at the battlefield beyond. When Lisette had ignited herself, in the same way the members of the Brotherhood had done in their death chamber far beneath the ground, she had also destroyed her followers.

The grassy clearing was covered with grayish-white forms, and as she watched, the wind came and spread them over the grass, and only the warlocks were left—the warlocks, and the few vampires who had been willing to stand behind Maeve in her time of greatest need.

"The dawn comes!" one vampire cried.

Calder and Valerian collected Maeve between them, sheltering her with their larger bodies, and she felt herself dissolve into particles. Moments later she was in a dark place, as cool and welcoming as a grave. When her dazed eyes adjusted, she realized they had brought her to a chamber beneath the circle of stones itself.

At one end of the small cellar was an altar, probably druid, so old that it was crumbling. Valerian stood before it and executed a truly regal bow.

"My queen," he said.

Maeve was lying in Calder's arms, and she was definitely grateful for that. "Get up," she snapped. "I am nothing of the sort!"

Valerian laughed and spread the fingers of one graceful hand over his chest. "Anything you say, Your Majesty," he replied.

Maeve closed her eyes, inexpressibly weary, and let her head rest against Calder's shoulder. "Leave us," she commanded, "and find a lair of your own."

He obeyed, that troublesome, beloved vampire, dissipating into smoke with a finesse only he could have managed.

Maeve lifted her mouth to Calder's, and he kissed her hungrily, furiously, and with unutterable despair. There was no time for lovemaking, however much they might want each other, for the sun was about to spill its light over the countryside above.

They lay entwined, Maeve and Calder, in the rubble of the old religion, and let the vampire sleep take them.

There were no dreams, at least not for Maeve.

When she awakened at sunset, Calder was already sitting up beside her, looking upon her with despair naked in his eyes.

"You're leaving me," Maeve said, certain that this was not reality, but merely what mortals called a nightmare.

Calder nodded once and reached out to caress her cheek lightly, with just the tip of one finger. "It will be better for us both," he said hoarsely. "I love you, Maeve—more than I ever dreamed I was capable of loving—and I understand that you've held me prisoner only to protect me. Still, I cannot be subject to your will, no matter how benevolent."

Maeve swayed, horror-stricken. It was real.

For an instant Maeve wished that she'd died in battle the previous night instead of Lisette, but her instinct to live was perhaps her strongest trait, and it prevailed.

She raised her chin. "I see."

Calder looked away. He was already withdrawing from her, even though they shared that small chamber. He started to speak and then stopped himself.

"We could change," she suggested tentatively.

His gaze returned to her face; his eyes smoldered with dark conviction. "Never," he said. "You are too strong, and I am too stubborn." He paused to sigh, and the sound was filled with heartbreak. "I wanted to be your true mate, your equal, but now more than ever I know that isn't possible."

Maeve closed her eyes. "But you are my equal."

"No, darling," Calder said gently, shaking his head. "You are the vampire queen, and I am a fledgling."

She was really losing him. It was unbearable, incredible, after all they'd been through. And they loved each other so much!

"How did you convince Dimity to bring you to the circle of stones last night?" she asked, needing to back away from the heart of the situation for a few moments, to gather the scattered pieces of herself and try to fit them back together somehow.

"I didn't," he said. "I sensed the danger you were in, and I guess my desire to be at your side was greater than your power to keep me away. I thought about you, and I was there."

"How do you intend to live without me?" Maeve asked in all seriousness. "How shall I live without you?"

Calder left her side, rose to his feet, and dusted off the legs of his trousers as a mortal man might do. "I suppose we'll see each other, now and then," he said, taking care not to look at Maeve. "In time we'll forget."

She shook her head. "When the last star collapses into dust, my darling," she said softly, sorrowfully, "I will still love you."

"Don't," he said, turning away. "Please. Just let me go."

"That's not so easy," Maeve replied, standing, laying her hands on his broad back where his shoulder blades jutted beneath his flesh. "I love you, Calder. I need you. Don't you care enough to forgive me, to try to understand?"

He turned then and looked down into her eyes. "It would only happen again and again—your trapping me somewhere every time you thought I was in danger—until I came to despise you as my jailer! The only thing we can do is end it now, before we're both destroyed!"

With that, Calder disappeared, but his words echoed in Maeve's mind.

*Before we're both destroyed.*

"Too late," Maeve said softly. Then, with no one to see, no one to lend comfort, she buried her face in her hands and wept. She had won so much in that final battle, and lost everything.

Nemesis was waiting in the graveyard of All Souls' Cathedral three nights later when Maeve arrived. He might have looked quite ordinary, in his conservative overcoat, with that simple but frightfully expensive black umbrella unfurled against the chilly rain, except for the luminous quality that came from inside him.

Looking upon this magnificent creature from a little distance, Maeve could see why the great masters had graced their painted angels with halos and bright auras. They must have been aware, some consciously, some unconsciously, of their own heavenly guardians and comforters.

She wondered if she'd had a guardian angel as a child, and what he or she was doing now, when his or her services were no longer required.

Or were they?

Nemesis smiled his cordial, benevolent smile when at last she stood facing him, feeling the fiery heat of his aura. "You did have a guardian, you know," he said. "Every mortal does."

Maeve covered her trepidation with bravado, for something about this powerful, mysterious, implacable being made her feel as defenseless as a child. "Fat lot of good it did me," she retorted somewhat testily. Losing Calder had made her even more reckless than usual; she had so little to lose.

The warrior angel chuckled, and the sound was throaty and rich. "We are not infallible creatures," he explained, and Maeve thought it was rather generous of him, considering the circumstances. "Sometimes we make mistakes."

The rain pattered on the roof of All Souls', the gravestones, and the ancient walkway that had been worn smooth by the passage of generations of saints and sinners. Maeve looked directly into the angel's eyes

and felt a strange, entrancing peace.

She shook it off. "Then perhaps you will be more understanding of the errors of others," she said. "We have destroyed Lisette as you probably know, and all but a very few of her vampires—which are being gathered by my friends at this moment."

Nemesis regarded her steadily, revealing none of his thoughts or emotions—if indeed angels had such things. She honestly didn't know.

"A great deal of damage has been done," he said.

"And there will be more still," Maeve reasoned boldly, flying blind, "if you unleash your forces on the dark kingdom. Granted, you'll eventually prevail, but we will fight you, you may be sure of that, as long as we have the strength to raise our swords."

"Insanity," Nemesis replied. "You cannot win!"

"No," Maeve agreed calmly. "We cannot. But remember this, Warrior Angel: We, the warlocks and vampires, have met your demands, and we plead without shame for peace. If you refuse us, and thousands of mortals die in the resulting fray, whose fault is that? Yours or ours?"

## CHAPTER 20

Maeve did not have to seek out the Warrior Angel to hear his final decision; she was in her studio, working feverishly on the tapestry she had yet to properly study, when he appeared in the center of the floor.

There was less fanfare than she would have expected of one of the most powerful angels in heaven, but she was startled all the same. Somehow all Valerian's abrupt entrances had not quite prepared her for this particular surprise.

She let go of the shuttle and stepped down off the high stool, her eyes wide. Everything depended on this meeting—everything. Either heaven was satisfied that Lisette had been stopped and her minions destroyed, or the end was upon them all.

Nemesis, who wore a good nineteenth-century-style suit, including the tight celluloid collar, did not immediately speak or even look at Maeve. He went, instead, to the tapestry, now spilling, almost complete, from the back of the loom, and examined it thoughtfully.

"What does this image mean?" he asked after a long and, for Maeve, difficult silence.

Maeve had not looked at the tapestry in weeks, although she had worked the shuttle often in moments of intolerable stress. She felt stupid for not being able to answer the question—her pictures were never planned, they simply came out through her fingers—and they were often prophetic. She rounded the loom to stand beside Nemesis, and what she saw brought a small, strangled sound to her throat.

The tapestry showed herself, in a flowing dress, holding a lush bouquet of ivory roses. Some of the petals had drifted to the ground, which was covered in leaves of brown and gold and crimson, and behind her was a low stone wall, perhaps waist high. Sitting on the wall, with the casual grace so typical

of the vampire, was Calder. He was smiling back at Maeve, who wore an expression of radiant joy, but it wasn't those things that moved Maeve. It was the beautiful, dark-haired child, perhaps a year old, who sat laughing on Calder's shoulder, small, plump arms reaching out to Maeve.

A child.

She laid her hands almost reverently on her stomach. A child? But that was impossible—no vampire in all of history had ever given birth.

Nemesis, probably weary of waiting for Maeve's long-delayed answer to his original question, had by then divined the meaning of the tapestry for himself. He reached out and touched the likeness of the little one with the gentlest brush of his fingers.

Maeve gazed up at him, in wonder and fear, because everything in that tapestry, every dream it represented, was in his hands. "Please," she said hoarsely. "Tell me what has been decided."

He heaved a great sigh and turned to look down on Maeve with a peculiar combination of sympathy and love and reluctance. "Were it up to me," he said, "I would still purge the earth of all night creatures—vampires, warlocks, werewolves, all of those things. But, alas, it seems there is some truth to that theory you expressed before—the Master feels that you have your place in the scheme of things." He was studying the child again, an expression of troubled amazement on his face. When he turned to meet Maeve's eyes once more, he said, "You will live and fulfill your destiny, and if you are to be destroyed, then it will have to be by one of your own kind."

Maeve felt a great surge of joy, closely followed by an equally powerful rush of fear. "This infant—" Her words fell away, and she laid a hand to Calder's woven image and then the baby's.

Nemesis heaved another sigh. "One of their poets said it—'There are more things in heaven and earth...'"

"But vampires do not have children," Maeve mused, as much to herself as to Nemesis, "and certainly I would never transform a mortal child..."

"This infant *will* be mortal," Nemesis said, frowning at the tapestry again. "Perhaps conception occurred before Dr. Holbrook was transformed."

Maeve was in a daze. There would be no war with the angels, and a miracle of the sort she had never dared to dream of was happening. She, a vampire, carried a living, *human* child within her.

And the father of that little one, she reminded herself brokenly, had gone away.

Having delivered his message, Nemesis vanished in the blink of an eye, and Maeve was alone with her thoughts and the mysterious tapestry.

Dathan and Valerian must be told that the danger was past, that Nemesis and his Master had relented. Maeve would leave the spreading of this good news to them, however, for she had other things to do.

She stared into the tapestry for a long moment, her heart swelling with happiness and anticipation, then focused her thoughts on Valerian.

He was in a smoky saloon in the nineteenth-century American West, wearing rough-spun trousers, an

old woolen shirt, six-guns, and one of the biggest hats Maeve had ever seen. A long, thin cigar protruded from one side of his mouth, and he was frowning at the hand of cards he held, as if the fate of the world depended on that very game of poker. A dance-hall girl hovered behind him, simpering and at the same time massaging Valerian's broad, powerful shoulders.

None of the mortals saw Maeve; she made sure of that. Valerian, however, looked up at her over his hand of cards. The merest shadow of a smile touched his mouth, and his eyes twinkled.

*You and your games*, Maeve told him.

He settled back in his chair, a gesture meant for the assortment of mortals sitting at the table and standing around it. *Eternity would be very dull without games*, he replied.

Maeve laughed. *I suppose you're right*, she said.

*Nemesis came to me a little while ago—he and his Master have decided not to make war on us.*

Valerian laid his cards out on the table in a flamboyant fan shape, and the mortals groaned in sporting despair and threw down their hands. *I am your creator, remember?* the great vampire finally said. *The instant you knew what had been decided, so did I.*

Maeve put her hands on her hips and tilted her head to one side. *Then you know about the child, too.*

Valerian gathered his winnings and tossed a chip to the dance-hall girl who was attending him so faithfully. *My dear*, he answered, *if you'd only troubled to look at the tapestry you were weaving, you would have seen the truth long ago. I've been aware of your delicate condition for days.*

Mild irritation moved in Maeve's spirit; sometimes Valerian's seeming omniscience really got on her nerves. *Well*, she retorted, *just tune out for a while, won't you please? There are things I want to settle with Calder, and I'd rather you weren't a witness to the whole encounter.*

He raised one shoulder in a shrug too elegant for the surroundings. *I have interests of my own*, he replied. *In fact, if you don't mind, I'd like to concentrate on my poker game.*

*You'll tell Dathan and the others about the truce with Nemesis?* Maeve pressed, eager to go but at the same time determined to accomplish her original purpose in coming to that rough, smoky place.

*Certainly*, Valerian answered, but he'd become absorbed in the new hand of cards he'd been dealt, and the dancing girl was perched on his knee. *The first time I see the warlock, I'll tell him. Then I'll tear his throat out.*

Maeve shook her head. *Have a care*, she warned. *Dathan is more powerful than you like to think.*

Valerian shifted his thin cigar to the other side of his mouth, clamping it between his white teeth. *I've been taking care of myself for centuries, Maeve*, he reminded her distractedly. *Believe me, I'm very good at survival. Now, get out of here and let me finish my game.*

She hesitated, then went to Valerian's side, bent, and kissed his cheek in gratitude, affection, and farewell.

Maeve found Calder in that same century, in a field hospital in northern Tennessee. He wore the uniform

of a Confederate officer and carried a black leather bag packed with modern instruments and medicines.

When Maeve revealed herself to him, he was injecting a powerful painkiller into the arm of a boy who should have been at home, playing ball, doing chores, and going to school.

Calder raised his eyes to Maeve's face, and she saw his love for her in them, and his pain.

"Can they see you?" she asked.

Calder smiled sadly and withdrew the needle from the man-child's arm. "Yes," he answered softly. "They believe I'm a mortal, like them."

She looked down at the soldier. "Will he live?"

Calder nodded, then rounded the cot, took Maeve's elbow in one hand, and led her outside into the balmy southern night.

"That's quite a uniform," she said, noting his gray tunic and well-made trousers. "When did you switch sides and become a Confederate?"

"I haven't," he answered, studying her through narrowed, worried eyes. "I've always been on the side of life—I go back and forth between the two armies, helping where I can. Why are you here, Maeve?"

She hesitated, then said bravely, "Because I love you."

"And I love you," Calder answered, setting his bag down and laying his hands on Maeve's upper arms. "But I can't let you hold me prisoner, no matter what dangers you might be trying to protect me from. I need the freedom to be myself, Maeve—without that, I might as well not exist."

"I understand," she replied. "And I'm sorry for those times I held you captive. My intentions were good, but I realize now that I was wrong."

Calder raised one hand to touch her face. "Perhaps we could try again, you and I," he said gruffly. "You let me take my chances with the world, and I'll let you take yours."

Maeve felt unvampire-like tears burning in her eyes and clogging her throat. "We could always find each other," she said, "with just a thought."

He bent and kissed her lightly on the mouth, and she felt the old, savage passion stirring. "Always," he agreed.

She took his hand. "Would you come away with me, just for a little while?" she asked almost shyly. "There's something I want very much to show you."

"Of course," he replied, looking puzzled.

"I'll meet you in my studio," she said, feeling as though she could fly home on the wings of her joy, needing no other magic than that.

"To London," Calder said with a grand gesture of one arm, as though inviting Maeve to precede him.



She was standing in front of the tapestry when her mate appeared, and she watched his eyes widen as he took in the images and their meaning. Finally he turned to her in wonderment.

"A child?" His voice was low and gruff, and he sounded as though he were trying to restrain his rising hopes, to avoid disappointment.

Maeve caught both Calder's hands in her own and arranged them flat against her stomach. "Nemesis says the baby is mortal," she said.

Calder looked at once joyous and baffled. "But how can that be?" he whispered.

She put her arms around his neck. "I don't know," she said with a smile. "You're the doctor."

He ran his hands up and down her back, his eyes full of wonder. "It's a miracle," he marveled, and then he kissed her again.

Maeve was intoxicated when he finally drew back, and so weak that she clung to the front of Calder's tunic to keep herself upright. "How will we manage, Calder?" she asked. "How can vampires raise a mortal child?"

"The same way mortals do," Calder replied, smoothing her soft dress away from her shoulders to reveal her white, full breasts. "With a great deal of love and patience."

"But—"

Calder bent and took one of Maeve's nipples boldly into his mouth, effectively cutting off her words and swamping her doubts in a storm of physical and spiritual sensation.

Maeve threw back her head, abandoning herself to Calder's attentions, glorying in the wild appetites he had aroused in her. He smoothed the rest of her clothes away without leaving her breast, and then Maeve was clothed only in moonlight.

"Here's something else mortals do," he said gruffly when both Maeve's breasts were throbbing and wet from his tongue. He dropped to one knee before her, like a cavalier acknowledging his queen, parted the veil of silk that hid her most sensitive place from view, and kissed her there.

Maeve cried out, half in protest, half in glorious surrender. Calder's hands cupped her bare buttocks, and he pressed her hard against his mouth and suckled until she was trembling against him, whimpering softly in her need.

Calder lowered her to the bare wooden floor finally, and his own clothes were gone, quite literally, in a twinkling. He poised himself over her, and she parted her thighs for him willingly, even eagerly.

He entered her in one hard, desperate thrust and, as quickly as that, Calder's own control snapped. He and Maeve moved together in a graceful dance of passion, their sleek bodies rising and falling, twisting and turning, as each worshiped the other.

It ended with a simultaneous, white-hot melding, not only of their physical selves, but of their souls as well, and afterward they both lay stricken and exhausted on the hard floor.

Maeve was the first to move. She put her clothes back on, reached into the pocket of her gown, and

took out the pendant the gypsy had given her, long, long ago. Crouching beside Calder, who was still splendidly naked and had managed to raise himself onto one elbow, she put the chain around his neck and then kissed him softly on each side of his face.

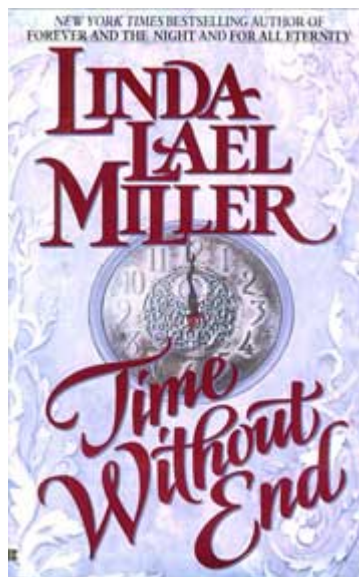
"This is my pledge to you," she said. "I will be your wife, now and throughout eternity, in heaven or in hell, in life or in death."

Calder sat up, took Maeve's face in his strong hands, and kissed her earnestly. "And this is my pledge to you," he replied then in a hoarse voice, drawing back only far enough to look deep into her eyes. "I will be your husband, faithful and brave and patient. I will love you beyond forever, and my soul will be a part of yours."

Maeve moved back into his arms. It was the closest they would ever have to a wedding, this exchange of vows they had just shared, but she and Calder had agreed to love each other for all eternity.

Forever sounded just right.

Time Without End (1995)



TIME WITHOUT END

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*For Doreen Drago,*

*Valerian's good friend and mine.*

*Heartfelt thanks from both of us.*

Prologue

*Las Vegas, Nevada*

*1995*

A hush fell over the audience as the full-sized glass coach rolled onto the stage, drawn by six perfect white horses with golden manes and tails. Dense fog tumbled and spun along the floor, rising slowly, encompassing the silent, gilded wheels of the carriage, swirling around the black iron pillars of the old-fashioned streetlamps lining the wings.

Daisy Chandler had been on a stakeout until half an hour before, and she'd arrived in the theater of the new Venetian Hotel just in time for the finale. Even though she'd lived in Las Vegas all her life, and knew more than a little about trickery and sham, she held her breath as the carriage door opened.

The magician stepped out of the coach onto the stage.

Tall and very broad in the shoulders, he stood just behind the fog-dimmed footlights, regarding the audience in imperious silence for a few moments, as though deciding whether or not these particular people were worthy of his presence, let alone his performance. He wore a plain tuxedo, exquisitely tailored, beneath a flowing black velvet cape embroidered with glimmering threads of every conceivable color, and his chestnut hair was thick, slightly too long over his collar, and faintly shaggy. His features were patrician, his complexion pale with a pearlescent glow to it.

Although Daisy could not see his eyes in the darkness, she would have sworn his gaze touched her, passed by, and then returned to cast some subtle spell.

Daisy felt an immediate wrench of sorrow and joy deep within herself, a recollection of great love and even greater tragedy. A fury of faded pastel images fluttered in her mind, like antique valentines...

Memories.

Daisy tried to shake off the fanciful impression. She was a cop, and an especially pragmatic one at that. She didn't believe in magic, or in memories of things that had never happened to her in the first place. She'd been having spooky dreams, on and off, ever since she was eight years old, but that fell into another category entirely.

She shifted in her seat, wondering why she'd come to see a magic show instead of going home to her apartment for a Lean Cuisine, a hot bath, and some badly needed sleep. Hell, she'd even laid out the seventy-five bucks for a ticket...

Daisy bit her lower lip. She'd heard about the magician, who billed himself simply as Valerian—with no Greats or Magnificents or Incomparables tacked on for purposes of pizzazz—from her friends. They said his tricks were impossible, that other sleight-of-hand specialists were flying in from the world over, hoping to figure out how he did it all, and Daisy had wanted to see the act for herself.

It was as simple as that. Wasn't it?

She realized she was holding her breath, and ordered herself to take in air, but her hand trembled as she reached for her glass of diet cola. Her gaze never left the commanding figure dominating center stage.

Daisy was enthralled, like all the other spectators, as Valerian raised his arms high in the air, turned his back to the audience, and faced the team and carriage. The metallic threads in his cape seemed to ripple and undulate under the stage lights, and Daisy shook her head, overwhelmed by another flood of footloose, whimsical remembrance.

The magician lifted his hands slowly, gracefully, from his sides, palms up, and as he did so, the fairy-tale coach and all the horses rose a few inches off the floor, then a foot, then several feet.

The silence in the room was explosive, absolute. No one spoke, or coughed, or cleared a throat. The horses seemed unconcerned with the fact that their hooves weren't touching the floor; they moved in place, as though they were trotting on top of a cloud, and the carriage wheels spun accordingly.

Valerian turned, in a swirl of shimmering color, and glared fiercely at the audience, seeming to challenge them to question the trick. Then the fog dissipated, and Cinderella's coach-and-six were still jostling along in mid-air, supported by nothing at all.

Daisy scooted to the edge of her chair, frowning, her practical cop's mind racing even as her emotions wrestled with the lingering sense of poignant recognition. She knew razzle-dazzle when she saw it. No matter how polished the magician, no matter how sophisticated the trick, illusions were illusions. There could be no question that her eyes were fooling her, but she was more than mystified by what she was witnessing—she was unnerved.

The wizard gestured, and a half dozen of the requisite dancing girls pranced onto the stage, three on one side, three on the other. At another silent command from Valerian, a trio of the skimpily clad women moved to sit cross-legged under the suspended coach. One of the three seated beneath the horses glanced upward with a thoughtful expression, then produced an umbrella.

A twitter of nervous laughter rose from the crowd, but that feeling of collective breath-holding remained.

Having proven, ostensibly, that there were no wires supporting the coach-and-six—an idea Daisy had already dismissed as preposterous anyway—the dancing girls scrambled out from under it.

Valerian raised an arm, and the coach door opened again. A glittering gold ladder stretched with soundless grace to the stage floor, and the girls ascended, one by one, into the carriage. The door closed behind them.

There was a sort of psychic drumroll, something felt rather than heard. Then the great deceiver raised his arms again, and the onlookers cried out in wonder, Daisy included, when the team began to move, still suspended, pulling the coach out over all their heads, making a grand and glorious sweep before returning to the stage.

Daisy's mouth dropped open. She closed her eyes, then opened them again.

The coach-and-six settled gracefully back to the floor of the stage, then rolled out of sight.

The audience soared to its feet, clapping and cheering wildly. The magician bowed deeply, a small, ironic smile lifting just a corner of his mouth, then vanished in the proverbial cloud of smoke.

Daisy sank back into her chair, still in shock. The horde of tourists straggled out, murmuring among themselves, speculating. Soon, the theater was empty, except for a few waiters, and the stage, with its tiered curtain of ivory silk, was dark.

Daisy remained, her heart in her throat, inexplicable tears burning in her eyes, obeying some unspoken command because she could not find the strength to defy it. Waiting.

For Daisy, the show was far from over.

1

*Dunnett's Head, Cornwall*

*September 1348*

"You've ruined both of those lads," Noah Lazarus groused from his position next to the table, mallet in hand. His wife, Seraphina, stood gazing out of the shop window, looking for those scoundrel sons of hers. He spat in an effort to gain her notice, knowing beforehand that he would fail. "The names you gave them, Sera—Krispin, Valerian—names fit for the sons of princes and kings. And me naught but a bootmaker!"

Seraphina turned those extraordinary violet eyes on him at last, and even though they flashed with contempt,

Noah was glad of her notice. He knew he was pathetic, but in such moments he couldn't make himself care.

"They are fine lads," she said acidly. The late afternoon sun came through the thick, bubbled glass of the window, playing in her rich chestnut hair. Noah marveled that such a creature had bound herself to the likes of him, under the laws of God and man, that she'd lain with him, borne the children he sired.

Just then, Noah caught a glimpse of the boys, returning from the keep overlooking the small seaside village and the wild Irish Sea. Valerian, the elder, was seventeen, tall and straight as a ship's mast, with powerful shoulders and his mother's dramatic coloring. He had strong bones, unblemished skin, and straight white teeth, Valerian did, and he was so physically perfect that Noah could hardly believe he was the get of his own loins. It was as though the boy had willfully taken all the best of his parents for himself, leaving little or none for the children who followed.

Krispin, smaller than his brother, fair-haired and as delicate as a girl, came next. He'd managed to survive, at least—that was more than could be said for the others.

Poor little Royal had been born three years after Krispin, only to have his mother confer that embarrassment of a name upon him. He'd been a blue and spindly twig of an infant; hadn't even survived a fortnight. As for the two girls, well, *those* wretched creatures, twins they'd been, had both given up the ghost before they could be christened.

The door of the shop swept open, and Valerian strode in. He wore the plain garb of a tradesman's son, leggings and a tunic of the cheapest wool, and yet he looked out of place, as he always did. More like a dandy down from London Town than the pauper he was. He kissed his besotted mother on the forehead, and she glowed as if she'd just been blessed by John the Baptist, or one of the lesser saints.

Valerian's eyes met Noah's, and the old knowledge passed between them; they had always despised each other. That day the whelp carried an unbelievably rare and precious item—carelessly, of course—in the curve of one arm. It was a book, bound in leather, and Noah knew without looking that its parchment pages would have been painstakingly inscribed by one monk or a succession of them, and exquisitely illustrated with vivid colors and fragile brush strokes.

Noah's heart clenched, and he felt a thin sheen of perspiration dampen his forehead and upper lip. "Where did you get that?" he demanded in a hoarse whisper. Jesus, Joseph, and Mary, the manuscript was worth more than the shop and all its contents—more, probably, than the whole village of Dunnett's Head. If such a treasure were to be damaged, or lost, there would be hell to pay.

And it would be Noah who paid, not his son. It was always Noah.

Valerian—God, how he hated that pretentious name, hated even more that it fit the young rogue so well, in its innate elegance—smiled in that way that made his father want to box his ears. Noah had done exactly that often enough, as it happened, and relished every blow, but Seraphina invariably coddled the rotter afterward and made the rest of them suffer.

"It belongs to the baron," Valerian said, following a short silence. It was as close as he'd ever come to explaining anything he said or did; he seemed to have some personal rule against giving reasons.

Krispin, that nimble shadow of a boy, spoke at last, in a quavering and earnest voice. "Our tutor told us we could take it," he burred. "Just until we go back for our lessons..."

Noah felt the blood pounding under his right temple. Lessons. Books. That had been the start of it, Seraphina's foolish insistence that her sons be taught to read, to yearn after poetry and art.

The older man fixed his gaze on Valerian. "Take it back to the keep," he commanded in a tone of coldness and thunder. "Now."

Valerian's look, indeed his whole manner, was one of purest insolence. "I will not," he replied very quietly.

Noah closed one fist—he was a big man, and stronger than his son, and he wanted with all his soul to strike the impudent pup over and over, to force him to his knees, to make him bleed and whimper—but Seraphina was beside her husband in a trice. She gripped Noah's hard arm in her small hands, their tiny bones fragile as a bird's skeleton beneath her silken flesh, and looked up at him with both a plea and a warning in her strange purple eyes.

He could bear no more of it, her choosing this whelp over him, her own mate. It was an abomination! "This is still my house, my shop," Noah said evenly. "And I, God help me, am still your father. I am the master here, and you will do as I tell you or take a hiding the likes of which you've never imagined."

"Noah!" Seraphina whispered, horrified, clutching at him again.

"Enough!" he rasped at her, wrenching his arm free and nearly oversetting her in the process, glowering all the while into Valerian's magnificent, hateful young face. After a few deep and tremulous breaths, he managed to speak more calmly. "Now. What shall it be?"

Valerian spat onto the rush-covered floor.

His behavior was beyond enduring; Noah wrenched the precious manuscript from the lad's grasp, shoved it into Seraphina's, and struck his son with such force that Valerian stumbled backward and collided with a wooden support beam. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, and the fires of deepest hell blazed in his eyes.

He didn't say that he hated his father, for there was no need to speak of it. Noah knew a moment of torturous despair, and wondered if things would have been different if he'd made Seraphina call the boys by solid, ordinary names, such as Thomas or John, Gideon or Joseph.

Seraphina screamed, but Noah could not stop himself. He cuffed the lad again and entangled a meaty peasant's hand in that mass of chestnut hair, pulling hard, forcing his firstborn to his knees.

Valerian did not fight back, even though Noah could feel the strength surging inside the youthful, granite-hard body; he endured each blow, each kick, each slap and wrench, all the time gazing upon his father with that ancient, murderous contempt in his eyes. Only when it was too late did Noah realize that this very passivity was Valerian's greatest weapon; by suffering the punishment without struggle, he had assured his mother's undying devotion. At the same time he had sealed Noah's doom, robbed him of the last shreds of Seraphina's esteem. He, this changeling with the face of an archangel, had at last destroyed that which Noah valued above all else.

He drew back his foot, with a mighty moan of sheer agony, and kicked the crouching Valerian as hard as he could.

Seraphina shrieked, kneeling in the rushes to gather her bleeding and now-unconscious offspring into her arms, cradling his head on her bosom. When she raised her eyes to Noah's face, his worst fears were confirmed; the hatred he saw in her gaze would outlive them all.



Though she might lie beside him every night, and even suffer his gropings and groans in the darkness, though she might sit across the board from him for a hundred meals, nay, a thousand, Seraphina was eternally lost to him.

Noah felt tears burning in his eyes, for he loved his wife the way a saint loves God, with fevered and unutterable devotion. He held out one hand to her, unable to speak, and she stared at the twisted, calloused fingers for a long moment, then turned her head away. She buried her face in Valerian's hair and spoke not to Noah, but to their second son.

"Take your brother to his bed," she told Krispin in a bleak, distracted tone. "I'll get a cloth and some water."

Only then could Noah manage one desperate word. Her name.

She rose, helping Krispin lift an insensate Valerian to his feet. She did not look at her husband, and her words sliced through him like a reaper's scythe honed for harvest. "May God curse you, Noah Lazarus," she murmured. "May all His angels despise your name, now and on the Day of Judgment."

### *Valerian*

I remember clearly, even after six hundred years, that I awakened sometime after sunset, in the dark, cramped little cell I shared with my brother, feeling as though I'd been trampled by the baron's horses. The straw in my pallet rustled when I moved, and I heard Krispin breathing softly in his own bed, against the opposite wall, but there was another noise tugging at the edges of my mind. It was several moments before I realized what else I was hearing—the sound of my father's drunken, disconsolate weeping.

I closed my eyes, as if to block it out, for although I had never loved Noah, I was not immune to his suffering. I did not revel in his injuries as he did in mine.

"Do you think she's left him at last?" Krispin asked.

"No," I replied, unable to withhold a small groan as I shifted on my bed, disturbing bruised muscles and broken skin. "She'll never leave him. Where would she go?"

There was a brief silence, within the room at least. Without, Father's wails grew louder and more desolate, like the cries of a wounded wolf, and I wondered if his agony would drive him to come after me again. Although he was not a cruel man in any other respect, there could be no denying that he enjoyed taking off strips of my hide.

"You're not his get," Krispin speculated, with no emotion whatsoever coming forth in his voice. "That's why he hates you so much."

The words wounded me sorely, although they shouldn't have. Certainly I'd had the same thought myself more than once, and I'd often pretended, when I was small, that I had sprung from the loins of someone far more interesting than Noah Lazarus, bootmaker, of Dunnett's Head, Cornwall. A smuggler, for example. Or a poet. Or one of the pirates who plagued the coasts of both England and France.

Alas, I had the boot-maker's broad shoulders and powerful, long-fingered hands; I had his temper and his oddly aristocratic nose, though he probably hadn't noticed the similarities. Oh, I was Noah's seed all right, but he couldn't have despised me more if I'd been begotten by the devil's great-uncle. And rather than try to make peace with him, to win his affection, I had always mocked him instead. Even now, after

all these centuries, I'm not sure why I had to defy my father, to constantly rouse his ire; I only know that I could sooner have ceased breathing and stilled my own heart than begged him to love me.

"Valerian?" Krispin sounded slightly irritated; it always annoyed him when he spoke to me and I failed to reply straight away. "What do you think? Are you his son, or are you a bastard?"

I smiled in the fetid gloom, even though I ached in every conceivable part of my anatomy, even though I wanted, on some level of my being, to weep and weep until my body was dry as sun-parched straw. "I am his son," I replied, "and I am most assuredly a bastard."

Krispin did not laugh at my jest, and I was sorry for that. It would have been a comfort to me, his amusement.

Things began to crash against the walls and floors in the outer part of the house where Father kept his shop. He was overturning cherished possessions now, flinging them in rage, and I shuddered inwardly, praying he would not remember me.

"He might have loved us," Krispin said at length, "if we'd wanted to be bootmakers."

I was weeping silently by then, and I didn't want my brother to know, so I didn't speak. But I knew it wasn't our rebellion that made our sire hate us, most especially me. It was the fact that our mother had always taken our part against him.

After a while Father was quiet. Krispin drifted off to sleep, and so eventually did I. On the morrow Mother gave me the book that had started the latest battle, carefully wrapped in her best shawl, and spoke to me in a subdued tone.

"You bring it upon yourself, Valerian," she said, pouring water from a ewer into my wooden cup. Father was not in the shop, and Krispin had gone down to the sea at daybreak to watch for ships, the way he always did, so Mother and I were alone. "Always baiting him, always defying him. Why do you do it?"

I was ashamed, for I knew she had endured much because of my willful nature. "I don't know," I answered glumly, tearing off a piece of coarse brown bread for my breakfast. My lower lip was swollen, and it hurt to chew and swallow. I did not express my fear that if I ever stopped rebelling against Father I would instead grovel at his feet, pleading with him to love me.

She looked upon me sternly, then touched my hair. "Be gone. He'll be back soon, with the things he needs to put the shop to rights again, and he mustn't find you here."

I nodded, snatched up a second piece of the hard, dry bread, took the manuscript shrouded in poor brown cloth, and started for the door. Matthew Challes, Brenna Afton-St. Claire's tutor, whom she generously shared with the boot-maker's boys, disliked laggards and dealt with them severely.

I was the first to enter the schoolroom, that hallowed, light-filled place, with its rush-scattered floors and windows opening onto a vista of the wild sea, and Challes gasped audibly when he saw me. He was a tall man, taller than I was by the span of my hand, with deep-set brown eyes, a poet's sensual mouth, and pale skin. There was a faint smattering of pockmarks across his right cheek.

"So Noah's been at you again, has he, lad?"

I simply nodded and held out the book.

Challes set it aside, with less reverence than I would have expected, and stooped slightly, eyes narrowed, to study my battered face. "Good God, it's barbaric. How do you bear it? Why haven't you run away to London or gone to sea?"

I could not go from Dunnett's Head, though I dreamed of it, because I knew my mother would perish if I abandoned her, and because there was someone else I could not bear to leave, but of course I had too much pride to admit the truth. Blessedly, before I could be compelled to make an answer, the Lady Brenna breezed into the schoolroom, and as always, I felt my steady heartbeat turn to a violent *thud-thud-thud* when I saw her.

She was fifteen that year, nubile and womanly, and it was generally known that her father, the baron, was seeking far and wide for a suitable husband. He had only two requirements in a prospective son-in-law, as I recall—social rank and a respectable fortune. The contents of the baron's coffers, never remarkable, had been dwindling rapidly for a generation or so.

I remember quite clearly that I would have given my immortal soul to be her mate, to bury my hands and face in that wild cascade of lush, red-gold hair, to see myself reflected in those jewel-like green eyes, to press my body against hers, my masculine frame moving in sweet, intimate concert with her soft, lithe one.

To this day I recall that she was wearing a velvet frock that morning, rendered in a deep blue, and that it was no less beautiful for its shabbiness.

Seeing me, and my wounds and swellings, she winced in mingled amusement and sympathy. "My poor Valerian," she said, touching my cheek with a light, cool hand. "When will you learn to steer around trouble instead of sailing straight into the heart of it?"

I had no answer for her question; I was too busy wondering if she knew what even so innocent a caress did to me. Although my tunic fit loosely and hung to the middle of my thighs, thereby covering any involuntary evidence of my desire for milady, a sidelong glance at my tutor told me he'd guessed the true state of affairs.

I blushed and pretended I hadn't seen the mating of mirth and censure in his gaze. I was just opening my mouth to babble something inane to Brenna when Krispin came in, bearing an armload of autumn wild-flowers and grasses and beaming.

"For you, milady," he said, holding the gift out to Brenna and following up with a courtly bow. He adored her, as I did, and I wondered if she knew and returned his esteem in even the smallest part.

The light of pleasure blazed in her eyes, and I was bludgeoned by jealousy.

It was Challes who interceded, clearing his throat loudly. "Here, now, no more of this nonsense. Sit down, the lot of you, and we'll begin our lessons."

I couldn't concentrate; the sun was bright and the wind coming up from the sea and swirling through the gapped wooden walls and high windows of the old keep smelled of salt. I dreamed of grand adventures in faraway, exotic lands, with the Lady Brenna at my side, and paid scant attention to my Latin.

When we were through with our studies, Krispin vanished, as he often did, to explore one of his sea caves or walk the shore, and I lingered just outside the great, sagging gates of the keep, looking at the

sea. Being a lad of seventeen summers, I was in no significant hurry to return to my home and spend the remainder of the day helping my father in the shop.

I had not heard Brenna's approach, and I was a little startled when she suddenly appeared beside me, holding some of Krispin's now-fading bouquet of flowers and sea-grass to her freckled nose. "Do you dream of leaving here forever, the way your brother does?"

I smiled, even though I felt an infinite sorrow stir in the depths of my spirit. *Yes*, I thought. *And I dream of taking you with me*. "I'd like to see France and the lands beyond," I conceded, cautious in her presence as always, because her opinion of me meant everything. "What about you, milady? Do you imagine being married and bearing children?"

A brief, troubled silence followed, during which I suffered the proverbial agonies of the damned, fearing I'd said the wrong thing. She gazed out toward the sea, squinting against the brightness of the late afternoon sun, her expression so solemn, so mournful, that I wanted to take her into my arms and promise to protect her from dragons and devils and all else she might fear.

Finally she looked up into my face. "I'm to go to Northumberland," she said at last. "Father has found me a husband there. Word reached us yesterday, and he told me as we supped."

I felt a great wail of grief and protest rise in me, pulsing painfully in my throat, but I did not release it. It would have frightened Brenna, and otherwise changed nothing.

Brenna linked her arm through mine. "I don't want to leave you, Valerian," she said. "You love me, don't you?"

I merely nodded, for I would not have dared to speak even if I could have managed it. Without Brenna, my life would be unendurable. And there would be no more lessons in the keep, no more Challes, no more books and poetry and music.

For the first time, I truly wanted to die. In retrospect, that seems an exquisite irony.

She rested her head against my shoulder, and I could smell woodsmoke in her hair, and the sea, and that scent that was, and is, peculiar to her. "I've always pretended," she said in a voice so small that the wind nearly carried it away, "that I would marry you one day. I knew it couldn't happen, and yet..."

I turned, staring into her face, bewildered and full of wild, impossible hopes. "What did you say?"

Brenna smiled that same unbearably sad smile that had rested upon her lips moments before. "Is it so difficult to believe," she countered, "that I should love you?"

I swallowed hard, full of sadness and ecstasy. How wrenching it was, knowing that she wanted me as I wanted her and, at the same time, being aware to the depths of my soul that we could never be together.

She interlaced her fingers with mine. "How will I bear it?" she murmured, asking herself, not me. Asking the sea and the hard, brittle blue of a September sky.

By then it was all a blur to me, the water, the village, the grassy slope leading down to the shore, for I was blinded by tears. I could not answer her question, or my own, which was exactly the same.

Brenna stepped in front of me, raised her hands to my face. "Perhaps Father would let us be married if I

told him how much we care for each other."

I laughed, and the sound was jagged, seeming to tear the flesh of my throat as it passed. "The baron? Bless a marriage between his daughter and the bootmaker's son? Good God, Brenna, he'd have me in chains before day's end, and on the rack not long after!"

She rested her forehead against my chest, and I wanted to push her away, for there were always servants and others about, watching, interpreting what they saw and heard to suit themselves, passing it along to all who would listen. Still, thrusting her from me would have been like expelling the breath in my lungs and never drawing another. I felt her tears dampening my tunic, and laid my hands lightly, reverently, on her slender shoulders.

At last she drew back, sniffing, and her attempt to smile rent my heart. "Perhaps he will be a good man, my husband. Perhaps he will be gentle and think me pretty."

I closed my eyes, remembering the sounds I'd heard so often, through the daub-and-wattle wall that separated my parents' chamber from the one I shared with Krispin. Those were primitive times, and that particular brand of modesty was in short supply in the countryside and the village alike. I had seen men take their wives in the fields, like dogs mounting bitches in the street.

"*Jesu*," I whispered, shattered by the image of Brenna lying in another man's bed. In that moment I wanted to go to the high cliffs south of the village and fling myself off them, into the sharp rocks clustered below. "Yes," I said finally. "He'll think you pretty. How could he not?"

We parted then—surely it was Lady Brenna who broke away first. I descended the hillside toward the village without looking back. I was still half blinded by tears and thus didn't see Krispin until I'd practically collided with him.

"There's a ship on the horizon!" he cried, fairly dancing with excitement.

I pushed him aside—perhaps I was a bit too rough in my despair. I didn't give a sacred damn if the shore was lined with Viking vessels, brimming with spear-waving invaders. Brenna was going away, probably before the winter snows, and I would never see her again.

Krispin was not content to let me pass; he clutched the sleeve of my tunic and wrenched me back. I swung at him without thinking, catching him up alongside the head and dropping him to his knees.

I barely noticed the flush of fury in his fine-boned face, or the venomous spark in his eyes. He raised himself and came hurtling at me like a snarling dog, and I cuffed him again, more out of surprise than anger.

He went sprawling once more, in the chilly grass, and then sat up, wiping blood from the corner of his mouth. His face was utterly expressionless as he sat there, looking up at me, thinking God only knew what.

"I'm sorry," I said, extending my hand to him, making no effort to hide the mark of tears on my face.

Krispin allowed me to help him, though oftentimes when we'd had such a scrap, he'd slap my hand away when I offered it. "What's the matter with you?" he demanded, dusting off his leggings and tunic. Like mine, they were poor and ugly garments, rough to the touch and virtually useless against the chill of a cold night. "I was only trying to tell you about the ship—"

I was already striding toward the village again, and the shop, where my mother would be keeping her pitiful vigil, watching for Krispin and me as if we were sailors just home from the sea, while my father watched her, in turn, and seethed. My brother scrambled to get into step with me.

I dragged one arm across my wet face, and we talked no more of ships. We could not have guessed, in our innocence, what monstrous suffering that vessel would bring to us all.

That night Father was in a mood, and Mother had taken to her pallet with some ailment born of the strain between them. Krispin slipped out to mingle with the men from the ship and hear their tales, while I sat in my chamber with my back to the wall, brooding over Brenna's impending departure.

In the morning there was no sign of Krispin. I shrugged at the realization, filled a basin with water from the ewer my mother kept filled, and washed as best I could. During the night I had conceived a plan—I would go to the Baron Afton-St. Claire, Brenna's father, and ask for her hand. If he had me clapped into chains or pulled me apart on the rack for getting above myself, so be it. I had to try.

As it happened, Challes was waiting at the schoolroom door when I arrived, his eyes red-rimmed, fairly bursting with tidings. Dire ones, I could tell.

He grasped my arm, hard enough to leave bruises, and growled, "What in God's name have you done? The baron is demanding to see you, and he is in a towering rage!"

I wrenched free of my tutor's hold, drawing myself up in fury even as terror seeped into every part of my being. In our village and in all the barren lands surrounding it, Afton-St. Claire was the most powerful of men, and my fate was most definitely in his hands.

When I did not answer his question immediately, Challes leaned in close and spat, "Damn you, bootmaker's son, *what have you done*?"

I remembered holding Brenna the day before, while she cried over our parting. Even though I might die screaming for daring to touch her, when I searched my heart I could find no regret. "The Lady Brenna was weeping. She laid her head against my shoulder."

"And you touched her with your hands?" Challes cried in a strangled voice. "Fool! Arrogant, willful fool!"

I straightened. "Where is the baron? In the great hall?"

Challes ran one narrow hand over his face. "We're all finished, you know. Not just you, you young peacock! The Lady Brenna will be locked up until her husband comes to claim her, and Krispin's education will be come to an end, as well as your own. And I will lose my position!"

I wanted to apologize, I truly did. I couldn't bring myself to proceed, though, because in my deepest being

I knew I had done nothing wrong. If others suffered because of the situation, it would be by the baron's decree, not by mine.

"Where is he?" I asked again. Stiffly.

Challes's sigh contained all the misery of that difficult and unjust world we lived in. "You'll find him in the



inner courtyard—practicing with his sword."

I was no fool, though Challes had called me one. I wanted to bolt from that keep, to run for my life, but there was nowhere to go.

I made my way to the inner courtyard, careful to keep my shoulders straight and my head high. When I arrived, the baron, a muscular, thick-chested man, was indeed wielding a sword, battling a knobby-kneed squire who was plainly terrified. It was little wonder, given the baron's earnest dedication to his task. The nobleman was drenched in sweat and bellowing like an outraged bull.

I stood waiting, and beyond the clanging flash of the swords I saw the Lady Brenna huddled in the shadowy arch of a doorway, watching me.

I was destined to lose her, I knew, and the realization gave me a strange, desolate sort of courage. Facing a lifetime apart from her as I was, years of knowing another man was laying his hands to her, in love and perhaps in anger, I could not but think that death would be a mercy. Any sort of death.

2

*Valerian*

*Las Vegas, 1995*

She was there.

Even before I walked onstage that fateful night, to regale the baffled masses with my illusions, I felt her presence in the grand showroom of the Venetian Hotel. The knowledge that she was nearby left me so shaken that I could barely concentrate on the performance.

Brenna. Dear God, my Brenna...

My lusty Elisabeth. And sweet, fragile Jenny. And Harmony. And Sarah.

But of course she had a new identity now, and those other names, all of which had been her own at one time or another, would mean nothing to her. Nor would I, I was certain.

I'd be lying—not that I've ever hesitated to bend the truth should it serve my purpose to do so—if I said I took no joy in the prospect of another encounter with my elusive beloved. Just the thought of speaking to her again, of touching her, was rapture, but there was fear, too, and I already felt the weight of the sorrow that would inevitably follow any bliss we might share.

For my darling and me, the story, played out over and over on the stage of six centuries, had never had a happy ending. Not once.

Invariably, except in her first incarnation, the ruby ring had arrived, out of nowhere, a mysterious thing of splendor and antiquity, and precisely a fortnight later I had been bereaved again. And always, try though I did to discover who had sent that glittering jewel, and with it the curse, the thing vanished while I was caught up in my mourning. The tragic puzzle was no closer to solution that night, when I found Brenna once more, than it had ever been.



I used my powers to hold her in her seat, there in that large and otherwise anonymous audience, sensing her desire to bolt as well as her fascination with my legerdemain, but even after the carriage trick had been completed and all the others had straggled out, I lingered backstage.

I remember wishing I could simply walk away—each time I found her, I entertained that same futile notion, of course—but I am neither fine nor noble enough to make such a sacrifice. I was starved for the sight and sound and feel of her, just as I had always been. It would have been easier to forgo the taking of blood than to turn my back on that particular woman.

So it was that I stood in the wings as the silence lengthened in that great room, watching her fidget at her table, seeing the shadows play in her coppery hair, for some fifteen minutes before one of the dancing girls appeared at my side. Her name was Jillie, and she was still wearing her delectably inadequate costume.

I do enjoy the many and varied facets of my work.

"Someone you know?" she asked with a slight edge of envy to her voice. Jillie was more than passing-curious about me, and I suspect she saw me as a romantic challenge. Being older, to say the least, and infinitely wiser, I didn't encourage her; she could have no way of guessing she was flirting with a bona fide monster.

"An old friend," I said softly, never taking my eyes from the woman sitting alone in the auditorium. She had finished her drink and begun chewing ice cubes, and the crunching sound made me wince.

Jillie lingered a moment, cast a venomous glance toward the object of my attention, and swept off toward the dressing room she shared with the other women in the act.

I allowed myself a fraction of a smile. I'd done Jillie a favor she could not begin to comprehend or appreciate by spurning her naive affections. Would that I could be so gracious with my Lady Brenna.

I had shed the cumbersome cape as soon as the show ended, but I was still wearing my tuxedo when I finally forced myself down the steps at the side of the stage and along the aisle.

If I'd had a living, beating heart instead of an atrophied vestige of one, that organ would have twisted at the sight of her watching me approach. She was helpless, like an animal dazzled by light; I knew that and used it to my advantage.

Fate is cruel, in my experience—except for the modern haircut and clothes, she looked just as she had in each of the previous lifetimes in which our paths had crossed. Her hair was a coppery-gold color, thick and lush, and her eyes were green. Even her face, with its delicate bone structure and impertinent little chin, was the same, right down to the faint smattering of freckles across her nose.

I closed my eyes for a moment, caught up in a spindrift of emotions, and when I looked again, she was staring up at me. Her throat worked, as if she'd attempted to speak and failed, and she offered me her hand. She seemed bewildered, afraid, and perhaps just a bit enchanted.

Her introduction was woven of pure bravado. "Daisy Chandler," she said, offering me her hand. "I'm a homicide detective with the Las Vegas Police Department."

I was taken aback by this flood of information, and arched one eyebrow as I enclosed her hand in my

own. I wondered if she felt the chill in my flesh, and puzzled over it. Although I can usually read a mortal mind with embarrassing ease, hers has always been veiled from me, except for a few shifting flickers of discernment here and there—perhaps because I care so much. Creation can be perverse in that way, so often withholding from us the very insights and objects we desire most.

"I am pleased to meet you," I managed to reply, though I have to admit I was as nervous as Daisy. I was just better at hiding what I felt than she was, that was all. I'd had a long time to practice.

She frowned, her pretty brow knitting for a moment in consternation. "Do I know you?"

The answer to that question was better saved for another time. "No," I replied, missing a beat or two. I knew that, deep in her subconscious, she remembered me, and everything we'd been through together, in minute detail. The human mind is a superlative scribe, missing nothing, trundling its uncountable impressions from one lifetime to the next.

Daisy rose, somewhat shakily, and only thought to remove her fingers from mine after she'd gained her feet. She was wearing tight jeans that had seen better days, and her white summer top was airy and ruffled, inviting the eyes to her finely shaped breasts.

I felt a rush of jealous irritation, a downright silly desire to fetch one of my capes and cover her with it. I had had to share her with others when she was Elisabeth Saxon; I could not do so again.

"Your show was fantastic," she said with a tentative smile.

I merely inclined my head once, in acknowledgment of the compliment. There was—and is—no false modesty in my makeup. The performance was indeed "fantastic," and more; my audiences paid for magic, and they got their money's worth.

She looked about, noticed as I did that the waiters and bartenders were gone, replaced by the cleaning staff. "I guess I should be going," she said with a sort of cheerful desperation, and I felt a pang of regret because I knew Daisy wasn't normally a timid person. I was frightening her, and I hated that.

"Yes," I said quickly, at last releasing the mental hold I had taken on her earlier. "Good night, Miss Chandler."

She studied my face, and for a breathless moment I thought she consciously remembered me. In the next instant, however, the pensive expression in her beautiful eyes vanished. Daisy waggled her unmanicured fingers in farewell and dashed out of the showroom without looking back.

I went to my dressing room, where the mirrors were draped and the lights were dim, and stood in the middle of the floor, struggling against the rage and frustration that had arisen in me. I didn't want to go through it all again, loving her, wanting her, losing her, and suffering the soul-crushing consequences once more, but I knew the curse some passing devil had cast over both of us would run its course. The ring would arrive, and Daisy would die.

I was standing there, outwardly still, but with all hell breaking loose inside, when a soft tapping sounded at the door.

My first reaction was fury; I was grieving and did not wish to be disturbed. But then the door opened, and I saw my caller.

Daisy had returned, looking uncertain, as if she'd reached the end of some invisible tether and been drawn back by it. She gripped one of my colorful, printed programs in her right hand and wore a determined if still-fragile smile. There were no photographs of me in the publication, of course, only reproductions of paintings, and she had the booklet open to one of these.

"I was wondering. . ." she began, her eyes straying around the dressing room, taking in the shrouded mirrors and muted lights.

I was so glad to see her that it required the utmost restraint on my part not to wrench her into my arms. "Yes?" I prompted, perhaps sounding the least bit patronizing. My friends, as well as my enemies, tell me that a certain arrogance is native to my manner.

She shoved the program at me, along with a cheap plastic pen. "Would you autograph this, please?"

I did so with a flourish and handed both the booklet and the pen back to her.

Daisy bit her lower lip, and I felt a rush of arousal so keen that I writhed in the core of it, like a man in flames. "Thanks," she said. She hesitated, then went on in a tumbled hurry of words: "I know magicians never tell their secrets, but that carriage trick was—well, it was impossible. You couldn't have used wires or platforms. So it had to be some sort of mass hypnosis—"

"Or," I interrupted gently, "it might have happened exactly as you saw it. By magic." I smiled and spread my hands.

She frowned, and I wanted to kiss the place between her brows where the skin creased prettily. "Something weird is going on here," she finally blurted out. "Who are you?"

I wanted to tell her; it would have been the most delicious relief to explain it all, but I couldn't. For one thing, the story would have taken hours to relate, and for another, I didn't want to frighten Daisy off forever. "You'll understand it all in good time," I replied with resignation. I was beginning to feel restless, agitated; I needed to hunt and feed, and perhaps prowl a bit, before retiring to my lair.

"I'm coming back," Daisy announced, still frowning.

I took a printed pass from the top drawer of my dressing room bureau and handed it to her. "Be my guest," I said.

Daisy accepted the special ticket, nodded her thanks, and left, looking as befuddled as ever. I suspect it wasn't me or my magic that made her thoughtful, but her own unexpected captivation with both. She was clearly not a person given to obsessions and strange fancies.

After she'd gone I mourned her, for even when we parted briefly, I was invariably bereaved. I stood with my forehead touching the door and my hands gripping the woodwork on either side, remembering. Suffering. Loving.

*The Lady Brenna*

*Dunnett's Head, Cornwall, 1348*

They were facing each other in the courtyard, Brenna Afton-St. Claire's father, the baron, and Valerian. The autumn sun, though fiercely bright, felt cold, and Brenna shivered.

Her father had been practicing his swordsmanship, though it was unlikely the king would ever again call upon him to serve as a soldier, given his age. For all his four and forty years, however, the baron was strong.

"The bootmaker's son," the baron said, assessing Valerian and at the same time using the hem of his tunic to polish the steel blade of his sword. It caught fire with daylight and flashed like a mirror.

Brenna held her breath, watching Valerian's face. *Jesu*, she prayed silently, *make him hold his tongue. If he doesn't my father will surely kill him, and with pleasure*.

Valerian only inclined his head, and Brenna nearly swooned with gratitude. The baron's anger was violent, burning hot as the fires of perdition, but it died quickly when it was not fueled.

Sweating profusely from his exercise, the baron held the sword up, between himself and the bootmaker's son, and then pressed the point to the pulse at the base of Valerian's throat.

Brenna gasped and started to bolt toward them, intending to intercede, but Challes, her tutor, gripped her hard by the arm.

"Stand fast," he warned in a whispered hiss, his grasp tightening when she struggled.

Valerian stood still, surely aware that the baron could kill him easily, with no penance forthcoming, looking almost insolently calm. Even from several feet away, Brenna could see that the expression in his eyes was fearless.

With a silent wail of despair Brenna realized that Valerian was courting death—he *wanted* to perish! She tried to cry out, but the only sound that came from her throat was a hoarse, senseless whisper.

The baron broke the awful silence, his words as cold and hard as the blade of the sword he held. "Why did you lay your hands to my daughter, peasant? How dare you touch a noblewoman?"

Brenna squeezed her eyes shut, terrified.

"I forgot myself," Valerian replied. There was no trace of subservience in his tone or manner, but no mockery, either. He was simply stating a fact.

Brenna put one hand over her mouth and swayed slightly in Challes's now-gentled grasp. Her eyes burned with tears as the full measure of her ardor for Valerian Lazarus came down upon her, crushing her spirit as surely as a fallen wall would have done her body. In that terrible moment she knew that she had loved Valerian as long as she had known him, which was all her life, and that they had been together before the stars were born.

"You are bold," the baron remarked, lowering the steel only to beckon to his squire, who was yet trembling from his own encounter with the nobleman. "Fetch a second sword," he told the servant.

Brenna's heart seized with the knowledge that her father meant to challenge Valerian. There could be no contest—despite the lad's youth and strength, he had no experience with weapons. The baron, on the other hand, had wielded heavy swords daily, from earliest childhood. He was a seasoned warrior.

"No!" she managed to shriek. Challes tried to hold her, but in her desperation of fear, Brenna broke

free. Her face streaked with tears, she clutched at the sleeve of the baron's tunic. "Don't do this, Father," she pleaded. She dropped to her knees then, grasping his clothing with both hands now, her knuckles white with the effort. "Don't kill Valerian," she pleaded. "Oh, please—I'll do anything—"

Her father's face was terrible, flushed with rage and chagrin, and Brenna did not dare to look at Valerian's. She knew, too late, that she should have listened to the tutor, that she had made a grave mistake in revealing the extent of her devotion.

"You would *beg* like a street whore," the baron seethed in a vicious tone, "for the life of this—dog?"

Valerian stiffened; Brenna felt it, though she still lacked the courage to look into his eyes. It was bad enough meeting her father's condemning gaze.

"I love him," she said.

The baron backhanded her then, so hard that she went sprawling backward into the dust of the courtyard. Valerian made a growling, inhuman sound and lunged at her father.

A furious bellow spilled from the baron's throat, and over it all Brenna's own sobs could be heard, as well as the frantic peace pleas of poor Challes.

The baron raised his sword and neatly sliced open Valerian's poor garment, along with the flesh beneath. The baron laughed, the sound echoing off the inner walls of the keep, like the ravings of a madman. "So you dare to go for my throat, do you?" he roared as the squire returned with the extra sword. "You are brave, as well as insolent, like so many fools." At a gesture from his master, the servant handed the second blade to Valerian. "Well, upon this day, you shall die."

"No!" Brenna screamed, clawing at the ground with spread fingers in her effort to get to her feet and fling herself upon her father. But this time Challes succeeded in forestalling her; he wrapped an arm around her middle and dragged her backward into the shadows. When she shrieked in protest, the tutor slapped her, but it was the words that followed that quieted her, rather than the blow.

"God save us all, my lady, you've already doomed your beloved with your imprudent ways! Will you see him sundered at the joints as well, like a fowl to be served at supper? In the name of all that's holy, *be still*, and perhaps some passing angel will show us mercy!"

Dirty and broken inside, Brenna sagged against her teacher, weeping softly, and he held her.

Valerian took the sword, and though he was not experienced, he was strong. The battle raged for an eternity, it seemed to Brenna. Her father prevailed for a time, then Valerian. Both men were bloodied, their clothes drenched with sweat and gritty with courtyard dirt. At last the baron swung his blade in a mighty arch, and Valerian went down with nary a cry, with a deep, crimson gash in his middle.

He did not rise.

Brenna screamed inwardly, silently.

The baron, unsteady on his feet, breathing hard and bleeding copiously from wounds in his upper arm and one shoulder, looked down upon the half-conscious lad and raised his sword for the kill. For a long time he stood there like that, prepared to run Valerian through and finish it, and for Brenna all of creation stopped, as motionless as a painting.

The baron glanced at her, and she saw the utter absence of love in his eyes, and then looked down at Valerian again. Finally the nobleman spat on the lad and flung the faithful sword aside, sending it clattering across the stone pathway that wove through the courtyard.

"He shall rot awhile in my dungeon, and then hang," the baron decreed, pointing one bloodstained, filthy index finger at Brenna. "You, Daughter of Eve, shall be witness to the fruits of your whoring, and so shall the bootmaker and his wife, and everyone else in the village who cares to witness the spectacle."

"There was no whoring, Your Grace," the tutor said quickly, stunning them all by what he risked. "The Lady Brenna was weeping, and the tradesman's son attempted to comfort her. It was no more than that."

The Baron assessed the scholar he had engaged some years before, at the behest of Brenna's late mother, whom he had loved with a slavish devotion. "Get out," he rasped. "Or you shall swing from a gibbet with this dog's get." He kicked Valerian's prone body once, eliciting the first and last moan from him, then stalked away.

Brenna ran to Valerian and placed his head in her lap, stroking his blood-streaked hair. "I won't let him part us," she whispered, cold with shock. "I'll die with you—I vow it by all I know of heaven—before I'll say farewell."

Somewhere, deeper within the keep, she heard her father shouting orders. Too soon, men came, wrenching the dazed Valerian from her arms, roughly hauling him away. Brenna did not fight them, because she was afraid of doing Valerian further injury.

Challes crouched beside her briefly, where she sat in the dust like a beggar, and spoke in a quiet but stern voice. "Go to your quarters, Lady Brenna. Wash yourself, and brush your hair, and don a clean gown. When your father summons you, and he shall, answer his questions respectfully and keep your opinions to yourself. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," she whispered. She didn't see what any of it mattered; all she cared about was saving Valerian.

Then even Challes was gone.

Brenna rose after a while and was met at the edge of the courtyard by her lady's maid, Moll, who clucked and fretted at the sight of her charge. Like a sleepwalker, Brenna let herself be led inside the keep, across the great room, up the broad stone stairs, and along the passageway to her own chamber.

There she stood still and endured while Moll stripped away her gown, along with the shift beneath it, and scrubbed her with chilly water and a rough cloth. Brenna's hair was brushed, then thick tendrils at either side were plaited, with narrow ribbons made from cloth-of-gold woven through. She was powdered and perfumed, like a bride being prepared for her husband. Then, finally, she was laced into a green frock, just a few shades darker than her eyes, and steered across the rushes to the looking glass.

Brenna did not connect herself to the beautiful image wavering upon the murky face of the mirror. She was numb, as insubstantial as a ghost, with no more depth than her reflection.

She turned to look into Moll's eyes and clutched the maid's work-worn hands in both her own. "I must go to him," she said. "Where is he?"

Moll's plain, earnest face paled. "The bootmaker's lad? I would imagine he's in the dungeon still,



mistress, where the baron had him put, but—"

Brenna's mind was beginning to work again. The servants lived in a world all their own; they knew each other's habits, had their own feuds and romances. Without their help, she could not hope to reach Valerian. "I know Father has already ordered that I am to be closed up in my chamber, after tonight. But you must bring the key and let me out, Moll, as soon as the moon is high."

Moll swayed slightly with fear. "Milady!" she rasped. "Do you know what you're asking of me? Why, if I were found out—"

"You won't be caught," Brenna interrupted, knowing the promise was a rash one even as she spoke. "Please, Moll—I must go to Valerian. Tonight!"

"It's no use, your putting yourself into such danger!" Moll rarely argued, but she did so now, with fervor. "He's to die one day soon, with the sunrise, is Noah Lazarus's son! And nothing you can do will save him!"

Brenna would not, could not, turn away from her course, though she knew as well as anyone that it was a deadly one. If these were Valerian's last days on earth, then they would be hers as well. If she must see him step into eternity, in the first flowering of his manhood, then she would follow on his heels, and cross the unseen river knowing what it was to pass the night in her beloved's arms.

She tightened her grasp on Moll's hands and looked deep into her old friend's troubled eyes. "My father will have me whipped if he catches me at this," she said softly. "If I can risk that, can you not chance letting me out of my room when the time is right?"

Moll was in anguish, but she nodded just before she turned and left the room.

Brenna's evening meal was served in her chamber, by the light of tallows, for she was well and truly banished from her father's table as well as his heart. He would not forgive her, and the knowledge grieved her sorely, but that night her status in the household was the least of her concerns.

She didn't even pretend to eat; the food on her trencher had grown cold, and she was pacing nervously back and forth at the foot of her bed, her hems whispering in the dry rushes. Moll did not return, and the hours dragged past, with Brenna still a prisoner in her chamber.

She slept in her beautiful gown, and no breakfast was brought when the morrow came. She was given water, that was all, by a servant who would not meet her gaze or answer her questions.

A week had passed, during which Brenna had eaten nothing and heard not a word spoken by another human being, when a burly manservant came and summoned her to her father's chamber. Still wearing the green gown, now much crumpled, she finished the last of a cup of water before stepping into the passageway to follow her silent escort across the stone floors to the other side of the keep.

The baron stood at an open window when she entered, gazing out at the dark sea, and he did not turn to greet her.

Brenna herself heard the song of the tides and felt the cooling mist on her face. She took courage from those things, and straightened her back, for she loved the sea.

"You sent for me," she said with simple dignity. She was light-headed with hunger and worry, but her



sense of injustice sustained her. "I am here."

Her father's broad back stiffened, and she felt a stirring of pity for him. He was bound by what and who he was, she realized, and even if somewhere inside himself he truly wanted to show mercy, he would be unable to do so. He had been born to a rigid code, he knew nothing else, and it was not in him to change.

"You have broken my heart," he said starkly, and still he did not face her. "Tell me, have you lain with that devil's spawn or simply lusted after him?"

Brenna swallowed. *Tread carefully*, warned a voice in her giddy mind, one with the timbre and substance of Challes's. "I want him," she admitted without the slightest remorse. "But, no, Father, I have never lain with Valerian or any man. You knew that before you asked me."

At last the baron turned, very slowly, and Brenna's heart quailed behind her rib cage. She was not effortlessly, foolishly bold like Valerian; she had seen her father punish servants and errant villagers, and she knew the ferocity of his rages. Now she was utterly stunned to see that his face was wet with tears.

"Perhaps," he whispered, "your body is indeed pure, just as you say. But yours is the soul of a whore. You have fused yourself to that filthy peasant as surely as if he'd taken you to his bed. And now there is nothing to be done. He must die, and you must go to your new husband in shame."

Brenna interlaced her fingers and bit her lower lip for a moment, trying to think calmly. "There *is* something that can be done," she said quietly, and at length. "Banish us, both of us, Valerian and me. We'll make our way to London, or—"

"Silence!" the baron roared. "Do you argue for him still, when you know I cannot bear any reference to the scab?"

A shrill commotion in the hall beyond the baron's heavy door stopped Brenna's impulsive reply in her throat. It was undoubtedly for the best.

"What in the name of—?" her father muttered as the great door crashed inward.

Seraphina Lazarus, Valerian's mother, filled the chasm, beautiful even in her frenzy. Her flawless skin was white as a corpse's, her violet eyes wild, her chestnut hair loose and untamed, like a witch's tresses, and her simple gown was streaked with ash.

Brenna felt ill, and would have retched if her stomach hadn't been shrunken and empty, as she watched the woman rush to the baron and kneel at his feet.

"My firstborn," Seraphina pleaded, clutching the nobleman's hand and kissing his knuckles and fingers and wrist, frantically, feverishly. "Oh, sir, I beg you, spare my boy—allow me to die in his place—take all of us, my husband, my other son—" The bootmaker's wife paused and made a pitiful, strangling sound, far down in her throat. "There is pestilence abroad in the land," she blathered. "Set Valerian free, I pray you, sir—if it is the will of Heaven that he perish for his sin, then surely the plague will take him—"

Plague. Brenna barely registered the word on a conscious level, weakened by her confinement as she was, and sharing Seraphina's agony as she did, but she felt a ripple of fear all the same.

"Damn your indecent soul, woman," the baron seethed, glaring down at Seraphina. "You utter one travesty on top of another, arguing and bargaining for the life of this young devil as if he were a lover!"

Brenna flinched at the cruelty of the words. "Father—" she began in protest, starting toward the pair, but there was no stopping fate.

The baron's rage mounted visibly; he went crimson, temples pulsing, and raised a swordsman's hard fist to strike Seraphina a savage blow. Even after he'd struck her, the bootmaker's wife scrambled through the rushes to clutch at his garb again, sobbing now, and wailing piteously.

Brenna's father tore himself free with a great curse, and he might have kicked the poor woman if his daughter hadn't stepped between them.

"Her only crime is love," Brenna reasoned with a tranquility that surprised her as much as it did the baron. "Oh, Father, turn from this—please. I'll do anything you say, anything at all, if you'll just unbend this once and show compassion."

The baron eyed her coldly, and then the woman groveling on the floor. He raised his voice to cover the sound of her anguish; she babbled something unintelligible and then fell to whimpering. "Valerian dies," he barked.

Seraphina gave a great, bubbling shriek and fell unconscious onto her side, and a spew of bright red blood burst from her mouth.

Brenna tried to go to the woman's aid, but the baron took a bruising grip on his daughter's arm and flung her out the door. He was shouting for the servants when Brenna started for her chamber, paused, and then slipped into the shadows and made her way to a rear passageway.

The dungeon was unguarded—the baron knew Valerian was injured and probably considered him unworthy of a bailiff's time. Carrying a tallow she'd stolen from the kitchen, along with some cheese, a basin, and a piece of soft cloth, Brenna moved from cell to cell until she reached the last and most cramped of them all. A rat scuttled out of the gloom before she could work the lock. It stopped at her feet to rise onto its haunches and whirl about in a macabre little dance, before falling dead on its side.

A chill trickled down Brenna's spine, and she crossed herself hastily and offered a prayer to the Virgin. Then she stepped over the small, furry corpse and into the cell where Valerian lay.

He was a shadow, curled in the fetid straw. The dank walls dripped with water, and the faint, panicky twitter of other rats reached Brenna's ears.

"Valerian," she whispered urgently.

He stirred. "Milady?" Valerian moaned the word, then sat up, blinking, one arm clutching his wounded middle. "Jesus, Joseph, and Mary," he marveled on a long breath. "Leave me—now—before they find you here!"

Brenna set down the cloth and tallow on a crude bench and knelt beside him in the straw, giving him water from a cup and the morsel of cheese. "This is where I intend to pass the night," she answered. "Here, with you."

He managed to eat just a little, and Brenna went back for the basin. Then, kneeling beside Valerian in the fowl straw again, she began to bathe the blood and dirt from his flesh. Even in the dim glow of that one candle, she saw the tears shimmering in his eyes.

"Oh, God, Brenna," he whispered. "How did we get ourselves to this place?"

"Shhh," she said and went on washing him. Her own hunger and weakness floated somewhere above her, suspended.

Presently the loving task had been done as well as it could be, given the circumstances. The tallow guttered out, and Brenna laid herself beside Valerian on the cell floor, and gathered him close with one arm. With the other hand she undid the laces at her bosom and, baring her breasts, offered him the only intimate comfort she knew about.

He was half dead of his wounds, but the blood in his veins was youthful, like the sap in a fierce young tree, and he drank hungrily from her breasts, and kissed her, and spoke pretty, disjointed words while he nibbled at her earlobe. Finally he raised her skirts and took her, with a hard, greedy thrust.

Brenna felt searing pain, followed swiftly by a treacherous pleasure, and she gave herself up to her forbidden lover with all the passion pent up in her innocent soul.

3

*Daisy*

*Las Vegas, 1995*

The victim was a showgirl, no more than twenty years old, and she lay sprawled on the living room floor of her cramped apartment, wearing nothing but a short sea-green robe. Her shoulder-length blond hair spilled over the cheap carpeting and partially covered her face.

She was impossibly pale, even for a corpse. Daisy thought of Snow White waiting for her prince, and shuddered. There was no blood anywhere.

Daisy had been promoted to detective six months before, after the requisite four years on the street, and she had seen her share of murders. No matter how many she investigated, the bile still rushed into the back of her throat, and sometimes she had to run to the nearest bush or bathroom to throw up. On other occasions, especially when the victim was a child, she wept.

This time she felt an ugly sort of shock take hold, deep inside her. Even before her partner, O'Halloran, started filling her in on the details, she knew they were dealing with some kind of monster.

"Look at this," O'Halloran said, crouching beside the body, which had already been outlined and photographed. In fact, the coroner's people were hovering, ready to do their grisly duties. He brushed back a tendril of the dead woman's glossy blond hair with remarkably gentle fingers to reveal a pair of neat puncture wounds, set about two inches apart, in the victim's neck. "If I didn't know better, Chandler, I'd say this was the work of one of them vampires. You know, like in the movies."

Daisy felt a chill trip down her spine. "I know what vampires are," she snapped.

O'Halloran, a wiry, graying man of medium height, with twenty-eight years on the force to his credit, sighed loudly and stretched to his feet. His eyes were either pale blue or pale green, depending on the

weather and how things were going at home. This was a blue day. "What's the matter, Chandler—you suffering from PMS or something? Well, take a pill. I got enough problems without you flashing an attitude."

Daisy didn't apologize, though she knew O'Halloran was right. She *was* off track—her meeting with the magician had occupied her every waking thought since she'd left his dressing room the night before. When she had managed to sleep, she'd been plagued by strange, vivid dreams of a medieval courtyard and two men fighting with swords...

"Chandler," O'Halloran prompted, poking her with an elbow.

Daisy jumped and shook her head once in an effort to clear her head. "Yeah, I'm with you. Sorry. What's her name?"

"Jillie Fairfield," O'Halloran answered, consulting his notes. "She was nineteen and worked with that hotshot magician over at the Venetian. What's his name—?" He began flipping pages.

"Valerian," Daisy said, feeling jolted.

"Yeah," O'Halloran agreed, tapping his pocket-sized notepad with the end of his stubby pencil. "That's him. You ever catch his show?"

"Last night," Daisy managed.

"I've heard it's really something. According to the papers, there are magicians flying in from all over the world just to see the act and try to figure out how he pulls it off. And he won't let anybody take his picture, either."

"He's good, all right," Daisy said, glancing at the body again. She remembered the dancers coming out of the coach while it was suspended in midair, then sitting underneath, smiling and posing. She wondered if Jillie had been the one who'd brought out the umbrella and gotten a chuckle from the audience. Even to Daisy's trained eye, the performers had looked very much alike.

The older cop led the way toward the gaping front door of the apartment, and Daisy went along gratefully. She'd never gotten used to the smell of death, or the clammy feeling it gave her.

"You look a little peaked," O'Halloran remarked. "You have a bad night?"

She drew in a deep draft of desert air as they descended the wooden stairs outside. The Las Vegas sun was bright, and for Daisy it dispelled some of the chill that had settled into her spirit. "Me? I never have a bad night, O'Halloran," she said with a manufactured smile. "And I never get PMS, either. What's your take on this? What happened to the Fairfield woman?"

O'Halloran shrugged. "I don't know. The coroner will fill us in, though." He paused beside his car, a battered sixty-seven Mustang on its fourth engine, and scratched the back of his head. "This one's different, I can tell you that much. There ought to be blood, and we didn't find a drop. No blow to the head, no visible wounds except for those punctures on her throat. You'd better haul it over to the Venetian and see if you can track down that magician character. See what he can tell you."

Daisy had hoped to encounter Valerian again, though certainly not under those circumstances. "I'm off to see the wizard," she said, heading for her own car, a sporty blue convertible. "Meet you back at the

office later."

When Daisy reached the Venetian, Las Vegas's newest and most elaborate hotel-casino, she left her car in the outer lot and stood looking at the place for a few moments, marveling. It was a spectacle in and of itself, bigger and gaudier than the Mirage or Excalibur or even Caesar's, an elegant palace with pillars and fountains. There was a maze of canals in front, traversed by sleek gondolas with costumed attendants.

With a shake of her head Daisy went to the quay and allowed herself to be helped into one of the boats, along with several tourists. Sunlight flashed on the water, dazzling her, and she slipped on her sunglasses, turning her thoughts from the conspicuous consumption that surrounded her to the magician.

Her first reaction, when she'd learned of Valerian's connection with the dead woman, had been to wonder if he'd had something to do with Jillie Fairfield's death. In cases like this one, the murderer often turned out to be someone the victim had known fairly well.

The gondola coursed along the narrow channels, making its way toward the hotel entrance, and Daisy propped her elbow on her blue-jeaned knee and rested her chin in her palm. If Valerian hadn't killed Jillie, and there was no reason to believe he had, he probably wouldn't have heard about her death yet.

Daisy hated being the one to break news like that. She and O'Halloran usually alternated, and when they couldn't remember whose turn it was, they flipped a coin.

Daisy murmured a curse as the gondola struck the dock in front of the hotel. It was O'Halloran's turn, damn it. She'd told a woman, just two days before, that her fifteen-year-old son had been shot in a gang fight.

Inside the hotel was a massive casino, filled with noisy slot machines, blackjack tables, and other accoutrements of gambling. The light was dim, the temperature pleasantly cool. Cigarette smoke made simple breathing a game of chance.

Daisy hurried through, toward the nearest bank of elevators. She hated casinos; they reminded her of when she was a kid. Her divorced mother, Jeanine, had been a cocktail waitress, and every once in a while she'd gotten the gambling bug. When that happened, Jeanine either left Daisy and her younger sister, Nadine, to fend for themselves, often for days at a time, or dragged them along with her. In some ways, that was worse, because Jeanine would either park them on the curb with a hamburger and a bag of french fries to share, or point out the pinball room and order them to stay there until she came back. Only later did she allow the girls to stay with their grandmother for a short time before wrenching them away again.

Snap out of it, Daisy scolded herself as she stepped into a sumptuously appointed elevator and pressed the button for the third floor. The business offices were there, along with a number of conference rooms and hospitality suites.

The receptionist looked Daisy over coolly when she asked where to find the magician. The main entrance to the theater would be locked at that hour, and there were probably big guys posted outside the stage doors.

"You a fan?" the girl asked. Her name tag read "Tiffany."

Daisy wondered how Tiffany could see, since her false eyelashes were the size of whisk brooms. In answer to the girl's question, she pulled her badge out of her handbag and showed it with the appropriate

flourish. "Where do I find him?"

Tiffany tapped acrylic nails on the surface of the desk while she thought. From the looks of her, that was no small accomplishment, but a feat involving many wires and gears. "How should I know?"

Daisy braced her hands against the desk's edge and leaned in close. "Look it up," she said evenly.

The receptionist flushed, and her plump lips, no doubt pumped full of collagen, quivered. She left her desk, disappearing into a nearby office, and returned a few moments later, looking resolute.

"We're not supposed to tell," she announced.

"Do I have to get a warrant?" Daisy muttered.

Tiffany vanished again, and when she came back, she brought a man in a three-piece suit. He smiled and offered a manicured hand.

"My name is Jerry Grover," he said. "I'm the assistant manager. And you're Officer—"

"Daisy Chandler," Daisy said. "Look, I don't see why this has to be a big deal, Mr. Grover. I want to talk to your headliner—" She pretended that the name had slipped her mind for a moment. "Valerian. It's police business, and it's important."

Grover smiled sleekly. He reminded Daisy a little of a lithe, vicious fish, gliding smoothly through his environment, hunting weaker prey. "If you'll just step into my office, Ms. Chandler..."

Daisy shrugged and followed him. Jillie Fairfield had had a connection with the hotel, although she'd been employed by the magician. She might as well clue management in before somebody saw it on the news.

Tiffany gave her another haughty once-over as she passed. A look was nothing to Daisy—the names gang members, streetwalkers, and other misguided souls had called her had hardened her sensibilities a little.

"We found a body this morning," Daisy said without preamble when she and Grover were inside his office. Apparently the casino brass believed in looking after middle management—the desktop was black marble, and the view from the wall of windows at the opposite end of the room was panoramic. The carpet swallowed up the lower half of Daisy's purple Keds. "The victim was identified as Ms. Jillie Fairfield. She was one of the dancers in the magic show."

To his credit, Grover paled and sagged bonelessly into the leather chair behind his desk. He recovered quickly, though, and gestured for Daisy to take a seat. "Damn," he said. "What happened?"

Daisy settled herself in the cushy leather chair she'd just pulled up. "We're not sure," she admitted readily, but she had no intention of discussing the details. "Ms. Fairfield was a hotel employee before signing on with Valerian, wasn't she?"

A thin sheen of perspiration appeared on Grover's upper lip. "I wouldn't know that, Ms. Chandler, without checking further. We employ a great many people, and as you probably realize, the Venetian hasn't been open all that long. In either case, the publicity won't be good for the Venetian, will it? Any *hint* of crime or scandal can be devastating financially..."

Daisy felt the old impatience surface inside her. A woman was dead, damn it. Jillie Fairfield was never going to dance or laugh or make love again; somebody had put her out like a candle. And all Grover was worried about was the publicity.

"You didn't meet Ms. Fairfield personally, then? Ever?" she asked in a taut voice.

"No," Grover answered quickly, flushing. "And I don't know the magician, either. He's an eccentric—in fact, he gives new meaning to the word *weird*."

Daisy leaned forward, intrigued. "In what way?"

Grover spread his hands, clearly flustered. "There are rumors, that's all. It's probably just a lot of hype, to bring people in to see his shows..."

"*What rumors?*" Daisy pressed. There it was again, that odd quivering in the pit of her stomach; her own instincts were telling her, as they had the night before, after the show, that there was something very strange about Valerian. Something far beyond the ordinary mystique of a magician.

"Well, he won't come out in the daylight, for one thing. And for another, he refuses to be photographed—ask our publicity people if you don't believe me."

Daisy thought of the program she'd brought. The text was accompanied by drawings and paintings, but there had been no photographs.

"I believe you," she said, wondering if she should go and get Grover a glass of water or a paper bag to breathe into. He looked really upset.

Grover wrenched a wad of tissues from a box in the top drawer of his fancy desk and daubed at his face with them. "Murder," he muttered to himself. "Oh, Christ—"

Daisy took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Is there anything else?"

"Yes," Grover burst out, after a moment of consideration. "Even the people closest to Valerian have no idea how he performs his tricks. He has never revealed even the smallest detail."

Daisy was irritated and not a little disappointed. "Of course he doesn't. He's a magician—everyone knows how carefully they guard their secrets." She stood. "If you'll just give me Valerian's home address," she said, nodding toward Grover's computer, "I'll be on my way."

"We don't have one," Grover said.

"What about a Social Security number?" Daisy pressed.

Grover spread his hands again. "Too personal. I don't have to give that out unless you can show me a warrant."

Daisy bit back a nasty remark. Grover was right. "At least get one of your security people to let me into the backstage area, then," she said. Maybe Valerian was in his dressing room meditating or practicing his levitation or something like that. Or perhaps he was onstage, rehearsing.

"All right," Grover agreed at length and with the utmost reluctance. "Come on. I'll let you in myself."



*Valerian*

*Dunnett's Head, 1348*

Today, I thought when I felt a shred of cold sunlight touch my face, I am going to die. I was in such pain, both physical and emotional, that I could not help thinking death would be a mercy.

Then Brenna stirred beside me, in the stale straw, and I remembered all that had transpired the night before, with rising horror as well as desperate love. She had come to me, washed my wounds, and finally lain with me.

We had both been virgins, and for me at least, the experience had been one of almost unbearable bliss. Before Brenna, I had known only the usual furtive satisfactions a lad discovers on his own. Now, having entered her sweet body, moved upon her supple softness in that ancient rhythm, and cried out as she rendered my seed from me, I was a man. And I was more aware than ever that life is precious, poignantly so.

"Valerian?" She raised herself, rumped and mussed, her lovely hair filled with straw. That same skimpy light that had awakened me, infiltrating that dark hole through some chink in the dungeon wall, played over her face. "I love you. And if you die today, you must wait for me on the other side. I'll soon follow."

I felt tears fill my eyes. The pain of my wounds was nothing to that of loving her, of knowing that an irrevocable parting lay ahead. I cupped her face in my hand, and brushed the pad of my thumb over the lips I had kissed so thoroughly, so hungrily, during the night.

"No, Lady Brenna," I said hoarsely. "You must live."

She shook her head wildly, but I stilled the motion with my hand.

"Listen to me," I growled as we heard an outer door opening, far off in the distance. We both knew that the day had arrived, they were coming for me, and I would soon mount the scaffold. "You must hide, over there in the shadows, until they've taken me out. Don't move until you're certain they've all gone. Return to your chambers when you think it safe, make yourself pretty, and pretend you've never heard of the bootmaker's son—"

She was sobbing by then, incapable, I think, of responding.

"I will find a way to be with you," I vowed, and I meant it with all my youthful soul. "I will curl up in a corner of your heart, and all you'll have to do to find me is turn your thoughts inward. Please, Brenna. Give me this one gift—a living heart to hide in."

Brenna was silent, and the voices grew nearer. Finally she nodded and hid herself in a pile of straw, off in a corner of the cell.

Two of the baron's men arrived to collect me only a moment later. They were murmuring to each other in fearful tones, and I could not make out what they were saying.

Finally they reached the cell door.

"Come along, then, bootmaker's son," said Tom, the largest of the two. He'd often come to my father's

shop; they'd been friends, in a manner of speaking, and Tom, like the rest of the men in the village, had enjoyed watching my mother as she went about her daily tasks.

"The baron says you're to be set free. Or at least that's what his manservant told us he said."

Brenna moved, rustling the straw slightly, but I made a surreptitious gesturing, bidding her to be silent. There would be no freedom, and no mercy, for either of us if her father learned what we had done, lying together in the straw.

I stood, painfully, for though my wounds were superficial, they burned like fire. I felt as if I'd been trampled by war horses and then set ablaze, but beneath it all was a thrumming sense of satiation. Brenna had done that with her lovemaking.

"If this is a jest," I said, "it is a cruel one."

Tom opened the cell door, never noticing, it would seem, that the lock wasn't engaged. "It's no jest," he replied. "The baron fell ill two hours ago. Black as a Moor and spewing blood, he is. And there are others, too."

I shivered, despite the wild relief I felt. "What others?"

"Your mother for one," Tom said. "You'd best go home and look after your family. Both Noah and Seraphina are both off their heads with fever, according to that brother of yours."

Alarm mingled with the ineffably sweet knowledge that I was going to live. I would find a way to be with Brenna forever—after the events of the night before, we were certainly bonded, in God's eyes as well as our own hearts—and we would both put Dunnett's Head behind us.

In the meantime, though, I had to go to my parents.

I made my way back to the shop as rapidly as I could, while the sunrise spilled a golden glow to light my way. The village was unnaturally quiet, even for such an early hour, and rife with a hideously putrid stench. There were no dogs barking in the streets, no housewives throwing pots of slop from windows and doorways, no fishermen going down to the sea.

It was eerie.

When I reached the shop, I entered by the back way, peering first into the little room Krispin and I had always shared. I had never expected to see it again, and, humble as it was, my heart lifted at the sight of my pallet, my blankets, my spare tunic and leggings.

There was no sign of my brother, so I went on to my parents' chamber. It was a squalid cell, barely larger than the one Krispin and I shared, and when I stepped over the threshold I was struck by a smell so much viler than the one pervading the village that it sent me stumbling backward a few steps.

"Mother?" I said, speaking to the shadows.

I heard a moan from within, and knew it for my father's cry, not my mother's. I squared my shoulders and forced myself to take a step inside. "Father?"

"No—" he said hoarsely. "Don't—come any closer. We—it's plague. Save yourself. Save—Krispin."

Yet again I wept. And for once in my life I obeyed Noah Lazarus, the bootmaker. "What of my mother?"

"Dead," my father answered. "For your own sake, and hers, you must not look upon her. Please. Flee this—place—"

I turned, unable to bear the stink any longer. My father could not be saved; I knew that. I would find Krispin, if I could, and Brenna, I decided, groping numbly through a welter of disjointed thoughts. We would take horses from the baron's stables and ride away to a new place—London, perhaps.

I stumbled back into the street and encountered Mistress Jane, the cooper's wife. Her face was contorted with grief. "God have mercy on us!" she cried, seeing me and, at the same time, *not* seeing me. "My Will, and my babies—all dead—"

I wanted to offer the poor woman some comfort, but there was nothing I could say that would alter the grim realities in any way. I took her shoulders gently in my hands. "Have you seen my brother?" I asked.

She looked at me without recognition. "All dead," she said again. "Little Mary, and Sam, and my Will, too. All dead, with their skin all black—"

I embraced her for a moment, on impulse, and went on.

All through the village, it was the same. Death raged in every hut and croft, and among the living there was naught but chaos. I didn't find Krispin, though I searched everywhere, and once I stopped, enthralled, to watch two rats rise onto their hind legs in the path and twirl, in a horrible and graceless pirouette, before toppling over in death. Blood spilled, thick, from their muzzles.

Finally I returned to the keep—the shock of all I'd seen waking instilled a new prudence in me—and I entered through a servant's gate in a rear wall. After a considerable exploration of the place, I found Brenna in her father's room, kneeling beside his bed and holding his hand.

He was blackened, like a statue burned in a fire, his flesh grotesquely swollen, as if his skin would split like a sausage. He stared sightlessly at the beams high overhead. He, like so many others, was dead, and the stench was overwhelming, causing my empty stomach to pitch and my eyes to water.

I hesitated a few moments, then took hold of Brenna's shoulders and raised her gently to her feet. "He's gone," I whispered, and she turned and burrowed into my embrace, burying her face in my tunic and weeping.

I held her until the storm had passed, and spoke to her only when her sobs had turned to soft, heartrending sniffles. "We must take ourselves from this place," I told her. "By some miracle, we've been spared, but if we linger, the plague will surely find us."

She nodded against my chest.

"We'll need horses and food and coin."

Brenna drew back and looked up into my no-doubt bruised and dirty face. "Let's go, Valerian. Now. Let's go and never look back."

I kissed her then. It was just a light, moist touch of our two mouths, but how I treasure the memory of that innocent contact. I hadn't learned, even then, how infinitely precious, and how profound, the simplest expression of affection can be.

"I'll fetch some food from the larder," Brenna said when we drew apart. "And my father won't be needing his purse." She glanced woefully back at the body lying on the bed. A light flickered in her weary eyes; perhaps it was hope for our future. "Hurry, Valerian. I'll wait for you at the servants' gate."

I nodded and hurried out.

At noon Brenna and I sat on a knoll east of the village, our horses nibbling at the sweet grass, saying our own silent goodbyes to the only home we'd ever known. We watched, dry-eyed, beyond horror, while the lucky ones carried corpses into the square and hurled them into a great, roaring fire. Later, I supposed, thinking of my mother and father, already beginning to accept the fact that my brother's body was surely there among those others as well, the charred skeletons would be properly buried. Prayers would be said, and absolutions granted, and heaven would enfold them all.

Please God.

"What of Challes?" I asked, hours later, as Brenna and I rode slowly along the inland road, passing no one. It was the first time either of us had spoken since we'd watched the bodies burn. "Did you see him?"

Brenna, who wore a cloak over a plain kirtle, shook her head. "No. He is probably dead, like Father. I wonder if Moll fell sick."

I knew Moll was her lady's maid, and that she had loved the woman devoutly. Moll, I suspected, had overlooked much mischief in her time at the keep. "It won't serve us to look back," I said quietly, reaching across to squeeze her hand where it grasped her mare's reins. "We have each other."

She looked at me with wide eyes, eyes void of innocence and girlhood fancy, and haunted by inconceivable horror. "Yes."

I reached out, grasped the mare's bridle—I was riding one of her father's geldings—and stopped both horses there in the middle of the road. "I love you, Lady Brenna," I said. It was all I had to give her—a few words, a fragile assurance. We both knew how easily fate could part us—the roads were dangerous in those days, and there was no guarantee that one or both of us would not fall ill with the pestilence at any moment.

Tears pooled along Brenna's lower lashes. "And I love you," she said. "It's enough."

I nodded, and we rode on, but there were clouds gathering on the horizon, and I had a feeling of foreboding. I tried to shake it off, telling myself the events of the day just past were reason aplenty for my gloom.

I was only partially right.

That night Brenna and I slept in an abandoned crofter's cottage, with straw for a bed. We made love, as much to give each other solace and consolation as to appease any physical need, and this second time my thrusts were pleasurable for Brenna. She strained beneath me, offering herself, crying out in her delight, and finally arched like a supple bow, quivering, her eyes sightless, her fingers clawing at my bare back.

I groaned, transported, and spilled myself into her. Soon afterward we tumbled headlong into sleep. It was raining when we awakened, and Brenna seemed uneasy, distracted.

"I want to be near the sea," she said.

I didn't question her, for I knew the waves of a sheltered cove near the keep had been her playmates—she loved the water, and took solace from it. So we ate our poor breakfasts of stale bread, and washed ourselves, running naked in the rain like pagans, and finally turned back, through the gray drizzle, in the direction from which we'd come.

I have tortured myself for centuries with a single question. Would things have been different if we'd pressed on toward London Town instead?

4

We rode hard all that day, through the gray drizzle and the chill, until we reached the sea. Brenna gave a soft gasp when first she glimpsed that steely, white-ruffled expanse, and drew up on her mare's reins, plainly struck by the harsh beauty of the scene.

The shore was narrow and littered with great stones, and the surf battered the land with such ferocity that huge and glittering scallops of spray arched high against the charcoal sky. The shiver that slipped down my spine like the tip of a dead man's finger had little to do with the cold; no, it was born of the terrible, nameless dread stirring in the darkest reaches of my being. Had I possessed the powers that were conferred upon me later,

I would have taken Brenna far from that place, be she willing or unwilling, but I could do nothing then.

She spurred her mare onto a steep, treacherous path that led down to the water, and though I lunged for the reins, I was too late. There was nothing to do but follow—and shout her name.

If Brenna heard my calls over the roar of the surf, she paid no heed. Instead she quickened the mare's pace, driving the frightened beast skillfully between boulders and churning pools toward the jagged shore. My own mount balked at the top of the path and would go no farther.

I sprang from its back and ran after Brenna, stumbling and falling several times before I gained the beach.

I screamed again; I can still feel that cry, swelling sore in my throat, lodging there like the pit of some large and bitter fruit. Brenna looked back at me over one shoulder, and I saw intense joy in her face as she rode, splashing, into the thundering waves. She threw back her head and laughed, and though I could not hear the sound, I saw it, and felt its echo in the very center of my soul.

I dashed toward Brenna, meaning to grasp the mare's bridle and haul the pair of them back to safety, but my sudden motion only frightened the horse, causing it to rear and toss its head in even greater panic. Brenna fought to calm the animal, but there was no fear in milady's magnificent face, only the purest concentration. I don't believe she regretted her recklessness; she surely hadn't guessed what was about to happen. To my torment, for that moment and all of eternity, I foresaw the event with sudden and brutal clarity.

I stood sodden in the cold tide, buffeted by it, blinded eyes stinging from the salt, and I was full of horror. My very breath was battered from me, and when I finally caught sight of Brenna again, she was far beyond my reach. The horse reeled and pitched, and Brenna went hurtling from the beast's back, her slight figure disappearing beneath the relentless waves.

I scrambled toward her, only to be swept back toward the shore by the sheer elemental force of the water. I struggled through the tide once more and was nearly trampled by the terror-stricken mare as it battled its way back to solid ground. I had a glimpse of Brenna's red-gold hair in the surf, and somehow, by strength of will, I reached her and gathered her into my arms.

I wept as I carried her ashore, for I knew, even before I laid her out on the sand, well away from the grasping, murderous water, that she was gone. I knelt beside her, the stony ground biting into the flesh of my knees, and emitted a great, wailing sob that shaped itself into her name. Then I fell forward, my forehead resting against her bosom, and gave full rein to my grief. My cries were wrenching and hoarse and seemingly without end.

Night came; I did not venture far from Brenna's side, even to search for the horses, which had both bolted long before. Instead I gathered what twigs and bits of driftwood I could find and managed to make a small fire—I still believed, in my bewilderment and sorrow, that I might offer my beloved some degree of comfort and protection.

I felt the too-rapid beat of my heart and the raw rasp of my breathing, but I cared nothing for those things. My tunic and breeches clung to my flesh, soaked and icy, and that did not matter, either. Physically I was numb.

I kept my vigil throughout the frigid night, holding her small, still hand in mine, and with the dawn came the devastating realization that this was no nightmare, but the cruelest reality. My Brenna was well and truly dead, and needed burying.

I lifted her into my arms once again and started off toward the place where I had glimpsed smoke rising between the gentle green hills the day before. I did not think beyond the hope that I would find a village, with a churchyard to receive Brenna's fragile remains and a priest to say the holy words that might secure her place in heaven.

I don't know how long I staggered over that barren, windswept terrain, holding my perished angel close against my breast, and I have no memory of reaching the small cluster of huts where I came groping and flailing to my senses some days later.

By that time, according to the aged and crowlike woman who had, by her account, dragged me back from the threshold of death, Brenna had already been laid to rest. Lucky she'd been, too, my nurse proclaimed, not to die of the plague like those other poor souls. *They'd* been flung onto a blazing pyre as soon as they'd breathed their last.

As I lay on my pallet, drenched in the sweat of a recently broken fever and smelling of all manner of base things, I wished with all my being that I, too, might be taken by the pestilence. I realized even then, however, that I was condemned to live, and to my great and secret shame, I also knew I hadn't the courage to put an end to my own misery. I believed too little of my father's grim theology to follow its dictates, and too much to risk the fires and pitchforks of hell.

I turned my face to the dank, daub-and-wattle wall and mourned in silence.

After a while a holy man came to see about me. I would not look at him.

"I am Brother Timothy," he said.

I did not reply.

"You must be grateful and repentant," he persisted. "God has chosen, in His infinite mercy, to spare your life."

I spat, though my mouth was dry.

The man of God sighed and left me to my private damnation.

I might have lain in that wretched hovel forever, despising everything that was holy, waiting to perish of despair, if the crone hadn't finally grown impatient one foggy day and put a foot hard to my ribs.

"Get up, you," she commanded, having apparently passed the outermost bounds of Christian charity. "I can't abide the smell of you, and I'm that weary of spooning gruel and goat's milk into your mouth as if you was a sickly babe. Go on, take yourself out of here."

I groped to my feet with her none-too-gentle help and swayed dangerously before finally catching my balance. I staggered out of the hut with its thatched roof and hard dirt floor into the cold glare of sunlight. For a moment or two I was blinded by the dazzle and raised one arm to shield my eyes.

Mortals are damnably resilient, even when they don't choose to be. Within a moment or so I could see clearly, and my weakened frame supported itself with a shaky determination that came from some unexplored part of my mind. I looked about and saw other huts—pigs and dogs and chickens wandering in their midst—and a few gaunt humans in poor clothes. Not far from the edge of the village was a great firepit, encircled with stones, black and acrid at its center. I was drawn to the place by a horrible fascination that shamed even as it compelled me to take the next step toward it, and the next.

Blackened bones and skulls lay scattered, haphazard, through the ashes, and I recognized a single charred arm, muscles clearly defined, sooty fingers curled. I wretched convulsively and reeled away from that grim sight and the other helter-skelter leavings of death. I could be grateful, at least, that Brenna's mortal remains had not been cast into the pit. That none of those hideous pieces and parts were hers.

I nearly collided with the small, rotund monk who stood behind me.

"What is your name, lad?" he asked, and I was struck, even in my welter of confusion and agony, by the serenity in his expression. I knew this was Brother Timothy, the holy man who had visited me in the witch's hut.

He wore robes of undyed wool, a narrow, frayed rope girding his middle, and his tonsured head was fringed with brown hair. The flesh of his face was tight, but the eyes were old, and I could not begin to guess his age; he might have been seventeen or seventy.

"Valerian," I answered hoarsely. I did not speak of my dead father, nor did I offer the name of my village. I had no home now, after all, and no kinsmen. For me, there was only one question, one concern, in all creation.



"Where did they bury milady?"

Brother Timothy gestured toward a copse of naked birches on top of a small knoll nearby. The branches of those trees looked like white cracks in the smooth, chilly blue surface of the sky. "There," he said. "On the hill."

I moved past him, awkward in my weakness, near collapse, but desperate to look upon Brenna's grave.

"We did not know her name," the monk hastened to inform me. "But there is a cross to mark her resting place. Was she your sister. Your wife, perhaps?"

At his words, the loss of Brenna cut through me anew, fresh and sharp, seeming to sever not just muscle and marrow, but other, less tangible parts of me as well. I locked my knees to keep them from buckling and forced myself to keep moving. "I have no sister," I said. "And the word *wife* is too feeble to contain all that Brenna was to me. If I could have died in her place, I would have done it."

"Such decisions are not ours to make," Brother Timothy replied. "Perhaps that is a blessing in itself. Nor is such a desire unselfish, for its root is merely the cowardly wish to escape your own pain."

A surge of contempt swelled within me and, somewhere deeper, where I was wont to look, shame. "Pray, do not speak to me of blessings," I said without meeting his eyes. "There is no mercy in your God, and I seek no favors of Him."

How glibly I uttered sacrilege in those days of innocence and sorrow, and how very little I knew of damnation and devils, gods and angels! I was yet a lad, after all, with a child's blithe certainty of a multitude of things.

Brother Timothy laid a hand on my shoulder, and though he was smaller in stature, his grasp was forceful enough to stop my progress. "Your grief makes you bitter and angry," he said with a tenderness that made me yearn to sink, weeping, to my knees. "Those feelings will pass one day. The wounds will heal. In the meantime, though, you must turn your heart toward heaven, where comfort and absolution lie."

I shrugged free of his grasp and went on, propelled by stubbornness, not strength. I ached with frailty and fatigue. "No more talk of heaven," I growled, blinking back the stinging moisture in my eyes. "No more."

I knew which plot was Brenna's, even before Brother Timothy pointed it out.

My beloved rested beneath a gentle mound of newly turned earth, with a crude wooden cross to mark her passing. It was a peaceful place, though the sea churned in the near distance, like some tempestuous gift seeking to ungive itself. Light would dance among the shimmering leaves of the birch trees, come summer, and in other seasons the wind and the rain and the sea would sing their varied choruses.

I pressed my palms into the raw dirt and dug my fingers in deep, as if to find her, drag her upward, resurrect her somehow. "Brenna," I whispered. What I wouldn't have given, facing the finality of her death yet again in the moments that followed, to be as she was, unaware, empty of emotion, immune to suffering. Hidden from the gazes of man and God.

I trembled, light-headed from my exertions, and might have pitched forward to lie sprawled across the grave if Brother Timothy hadn't grasped my shoulders and raised me to my feet.

"Come away," he said quietly. "You can do no good here."

I had risen from my sickbed not even an hour before, and I had no power to resist. I allowed that tenacious and good man to support me as we moved away from the village, descending the opposite side of the hill.

Below lay an ancient structure, surely a monastery, with low stone walls and a single crumbling tower. From that height I saw garden plots, a well, a narrow courtyard without fountain or bench. I stumbled, and Brother Timothy tightened his grasp, and once again kept me from falling.

The interlude that followed lies strewn through my memory like dried bones, disjointed and strange. I was taken to a cell, furnished only with a cot and a crucifix, and able hands stripped away my ruined garments. I was bathed in warm water, garbed in a clean, if coarsely woven, robe, given stout wine and broth by spoonfuls.

I slept, wandering in the dark mists of my dreams, searching tirelessly and in vain for Brenna.

When at last I returned to full awareness, body and mind rallying to a semblance of their former vitality, I discovered myself to be a dry, hollow husk of a man. My grief had vanished, but so had my conscience, my better graces, and, indeed, my soul.

I was empty.

"Stay with us, your brothers," Timothy pleaded when, after days of gradual, painstaking recovery, I was well enough to rise from my cot and move about the monastery and the grounds. We were in the courtyard that afternoon and the weather was bright and crisply cold. "Surely it was a sign, our finding you—"

"I am grateful for all you've done," I said, though in fact I felt nothing—not gratitude, not hatred, not grief or joy. What followed, however, was purest truth. "I am not suited to this life, Timothy. I was born a sinner and I shall remain one for all time."

Would that I could have known how prophetic those rashly spoken words really were. But then, I do not believe anything short of Brenna's return from the dead would have changed my course.

Timothy looked pained; tears filled his kindly eyes, and he spread his hands in a gesture of pleading. "Valerian—"

I was unmoved by the monk's sorrow and held up a hand to silence him. In the next moment I looked ruefully down at my borrowed robe. "Have you no breeches in this dreary place? No tunics or belts or boots?"

He drew an audible breath. "We keep a store of such garments, yes," he admitted slowly. "Each of us arrived here as an ordinary man, after all. Our possessions are part of our sacrifice, and as a rule they are either sold for the benefit of the order or given to the poor."

"No one," I said, laying my hands on my chest and looking at Timothy with gentle impudence, "is poorer than I am."

Timothy nodded sadly and left my cell, returning minutes later with a stack of colorless, somewhat ragged garments, neatly laundered and folded. He said nothing as he held them out to me, and I confess

that I snatched them from his hands.

I was eager to be gone from that place and those people.

I left the following day, wearing the ill-fitting tatters Timothy had brought to my cell. I also had two coins, of very modest value, that he had provided.

Thus began seventeen years of searching, not for Brenna now, but for that vanished part of myself that had enabled me to love, to laugh, to weep, to mourn.

All hope of that soon perished, and I sought only to meet a merciful death. I was, like the Prodigal, a libertine, a liar, a heretic, and a thief. I wandered, and I committed every sin I could think of without compunction, and a few that were suggested to me. I consumed what wine I could beg or steal, and awakened in pigsties and gaols and the beds of strangers. I cared for nothing and for no one, least of all myself.

Then one momentous gloomy night, when I was five and thirty, and the most devout of derelicts, my old tutor, Challes, quite literally stumbled across me where I lay sprawled, stuporous with drink, upon the filthy floor of a stable.

It was soon after that the dark miracle occurred, and I was forever changed.

*Daisy*

*Las Vegas, 1995*

Daisy was not the whimsical type, but it seemed to her that a faint echo of magic lingered in the silence of that empty auditorium. When Jerry Grover flipped on some of the interior lights, the multicolored tinsel curtain threw off a blinding dazzle, and Daisy winced.

Grover smiled, obviously pleased by her discomfort. "You won't find Valerian here," he said with a combination of indulgence and condescension in his tone. "As I told you, he never appears during the daylight hours." He paused to smirk, then added, "Perhaps he's a vampire."

Daisy thought of Jillie Fairfield and her bloodless body and felt a quiver of fear. She quickly squelched it. "No doubt," she answered dryly, widening her eyes, "he's tucked up in a coffin somewhere, fast asleep."

Grover sighed. "Where Valerian is concerned," he said, "nothing would surprise me." He paused to consult his watch, a sporty Rolex, and Daisy didn't miss the point of the gesture.

She folded her arms. "I won't keep you—I can find the dressing rooms on my own," she told him. "In the meantime, I suggest you take another look at your computer files. For a start, I'd like to know where you send this guy's paychecks."

Color seeped up Grover's tanned neck, and he spoke with exaggerated slowness, as though addressing an idiot. "That's easy, Officer Chandler. Like most performers, Valerian has an agent. There are contracts."

"That's *Detective* Chandler," Daisy said, undaunted. "What's this agent's name?"

A pulse pounded in Grover's temple. "I haven't the vaguest idea."

"Then I'd suggest you find out," she answered, turning to start down the nearest aisle. "I'll stop by your office for the information before I leave."

Grover spared her a slight nod, whirled on the heel of one Italian loafer, and strode away.

Daisy lingered for a moment, recalling the events of the night before. She'd never seen a trick that even remotely rivaled the carriage bit, and the mystery of it both intrigued and frustrated her. And there was something else, she admitted to herself, walking toward the door at the right of the stage.

Valerian had touched her, not with his hands, but with his mind. She'd been downright mesmerized by him, and the realization was profoundly irritating. If for no other reason, she wanted to face the magician again and prove to herself, as well as to him, that he had no power over her.

Very little light reached backstage, and the ornate carriage Valerian used in his act loomed in the shadows, ghostly and somehow ominous.

"Hello?" Daisy called out. "Anybody here?"

No answer.

She left the wings and proceeded into the area behind the stage. She immediately encountered a ponytailed young man in jeans and a T-shirt, pushing a rack of costumes along the hallway.

"Hi," she said, pulling her badge from her purse and offering a glimpse before stowing it again.

"Hi," he replied, looking uncertain and slightly flustered. "Can I help you?"

"I hope so," Daisy replied, smiling in an effort to put him at ease. "What's your name?"

He flushed, perhaps with relief. "Joe Fitch. Is—is something wrong?"

Joe hadn't heard about Jillie Fairfield's murder, then. Daisy wished she didn't have to be the one to break the news.

Joe went pale as he took in Daisy's words. "Oh, my God," he whispered when she'd finished, clasping the clothes rack with both hands to steady himself.

Daisy put a hand on his arm. "Would you like to sit down?" she asked.

"I'm okay, really," Joe said, but he fell into a folding chair next to the wall all the same. "Oh, God," he murmured again. "Oh, God—I don't believe it."

Dragging up another chair, Daisy sat down facing Joe. Between the two of them and the clothes rack, they blocked the hallway. "Did you know Ms. Fairfield well?" Daisy asked.

To Daisy's disappointment, Joe shook his head. He looked sick, and he was trembling. "Not really. Neither of us have been here very long. You know how Vegas is—people move around."

Daisy nodded. There was a watercooler a few feet away, with a stack of paper cups on top. She rose to fill one and bring it to Joe. "How about Valerian? What's he like?"

Joe took the cup in both hands and drained it before answering. "He keeps to himself."

"How about the other women in the show? Were any of them friendly with Ms. Fairfield?"

"I think I'm going to puke," Joe confided. Then he bolted, overturning his chair with a metallic clatter, one hand clasped over his mouth.

Daisy followed him to the door of the men's rest room and waited, leaning against the wall until he came out. His skin, starkly white before, had turned to a greenish shade of gray.

She let her folded arms fall back to her sides and straightened, then reached into her purse for a dog-eared business card. "Here," she said. "Give me a call if something comes to you."

Joe took the card and stared at it like a foreigner trying to read a strange language. "Okay," he agreed. Then he turned and fled back into the men's room.

Daisy heard him retching as she turned away. It was a good thing Joe had gotten the bad news secondhand, she reflected. If he'd actually seen the body, he would have hocked up his socks.

She rapped at Valerian's dressing room door and, when there was no answer, tried the knob. To her surprise, the lock wasn't engaged. She stepped over the threshold and turned on the lights, frowning.

What did you expect, Chandler? she chided herself. An open casket? Maybe some cobwebs and a pair of six-foot candelabras?

"Vampires, indeed," she scoffed aloud, recalling Grover's smart-ass remark and what O'Halloran had said that morning at the crime scene. She backed into the hallway, even though she didn't believe in monsters, and her pace was a little faster than usual as she made her way toward a rear exit.

*Valerian*

*Las Vegas, 1995*

I awakened promptly at sunset, as usual, after a troubled sleep. I'd been tormented by dreams of Brenna—now called Daisy Chandler—throughout the daylight hours, and the terrible images followed me into full consciousness.

I sat up and took in my immediate surroundings, and I was oddly surprised to find myself in my desert lair, even though I distinctly remembered retreating to it just before dawn.

My subterranean palace had been built by a paranoid billionaire with a bizzare imagination and a taste for luxury. I had always found it ironic that the survivalist had not survived, but had succumbed to some relatively minor ailment. I had purchased the place from his widow, who evidenced no desire to live in a rabbit's burrow, however splendid.

The soft strains of Mozart poured into the master suite as I rose from my silk-covered bed. My beloved had returned to me, and I could not help rejoicing in the knowledge, but I felt terror, too. Through the centuries since Brenna's drowning in the treacherous waters off the coast of Cornwall, we had found each other no fewer than five times.

On each occasion, in each new incarnation, Brenna had succeeded in winning my heart, no matter how I resisted. Oh, and *Idid* resist, with all the might I possessed, for there was a curse upon milady and me, and it followed us mercilessly, relentlessly, down through the years.

Always, in every lifetime, Brenna's soul remembered our bond, but consciously I was always a stranger to her, a wayfarer who could only come to her in the night. I invariably fell in love with her all over again, and more deeply then ever before, and she returned my affections—for the most part. What bliss it was to hold her, to look upon her face, and what hell to know that she would soon be gone.

It mattered not what efforts I made to protect my darling; my powers were useless against this hex, whatever it was. We were doomed, Brenna and I, to relive the torment of parting, over and over. I could only conclude that it was divine punishment, meted out to me because I had accepted Challes's evil gift all those years before, and used it to the fullest, without the slightest hesitation.

But what sin had Brenna committed, to deserve such a fate? The question angered me, as it had always done.

I went into my glittering bathroom and groomed myself, then selected a starched shirt and a perfectly tailored suit from my wardrobe. A smile, faint and fleeting, touched my mouth. It puzzled the mortals of my acquaintance that I never suffered from the desert heat, no matter how formally I dressed, and I enjoyed their consternation.

Usually.

I affixed my cufflinks and wandered into the vast living room, where the stereo system spilled soft, vibrant notes of music into the air. I silenced the machine with a sort of mental nod and by the same means caused another contraption, an enormous television screen, to fold down from its hiding place in the ceiling.

The set flared with light, and a scene took shape. The images I saw were not being broadcast by any station or network, however. I knew well enough that they sprang from the secret realms of my own mind.

I saw a corpse lying on a matted carpet. The body was that of a woman, and I knew what had killed her even before I focused on the tiny puncture marks on her throat, knew there wasn't a drop of blood left in her veins.

Jillie Fairfield. One of the delectable young creatures who had added so much to my act.

Suddenly weak, I sat down in a soft chair and stared at the horrific vision. This was no ordinary murder, no crime of vengeance or passion. It had been committed by one of my own kind—a vampire. And because of Jillie's connection with me, I could be certain the gesture had been meant as a challenge.

I closed my eyes and willed myself to the scene, materializing in Jillie's small apartment only moments later. The place was dark, a fact that was of no consequence whatever to me, and the body, of course, had been removed.

The corpse had been emptied of blood, but there were traces of that precious stuff everywhere, glittering in the gloom like tiny points of blue light. The scent of it, stale now, and wasted, filled my nostrils.

"Who are you?" I demanded aloud. "Show yourself!"

There was no sound besides the ordinary doings of nearby mortals, which came to me through the walls and the floor as a low murmuring. And yet there was something beneath it, a deeper silence, and not an empty one.

I tried to go back to the moment of the murder—vampires travel through time as easily as men and women pass from one room to another—but my way was blocked. I heard poor little Jillie's muted scream, I felt her terror and then the unholy ecstasy that is a hallmark of a blood-drinker's fatal kiss, but I could not see her killer, and I was unable to help her.

I was swamped by despair, then fury.

The woman's death was the work of another night-walker, a powerful fiend. But who was this monster? I knew of many other vampires, of course, but of all those, only Maeve was stronger than I. She was a regal creature and did not feed on harmless chorus girls—her prey fell into two distinct categories: those who took pleasure in evil, and those who were already on the brink of death. Lisette, the former queen, would have done just such a murder, sparing no thought for the victim's youth and relative innocence, but she had been destroyed long ago. Dingdong, the witch was dead—but something else, something equally pitiless, was very much alive.

5

*Valerian*

*England, 1363*

Forceful hands gripped the front of my tunic, and I was wrenched, half insensible, out of the stinking straw where I'd collapsed earlier, and onto my feet. I recognized Challes, my former tutor, in spite of my wine-sodden state.

"By the gods, it's you!" he rasped. "What in the name of heaven—?"

I swayed, and he steadied me. I felt a rush of drunken sentimentality, followed by an emotion I had not acknowledged in a long while—hot, searing humiliation. I had liked my teacher and sought his approval, and I found that I wanted it still. My normally quick tongue failed me, and I could say nothing at all.

Challes cursed and released me with such force that I struck the stable wall behind me. The shock cleared my head a little.

"You were the brightest pupil I've ever had," he said furiously, waving with both hands, so that somehow the gesture took in both my disheveled person and my disordered soul. "Now look at you—dissolute, filthy, wasted! Why have you allowed yourself to fall into this shameful state?"

I swallowed, clinging to the last rotted shreds of my pride. "I want nothing but to die," I said in an undertone that was both truthful and defiant.

He stunned me again by slapping me hard across the face. "Weakling!" he whispered vehemently, and when I tried to sidestep him, he grasped my shoulders and thrust me back against the wall once more. "Every day and every night brave men and women beg whatever gods are listening to let them live. And



you, you sniveling, pettish little whelp, dare *tothrow away* your powers and your gifts like so much rubbish! Well, I won't have it, do you hear me? By God, *I will not allow you destroy to yourself!*"

Tears burned in my eyes, shaming me anew, and I looked away in a vain effort to hide them. "It is too late," I said in a bare whisper. "Too late."

For a moment I thought Challes would strike me again. Instead he tightened his grasp on my shoulders just briefly, then spoke in a gentle, broken voice. "When was the last time you had a decent meal or a real bed to sleep in?"

I had been stealing food, sleeping in ditches and horse stalls, and begging coin for wine for so long that I could barely recall any other life. My childhood in the village of Dunnett's Head seemed unreal, and my brief happiness with Brenna was naught but a pretty tale.

I spread my filthy hands. "When I was with the brothers, I suppose. They took me in after milady died." I didn't remember the old woman and her rough ministrations until much later, and therefore failed to mention her in my hazy account of those wretched days.

"And you've wandered ever since, like some savage lost from his tribe?"

The answer came hoarse from my throat. "Yes." Only then did I notice that Challes was finely dressed—*muchtoo* finely for a poor tutor. His tailored garments and exquisite opera cape would have been more suited to a London theater or a gentleman's club; to say he looked out of place in the stable of a disreputable country inn would constitute an understatement of gross proportions. Odder still, he had not aged in the years since I had seen him last; there was a subtle vitality about him, and yes, he'd acquired an attractive air of quiet menace that made me think of wolves prowling stark and snowy downs.

Challes laid a hand to my shoulder. "Come," he said. "I have a splendid gift to offer you, my misguided friend, but first you must be made ready to receive it."

The strangeness of the remark did not penetrate the dense muddle drunkenness had made of my mind. I believed he was offering food and shelter, perhaps wine, too, and I wanted all of those things. Especially, I am ashamed to admit, the latter.

Challes led me to a carriage, waiting axle-deep in mud on the road. The moon rose around it like a huge and silvery halo, and I felt a shiver at the sight, one more akin to excitement than to fear. A footman opened the door for us, and I sensed the look that passed between him and my tutor rather than saw it.

"How did you know where to find me?" I asked, once settled in the sumptuous leather seat across from Challes.

He sighed. "I will explain that at a later time. For now, it is enough to see that you are fed, scrubbed clean, and rested."

I was already beginning to feel thirsty, and hoped the impressive improvement of Challes's circumstances meant he kept a good stock of wine. Even though I was not particularly alert at that point, I know I didn't give voice to the thought, for I'd guessed that it would not be well received.

Challes heard it all the same, for he responded as if I'd spoken aloud. "Foolish knave. You will crave another nectar soon, but the questionable pleasure of drunkenness is behind you."

I folded my arms, still too fuddled to sort out the fact that Challes had just read my mind. What *was* clear to me was the absolute conviction that I could not bear a lifetime without wine. Such a sacrifice would lay bare my every nerve, physical and spiritual, to agonies beyond my ability to endure.

"Nonsense," Challes said, though again I had not spoken. "You are not about to die, Valerian. You are on the verge of a glorious rebirth."

I frowned. "You sound like my father now, God rest his soul. If it's religion you're peddling, I'll go back to the stable. And how did you do that?"

"I assume you're asking how I interpreted your thoughts. Alas, the divination of mortal minds is the least of my powers. Hardly a challenge at all."

If I'd been sober, I believe I would have been insulted. I started to ask Challes what he was talking about, but he extended an imperious hand in a demand for silence, and I obeyed. My dedicated debauchery had reduced me to less than nothing: I had all the dignity and self-possession of a slat-ribbed hound snuffling through garbage.

"I live near here," Challes told me after a brief silence, during which he gazed pensively through the carriage window, his oddly beautiful face drenched in moonlight. "Our journey will not be a long one."

I studied him, struck by the differences he evidenced and yet unable to define them. "What's happened?" I said. "You've changed."

For the first time my tutor smiled. "So have you," he answered. "Do not trouble me with questions tonight, Valerian. It is enough for now that I have found you."

We traveled the rest of the way without speaking. I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep, and although I was still thoroughly inebriated, I was well aware of Challes's gaze upon me. I knew, somehow, that his regard was pensive, and that there was a certain strange hunger in it.

His home was grand, for that desolate part of England, a small, square keep, made of gray stone and lighted from within. Surely there would be wine in such a place.

I had recovered some of my spirit, so buoyed was I by the mere prospect of a bath and the knowledge that I would not be required to share my bed with vermin. I glanced warily at Challes as a new and disturbing possibility struck me.

My tutor was just alighting from the carriage, tugging at one immaculate white glove as he did so. "Pray do not pursue that ridiculous and insulting thought any further," he said dryly. "I have no designs on your virtue—such as it may be. In point of fact, I shall ask nothing of you behind the joy of seeing you find and exercise your own magnificent powers."

That was all Challes would say, and I had neither the energy nor the will to press him for more. I simply followed him up to the arched wooden door, which was promptly opened for us by a servant bearing a flickering tallow.

He nodded deferentially to Challes, but gave me an oblique look as he stepped back to admit us.

My wits were not about me, so to speak, but I did take note that the place was very clean, and not in

the least gloomy. Indeed, moonlight streamed through the high windows in one wall, illuminating the foyer with a glow that was no less beautiful for being eerie.

It seemed that I had been expected. A spacious chamber awaited me abovestairs; there was a cozy blaze snapping on the hearth, and a table had been laid for a meal. A large metal tub steamed in the firelight, and the counterpane on the featherbed had been turned back to reveal linen sheets of the purest white.

I went to the table and checked its contents. There was bread, cold meat, boiled turnips, and even fruit, but alas, no wine.

I sighed.

Challes laughed. "Reprobate," he said, tossing me a bar of hard soap. "You'll find nothing there to fog and foul that splendid mind of yours. I've told you—*no more wine.*"

Not troubling to answer, I raised the soap to my nose; the scent reminded me of my beautiful mother, Seraphina, and for a moment I missed her keenly. I turned from Challes, seeking to disguise my emotions—I had not yet learned that I could hide nothing from him.

"I shall not stay long, then," I answered.

"We'll see," Challes replied. And then he left me.

I bolted the door—in my sorry travels I had learned that what seems like good fortune is often a trap instead—and then stripped off my pitiful clothes and stepped into the tub. I gave a low groan of pleasure as the warm, clean water lapped against my flesh.

I soaked for a long time, then scrubbed my shaggy, red-brown hair and every dirty inch of my hide. When I was clean at last, I rose and stood naked on the hearth, letting the heat of the crackling fire dry the little glittering beads of water that trembled like jewels upon my skin.

A nightshirt of some fine, shimmering fabric—I know now that it was rare and priceless silk—lay spread upon the bed. After I had enjoyed the fire for a time, I pulled the garment over my head and took myself to the table. I ate with remarkable appetite, given the shrunken state of my oft-abused stomach, and no semblance of grace. When I'd finished, I was dizzy with fatigue.

Sated, and able to tolerate my own company for the first time in recent memory, I fell into the lush depths of the bed and gave myself up to sleep. My rest was absolute; I kept no vigil and dreamed no dreams.

It makes me smile to remember that I felt safe.

*Daisy*

*Las Vegas, 1995*

Daisy was waiting in Valerian's dressing room when that night's performance ended to thunderous applause and shouts of approbation, and he did not seem at all taken aback to find her there.

So much, she reflected, for the element of surprise.

The magician was a spectacular specimen, not only onstage, but up close as well. Something fast-moving and intangible came to a lurching stop, deep in Daisy's middle, when he looked at her.

She reminded herself that show-business types didn't impress her, and he smiled slightly, as though he'd heard the thought.

But that was impossible, of course.

Daisy's face felt warm. "I'm Detective Chandler," she said.

"I remember," Valerian replied smoothly. He was wearing a majestic black silk cape, lined in red, and he loosened the ties and slipped the garment off, laying it almost tenderly over the back of a chair. There was something intimate and sensual in the way he performed that simple task, and Daisy had taken a hot, dark pleasure in watching him.

"I'd like to talk to you about Jillie Fairfield's murder."

She saw a flicker of grief in the aristocratic face. There was something so regal about the man, she thought, something old-fashioned and almost courtly.

Valerian took his sweet time replying. "What do you want to know?" he finally asked in an abstracted tone, his gaze fixed just above her head as he unfastened his cuff links.

"Several things. Starting with this—did you kill her?"

He met her gaze then, and both pain and annoyance moved in his eyes. "No," he said, and the chill in his voice went straight to the marrow of Daisy's bones, like a wintry wind. "Of course not."

Daisy was unnerved, even disturbed by this guy, though she could not have said why. Even if he had done the murder—and practiced instincts told her he was innocent—she had no reason to be afraid of him. She was a good cop, and she'd learned to take care of herself a long time before.

"Do you know who did?"

Valerian raised one eyebrow and flung his gold and onyx cuff links onto the vanity table, where they landed with a clatter. The wall above, where there should have been a lighted mirror, was empty. "No," he bit out. "It's your responsibility to determine that, isn't it?"

Daisy was stung, and it made her damn mad to catch herself feeling that way. She couldn't afford that kind of vulnerability. "I'm trying to do my job, Mr. Valerian," she seethed. "Unfortunately, that usually involves a lot of spade work."

"Just Valerian," he said, and the very calmness with which he spoke made Daisy feel like a raving hysteric. "Sit down, please," he went on, gesturing toward a velvet-upholstered antique chair, which Daisy promptly took. He drew up a high stool and perched on the seat, arms folded, looking art-deco elegant in his tails, tuxedo pants, and white pleated shirt. "I didn't know much about Jillie," he confided. "We worked together, but that was the extent of our association. I am not a social animal, you see. The other women in the act might be able to tell you something more, however."

Mentally Daisy awarded Valerian a point for referring to the dancers as women and not girls. And it

struck her that, although he'd been working under hot lights for a couple of hours, wearing a full suit of clothes and a cloak, he had not broken a sweat. Odd, indeed, she thought.

"I've talked to some of them already. They're pretty upset, though I've got to say they performed well tonight."

Valerian loosened the collar of his shirt, which had probably cost more than the new engine O'Halloran had just put into his car. "I'll pass along the compliment," he assured her. There wasn't a trace of sarcasm in his tone, and yet Daisy knew he was needling her.

Or was she just being oversensitive?

"Where can I get in touch with you during the day, just in case I need to question you again?"

There was a wry twist to his mouth, and a weariness in the set of his broad shoulders that seemed ancient as well as profound. He produced a card, by some sleight of hand, and held it out to Daisy.

"Call my answering service," he said. "I usually spend the daylight hours perfecting my magic, but if you leave a message, I'll be in touch."

Daisy had no reason to linger, and yet she longed to stay. A fragment of a dream she'd had stirred somewhere in her brain, and she heard the terrifying clang of swords clashing in battle. She eased toward the door.

"Well, thank you," she said. "And good night. It was a terrific show."

Valerian bowed. "Sleep well, Miss Chandler."

Daisy went home to her apartment in a complex at the edge of town, heated a frozen entree, and curled up to watch a news channel. The state of world affairs left her thoroughly depressed, as usual, and she went to the kitchenette and tossed the rest of her dinner into the trash, box and all.

"Maybe I should get out of this business," she said aloud. She was talking to herself more and more these days, but she figured it would be okay as long as O'Halloran "didn't find out. He was a good guy and a first-class cop, but he saw it as his mission in life to give her a hard time. That, according to him, was what partners were for.

Daisy kicked off her sneakers as she crossed the gray carpeted floor of her living room, checked her answering machine, and saw that there was one message. She reached for the Play button and then drew back when a vague sense of menace brushed the back of her heart.

She was being silly, she chided herself. The message was probably from her sister, Nadine, who lived in Telluride and was expecting her first baby. Or maybe O'Halloran had called to ask about her interview with the Great Valerian...

Daisy touched the button, and one ominous word swelled from the machine like an evil genie from a lamp.

"*Soon*," the voice said, and Daisy could not tell whether the caller was a man or a woman.

"What the hell?\*" she demanded, stabbing the button again.

That time the tape dragged, making the warning, if indeed it *was* a warning and not a prank, that much spookier.

"Damn," Daisy whispered, more irritated than afraid. Was this somebody's idea of a joke—O'Halloran's, for instance? Even as she framed the thought, she knew her partner wouldn't try to scare her. His sense of humor ran toward whoopee cushions, plastic vomit, and hand-buzzers, bless his tacky and totally uninspired heart, but he wasn't cruel.

While Daisy was still standing there, gnawing at her lower lip and wondering whether to worry about this development or have a light beer and go to bed, the telephone rang. It was an ordinary sound, but she almost jumped out of her sneakers, and her hand trembled when she reached for the receiver.

"Hello!" she barked.

"Soon," said that same genderless, robotlike voice she'd heard on the tape only moments before. "Soon you—will—die—again. And again—and—"

"Who is this?" Daisy demanded, furious.

"—again and—"

Daisy slammed down the receiver and shoved a hand through her hair. "Take a breath, Chandler," she told herself in a whisper. "It's just some smart-ass kid, or one of the guys at the station—"

She closed her eyes for a moment, deliberately making her mind a blank, until she was calmer. She started to dial O'Halloran's home number, then stopped in the middle of the process. She had worked damn hard and taken a lot of scary risks to get where she was. She didn't want her partner, or anybody else on the force, to think she couldn't take care of herself.

Daisy went back to the front door and made sure the deadbolt was turned and the chain in place. Then she checked the windows and, on a roll, peeked behind the shower curtain and under the bed.

Finally she washed off her makeup, brushed her teeth and hair, and went to bed. The telephone on her night-stand rang once, but by the time she'd groped for the receiver and put it to her ear, the line was dead.

"Damn," she said again. Then she turned over onto her side, yawned twice, wondered whether or not Nadine suffered from morning sickness, considered getting a big dog, and dozed off.

The dream was remarkably real.

She was wearing strange, simple clothes—medieval, perhaps—and riding a horse. She could hear the roar of the sea and taste its salt in the mist, and suddenly she felt a surge of wild, ebullient daring. With a laugh, she spurred her mount toward the water.

Someone shouted at her to come back, but she had suffered much in recent times, and she had grown up beside the sea, playing chase with the tide. Now the vast ocean seemed to beckon. It was a siren's call, one she could not resist.

She rode down a steep path, wending her way between giant stones, urging the little horse onward when

she knew it wanted to bolt.

Another cry found its way over the roar of the waves and made her turn, laughing with delight, to look toward shore. She saw him then, her companion. In that strange way of dreams, she recognized him as the magician, Valerian. And yet he was much younger, hardly more than a boy, and his clothes were ill-fitting and strange.

His face was a mask of terror as he lunged down the rocky path and raced toward the water.

Poor silly darling, she thought indulgently. He's afraid for me. I must tell him that I've ridden into the sea many times before without harm.

She smiled, tossing her head, and raised one hand to wave him back. He was no swimmer, after all, and the sea was more fractious than usual that day.

He shouted to her again, foundering through the surf, and she lost control of the horse. The animal shrieked and reared, and she was flung off, striking her shoulder hard against a rock.

Pain thundered through her. She tried to scream, and water filled her mouth, drove her under, held her there, flailing. The weight of her gown and kirtle pulled her deeper into the smothering darkness, and then a current caught her up and twirled her around.

There was another blow, this time to the head, and then she saw nothing, felt nothing, knew nothing—except for the name she'd been screaming before she died.

*Valerian.*

*Valerian*

*England, 1363*

When I awakened that first morning, to find myself in the place I would later know as Colefeld Hall, I am ashamed to say that my first conscious sensation was a craving for wine. My mouth was as dry as straw, my stomach felt as though it had withered within me, and every bone and sinew ached in merry time with the slow thud of my heart.

I rose from my bed, relieved myself in the chamber pot provided, and unbolted the door to peer into the hallway. The taciturn serving man was almost to the threshold, his arms laden with folded garments of exquisite quality. Raised in the home of a poor bootmaker and residing, until very recently, in horse stalls, abandoned dovecotes, and pigsties, I had never dared to dream of such things.

"Good morning, sir," said the quiet fellow. "Milord instructed me to provide you with whatever you required." He actually smiled, taking in my nightshirt. "I see I was correct in assuming that proper garb would make a good beginning."

I was delighted and forgot for a moment my deep-seated yearning for the fruit of the vine. I reached out for the garments with a nod of gratitude, barely able to keep myself from donning them right there in the doorway.

"Where is Challes?" I asked, turning away. "I must thank him personally for his generosity."



"I am afraid His Lordship is engaged this morning. He'll be quite busy for the remainder of the day, as it happens. In the meantime, I will look after you—my name, by the way, is Abelard."

I might have been curious about Challes's "engagement" at any other time, but I was still sick and half starved, and those splendidly embroidered tunics and closely woven hose held me rapt. Oh, I was a greedy creature, even then.

Abelard went away, and I put on dark blue hose and a multicolored tunic. When I stepped into the hallway again, intending to explore—and, yes, I confess it, to find Challes's store of wines and spirits—a pair of soft leather boots waited by the door. I snatched them up with joy and paused to pull them onto my feet before proceeding downstairs.

The great house had a curiously expectant air, it seemed to me; as though the very walls and floors and rafters in the ceiling were awaiting some momentous event. I found the kitchen and purloined the leg of a roasted fowl of some sort before continuing to acquaint myself with my tutor's domain. ' He owned many manuscripts and even a few bound books—envy flared inside me when I saw those tomes—row upon row of them, brimming with secrets and with magic. I touched their spines reverently, but even I did not dare to take even one down from the shelf to examine it. Those volumes were holy to me in a way crosses and relics and statues had never been, and one does not touch sacred things thoughtlessly.

Besides, my fingers were greasy from the food I'd consumed.

I left the books, albeit reluctantly, and went in search of the wine. Abelard appeared to be occupied elsewhere and did not bother me for the whole of the morning.

The cellar was empty, except for a heavy iron door that would not open when I pulled on the latch. I tried several times and even kicked it once—for I had a more than ordinary dislike for things that thwarted me—but to no avail.

After that small defeat, I searched the pantries, the storerooms, and even the stables and the carriage house. I found nothing except my friend's tidy possessions, all neatly tucked away in their proper places.

Abelard produced a venison stew for the midday meal—he was, it appeared, the only other occupant of the house besides Challes and myself—and sat on the other side of the trestle table talking with me while I ate.

"Has Mr. Challes—his lordship—always lived here?" I asked. It had occurred to me, as my throbbing head cleared, that the gentleman might have deceived us all—Brenna, the baron, her late father, my brother, Krispin—every one of us. Perhaps he had never been a poverty-stricken tutor at all, but a dilettante, merely amusing himself among the poor. Experimenting, perhaps, to find out if country folk were as stupid as mules or if they could learn to reason and work sums.

"He came into an inheritance quite recently," Abelard replied, obviously uncomfortable with the line of questioning. "We have been in residence for perhaps five years."

My mind, ever fitful, had returned to thoughts of Krispin. I did not often let myself remember my brother, for when I did I always imagined how the plague would have changed him. Had his skin turned to a dark, bruised color before he died? Had he risen from his pallet and spun about in a hideous death dance as I had heard of others doing?

I pushed my stew away, my appetite spoiled.

"Where is this engagement of his lordship's?" I asked with an impertinence that causes me to wince when I recall it. "I've looked through practically every window in the keep, and there's naught but empty moors in every direction."

Abelard's patience was not easily strained. "Not empty," he said, drawing a trencher of bread close and tearing off a piece. "There are wolves abroad. Gaunt ones, with ribs showing through their hide, that like nothing better than to happen upon an arrogant fool of a man with more bravado than good sense."

Everyone in England was afraid of wolves in those stark, brutal days, when vast forests still covered the land—the creatures had been known to leap, snarling, into carriages and even to creep into huts and crofts and carry children away in their teeth. The stories about the beasts were rife, told at every cradle and fireside in the country, used, as fear has ever been used, to control those who might otherwise take it into their heads to wander.

Just the mention of the beasts made me go bloodless with dread. In the next instant I blushed furiously, embarrassed by my first reaction.

"We saw no such animals last night while riding in the carriage," I pointed out. The unpleasant images of a dying Krispin had faded from my mind, and I reached for my half-finished stew again.

Abelard made a production of chewing his bread, swallowing, and biting off a new piece. "I suppose they were busy elsewhere, then," he said at long last. "They're out there, though. You can be sure of that, sir."

I could not hide my shudder. "Have you seen them?"

"Oh, yes," Abelard confided in a low voice. "And any man with ears can hear them howling of a night. Calling and calling they are, wanting the unwary to come out and play their dreadful games."

I shifted the conversation away from the subject of wolves. "Is his lordship here, in this house?"

"He might be," Abelard said speculatively, though it was plain, even to me, that he knew exactly where his master was and what he was doing.

"It's damn rude," I blurted out, "making such a mystery of things and leaving a guest all on his own. I didn't ask to come here, after all."

Abelard smiled. "Didn't you?" he asked.

I was completely confused. "By the saints, man, I wasn't so drunk that I can't recall what I said with my own mouth!"

The servant finished his bread and then rose from the table. "There's no need to be afraid, lad," he said gently. "This is where you belong, and you're welcome here, and safe, too, if you mind your manners."

I wanted to point out that I was not some witless youth, that indeed I had lived five and thirty years, but I realized as I shaped the protest in my mind that I would sound foolish if I uttered it.

"Have you any wine?" I wanted to know. Blustering bluff was one of my stock traits; I had relied upon it, among other deceptions and ruses, for a long time.

Abelard sighed. "No," he told me. "And if I did, I would not offer it to you. The stuff might have been your destruction, if his lordship hadn't found you when he did."

I was yet considering the wine, and resenting my host's lack of charity where strong drink was concerned, so I did not stop to wonder how Challes had known where to look for me, or what business he had with me in the first place.

By the gods, I was not only mortal then, I was an idiot. I might have been deaf and blind for all the notice I took of the terrible and magnificent drama unfolding around me!

Abelard brought me one of the precious books that afternoon, and I read hungrily of ancient Greek adventures, hardly noticing when twilight came and the candles were lighted. I was so absorbed that I did not hear Challes enter the room where I sat, my stool drawn up close to the fire.

"This," he said with gruff fondness, "is the Valerian I remember."

"Tell me," I demanded quietly, closing the manuscript with great care. "Tell me why you sought me out, why you brought me here. Now."

He smiled. "*I have* told you, my friend. I have an astounding gift to offer you. If you accept my tribute, you will have powers you cannot begin to imagine now."

I was intrigued. "What is this great and mysterious treasure?" I asked.

Challes reached out to touch my shoulder. There was love in the contact, and reverence. His eyes glowed with affection as he looked down at my face. "Life upon life," he said. "Endless, fathomless, unbounded*life*. Drink from the cup I hold out to you, Valerian—arrogant Valerian, as beautiful as Lucifer in his days of perfect favor—and you will never die."

6

The light of the drawing room fire flickered over Challes's features as he sat beside me on that momentous night, staring fixedly into the grate. Beyond the windows, on the moonlit moors, I heard the wolves calling sorrowfully to each other like souls just waking to find themselves in hell, and I shuddered.

Nearly imperceptible though the motion must have been, it somehow drew my tutor's notice. He turned his head toward me and smiled, and I remember thinking how remarkably white and even his teeth were. I was more conscious than ever, in that moment, of the dangers that filled the world.

"The time has come, Valerian," Challes began moderately, "to discuss the gift in depth. Preparations must be made, of course, before it can be given. Still, I wish to tell you all that this entails, for you will be called upon to make a choice never presented to most mortals."

I could barely contain my eagerness and curiosity; indeed, I had been in a state of quiet frenzy since he'd made the astonishing claim, a short while before, that I need never die. I find my excitement ironic now, in light of the fact that I had been trying for fifteen years at that point, albeit in a cowardly and indirect fashion, to murder myself.

"Tell me," I pleaded on a scant breath and came near to clasping his arm like a supplicant begging blessings from a saint.

"Be patient, beautiful one," he said fondly. "Once you shed your mortal limitations, you will have all eternity to celebrate what you are."

I waited and held my tongue, but it was the most difficult thing I had undertaken since my failed attempt to rescue Brenna from the merciless surf. I trembled with my need to understand what Challes was offering me, to snatch it from his grasp and hide it in my heart.

He settled back in his great chair, draped now in shadows, now in dancing light, and watched the blaze again. Just when I truly believed I would not be able to restrain myself from lunging like a fevered beast, to somehow wrench the secret from him, Challes began to unburden himself.

"I went to sea after I left Dunnett's Head," he told me, still gazing into the fire. "I know not how I kept myself apart from this cursed plague—it was, and is, everywhere. I saw so many perish, so horribly. I wandered, as you have done, and finally settled on the Continent, in Florence. There I encountered artists, bards, philosophers, and men of science—" He paused and smiled again, not at me certainly, but at some memory he must have glimpsed in the snapping flames of that cheery fire.

"Whores and dancing girls, too. Gypsies and princes, and vagabonds, like myself. Those who were drunkards"—he had the charity, bless him, not to look at me when he made this last statement—"those who were saints, and those who were a curious and fascinating combination of the two. I cannot possibly describe the richness and pleasure of my life in that gracious city—and yet I was not truly happy. At times I knew unutterable loneliness."

I bit my lip, feeling no compunction to interrupt now, listening with all my powers of attention. I, too, had known such a separation from others—it was that, more than any other factor, which had spawned my eternal need for strong drink.

"I encountered a magnificent being one night when I was brooding in one of the small piazzas that abound in Florence. We became friends, and then something more than that. Lovers, of a sort, though our consummation was spiritual, rather than physical. Many wondrous nights passed before Christoph told me what he was. What he is and will always be—" Challes hesitated again and studied my face with a troubled expression in his eyes, and I thought I would burst with waiting before he went on at last. "Christoph is a fiend, Valerian, as am I. He is a vampyre."

My heart seemed to stop and, just as quickly, start itself pumping again. I drew back a little, I think, though the response was not a conscious one. "*Avampyre*? You mean, a drinker of blood?"

"Yes," Challes answered with a sound that resembled a sigh, but was not.

I bolted to my feet, overturning the stool with a crash, suddenly far more frightened of my old friend and tutor than I'd ever been of the wolves waiting outside in the darkness.

"Wait," Challes ordered calmly, even gently, rising unhurriedly from his chair. I would not have obeyed the command, but there was something in his eyes, something that held me spellbound and stricken, overriding my weak will. "I will do you no hurt, cherished one. There is only pleasure in what I would give to you, only joy." He was silent for a moment, gazing at me, and when he spoke again, it was briskly, in the schoolmaster's tone from days of old. "Sit down, pray, and listen."

Though I was terrified, I righted my stool and slumped onto it, speechless and void of grace, my limbs full of trembling. I made the sign of the cross, and to my horrified amazement, Challes did not recoil. Did not so much as flinch. No, there was only the brief hint of a smile, falling across his lips like a passing shadow, and a deep, pitying sorrow in his eyes.

"Such gestures have their power," he told me, "when there is true faith behind them. But you have none of that, do you?"

I tried to speak, stammered insensibly, and began again. "I believe there's a God—I believe in the Holy Mother, and the Son", and all the saints and angels—"

Challes laughed outright, and the sound echoed, raucous, off the high ceiling of the keep. "Such a hasty and convenient creed!" he exclaimed finally with grim humor. "Even the demons grant the existence of God, Valerian—oh, especially them. Do you think you can fool me—I, who know you so well? You believe now, in this moment, it's true, but only because you perceive your sinful hide to be threatened. Tell me, lovely one, were you so devout when the good brothers bade you stay there to take up the cross and become one of their number?" He shook his head, as if in response to something I'd said, although I spoke not a syllable, for I was too shaken to refute his words. "Let go of what is past, you spectacular idiot, and enter into the glorious future that awaits you."

I could not move or make a sound. I heard the wolves, nearer now, and wished that I might be their prey, alone and unprotected on the moors—that I could be anywhere but in that warm, comfortably furnished drawing room in the company of a devil.

Challes began to speak, his tones the low and measured ones of a father lulling a fretful child to sleep. He told me what it meant to be a vampire—told me of the powers he possessed, the powers I would command should I raise the figurative chalice to my lips and drink. I would be able to will myself from one place to another and, eventually, from one century to another. I would become a shape-changer, of sorts, able to present myself to mortals in an endless variety of forms. I should not need food or water, nor would I lack any desirable thing—gold, castles, fine horses, and exquisite garments could be mine by means of simple trickery. And there were much greater gifts and abilities that would come to me over time, with the practice of my art.

"But I must drink blood?" I asked with a slight shiver when Challes had finished painting his grand, glorious images in my mind.

His smile was tender now. "Not in the way you think," he said. And he proceeded to explain that, too—how the blood was drawn in through the fangs, how the victim could be made to feel ecstasy instead of fear and pain if the vampire wished it so, how the innocents need never be touched, because there was such a thriving abundance of truly evil mortals.

I was intrigued, despite my terror. I wanted the terrible magic of which Challes spoke, as he had always known I would. I wanted to fly, to learn, to explore. I wanted to wear rich clothing, always, to hear the music of a thousand minstrels, to traverse the wide seas and continents, to know secrets forbidden to ordinary men.

"Will you accept this gift?" he asked, although he knew what the answer would be. We both did.

I flushed. "Yes," I heard myself say. My old life was untenable now; I truly *would* surrender myself to the wolves before returning to the beggar's existence I had known only the day before. "Now. Tonight."

Challes laughed again and shook his head. "Dear, precious fool! If I changed you now, you would be forever as you are at this moment—gaunt and ill mannered and totally void of the graces. No, Valerian—you must be groomed and prepared for the transformation, as I said before."

I was alarmed—now that I knew what it meant to be an immortal, I could not bear the idea that my tutor might change his mind, might deny me what he had already offered. "How long will it take, this preparation?"

"A month, perhaps two," Challes said. "I will bring you along slowly, lovingly, just as my dark angel Christoph did for me. That way, when you enter in, it will be willingly, and with full knowledge of what you undertake. Anything less would be a travesty before hell as well as heaven."

"I must have it now," I muttered, covering my face with my hands. "I cannot bear to wait!" The marvelous gift would be withdrawn, snatched from my fingers for all time—I knew it would. I would suffer that worst of all fates, and remain ordinary.

Challes laid his hand on top of my shaggy, unbrushed hair. "Do not fret," he scolded with gruff affection. "I cannot hurry this process, for it is too important. But I shall show you some of the joy that awaits you, if you're willing."

I raised my eyes to meet his gaze. And I nodded.

Not even Brenna or my poor, ill-fated mother had ever looked upon me with the kind of love I saw that night in Challes's translucent face. It was not a lascivious regard he bore me—even in my ignorance and self-centered naïveté I knew that—but something much deeper and far more complex. The emotion transcended gender, made a mockery of human gropings, and I was in awe.

I could not have known, back then, that one day I would cherish another in just that way, that I would understand completely how Challes felt.

I knew nothing of anything. I craved some blessing from Challes, some unnamed and joyous communion, with an intensity greater even than the wanting of wine.

In the end he dismissed me, to my wretched disappointment, and sent me off to my chamber as if I were a child. Certainly he had power over me, even then, but my obedience was grudging.

Challes came to my room perhaps an hour before dawn—I lay wakeful in my bed, watching the moon through the window and listening to the wolves' song—and suddenly he was simply there. I knew he had not entered by any ordinary means, but I was beyond questioning that. I simply looked at him, silently imploring him for I knew not what, knowing I would perish of grief if he denied me.

Challes knelt beside my bed, smoothed my hair, murmured words I did not comprehend, and bent his head to my throat. The experience was profoundly sensual, but again it was more a thing of the mind and spirit than of the body.

I, who had never knowingly been intimate with a man—I confess there were instances during the dark years after Brenna's death, however, when I was too drunk to know whose pallet I'd shared—was ready to surrender my very soul.

I started when I felt two sharp points penetrate the skin of my neck, and perhaps managed a whimper of fearful protest, but in the next instant, as my very life's blood flowed in Challes's fangs, ecstasy crashed



down upon me like a giant wave. I moaned as he drank, only vaguely aware that he wasn't touching me at all, except where his mouth was pressed to the pulsing vein at the base of my throat. It was as though every erotic point, within and without, was being stimulated at once.

It was dark and sweet and violent, my first communion with Challes, like the pleasure I had known when Brenna wooed my seed from me, except that this release encompassed the whole of my being and went on and on, endlessly. At long last I swooned, the exertion and the joy so great that I could not endure them, and when I awakened with the morning sun I believed at first that I'd dreamed the entire episode.

When I touched my throat and felt the two tiny, rapidly healing puncture wounds, however, I knew all that Challes had said was true, that all I remembered was real. And I was filled with a delight, and a terror, of truly infinite proportions.

I did not see Challes that day, and I grieved until darkness fell. It was just after sunset when he returned, and began molding me, ever so artfully, into a fiend's fiend.

*Daisy*

*Las Vegas, 1995*

"Why the hell didn't you call me?" O'Halloran demanded the next morning when Daisy had told him about the threatening telephone message. They were riding in his car, on their way to the home of Jillie Fairfield's next of kin, her divorced mother. Daisy was up to her ankles in empty soda bottles, misfolded maps, and crumpled candy wrappers.

"What would you have done?" she countered irritably. "Hauled yourself over there and sat on my couch all night, holding a .357 in your lap?"

It wasn't the crank call or O'Halloran's gruffly solicitous attitude that was bugging her, she admitted to herself. Mrs. Fairfield resided in a trailer park where Daisy and Nadine had spent six happy months when they were in elementary school, in the care of their paternal grandmother. Inevitably their mother, Jeanine, had returned, ruffled and a little drunk and smelling sour from the bus ride that had brought her back to Vegas from wherever she'd been. She'd reclaimed her daughters, over Gran's fierce but helpless protests, and headed straight for the nearest social worker. A couple of kids made it a whole lot easier to collect welfare, after all, and once Jeanine had dumped or been dumped by her latest boyfriend, a biker with a slipped disk that entitled him to state compensation, she'd suddenly developed all manner of maternal instincts.

"Relax, Chandler," O'Halloran said. "I'm not trying to step on your goddamned feminine rights or anything like that. I just want to make sure this sicko doesn't get too close, okay?"

Daisy wanted to reassure her partner, but she was still distracted by her dread of returning to the trailer park. She and Nadine had never been allowed to go back, even to visit, and after a couple of years the old woman had passed away. Jeanine's boyfriend at the time—Daisy couldn't remember his name and didn't care if she ever did—had shown her the obituary in the newspaper and said maybe they'd get a mobile home out of the deal, "now that Granny has kicked off."

"Chandler?" O'Halloran prompted. They turned a corner on a yellow light, and the door of the glove compartment fell open, slamming against Daisy's knees and spilling a variety of cassette tapes, empty cookie packages, expired registration slips, and unpaid parking tickets into her lap.



She stuffed the whole mess back where it came from and closed the little door with a crash. "What?" she snapped.

"You suffering from a year-round case of PMS, or what?"

Daisy sighed and shoved a hand through her hair. "Why is it that men always think any change in a woman's mood has to be connected with her hormone levels?"

O'Halloran shrugged, running another yellow light, bald tires squealing, and the driver of a tour bus blasted his horn and displayed a specific finger behind the broad tinted window. "After ten or twenty thousand years the evidence starts to stack up," he said. "The thing is, we got this weird case to solve—you know what the medical examiner said—and it's gonna take our undivided attention to work the snarls outta this one. You gotta get all your body chemicals in sync, Chandler, 'cause I need your help."

Daisy tossed him a mock salute. "No problem, Officer Friendly. My mood has nothing to do with chemistry. And slow it down, will you? You take one more corner on two wheels, and I'll have to write you up for driving under the influence of sugar and preservatives."

He grinned, but in the next moment his expression was solemn again. "I don't like this, Chandler," he confided. "This Fairfield thing, I mean. By the time we got to that girl, she didn't have enough blood left in her veins to reach a gnat's ankle. What the *sonnabitchen* hell*happened* in that place? What about those marks on her neck?"

Daisy shifted in the seat as the entrance to the trailer park came into view. She took a pair of sunglasses from her purse and put them on, telling herself it was because of the glare. "Forensics found blood on the scene when they went over it after the body was removed," she pointed out. "It just wasn't visible to the naked eye, that's all."

"Okay, so there was a little blood. There sure as shit wasn't enough. What happened to the rest of it?"

She shivered, somewhere down deep, and knew her reaction didn't show on the outside. Jillie's corpse, the crank call, the dream, and the magician all sprang out of her subconscious at once to haunt her. "I don't know, O'Halloran," Daisy replied finally in a somewhat testy tone. "Maybe you were right in the first place. Maybe we've got a vampire running loose."

O'Halloran flung her a mildly contemptuous glance and slowed to enter the Lucky Dollar Trailer Park, passing beneath the burned-out neon sign and bouncing down the rutted gravel road between battered mobile homes. "You wish," he said, making a cranking motion with his left arm as he rolled down the window. The air-conditioning had petered out years ago, with the second or third motor. "Better the real thing, for my money, than some psycho who believes with all his diseased little brain that taking a drop of human blood now and then will make him live forever."

Daisy didn't answer. Her thoughts lingered on Valerian. She was comparing the way he looked in real life with the younger, less polished version she'd seen in her dream, wondering if he was gay, straight, or in between, and where he'd learned to do magic. Something told her he was accomplished in the subtler forms of wizardry as well as the spectacular ones he employed onstage.

"Chandler?" O'Halloran barked. "Pay attention, damn it."

Daisy switched mental gears and forced herself to concentrate. "I'm with you, buddy. Let's go make the

world safe for humankind."

After asking directions from a gray-haired man mowing<sup>^</sup> a lawn, they found the Fairfield trailer. It was a rundown, two-tone double-wide with a sagging step and a yard made up of crushed gravel and cigarette butts.

Mrs. Fairfield came out onto the dilapidated porch when they drove up, a petite blonde with a leathery tan, wearing white short-shorts and a skimpy red top. She wore high-heeled sandals, her toenails were painted, and her makeup gave rise to speculation concerning the way she earned her living.

"You the cops?" she asked, raising a lipstick-stained cigarette to her mouth.

Just two of them, Daisy thought, flashing her badge, but she didn't say the words out loud because after all, this woman's daughter had just been murdered. Just to the left and a little behind her, O'Halloran flipped out his wallet.

"I'm Detective Chandler," said Daisy, "and this is Detective O'Halloran. We're investigating your daughter's death, and we need to ask you some questions."

"Took you long enough to come around," Mrs. Fairfield replied, giving no sign that she intended to invite them inside.

Daisy was relieved. The place probably reeked of smoke, and worse, it might look too much like Gran's trailer. There might be a loosely crocheted afghan draped over the recliner in the living room, pictures in dime-store frames on top of the television set, cheap shag carpeting with a worn spot in front of the door—

O'Halloran consulted his ever-present notebook, and out of the corner of her eye Daisy saw a short grocery list scrawled on the first page. "According to my log here, I called you myself from the station, about an hour after we left the—er—scene."

Mrs. Fairfield sat down on the top step, crossed her still-shapely legs, and tapped the ashes from her cigarette into a clay pot containing a dead plant. She sounded bored when she spoke again. "If you're going to ask me who Jillie was dating, or who her friends were, I couldn't tell you. She and I didn't get along too well. I do know that she worked for that magician, Valerian something-or-other, in the showroom at the Venetian Hotel. That's some kind of place, isn't it?"

Daisy felt a swift, dizzying fury. Someone was dead, and this woman, the victim's *mother*, for God's sake, was talking about the latest addition to Glitter Gulch. She opened her mouth to comment, but O'Halloran, who could be amazingly perceptive when he tried, silenced her with a touch to her forearm.

"Yeah," he said. "It's something, that hotel. You ever go down there and take in your daughter's show?"

Mrs. Fairfield laughed. The sound was low and throaty, but there was more despair in it than humor. "At the price those places charge for a ticket? Not on what I make serving drinks in a fourth-rate casino. And Jillie sure as hell never found it in her heart to get me comped in. I hear it's a great act, though. HBO wanted to do a special a few months back, according to the papers, but this Valerian character won't let any kind of camera through the door." She tapped more ashes into the planter. "It's all a lot of hype, if you ask me—that stuff about how he's never seen in the daytime and everything. There's nothing like an attitude to generate publicity. You gotta know how to sell yourself in this town, and that guy's a master at it."

Daisy wondered if Mrs. Fairfield was really as crass and unfeeling as she seemed. People handled grief in a lot of different ways, some putting on fronts, some breaking down right away. Daisy had heard more than a few talk all around the subject of their loved one's death, too, just the way this woman was doing. "We need to know if your daughter had any enemies, Mrs. Fairfield," she said, grateful to O'Halloran for running interference until she could get her emotions under control. "In an incident like this, the killer is often someone the victim knew." —

The aging cocktail waitress raised a carefully plucked eyebrow. There was something faintly mocking in the motion, and some of Daisy's sympathy ebbed away.

"Is that right? How long you been a cop, sweetie?"

Daisy took a breath, let it out slowly. "We're not here to talk about me, Mrs. Fairfield. Please—tell us whatever you can about your daughter."

"I told you, we didn't get along," came the distracted, slightly hoarse reply. "We didn't speak at all for the last two years."

"Why not?" O'Halloran asked with quiet compassion.

Mrs. Fairfield's eyes were luminous with tears when she raised them to meet his gaze. "It was a stupid thing, really—she was dating a married man, and I told her he'd never leave his wife for her, 'cause they never do, you know—and Jillie and me, we had too much to drink one night, and we got into it good. We tore into each other, right here in front of this piss-ant trailer, and it was a catfight like you never seen before." She paused and smiled faintly at the memory, as though proud that she and her daughter were scrappers. "The cops came, too. Look in your computers if you don't believe me. Jillie and me, we was both too stiff-necked to say we were sorry afterwards. We thought we had forever to make things right, you know?"

At this last, her face crumbled, and Mrs. Fairfield gave a small, raw sob that wrenched hard at Daisy's insides.

"I'm so sorry," she said.

Mrs. Fairfield rose gracefully to her feet and tossed her cigarette butt into the gravel. Then she wiped her mascara-streaked cheek with the back of one manicured hand. "Yeah, sure you are, honey. Sure you are."

With that, Jillie's mother turned and went into the trailer, closing the door firmly behind her.

"Back to square one," Daisy said.

"Families just ain't close anymore," O'Halloran philosophized in response as they walked back toward his car.

Later that afternoon a woman ran over her ex-husband in the parking lot of a convenience store, and a fifteen-year-old gang member was knifed to death by his older brother, who had been out of prison just over two weeks. It all seemed to underscore O'Halloran's theory about families, and Daisy was thoroughly depressed when she went off duty at six-thirty that night, got into her convertible, and drove back to her apartment.

There were no messages on the answering machine. That was something, at least.

The blues invariably made Daisy restless, so she dragged her rowing machine out from under her bed—she'd ordered it eighteen months before, inspired to a frenzy of ambition by a late-night infomercial—and into the living room. Usually she worked out in a health club a couple of miles from her building, but that night she just didn't feel like dealing with a lot of people.

She put on her shorts and a T-shirt, switched on the TV, warmed up with a few brisk calisthenics, and rowed up a sweat. The effort relaxed her, as she had known it would, and Daisy showered and put on her chenille robe. She had just put some low-fat fish sticks into the microwave for her dinner when the telephone rang.

Daisy didn't hesitate to answer. Maybe Nadine had picked up on her intent to call and beaten her to the punch.

"Chandler," she said, just in case.

"We got another one," O'Halloran told her wearily.

The bottom dropped out of Daisy's stomach. No matter how many homicides she investigated, she never got over the shock of learning that one human being had killed another. Again.

"What do you mean, 'another one'?" she snapped, though she knew. Damn it to hell, she knew.

"Her name was Susan Cantrell," O'Halloran said. "Miss Cantrell's roommate came back from a long weekend this afternoon and found her dead in the bathtub. No blood, Chandler. And she had those funny little marks on her neck, just like the Fairfield woman did, and the M.E.'s office thinks it happened last night sometime. God, but I hate this job."

"What else?" Daisy prodded, knowing there was more because she could read O'Halloran so well. She didn't argue that he shouldn't hate his job, because he always did when there was a murder. So did she.

O'Halloran gave a deep, sorrowful sigh, and Daisy could just see him running a stubby hand through what was left of his hair. "She worked for that magician, too. The one that's been packing them in down at the Venetian since the hotel opened—" Daisy heard papers rustling. "Let's see here," her partner went on. "His name's—"

"Valerian," Daisy said, leaning against the wall and closing her eyes as tightly as she could.

7

*Valerian*

*Las Vegas, 1995*

For the second time in as many nights, I regained consciousness at sunset to find that there had been another murder. I saw poor Susan's death plainly before I ever opened my eyes—the horrible images were imprinted on the insides of my lids—and I glimpsed the vampire who had done the killing as well. I

could not recognize the fiend, for its face was shadowed by a hooded cloak, but I intuited that the creature was male, and for a reason I could not grasp, I felt that I should have known him.

I wept with grief and helpless frustration, although I had not been well acquainted with Miss Cantrell, as I rose from my luxurious pallet and began to dress. This night there would be no performance at the Venetian Hotel—how could there be? No, tonight I would hunt, traverse centuries and continents if necessary, to run this monster to earth and put a finish to him by whatever means that might seem prudent at the moment.

Before destroying this vampire, however, I would extract much in payment for the suffering of my friends. I was furious that the thing had not confronted me directly, for I was obviously the true object of its hatred. The creature was cowardly, however, as well as implacably vicious; it clearly knew that, save Maeve Tremayne, who had not been weakened by her marriage to a fledgling named Calder Holbrook, I was the most powerful blood-drinker on this plane of existence. Better, then, to torment me through those helpless beings close to me, those I valued and, in my way, loved.

I had to find it before another innocent died.

*Before it turned to Brenna—now Daisy Chandler—the love of my eternal life.*

Before the ruby ring arrived.

I was drawn to the living room of my hideaway, and the television set descended from the ceiling as I entered. I had not willed this to happen, and I felt a mental chill as I watched light flicker in the center of the screen and then spread into an image. My lair had heretofore been sacrosanct, but now it seemed that some other creature dared to work magic within its walls.

Perhaps, I thought, I would not have to search out my enemy after all. Perhaps he had come to me.

The televised picture solidified into an image of Brenna, riding boldly into the surf, laughing, never dreaming that her death was imminent. Before my eyes the scene shifted; Brenna was gone, and the raging sea had vanished to become a shoddy fifteenth-century tavern called the Horse and Horn. Brenna appeared instantly, immediately recognizable for her green eyes and coppery hair, but now her name was Elisabeth Saxon. She was a bold and fiery wench, her cheap dress showing too much of her bosom, flirting shamelessly with the ruffians she served, permitting them to touch her. Driving me half mad with jealousy and frustration. She faded away, and then I saw Jenny Wade, my lovely Jenny, another incarnation of Brenna, though she wore the lush, red-blond hair in a tidy chignon and her green eyes were sightless. I had cherished her especially, because she loved me so completely and so selflessly without ever seeing my face.

Jenny and I were together in the late sixteenth century, for far too short a time.

I heard that gentle angel whisper my name, and when the screen went blank, I was startled to find myself standing in front of the set with both hands pressed to the glass.

"No more," I whispered, for I could not bear to see the other incarnations my beloved had donned, like pretty frocks, over the centuries. It was enough to be reminded of Brenna and Elisabeth and Jenny, of how completely and how hopelessly I had loved them, all different facets of the same glorious, intrepid spirit.

Suddenly another picture spilled across the surface, and I drew back, appalled. The leading lady in this

new tableau was Daisy Chandler—the latest incarnation of Lady Brenna Afton-St. Claire. I saw that she lived in one of those bland and anonymous apartments that are so prevalent in the twentieth century, with no more variance between the units than between the cells in a honeycomb.

"Daisy," I muttered, but of course she could not hear me. She was only an image, but a modern version of Brenna nonetheless, projected from the dark depths of my mind—or, more likely, the mind of my enemy, whoever and whatever it was.

I watched as Daisy moved about her small kitchen, preparing a frozen dinner—a peculiarity of the modern age that makes me glad vampires do not require the same sort of sustenance mortals do—and I heard the nerve-jangling ring of her telephone. When she answered, "Chandler," I was touched by the note of bravado in her voice.

I could not discern what the caller said, but I saw Daisy's lovely, impudent face go white with fear and fury. I watched and listened helplessly as she slammed the receiver back into its cradle and then sagged against the wall, trembling.

I wanted to will myself to her side, to draw her into my arms and offer her what comfort I could, but better judgment prevailed. The vignette I'd seen was not occurring at that moment; it was a colorful shadow of the future. If I went to Daisy then, I might find her in the shower, driving her car, doing any one of the millions of wonderful mundane things mortals do. It would be neither kind nor wise to reveal my unique powers to her in such an abrupt way.

Yet I feared for her in those moments as I had never feared for another living being. My unknown foe had shown me all these visions, but most especially the last, to taunt me with the fact that it was stalking Daisy, that it meant to murder her as it had already murdered poor Jillie and Susan.

I closed my eyes. *What was this thing ?*

There was no answer, of course—not then. The television screen went dark and returned to its nesting place in the ceiling with a low, electronic buzz.

I was instantly possessed of a brutal weariness, as abject as if my immortality had suddenly proved an illusion or a jest, as if my vampiric powers had been wrested from me and I had been reduced to a fragile, human state. To ask such pitiful flesh and bone to bear the weight of some six hundred years of adventurous living would be like expecting a spider's web to support a cathedral.

With some effort, I collected myself, faced down the consuming panic that threatened me, and centered my thoughts on the one immortal I truly trusted, the only vampire I dared depend upon for help and advice.

I sought Maeve Tremayne, once my fledgling and now my friend and my queen—she who knew our species to be ungovernable, and governed it nonetheless. She who protected us from our foes, be they angels, warlocks, or rogue vampires, and meted out punishment for our crimes.

I found her in the uppermost chamber of her London house. She shared the residence with her mate, Holbrook, who had been a brilliant physician and surgeon in his mortal life. Their remarkable child, Kristina, was grown and far away.

Maeve was at her weaving when I arrived, and alone, as I would have preferred. Calder and I are not particularly friendly; I find him too absorbed in his incessant experiments, and he dislikes me, I suspect,



for my superior mind.

Maeve feigned a little sigh when she saw me and said, "Ah, Valerian. What now?"

*Daisy*

*Las Vegas, 1995*

Susan Cantrell had died in the same way Jillie Fairfield had, except for a few small details. Her slender dancer's body had been virtually bloodless and unmarked except for the two small puncture wounds at the base of her throat.

The differences were minimal—Jillie was murdered in her living room, and she'd been partially clothed.

Susan's body was found naked, and in a ludicrously modest pose, lying in her bathtub.

Two full days after the killing, late in the afternoon, Daisy left the city morgue in a daze. She'd seen corpses before—a lot of them in far worse condition than Miss Cantrell's—but there was something chillingly different about these cases. Even O'Halloran was subdued, and he wasn't given to sensitive contemplation of the deeper mysteries.

"You gonna be okay, Chandler?" he asked when he and Daisy stood between their cars in the parking lot.

She thought of the calls she'd been getting, and a shiver of pure paranoia trickled down her spine and formed a chilly pool in her stomach.

"Yeah," Daisy answered. "As soon as we nail this pervert, I'll be fine."

O'Halloran nodded, opened his car door, and pushed a crumpled potato chip bag off the seat before getting behind the wheel. "You watch out for yourself," he said. "You get any hotshot ideas, you call me. Don't go running off on your own. You hear me?"

Daisy sighed and saluted.

O'Halloran slammed his door and rolled down the window. "And eat a decent dinner for once in your life, will you? Something besides them frozen things with more calories in the carton than in the food."

She smiled. "A nutrition lecture from you?" she said. "*Imust* be in a bad way."

"Get outta here," O'Halloran said. "I'm tired of looking at you." With that, he started up his car and backed out with a screech, narrowly missing Daisy's left foot and a UPS truck.

Daisy got into her car and locked both doors with a flick of a button on her armrest. Ironic as it was, she suspected O'Halloran was right about her eating habits. She hadn't had real, unrefined food in days, and she felt like an old beater in need of an oil change.

She went back to her office for an hour, going over reports and statements on the Fairfield and Cantrell cases, looking for something—anything—she might have missed.

Later, on the way home, she stopped at a supermarket in her neighborhood, arriving just after dark, and



started wheeling a cart down the aisles. A well-nourished, healthy cop, she reasoned, is a smart and insightful cop. She bought fresh vegetables and fruit, chicken and fish, bread and cereal, and some skim milk. She was standing in the checkout line, reading a tabloid article about space aliens having affairs with members of Congress, when her personal reality splintered.

Suddenly she wasn't Daisy anymore, and at the same time she was, and she was no longer standing in a busy supermarket in one of Las Vegas's more ordinary neighborhoods.

Her name was Elisabeth Saxon, the year was 1457, and she was serving ale in a tavern with the picturesque name of the Horse and Horn. Everything around her seemed real, although she knew it was an illusion, that she was finally cracking—everything from the spit-slickened board floors to the impossibly grubby men seated at tables all around her. They were singing bawdy songs, in a version of English she could barely understand, and swilling ale between choruses.

One of them reached out and pinched her hard on the backside, and she was still Daisy enough to be outraged. She spun around on the heel of her soft leather shoe and clouted the culprit over the head with a pewter trencher.

*Atrencher*? She thought frantically, looking down at the weapon in her hands even as her victim swayed beneath the blow. Since when did she refer to platters as "trenchers"?

A raucous cheer rose from the crowd of unwashed revelers, and Daisy—that*was* her real name, wasn't it?—glanced wildly about for an escape route. There was a door open to a starry night, and she dashed toward it, her customers grabbing at her apron and her skirts as she passed.

She collided with a hard form in the doorway, felt strong hands close over her shoulders.

"It's all right," a familiar voice told her gently, and she looked up into the dark blue eyes of the magician, Valerian. "You're safe. I'll take you home."

His clothes were strange—he wore a tabard, belted at the waist, and his silk shirt was puffed at the shoulders and then fitted to his wrists. Woven hose accentuated his muscular legs, and high boots, with cuffs folded down from the top, covered his feet.

All the same, this was the man she knew from her dreams—and from the Venetian Hotel in that faraway world she was already starting to forget.

She fainted, and he caught her up in his arms. When Daisy came around, she was back in the supermarket, and Valerian, incredibly, was there, too. He was holding her.

Daisy stared at him and saw understanding in his eyes, along with sorrow. She was struck in that instant with the dizzying realization that he knew exactly what had just happened to her, that he had indeed shared the experience.

"Put me down," she said, embarrassed by the gathered crowd and the revolving lights in the parking lot. Obviously the paramedics had been called. "I'm*fine*, damn it."

Valerian set her on her feet without a word, but there was a wry twist to his mouth. She stole a sidelong glance at him, half expecting to see that he was wearing a tabard and boots, but his clothes, though obviously expensive, were quite ordinary, quite suited to the twentieth century. Black slacks, a gray silk skirt, Italian shoes.

The paramedics burst through the doors, and Daisy's embarrassment intensified. She knew the majority of these people—worked with them practically every day of her life. The very last thing she needed was for them to think she was losing her grip.

"What happened?" Charlie Cook, the senior EMT, asked Daisy, looking around for the patient.

"Nothing," Daisy said without looking at Valerian, pushing her hair back from her forehead as she spoke.

"Nothing?" demanded a middle-aged checkout clerk with the name Marvella stitched onto her red smock. "This young woman fainted dead away, right here in my line. Went down like a ton of bricks. And look at her—she's pale as milk."

Charlie looked stern, and his co-worker, a rookie Daisy wasn't acquainted with, studied her with a critical eye.

"We'd better check you over, Chandler. After all, it isn't normal to pass out in the supermarket when they haven't even rang up your total yet."

Daisy grinned, though she felt shaky and sick and wanted nothing so much as to be alone with Valerian, so she could ask him what the hell had just happened to her. She was certain that he knew. "Okay," she said, pushing back her hair again. "But just let me pay for this stuff first. I don't want to lose my place in line."

"Funny," Charlie said, and then he glanced at Valerian.

The magician nodded and spoke for the first time. "I'll look after her," he said.

Charlie was apparently satisfied; he cocked a thumb toward the parking lot and told Daisy, "We'll be waiting outside. Follow the flashing red lights."

Daisy paid for her purchases, Valerian standing silently beside her the whole time, and then started to push the cart out of the store. He edged her aside and took over the small task.

"Did you cast some kind of spell over me back there?" she whispered. "Or am I losing my mind?"

"Neither," he answered, with that half smile that tugged at something deep inside her. "What happened to you is called spontaneous regression. You just visited one of your past lives."

"Oh, right," Daisy retorted. She had a headache—stress-related, to be sure.

"Your name was Elisabeth Saxon," Valerian said. "You lived in the mid-fifteenth century. You were a serving wench, and something of a lightskirt, at the Horse and Horn, a tavern on the London road."

Daisy stared up at him as the supermarket doors swished open and they went outside into the dry warmth of the night. "How did you—?"

"I was there, remember?"

He had been.

"I'm having a nervous breakdown," Daisy announced.

Valerian raised one majestic eyebrow. In the glow of stars, streetlights, and the not-too-distant Strip, his skin had a translucent quality. "Are you?" he countered, pushing the cart toward her car without being told which one it was. "If that's the case, then how do you explain my presence there? I was on the threshold of that inn, Daisy, when you hurtled into my chest like a rabbit fleeing a pack of foxes."

Daisy murmured an exclamation. "What is this? Some kind of hypnosis?"

"I'll explain it later," he said, glancing down at the trunk of her car. It sprung open, though neither he nor Daisy had touched the latch, and Valerian began putting the grocery bags inside, that curious little smile playing on his mouth again. "You'd better let your friend listen to your heart, test your reflexes, and look into your ears," he added, nodding toward the ambulance parked only a few spaces away. "He'll follow you home if you don't."

"You'll wait?" Daisy asked. She should have been afraid of this man, she supposed, but she wasn't. Instead she was full of questions she knew only he could answer.

"I'll be right here," he said.

Daisy started to turn away, men frowned down at the trunk of her car, now tightly closed again. "How did you open that without a key?"

Valerian shrugged. "I'm a magician, remember?"

Daisy left him, shaking her head.

She endured the exam, which was perfunctory, knowing all the while that Charlie probably thought she'd fainted because she was pregnant. By this time tomorrow, she figured, the word would be out that Detective Chandler had passed out in the supermarket with a cheap tabloid in her hands. She'd be called into the chief's office, no doubt, and probably taken off the Fairfield/Cantrell case if she didn't talk fast. Her boss was more likely to attribute the fainting spell to stress than pregnancy, and to decide that Daisy needed a break from homicide.

Maybe she did. God knew, she didn't love it.

Valerian waited, as he'd promised, and he insisted on taking the wheel.

Daisy looked around the lot. "Where's your car?"

"I don't own one," he said and offered no further explanation.

Daisy gave him the keys because on that one night she needed to lean on somebody. The fact that he was a stranger, for all practical intents and purposes, and up to his eyeballs in murdered chorus girls, didn't seem to make a difference.

"Where do you live?" he asked, once they were inside the car, though Daisy guessed from his tone that he already knew her address. For some reason, he was going through the motions.

"Are you the nutcase who's been calling me?" she inquired after rattling off directions to her apartment complex.

"No," he said, starting the engine and driving with an easy confidence that made Daisy wonder why he didn't have a car of his own. It wasn't that he couldn't afford one, that was for sure—headliners like him brought home the big bucks.

Maybe he'd lost his license, she speculated to avoid scarier concerns for a little while longer.

"I didn't have a license to lose," he said, as if Daisy had spoken aloud. "And I don't own a car because I have no need for one. Furthermore, the phrase *big bucks*, tacky as it is, doesn't begin to describe my salary. Now, could we talk about the real issue here?"

Daisy sagged back in the passenger seat, knocked breathless by his words. "I wish you'd teach me that trick," she said after a few moments of tumultuous silence, her voice squeaky with bravado. "Mind reading would come in handy when I'm interrogating suspects."

He gave her a sidelong look, then turned his attention back to the road. "Come back in a thousand years or so. By that time the ability will have evolved to the point where ordinary mortals can use it."

The term *ordinary mortals* nettled Daisy, and, besides, it sounded weird, as if Valerian considered himself to be outside the category. "Gee, thanks," she snapped, to hide the fact that she was seriously spooked. "Of course, most of my cases will probably be solved by then, though God knows the paperwork won't be caught up. On the other hand—what will I care? I'll be somebody else."

"You don't believe me?"

"Why should I?"

He smiled. "Why, indeed?" he replied, signaling to turn onto the side street that ran behind her building. "Perhaps our little talk will change your mind—if the incident in the supermarket truly wasn't enough."

"I want to ask you some questions while we're chatting," Daisy said as he brought the car to a stop in her assigned space. Which, of course, was unmarked. She got out of the car and closed the door with a bang. "Like how come the women in your act are being murdered?"

"I don't know," he answered with a weariness on a scale with Daisy's own and perhaps even greater. "Maybe you and I can figure that out together, after you know the truth." He handed her the keys and then opened the trunk, again with no outward motion, and took out both grocery bags.

Daisy led the way up the outside stairs to her apartment.

Inside, Valerian carried the bags to the kitchen and set them on the counter. "Sit down," he said when Daisy started putting things away. "You're still in shock."

With that, he took a head of lettuce and a bag of tomatoes from Daisy's hands and proceeded to put them in the refrigerator. Daisy sat on one of the two stools at the breakfast bar and cupped her chin in one hand.

"Evidently," she said, "your wish is my command."

He grinned at her, and again she felt a wrenching, so far within herself, so far back in her memory, that momentary tears burned behind her eyes. He took a half-eaten entree, still in its box, and carried it

disdainfully from the refrigerator to the trash bin. "Wretched stuff," he muttered.

Daisy was defensive. "I suppose you eat nothing but gourmet fare?"

He laughed and returned to the task of emptying the grocery bags. "*Au contraire*," he said. "I subsist on a very simple liquid diet. It's the secret of my great longevity, along with a certain talent for evading the consequences of my own actions."

Daisy ran her eyes over Valerian's magnificent physique and discounted most of what he'd just said. Nobody looked likethat living on fruit juice or vitamin shakes. "I believe that last part—about your evading the consequences of your own actions, I mean," she conceded. "But I'm warning you right now—if you killed those women, I'll get you."

"I believe you would," he answered thoughtfully, having finished putting the food away. "You're very good at what you do, I think."

"So are you," Daisy said, remembering his magic act at the Venetian Hotel, the way he'd opened the trunk of her car, that knack he had of appearing in her dreams. That night he'd even managed to be a part of a psychotic episode.

Impressive.

He brewed tea for her—her favorite English brand, purchased in London in the food stalls at Harrod's by a friend who worked for an airline. Not surprisingly, he didn't ask where it was, where the cups were, or if she wanted tea at all. He simply made it and set it in front of her.

She took a sip, and some of her strength returned. "Am I going crazy?" she asked, addressing herself as much as Valerian.

He leaned against the breakfast bar from the other side, arms folded on the countertop. "No," he said easily, "but there is much I must tell you. You have, to paraphrase one of your better poets, 'miles to go before you sleep.'"

"Talk," Daisy said.

*Valerian*

*Colefield Hall, 1365*

"You are ready at last," Challes announced one winter night, some three months after he'd found me unconscious in a horse stall. We'd accomplished a great deal in the time that had passed since, but I was young and impatient for the gift to be given, and it seemed then that my tutor had deliberately withheld the joys he'd promised. That he wanted to taunt and torment me.

He had brought me along so slowly, making sure I ate robustly, so that my frame filled out, teaching me to fence, that I might be graceful, pouring the most exquisite music into my ears and inundating me with poetry and numbers, philosophy and science, languages and etiquette.—

I was an apt student, perhaps because of my eagerness to be what Challes was, to do what he did, and I was handsome in my fine new clothes, with my trimmed hair and clean-shaven face. I possessed an almost boundless vitality, even surpassing the energies of my early youth, except during the blissfully

languid interval following Challes's nocturnal visits to my bedside.

"Tonight, then?" I cried, nearly oversetting my chair by the drawing room fire, where I had learned so many lessons, as I bolted to my feet.

"Tonight," Challes confirmed with tenderness and sorrow in his voice.

I wondered at his sadness, but I was too self-absorbed, too eager to make the change, to ask why he was troubled.

There was a Roman couch beneath the window, with its glittering frosting of ice, and my tutor led me to that and bade me to lie down.

I would have done almost anything he commanded, for by that time I loved him completely. My adoration for Challes was a thing of purity and grace, transcending genders, a joining of spirits rather than bodies. There are those who would call me deviant; instead, I am simply whole.

I did as Challes asked, closing my eyes while he opened the collar of my shirt, listening to the thin, far-off cries of the wolves. I felt their starvation in my own gut, and at the same time my whole being, flesh and soul, hummed with the anticipation of ecstasy.

My joy was terrifying, beyond anything I'd felt before, surpassing every happiness except what I had known in the arms of Brenna Afton-St. Claire. Nothing, before or since, on earth or in heaven, could rival the mere touch of her hand. Still, the pleasure Challes gave me was keen-edged and beautiful.

He had told me that I would die as a man, during this, the greatest of our communions, but when I felt my mortal life ebbing away, I panicked and tried to cry out. By then I was too weak to make a sound, and certainly I could not struggle, but Challes murmured words of comfort and soothed me with gentle whispers. I sank quietly into my death, and all consciousness was obliterated, swallowed up in darkness.

When I awakened, I realized I was in a cryptlike vault, under the earth. I lay on a slab of cold stone, and Challes slumbered an arm's length away on another pallet of rock. I heard rats scabbling in the corners and shuddered.

A low chuckle sounded, and I turned my head to see that Challes had awakened and lay with his weight braced on one forearm.

"No need to be afraid, Beautiful One," he said. "The rats cannot hurt you. Nothing can, except sunlight or the point of a wooden stake. If you do as I have taught you, you will live forever."

I had wanted this, yearned and pleaded for it, and yet the magnitude of eternity was only then coming home to me. *Never* to die? To never lay down my burdens and rest?

"Now you must learn to hunt," Challes told me, rising from his slab and dusting off his leggings and tunic. "Once that is done, I shall be gone."

I sat bolt upright. He had never spoken of leaving. Did he truly mean to abandon me now, when there was still so much I did not understand?

As he had done so many times before, my tutor laid his hands to my shoulders. "It was worth incurring Nemesis's ire to create such a splendid fiend as you," he said.

I knew, from our studies together, that Nemesis was a warrior angel, greatly feared in the dark realms. "You've had dealings with—" I could barely speak the name, it inspired such terror in me. "With *Nemesis*?"

"In a manner of speaking," Challes replied without flinching. "I have made too many blood-drinkers for his liking, and he is a powerful angel. He vowed revenge, with or without the permission of higher angels, should I make even one more." He feigned a sigh. "Alas, you are so beautiful and so bright—even in your drunkenness, you were magnificent. I could not resist making you immortal, for you were wasted as a mere man. To think of you here a moment, then gone—it was too painful to endure."

"What price have you paid?" I whispered, but I knew the answer already, and it filled me with fathomless grief.

Challes, my teacher, my only friend, was to be destroyed.

Because of me.

I whispered an exclamation that might have qualified as a prayer, had I been anything other than the abomination I was, and wept my first tears as a vampire.

Would that they had been my last.

8

*Daisy*

*Las Vegas, 1995*

The thing that surprised Daisy most about Valerian's story—and it was an incredible tale, spanning some six hundred years—was that she was very much inclined to believe it. She guessed she'd had some glimmer of the truth that first night, in the showroom at the Venetian Hotel, when she'd watched him raise a coach and a team of horses off the stage floor and send them sailing out over the audience members' heads. And while she still didn't consciously remember being those other women he spoke of with such passion and love—Brenna Afton-St. Claire, Elisabeth Saxon, Jenny Wade—the mere mention of their names had struck a resonant chord within her. Perhaps the dreams she'd had all her life had not been dreams at all, but memories of those other lifetimes.

"I've looked exactly the same, in every incarnation?" she asked. "Is that how you recognized me?"

"Yes," Valerian said, his eyes glowing with affection. "You are always your same beautiful self, at least when I've known you—only the costumes and the hairstyles change. Still, I think I would know you even if your looks changed significantly. I felt your presence in the audience at the Venetian long before I actually saw you."

She nodded thoughtfully. "I've read about reincarnation," she said, "like almost everyone else. But I thought people came back in different bodies, sometimes as men, sometimes as women."

"They do normally," Valerian affirmed. "You are an exception, and you needn't ask me why, for I



confess I do not know. I can tell you that souls tend to return to the flesh in the company of others they've known and loved or hated in the past."

"You've told me that you can travel through time—back to the point of your own death as a mortal. If that's so, am I in all those other places, as all those other selves, simultaneously? Can you journey back there and see me as Jenny, for instance? Or Elisabeth?"

The magnificent face was drawn for less than a moment with terrible grief. "I don't know," he said. "Some vampires can change the course of events and see and influence the ones they love. Whenever I've tried to find you, however, I've met with utter failure."

She considered that. "Talk about information overload," she murmured. "If you're really Count Dracula, Junior," Daisy reasoned at some length, still sitting at the breakfast bar, elbows on the counter, fingers buried in her hair, "why haven't you tried to bite my neck? And why should I believe you when you say you didn't commit the Fairfield and Cantrell murders? That was a vampire's M.O. if I've ever seen one."

Valerian smiled, and there was just a hint of condescension in it. "Have you?" he inquired. "Seen a vampire at work, I mean?"

Daisy sighed and sat up straight on the stool. "It was just a figure of speech," she said impatiently. "Answer my questions, please."

"I haven't 'tried to bite your neck,' as you so crassly put it, because I adore you—in whatever lifetime I happen to stumble across you. That is my curse. As for why you should believe I'm innocent of these killings—" He paused and shrugged aristocratically. "Because I have told you so. I have done murder in my time, make no mistake, but these poor little creatures? No. I cared for them."

Daisy pondered him skeptically, chin in hand, and said nothing. He had just confessed to the worst crime a person can commit, but she could not picture him taking a life and therefore did not really believe that he had.

"All right," Valerian snapped, waving his arms in a gesture of wild impatience. "Don't believe me. Lock me up in one of your silly jails. But I warn you"—he was shaking his finger now—"that any attempt to detain me is an exercise in futility. If you try, I shall evaporate like so much smoke!"

Daisy looked down at her empty cup and frowned. Her head was still fogged, and it was late. Maybe that was why she believed everything Valerian said; because she was tired and her defenses were down. Or perhaps he'd drugged her. "I'll keep that in mind. Did you put something in my tea?"

Valerian drew himself up, annoyed to a truly imperial degree. "*Ofcourse* not. I have no need of such silly contrivances—I am a vampire!"

Daisy sighed. "Have I missed something? Did Halloween sneak up on me this year?"

He leaned across the counter and bared his teeth with a theatrical hiss.

She bounded off the stool, wide-eyed, her heartbeat making a one-second leap to warp speed. Valerian's incisors, while beautiful like their dazzling counterparts, were longer, and they came to distinct points, sharp as a wolf's fangs.

"Shit!" she blurted, before regaining her courage, easing back to the counter, and raising herself onto the

stool again.

"Trick or treat," he said.

Daisy flushed, embarrassed that she'd shown fear. "You could have had that done," she reasoned hastily. "This town is full of people with custom-made teeth. Some of them are probably even crazy enough to think they're vampires!"

Valerian subsided a little, leaning back against the counter opposite the breakfast bar, his hands on his hips, and regarded her wearily. "What do you want, Daisy? How do I prove to you that I'm telling the truth?"

She leaned forward again, studying him for a long time. She was mystified by this maniac, or this vampire, whichever he was. But, oddly, she wasn't afraid of him; underlying all her misgivings was a strange sense of familiarity and the sure knowledge that she was safe in his presence. "I did not say I didn't believe you," she reminded him. "Something weird is definitely going on here. I just need to work through it for myself, that's all." She paused, remembering her impromptu visit to the year 1457, via the supermarket, and how vivid the experience had been. There could be no denying that the episode was more than a dream or a hallucination. "I saw you," she said. "In my—vision, I mean. But you were wearing different clothes. If you were really there, how did you make such a quick change?"

Valerian made a sound that might have been a sigh, but was somehow different. "I merely projected myself into the scene," he said patiently, "complete with costume. You saw me because I wanted you to see me."

Daisy ran her tongue over her teeth, something she often did when she was pondering an enigma. Her headache was starting to come back, and if she didn't get some sleep, she'd be a zombie all the next day. "Earlier, when you were telling me the story of your life, you said you could travel back in time, as far as the point of your own death as a mortal."

He sighed again. "Yes."

"What's to prevent you from meeting yourself somewhere between now and then?"

"Nothing. Occasionally it happens. It's a paradox, like time travel itself."

"I don't understand."

"I'm not surprised. I don't understand, either. I suspect that no one does—at least, not completely. It's a universe of specialties—vampires are vampires, roses are roses, jellyfish are jellyfish. Which of us can grasp the whole of reality, in all its multifaceted complexity?"

Daisy didn't have an answer.

Valerian came around the counter and very gently touched her face, his thumb tracing the outline of her cheekbone. "My poor love," he said. "You've always been this way, you know—wanting answers to impossible questions, tilting at windmills, chasing rainbows. Just as you always have copper-colored hair, green eyes, and a smattering of freckles across your nose."

A shiver of mingled delight and passion moved through Daisy, and strange erotic images stirred in her memory. She did not recoil, although Valerian was still a stranger, and probably a dangerous one at that.

Instead, she wanted him to make love to her, she who had slept with exactly three men in her entire life.

The pad of that same thumb strayed sensuously across her mouth. "Soon," he said, apparently reading her mind again. A thoughtful expression darkened his eyes. "But perhaps a small reminder of what we've shared together over the centuries would not be amiss."

He was a hell of an actor, Daisy thought. There were so many things happening in her body, so many sensations bouncing from one part of her insides to another, like laser beams running amuck, that she didn't have the energy to speak.

Valerian smiled ever so slightly, bent his head, and kissed her.

It was only a brief contact, a mere brushing of his lips against hers, but it rocked Daisy to her core. The earth seemed to spin away beneath her feet and shoot off into space, leaving her dangling in a throbbing void. There was no oxygen, and her heart swelled painfully against her rib cage.

She gasped and stared up into Valerian's wise eyes—she could well believe that he was six hundred years old in that moment, for she saw so many emotions reflected there, in that fathomless blue, myriad things that could not have been garnered in a normal lifetime.

"Why aren't I afraid?" she whispered.

He smoothed her hair, and even that innocent motion sent new fissures streaking through her few remaining defenses, caused the last walls to crumble and the innermost doors to swing open. "Because you know, in the essence of yourself, that I would brave hell itself for you." He glanced at the window above the sink. "It will be dawn soon. I must go."

Daisy was disappointed. Hadn't he promised to stay?

He'd read her thoughts again. "I promised a small reminder of what we had together," he clarified with a smile. "And now for one of my more impressive tricks."

With no more preamble than that, he vanished. In the space of an instant—with no drumrolls, no smoke, no mirrors—he was simply *gone*.

Daisy swore and leaped off the stool, as if to pursue the magician into thin air. She thought she heard, far in the distance, the faintest echo of a chuckle.

She stood there for a few moments, open-mouthed, convinced she was certifiable, before her basically pragmatic nature took over. After washing her face, brushing her teeth, and gulping down two aspirin, Daisy fell into bed and slept like a dead woman.

She did not dream.

With the morning and full consciousness came vivid memories of the night before—her "spontaneous regression" to the fifteenth century, Valerian's wild, and undeniably fascinating, tale of living six centuries as a vampire, that soul-shattering kiss, and, finally, his spectacular disappearance.

He was a magician, she reminded herself. But that single fact didn't explain all the things she'd seen and felt. There was more to it—much more.

All right, then, Daisy's highly developed left brain argued, he was a hypnotist as well as a stage wizard. He'd said straight out that he could project his own image into her mind at will, hadn't he? That, supposedly, was how he had joined her in the Horse and Horn, when she was Elisabeth Saxon, erstwhile tavern wench.

Somehow, logical as it was, that explanation didn't work, either.

Daisy tossed back her covers and got up. She was probably getting an ulcer from trying to figure this out—better to let it simmer in her subconscious for a while and think of other things with the everyday brain cells. She'd gotten to the crux of more than one case that way—using what O'Halloran called her woman's intuition.

She smiled. He'd never claimed to be original.

After going to the bathroom, Daisy opened her front door and picked up the newspaper lying on the mat. The headline wiped the smile from her face.

POLICE DUB RECENT CRIMES 'VAMPIRE MURDERS.'

"What police?" Daisy grumbled, pushing the door shut with her foot and scanning the article as she crossed the apartment to the kitchenette. "Nobody asked *me* about the case."

The piece was peppered with quotes from one Detective John P. O'Halloran, who was, according to the reporter, "in charge of the investigation." Daisy might have been his golf caddie, for all the mention she got, but she didn't care about that. What bothered her, and she knew it was a waste of time to worry about it, was the way the press seemed to *glamorize* what had happened.

Whoever the killer was, he was sure to get off on the attention and notoriety.

When the telephone rang, she was already reaching for the receiver to call the office. She almost hoped it would be the screwball who'd harassed her after Jillie Fair-field's murder; there was a thing or two she wanted to say to him.

Alas, the voice that replied to her brisk "Hello, this is Chandler" was O'Halloran's.

"It's your partner," he said, master of understatement that he was.

Daisy dragged over one of the stools from the breakfast bar and perched on it. "Oh, yes—the dimpled darling of the Fourth Estate. Tell me, O'Halloran, did you have to stay up all night to make the world safe for old ladies and Cub Scouts, or did you just take care of it on your break?"

"Smart-ass," O'Halloran said fondly.

"Have you got something new to tell me about the case, or are we going to go on exchanging sloppy sentiments all morning?"

He cleared his throat, then took a noisy slurp of what was probably coffee. He was stalling, and that was a bad sign.

"O'Halloran," Daisy pressed.

"All right, all right," her partner blurted. "The chief saw the EMT's report on your collapse at the supermarket last night. He wants you to take a few days' leave and get a checkup."

"Are you telling me that I'm suspended?"

"I'm telling you that you have to rest a few days and see a doctor. Don't come unwrapped on me now, Chandler, because this wasn't my idea. It came down from the brass."

"Shit," Daisy muttered, chewing one fingernail.

"You shouldn't talk like that. It ain't becoming."

Daisy struggled to regain her self-control before going on. There was no sense digging herself in deeper. "What the devil did Charlie tell those people?"

"That you passed out."

"And?"

O'Halloran let out a long-suffering sigh. "And the head office got a call from the checkout lady late last night—Marvella somebody. She was worried—said you were talking gibberish while you were out."

Daisy closed her eyes. "They want me to take a drug test, don't they, O'Halloran?"

"Look, it's routine—you know that. Any one of us could be asked to pee in a cup at any time."

She sighed. "I'm not popping pills or shooting up," she said, suddenly feeling as if she could crawl back into bed and sleep for two weeks. "You know that, don't you?"

"Hell, yes," O'Halloran answered gruffly. "Of course I know that. Look, partner, don't try to buck the system, okay? Just catch up on your sleep, get the checkup, and come back to work. If you stay out too long, somebody might get the idea that you're the real supercop and I'm just the sidekick. I've got to think about my image, you know."

Daisy laughed, even though there were tears gathering along her lashes. "Don't worry, fella—your reputation is safe with me."

She hung up the receiver and moved around the apartment in a sort of stupor, showering, brushing her hair and teeth, dressing in jeans and a lightweight sweater, making toast and a poached egg for breakfast. When she'd done those things, she got into her car and drove downtown.

After a thorough examination and a lot of questions, the official department physician announced that Daisy was suffering from exhaustion and recommended that she take two weeks' leave. Her first instinct was to resist, but then she reconsidered. She had all the signs of a classic case of burnout, and if she kept pushing herself, she might just wake up one morning to find that she was an ex-cop, with her law enforcement career behind her forever.

With that specter staring her in the face, Daisy filled out the necessary papers, called O'Halloran with the news, and then went back home. For now, she told herself, it was enough that there would be no question that she'd been abusing drugs.

She stayed in her apartment just long enough to pack and call her sister, Nadine, who reported that she was getting labor pains. Within half an hour Daisy was on her way to Telluride, tape deck blaring. The screaming ghosts of all her fears and doubts followed along, staying just inside the outermost edge of her awareness.

*Valerian*

*Las Vegas, 1995*

I knew Daisy was gone when I arose that evening, rested and ready to feed, and then to resume the hunt for my enemy. Her absence gave me a bereft, hollow sensation, in that dry and atrophied thing that had been my heart, but I thought it better that she was far away. The greater her distance from me, the safer she would be.

I fastened my cuff links, smiling to myself. I had chosen a special pair that night for luck, antique gold ones that had been a gift from a cherished friend, George Bernard Shaw. But it wasn't the jewelry that gave me pleasure, it was the idea of keeping a certain promise to Daisy.

Tonight she would know my magic in a new way, and I hoped it would cause her to remember all we had been to each other over the centuries. She had been a will-o'-the-wisp, flitting from one identity to the next, having the same face and body but a different name in each generation, and having no conscious memory of me whatsoever.

I, on the other hand, had always been Valerian. Endlessly, eternally myself.

I confess that I grow weary of my own company on occasion, fascinating though I am. One gets to know one's self, over the course of centuries, and the utter absence of surprise can grind at the spirit.

"How like you, Valerian, to wax philosophical," observed a cheerful feminine voice, catching me completely off guard.

I whirled to see Maeve standing only a few feet away, gloriously beautiful in her flowing, iridescent robes, her long dark hair falling free around her shoulders, her dark blue eyes like windows into the heart of the universe. She has a penchant for the dramatic, our Maeve, a fondness for spectacular entrances and fiery exits.

But then, so do I. Perhaps it is a trait of vampires, after all, for they tend to be flamboyant creatures.

"You honor me," I said with a slight inclination of my head, "both by your visit and your words."

She laughed. "Still charming as a serpent," she said, putting her hands on her hips. "What a flatterer you are." She paused again, gazing upon me thoughtfully. "I came to ask if there have been more difficulties with this rogue vampire you spoke of the other night."

"I have not been successful in tracking him down," I admitted ruefully. I thought of Daisy again and my resolve to protect her strengthened. "But you have my vow that I will put an end to his mischief, whoever he is."

Maeve picked up one of the pretty glass bottles I kept on my dressing table and examined it with the absorbed interest of one who appreciates fine craftsmanship. "Do not be too hasty, my friend," she warned, returning the bauble to its place before turning her gaze to my face. "This may not be a

blood-drinker, but a warlock, for instance, only posing as one of us. I feel certain that this is some sort of trap."

I almost whispered my next words. "Could it be that Lisette has returned?"

"No," Maeve answered with a reassuring lack of hesitation. "She is most certainly dead. You saw her perish—we all did."

"Still—"

"If Lisette had managed to resurrect herself, even in some other form, I would know it. We have other enemies, Valerian. There are many monsters roaming creation—ones we know nothing about. According to Calder, who has been performing some very interesting experiments since his transformation, there could well be other species of vampires, with different powers from our own. He has even uncovered evidence that gaps might exist between dimensions—passageways leading in and out of other realms and realities."

I found the mere prospect so overwhelming that I could not speak. The fiends of my acquaintance were daunting enough, without being joined by a host of other horrors skulking back and forth from one world to another.

Maeve folded her arms and looked at me with sisterly concern. "What is it that you're not telling me?"

I smiled sadly, touched and somehow calmed by this reminder that she cared for me. "I have found her again."

"Not—?"

I nodded, reaching up to straighten my elegant string tie. I often wear formal garb to hunt—a cape and tails, ruffled linen shirt and cummerbund, trousers with silk stripes down the outer seams—due to that theatrical streak I mentioned before, I suppose. And because my victims expect me to resemble the classic media vampire.

Who was I to disappoint the poor wretches?

"Yes," I said. "Same face, same body. This time her name is Daisy Chandler, and she's a homicide detective with the Las Vegas police."

Maeve looked worried. "You know what always happens—the ruby arrives, she dies, and then you are heartbroken. You must avoid this woman at all costs, Valerian, for your own sake as well as hers."

I wanted to weep at the impossibility of the situation, at the injustice and terrible irony of it all. "It's already too late," I confessed. "Besides, there is no avoiding Daisy. It's part of the curse."

"The curse," Maeve mocked. Surprisingly, considering what she is and what she's seen, my revered queen is not in the least superstitious. "That's a medieval idea. There is no dark magic at work here—someone or something is *causing* these things to happen. Find the root of the problem and you will know how to solve it."

"So practical," I said with a sad smile. Maeve is young, in terms of being a vampire, having been made quite recently, in the turbulence of the eighteenth century. "Do you fancy that I've never *tried* to uncover



the cause? I have searched for centuries, all to no avail. And every generation or so, the horror repeats itself."

She approached me and put a gentle hand on my arm. "Perhaps Calder can find some remedy in science," she said in an effort to lend comfort.

I laughed, though my feelings resembled bereavement more than mirth. "You have great confidence in that husband of yours."

Maeve nodded. "I have," she admitted. "And it is well placed, I assure you. Now, come with me. We'll feed together, and then search for this mysterious foe of yours."

"It has occurred to me," I said, looking down into her sweet, beautiful face, "that our cause would be better served by keeping watch over the four young women who remain in my employ. I shall sever all ties with them, of course—when I again perform my magic act, I will appear alone—but they seem the most likely targets."

"What about this Daisy woman? I should think she would be in the gravest peril of all."

There could be no denying that, but I had a suspicion that the creature wanted to punish me, to subject me to a lengthy and torturous ordeal. Logically, he was more likely to save Daisy's death for last—and to make it the most grisly of all.

I voiced these thoughts to Maeve, who agreed, though with reservations.

"Still," she said, "you must not leave her unguarded for long."

We linked arms, as though to enter a grand dining room or stroll onto a dance floor for a waltz. "I would like to bring Daisy here to my lair, where she would surely be safe, but mortals balk at such forms of protection—they consider them arbitrary. Remember how Calder hated your efforts to keep him out of danger?"

Maeve winced and then flashed me a guilty little smile. "He was quite impossible as a mortal," she said. "I like him much better as a vampire."

With that, we willed ourselves away.

Feeding was not a challenge—though neither of us had a taste for the blood of innocents—for humans with evil hearts, while in the minority, are still all too easy to find. Prisons abound with them, and so do the world's various halls of government.

When we had taken the necessary sustenance, Maeve and I set out on our search for the demon who had murdered Jillie and Susan.

Our efforts met with failure.

Daisy pulled into the parking lot of a well-known motel at ten-thirty that night, too tired to travel even one more mile. After buying half a turkey sandwich and a can of tomato juice in the convenience store across the highway, she locked herself in her room and sat cross-legged on the bed, consuming her dinner and watching the early news.

There was nothing about the so-called "vampire murders" in Las Vegas, but she supposed it was only a matter of time before the wire services and major networks picked up the story. What the tabloids could make out of it didn't bear thinking about.

She got off the bed and threw away the debris from supper, muttering to herself. "Don't think about work, Chandler. Think about Nadine and your niece or nephew. Think about happy things—fun things. Do you want to have a nervous breakdown, for heaven's sake?"

Daisy looked at her reflection in the mirror over the sink. "You're not a crazy person," she said forcefully. "You're smart and strong and brave, and a damn good cop on top of it all. And you *are not* losing your mind. You're just tired, that's all. A week with Nadine and you'll *bethrilled* to rub elbows with homicidal maniacs again!"

She laughed, but the sound lodged in her throat when the telephone rang.

A lesser person wouldn't have answered it at all, Daisy reflected, but she was Woman, and if she had to, she would roar.

"Hello!" she snapped.

A familiar chuckle came over the wire. "I found you," Valerian said. "There are times when I wonder if my magic is a plus or a minus."

Daisy was pleased out of all proportion to reason to hear his voice. Later she would think about the impossibility of his finding her in a motel she'd chosen at random. For the moment she was simply happy that he had.

"I guess it's a plus," she said. "If I asked how you tracked me down, would you tell me?"

"Sure," came the blithe reply. "But you're not going to ask me, are you? Because you already know the answer I'd give."

Daisy wound an index finger in the telephone cord, as wildly happy as a teenager about to be asked to the prom by exactly the right guy. "You'd say it was vampire magic."

"Something like that." He sounded solemn now, almost sad. "Are you all right, Daisy? Have I frightened you?"

She considered. "Yeah, you've done that all right, but in a different way than you probably think. It's a kind of quivery, excited feeling, like I get used to get in high school, when my girlfriends and I would go to a horror movie and then stay up half the night scaring the hell out of each other."

"I honestly don't know whether to be honored or insulted," he said, and the smile was back in his voice.

Daisy sighed. "Take your choice," she said. "You are definitely weird, but I've got to admit, I like you. Maybe it's the old snake-charmer syndrome."

"Maybe," he agreed. "I have to go now, love. But before I hang up, I'd like to ask you a question."

"Okay," Daisy replied.

"Do you remember the promise we talked about last night?"

She felt a shivery, delicious warmth in all the places where she was most feminine. "Yes," she said. "Sure."

"I'm about to keep my word," Valerian told her. "That is, if I have your permission."

Daisy was trembling with anticipation and sweet terror. If this was a sexual fantasy, it was a hot one, and she wasn't about to squelch it. "Okay," she said shakily.

"If you want the lovemaking to stop, you have only to form the thought in your mind, and it will be over."

Daisy was glad he couldn't see her—at least she didn't *think* he could—because she was blushing like crazy. "That sounds fair."

He chuckled. "Good night, Daisy."

"Good night," she whispered, but the line was already dead.

Confused, happier than she'd ever been, Daisy got ready for bed, turned out the lights, and slipped between the sheets. Both the nightgowns she'd brought were still neatly folded in her suitcase.

She lay still for a long time, waiting, half expecting Valerian to appear in her motel room in the same way he'd vanished from her apartment..

Forty-two minutes had passed on the digital clock on her bedside table when the urge to throw aside the blankets and sheets struck her like a sudden fever. She trembled as the cool night air touched her bare skin, making her nipples tighten.

In the next instant she felt hands on her flesh, and she knew the hands were Valerian's, even though she was still alone. Then she felt his lips, warm and wet and soft, on her breasts, on her belly, on her neck and her thighs. It seemed that every part of her, inside and out, was being kissed and caressed, fondled and teased.

Daisy arched her back, giving herself up to the passion that swept around and through her like a storm. She was reminded, in the midst of the wild ecstasy that followed, of a recent dream. She'd been someone else in that dream, living long ago and faraway, and she'd ridden a horse into a pounding surf. The waves had consumed her then; this time, it would be the pleasure, the mounting, excruciating, *glorious* pleasure.

9

*Valerian*

*England, 1457*

True to his word, Challes had abandoned me after teaching me the rudiments of feeding and protecting myself from certain gruesome perils to which vampires are subject. I was at my most licentious in the years and decades that followed; there were few pleasures I did not sample and even fewer sins I did not

commit. In retrospect, it seems that my proclivity for wine had been replaced by an equal devotion to the ever more capricious demands of my senses.

I was beautiful as an archangel and as self-centered as a spoiled child, and I resented my erstwhile tutor bitterly for leaving me to my own devices as he had. I carried cynicism to new heights, and might have continued on this treacherous and unsavory course if I hadn't happened into a seedy roadside inn one spring night in 1457. I'd been traversing the countryside in my coach, pretending to be a mortal, as I sometimes did when I was bored.

I doubt it will surprise you to learn that the place was the Horse and Horn and that I found Brenna within its shoddy walls, clad in a cheap, undyed gown that revealed too many of her charms and carrying pitchers overflowing with ale to tables full of leering louts.

Imagine my astonishment, my joy, my outrage! I had believed her dead—I *knew* she had perished in the waters off the coast of Cornwall—and yet here she was, looking as she had always looked, except for the coarse dress, laughing and bantering with a lot of louse-ridden sailors and highwaymen!

Utter silence descended when I was noticed at last, standing there in the doorway of that wretched establishment, a gentleman to all appearances, finely dressed and obviously rich. I heard their jumbled thoughts—more than a few planned to rob me, and most would have done murder for the least of my valuables—but I was interested only in Brenna.

She turned to see what had caught her customers' attention, and the look of speculation in her green eyes was devastating to me, for there was no recognition in them and certainly no love. She, like the bilge-rats and pickpockets seated round the rough-hewn wooden tables, was calculating my worth. The thought that I would pay well for a tumble in the straw, and probably be a pleasant partner in the bargain, flitted across her mind.

This was not my Brenna, and yet it was. The flowing, coppery hair, the slightly freckled and otherwise flawless skin, the sumptuous little figure and the breathtakingly beautiful emerald eyes all belonged to my beloved. The mind and spirit, at least in their deepest recesses, were hers, also; it was the outward character I did not recognize.

She sidled over to me, smoothed the fine silk of my tunic with the palms of her small, grubby hands, and smiled up into my rigid face.

"My, ain't you pretty," she crooned.

Catcalls erupted all over the room, but those men were no more to me than the vermin that crawled among the folds of their ragged garments and skittered behind the walls.

Despair nearly overwhelmed me, and yet I could not help rejoicing. In whatever form I found her, this was my treasured one. The darling of my heart. I would carry her away and, in time, share with her the gift Challes had given me. Together we could explore eternity.

"Brenna," I whispered, catching her fingers in my own.

"You can call me whatever name you want, pet," she simpered, batting her eyelashes and even managing to blush a little. "But I'm Betsey to me friends."

I wanted to carry her out of that place over one shoulder and to throttle her, at one and the same time.

In the end I did neither, for I could not move. "Betsey?" I echoed stupidly.

She drew herself up, preening, and her coquetry almost made me laugh, for she was no cleaner than if she'd been thrown down and dragged through a barnyard by her ankles. The poor thing suffered greatly in comparison to the sophisticated mortal women I normally consorted with; in her present state she barely had the grace to slop swine.

"Elisabeth Saxon's me full name," she announced very proudly.

More hoots and crude comments rose from the Great Unwashed, and I ignored them as before. I would deal with any who dared to approach me—or Elisabeth—later.

I placed a small leather pouch in her palm, weighted with gold, and watched with an odd mingling of pleasure and pain as her eyes lit up at the prospect of such wealth.

"Come with me," I said quietly.

Elisabeth did not hesitate; she untied her stained apron and tossed it aside, never noticing that it settled over one reveler's head like a crudely woven shroud. Then she offered her hand to me, and I took it and pushed her out into the dark dooryard of the inn.

Her companions rose almost as one from their benches and stools, and their faces, in the flickering light of the candles and the scant fire on the hearth, were the faces of fiends.

It was pitifully easy to intimidate them, however; no magic was required. I simply swept them up, one and all, in a look calculated to shrivel their very souls. None of them tried to follow as I turned and strode outside, catching Elisabeth's elbow in a forceful grasp as I passed her and thrusting her toward my waiting carriage.

"You're not one of that sort what likes to be rough with a girl, are you?" she asked as I bundled her inside.

"I won't hurt you," I said. I was trembling with emotions I could barely sort through—passion, fury, adoration, disgust. "Great Zeus," I muttered at last when we were settled and I had signaled the driver to be off with a rap of my knuckles on the carriage roof. "What's happened to you?"

Her eyes were huge in the darkness, and she held the small bag of gold tightly against her belly, as though fearing I might snatch it back from her at any moment. "What do you mean by that, sir? I've just been making me way in the world, like any girl would, in me place—"

"When was the last time you had a bath?"

Fire flared in her spirit, and I was heartened to see it.

"Baths ain't good for a lady's health," she said with conviction.

I folded my arms and regarded her in silence for a long time. "Don't you remember me, even a little?" I asked at last, unable to keep myself from voicing the deepest disappointment at all.

Elisabeth shook her head. "No," she answered bluntly. "And I'd recall a fine and fancy man like yourself if we'd ever met, now wouldn't I?" She paused to ponder me, though I must have been nearly invisible to

her in the thin moonlight, her lovely eyes narrowed. "Why did you call me by that other name, even after I told you it weren't mine?"

I feigned a sigh, wondering what this poor little urchin would think if she knew I wasn't a man, fine and fancy or otherwise, but a beast instead. A creature that ventured out of its vault only by night, loving the darkness, exalting in it, drawing nourishment from the veins of hapless mortals.

"You remind me of someone I knew a long time ago," I answered at length. I believe I realized, even then, that I would not be able to change Elisabeth back into Brenna, but I was not yet ready to accept the fact. I was still caught up in the miracle of finding her at all, and I did not think beyond the easing of my own terrible loneliness.

She held up the pouch and gave it a slight shake, causing the coins inside to jingle with merry solidity. "I guess you'll want plenty for this," she said with what seemed to me uncommon valor, given the circumstances. For all she knew, I meant to make full use of her grubby little body, kill her for sport, and reclaim my gold. She could not have guessed that I wanted only to be near her and keep her safe.

"Yes," I replied, settling back against the upholstered seat and folding my arms. "I will expect a great deal from you. You can start by putting your knees together—you look like a bawd, sitting there with one foot on either side of the coach."

Elisabeth flushed, and that raised the vampire hunger in me, though of course I quelled it immediately. Even I had standards, though one would not have guessed it by my behavior in the years prior to that momentous night, and I had no intention of feeding on her.

Which is not to say that the temptation didn't present one of the keenest agonies I've ever had to endure. Elisabeth's vitality, her sumptuousness, filled the interior of that carriage, thrumming like a heartbeat.

I took her to Colefield Hall, the estate that had been Challes's and was now mine. I had not seen him again since his farewell, shortly after my making.

The moon was high when we arrived, and she'd fallen asleep on the coach seat opposite me, curled up like a child.

She did not awaken when I carried her into the keep, or when I laid her gently on the finest bed in the house and covered her with the best blankets.

I stood there, gazing down at her, spellbound by her disheveled magic, stricken by her unexpected reappearance in my life. I had not made the effort to investigate such things up until that time, having been wholly devoted to the pursuit of unceasing pleasure, but now I could only conclude that Brenna had been reincarnated as this grimy, tousled hoyden.

For what purpose, I wondered, if not to find me, her true and only love, once again? That would explain why she looked exactly as she had a century before, in that other, too-brief existence.

She stirred in her sleep, and I smiled to myself. By returning, she had transformed me, I thought—for I, too, was still naive in my fashion, having troubled myself to learn so little of life and love.

I left her to hunt, retracing my steps, so to speak, to the dooryard of the Horse and Horn to feed, and returned to Colefield Hall just before dawn. I was settled in my vault, far beneath the earth, where the acidic light of the sun could not reach my vampire's flesh, when Elisabeth awakened and proceeded, as I

later learned, to set the household on its ear.

*Daisy*

*Between Las Vegas and Telluride, 1995*

The orgasm was violent, when at last it overtook her, seeming to slam her deep into the mattress even as it sent her hurtling upward to collide hard with the ceiling. She alternately moaned and mumbled incoherently, having no breath for the screams of pleasure that throbbed in the back of her throat, pitching and thrashing and clawing at the sheets with splayed fingers as her body convulsed in spasm after spasm of ecstasy. She longed for peace and stillness, fearing her heart would explode at any moment, it was beating so fast, and at the same time she prayed the release would never end.

Alas, it did, ebbing away slowly, like a tidal wave in grudging retreat, leaving a limp and trembling Daisy behind. She felt the sheen of perspiration cooling on her body, felt her hair clinging wetly to her cheeks and temples and nape. She huddled there upon that strange and anonymous bed, quivering inside an intangible cocoon that still reverberated with the force of her satisfaction. Her breath came in gasps and her heartbeat was still too rapid, thudding like the hooves of a fleet horse racing over hard ground.

She wept, because her mystical union with Valerian had been so unbearably beautiful, and because he was not there to gather her in his arms and hold her close. Then, exhausted, utterly sated, in soul as well as body, Daisy slept.

She awakened with a start, blinking against the bright sunlight sneaking between the blinds at her window, to the sound of someone pounding at the motel room door.

"What?" she demanded, pushing back her hair.

"Five minutes until checkout time," a woman warned cheerfully.

Daisy swore and scrambled out of bed to wash her face and brush her teeth. She wriggled into fresh clothes, grabbed her suitcase and purse, and made a dash for the door, and it was only later, when she had paid her bill, bought a breakfast sandwich, and hit the road again that she let herself think about what had happened the night before.

The languid, limp-muscled sense of well-being was still with her, a warmth that had settled in deep, soothing her nerves, permeating her very bones. As crazy as it was, and as impossible, there could be no denying that Valerian—or someone—had made slow, thorough, excruciating love to her in that motel room.

Without actually being there.

Daisy swallowed another bite of her sandwich. It was hypnosis again, she concluded, chewing. Valerian had known she was attracted to him, and he'd planted the seeds of that session of solitary passion by things he'd said to her, first in her apartment, and then over the telephone. Or maybe the whole thing had been a sort of hysterical hallucination and she'd done it all on her own...

She discarded the idea along with the rest of her sandwich and its paper wrapper, which she stuffed into a plastic garbage bag hanging from a knob on her dashboard. There was no easy explanation for the kind of long-distance lovemaking she'd enjoyed so much, or for Valerian himself.



He'd disappeared from her apartment, vanishing before her very eyes, and last night he'd given her the mother of all orgasms without even *being* there. Those were the facts—unless, of course, it turned out that she was suffering from a major case of self-delusion and had flunked the drug test after all.

Hardly likely, Daisy decided, keeping her eyes on the road. She'd tried to go into denial on several occasions, hoping to escape her problems, and it hadn't worked. She was just too damned left-brained to fool herself for more than a few minutes at a time.

Much as she might wish otherwise, Valerian was real. His magic was just that, and he had really and truly seduced her with his mind, from who knew how far away.

Daisy muttered an expletive and reached out to turn on the car radio.

Nadine, normally petite, was as big as the A-frame she shared with her earnest but quiet husband, a greeting-card artist named Freddy. They both looked sleep-rumpled and a little dazed, and Daisy felt a mild twinge of guilt for awakening them at one in the morning. She supposed she could have checked into a motel, but the truth was that she needed some time to recover. Another bout of psychic sex would probably have killed her.

She kissed Nadine's cheek and nodded to Freddy. "I'm sorry," she said. "I should have let you sleep."

Nadine, bundled in flannel, laughed and shook her head. She was twenty-two, with chin-length dark hair and brown eyes, and worked as a clerk in a supermarket. "Don't be silly. We're glad you're here, and I would have been worried if you didn't show up."

They were standing in the living room, and Freddy went over to fold out the hide-a-bed while Nadine helped Daisy out of her coat.

"I thought you said you were in labor," Daisy said, rubbing her hands together. The mountain air was crisp, and the fire in the woodstove had apparently gone out a long time ago.

"False alarm," Nadine said with a cheerful shrug. "Do you want a cup of cocoa or something? Are you hungry?"

Daisy felt a small, sharp twist in the center of her heart. She and Nadine had always mothered each other, except for that short stint when they'd lived with their grandmother, since Jeanine hadn't had a clue when it came to parenting. "No, sweetheart," she said, blinking rapidly and looking away for a moment. "If I find myself on the verge of starvation, I'll get up and raid the refrigerator. You go back to bed. You need your rest."

Freddy, having folded out the couch, proceeded to fling a few chunks of wood into the stove, which was set into an old-fashioned flagstone fireplace. "The bathroom's at the end of the hall," he told Daisy, putting a gentle hand to the small of Nadine's back and pushing her along ahead of him. "Night."

"Night," Daisy replied.

She found the bathroom, which was so cold they could have hung beef carcasses in there without fear of spoilage, and hastily washed and brushed her teeth. The living room was a little warmer, but she figured she would have been able to see her breath in front of her face if there had been enough light.

After stubbing her toe on one of the metal legs of the hide-a-bed, Daisy threw back the covers and

plunged beneath them, shivering.

She tossed and turned and finally tumbled into a fitful sleep. A sound awakened her sometime later, and she sat up, shoving a hand through her hair. At first she didn't remember where she was, and then she thought there was something wrong with her sister.

"Nadine?"

Silence.

Daisy sat up, groping for the switch on the lamp beside the couch, but before she found it her eyes adjusted to the darkness, and she saw him, standing at the foot of the bed. She didn't scream because she wasn't afraid.

"Valerian," she said softly.

"I'm sorry, love." She heard a smile in his voice. "Did I frighten you?"

"No. Are you really here, or is this one of your tricks?"

He came to sit beside her on the mattress, offering his hand. "I'm here, all right," he said.

"I'd hate to have to explain you to my sister and brother-in-law."

Valerian chuckled. "You won't have to. They're both sound asleep with visions of sugarplums dancing in their heads."

Daisy leaned against the back of the couch. She was wearing long underwear for pajamas in an effort to keep warm. "Last night was pretty spectacular," she told him. "Was I the only one having fun?"

He touched her face, and she saw in the dim light that one corner of his mouth was curved ever so slightly upward. "I knew what you were feeling," he said, "and I took pleasure in that."

"Why did you make love to me from a distance?"

"Because it would be too dangerous up close."

"You certainly take an innovative approach to safe sex. Most people just use condoms."

Valerian laughed, and Daisy was sure the sound would wake Nadine and Freddy, but apparently it didn't, for neither one of them showed up in the living room.

He leaned forward and kissed her lightly, briefly, on the lips. "I was talking about another kind of danger entirely," he said.

"You're afraid you'll pounce on me, in the throes of passion, and bite my neck?"

Valerian shook his head, and she caught a glint of mischief in his eyes, veiled in shadow though they were. "If we were in the 'throes of passion,' as you put it, I would already have pounced." He raised a hand to her face, rubbing his thumb along the length of her cheek. "No, Daisy love, I'm quite capable of making love to a mortal woman. But it's better if I stay away from you—I shouldn't even be here now."

"Because?"

He shoved his fingers through his lush, gleaming brown hair. "Because whoever—*whatever*—murdered Jillie and Susan might come after you next."

Daisy shivered involuntarily, remembering the murder scenes and the bodies of those two ill-fated women as vividly as if she'd seen them moments before. She started to speak, but Valerian stopped her, laying a fingertip to her lips.

"It is vital that you listen to me, Daisy," he said quietly, "that you *believe* what I'm telling you. You are in grave danger, but there is a place where you'll be at least moderately safe."

She closed her hand gently around his and spoke in a soft voice. "I'm a cop, remember? I'm not really safe—moderately or otherwise—anywhere. Hell, I don't even *want* that kind of security. The only risk-free place is the grave, and I'm definitely not ready for that."

Even in the gloom, she saw his magnificent face contort with some powerful emotion—anger? Frustration? Fear?

She couldn't begin to guess.

"You don't understand," he said with admirable control, after a short, tumultuous silence.

"I do," Daisy insisted. "You want to protect me, and that's wonderful. But I'm a big girl, with a badge and a thirty-eight. I can take care of myself, and I won't hide from anybody or anything."

"What use would a piece of metal and a primitive handgun be against a vampire?" Valerian said, leaning in close to make his point. "Don't you see that I—another nightwalker—am your only hope?" He paused, and his struggle to contain his emotions was visible in his face, despite the shadows. "*Damn it*, Daisy," he whispered, "if you won't do this for yourself, do it for your sister and her family. Do you want to draw this creature here, to this house?"

Daisy felt the blood drain from her face, and she raised one hand to her mouth. "Oh, God," she murmured. "Nadine—Freddy—that poor little baby—"

Valerian gripped her shoulders and gave her a gentle shake. "They have guardian angels, Daisy," he said quickly to stem her panic. "Especially the child. But angels are single-minded creatures, almost wholly absorbed in the adoration of their Creator. Sometimes they miss things."

"Oh, great," Daisy muttered.

"You've got to leave here now, tonight," Valerian insisted.

She glanced toward the doorway to the hall. Just beyond it, Nadine and Freddy lay sleeping peacefully in their bed. "I can't just abandon Nadine," she argued frantically. "What would she think if she woke up and found me gone? She's counting on me to help her—she's about to *give birth*, for heaven's sake!"

"That's easy," Valerian said. He was already pulling her to her feet, finding her discarded clothes unerringly in the dark, tugging the garments onto her body, over the bulky long Johns, as if she were a child. "I'll simply remove all memory of your arrival from both their minds."

"That's crazy," Daisy protested and he closed her suitcase and shoved it at her. "You can't actually do that, can you?"

"I can," Valerian said, "and I have. Tonight your sister dreamed you came for a visit. In the morning she'll feel a little wistful and wonder how you are and if you're taking good care of yourself."

He pushed her out the door, closed it quietly behind them, and ushered her straight to the car.

"What about Freddy?"

"Same thing. 'Strange,' they'll say, 'that we both dreamed about Daisy. Do you suppose it means anything?' "

Daisy was pressed into the driver's seat. "Won't they hear the motor?"

"They might," Valerian said, relaxing at last, "but they'll just think it's one of the neighbors' cars."

"But—"

"Just drive, Daisy."

"Terrific. After all this, I don't even get to travel by broomstick."

She could see his face clearly in the moonlight, and his expression was downright reproofing. "That was beneath you, Daisy," he said. "Just go home before I lose my patience."

"Okay, genius, I will. It's not like Super-ghoul would think of looking for *methere* of all places. And what happens if you lose your patience?"

"Leave," Valerian said evenly, "before you find out."

With a sigh Daisy started the engine, backed out of Freddy and Nadine's driveway, and headed back in the general direction of Las Vegas.

*Valerian*

*Colefield Hall, 1457*

Elisabeth let out a bloodcurdling shriek, not of fear but of fury, as I ripped away the last of her clothes—no better than rotted rags, they were—and hoisted her off her kicking feet and into the brimming tub before the fire. "This is foul treatment, sir!" she shrilled, hammering at my chest with her fists and splashing enough water over the sides—and down the front of my breeches—to fill the long-empty moat outside. "And it weren't no part of our bargain, neither! Don't you know I could catch me death? And you don't care, neither, do you, you bloody mother-loving—"

"In the name of whatever deity you worship, Elisabeth," I said through my teeth, "stop this mewling and thrashing, or I swear I'll take you to the nearest nunnery and leave you there to rot!"

She fell silent, and I felt pity for her, seeing the look in her eyes, but I wasn't fool enough to show it. She'd have been raising the roof again in a trice, the little imp.

"That's better," I said with what would have been a heartfelt sigh, had I been a mortal man. "You've been laboring under a delusion, my dear. Being clean is a most desirable state."

Elisabeth's expression was one of pure bafflement, and I realized, with both tender amusement and weariness, that she hadn't grasped my meaning at all.

I tried again. "No one has ever died from taking a bath," I assured her quietly. I scrubbed her from head to foot, for it was plain that she hadn't the vaguest idea how to scrub herself, then wrapped her in a blanket.

She knelt in obedient silence by the fire while I sat in the hearth chair, gently combing the tangles from her copper-gold hair.

At last she turned and looked up at me, letting the blanket fall away, revealing her exquisite, creamy body with a combination of shyness and pride.

"Will you have me now?" she asked.

I could not help myself; I reached out to touch her damp hair, her smooth, fire-warmed cheek. "Not yet, love."

"But I am a—a whore. You paid for me."

"You are not a whore. You are a princess. And if I paid for you, then I have the right to decide when to take you to my bed. Is that not so?"

The perfect column of her neck moved slightly as she swallowed. No sound came from her lips.

I pulled the blanket around her again and raised her to her feet. "Are you afraid?" I asked, holding her in my arms because I could not resist doing so. Not after loving her, wanting her, mourning for her for so many long, empty years.

Elisabeth nodded.

"Don't be," I whispered. "Because I would sooner destroy myself than do anything to hurt you. All I want is to look after you—"

"I'm not a fine lady, like you're used to," she murmured. "Is that why you don't want me?"

I laid an index finger to her nose, remembering so many things we had done together, things I knew she could not recall. "But I do want you," I said softly. "I want you desperately."

"Then, why—?"

I bent to kiss her lips, but only lightly. Only briefly. "We have time," I told her.

She trembled against me. "Well, I can't stay away from the Horse and Horn forever, you know," she protested, drawing back in my embrace. "There be those who'll be asking after me. I've got to look out for me lads, or some other girl will have them—"

An unholy rage surged through me at the thought of her giving herself to another man, whether for love or for money.

I caught her chin in my hand, perhaps a touch too roughly at first, and immediately relaxed my hold. Still, I knew from the fear that rose in her eyes that I had hurt her a little, and that she had not missed the look of fury I had been unable to disguise.

I closed my eyes for a moment, cursing myself for a rash, intemperate fool.

"I'm sorry," I said hoarsely. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

Her lower lip quivered as she gazed up at me. "I'm not that other girl—the one you used to know. I'm just plain Betsey Saxon, who lifts her skirts for them what can pay."

I should have listened to her. It might have saved us both so much pain.

Instead, I turned furiously away. "Don't ever say that again," I rasped, and she made no other attempt to reason with me for the rest of that night.

10

*Elisabeth Saxon*

*Colefield Hall, 1457*

Elisabeth lay alone and puzzled in Valerian's enormous bed, watching the firelight flicker across the ceiling. It was unheard of for a man to offer coins and then not take his pleasure, and she was troubled. Perhaps the gentleman did not think her fetching—the idea nettled her sorely—or perhaps she just wasn't fine enough for the likes of him.

Well, come the morrow, she'd take her bag of gold—it was tucked safely away beneath her pillow—and go straight back to the Horse and Horn. There were men there what appreciated a sweet-natured woman, and they wouldn't try to drown her in hot water or burn her eyes out with soap, neither.

She stretched, enjoying the feeling of the clean, smooth sheets against her bare skin, and sighed. She'd known a queer sense of recognition, when Valerian had entered the inn, as if she remembered him from somewhere beyond the reach of her memory, but she'd worked out why he'd seemed familiar. He was the living specter of a figure in a painting she'd seen, up in London Town, when she was a girl of eight.

Her father was still alive back then, and they'd gone to the city, the pair of them, hoping to sell off a cartload of cabbage in one of the marketplaces. They'd done well and shared an eel pie to celebrate, but as they started back toward home, a storm had come up, washing the cobbled streets and stinking gutters with rain.

They'd left the cart and pony in the mews and taken refuge inside a vast church, where there were paintings on the walls, and statues all about, and what seemed like thousands of candles. The place was empty, except for a priest and two or three old women kneeling in prayer, and as Elisabeth looked about, she marveled at the grandeur of it all.

The biggest painting loomed on the rear wall of the sanctuary, and Elisabeth's father, cap in hand, had told her in a whisper that it represented the aftermath of the great battle between God's angels and those who followed Lucifer. They'd been tussling on and off ever since, the good sorts and the bad, by his reckoning.

The eerie reality of the picture fascinated Elisabeth. The sky was filled with angels that appeared to fly, wings fluttering gracefully, while below their dangling, snow-white feet, amidst leaping flames, hideous demons thrust their pitchforks upward and leered in defiance.

On an outcropping of rock, well below heaven, but not quite in hell, or so it had seemed to Elisabeth, stood a magnificent figure, gazing up at the angels with a look of such sorrow and yearning that she'd wanted to weep for him. "Who is that?" she'd whispered and would have touched the image with a small, dirty finger if her father hadn't grasped her hand to stop her.

A monk had crept up behind them, leathershod feet moving soundlessly over the cold stone floor, and it was he who answered Elisabeth's question. "That, my child, is Lucifer—once God's favorite angel."

"Why does he look so sad?" she'd asked.

The monk spoke briskly and without compassion. "He knows that he is forever damned. As are all who willfully disobey God. Have a thought for the well-being of your soul, or you also will know the wrath of heaven."

Elisabeth had shuddered and moved a little closer to her father, who had put an arm about her shoulders. He had often remarked, in the privacy of their poor hovel in the outmost edge of the village of Lower Bilby, that kinder gods had once ruled in England, before the Christians came, bringing their devil with them.

Now, lying in a warm bed, with her belly full of good food, Elisabeth realized only too well why the master of this grand house had seemed familiar.

He looked exactly like that beautiful, solemn being in the church painting.

She shivered and pulled the covers up under her chin.

"Don't be a dunce, Betsey Saxon," she murmured to herself. "The master's a strange one, I'll give you that, but he's no more than a man."

A shadow moved next to the window, took on solidity and shape. "Ah," said that cultured, resonant voice she had come to recognize. "But I am 'more than a man,' Elisabeth. So much more."

Valerian.

Elisabeth's heart thundered; indeed its beat seemed to reverberate into every part of her body, but she couldn't rightly say she was afraid. "Where did you come from?" she demanded. "You wasn't here a minute ago."

He laughed, and the sound, rich and masculine, moved over Elisabeth like an intangible caress. "No, I wasn't," he said. He took the candle from its pewter stick, carried it over to the hearth, and squatted to touch the wick to the embers.



Thin, golden light gilded his face, his hair, and the fine, strange cut of his clothes as he crossed the room again. He stood at the foot of her bed, holding the tallow at chest height, seemingly unaware of the hot wax dropping onto the flesh of his hand. In the candle's glow, and the silver wash of the moon, it seemed he'd been sculpted from alabaster or ivory, like the statues in that London church.

"I just wish you'd make up your mind, that's all," Elisabeth said. "About whether you want a tumble or not, I mean."

Something moved in the exquisite, shadowy face at her words. Some fleeting emotion she supposed was better left unrecognized.

"Must you speak like a common trollop?" he asked after a moment's silence.

Elisabeth sat bolt upright in bed, and it never occurred to her to cover her full breasts. Modesty had no place in her life; she survived by enticing men with coppers to spend. And she had not been unhappy or ashamed, for she'd only done what she must.

Her cheeks were as hot as the last coals tumbling through the grate. "That's what I am, sir. Who else would I talk like now, besides me own self?"

Valerian looked as though she'd struck him, then he whirled suddenly and flung the candle into the fireplace. The tallow melted and caught fire before he turned to face her again.

"I can't bear it," he murmured, rubbing his temples with a thumb and forefinger. "This is worse than if I'd never found you at all."

Elisabeth felt a sudden, sweeping sympathy for him, just as she had for that lonely fellow in the painting, standing on the very brink of hell. Rising onto her knees, she made her way to the end of the bed. "For tonight," she said softly, "I can try to pretend that I'm her. I ain't been around so many ladies as some others might have been, but I think if I just kept quiet—"

He made an odd, strangled sound that might have been either a sigh or a sob. Then he came to where she knelt, placed his hands on either side of her head, and pressed her close against his chest.

"No," he whispered brokenly. "No, love. You needn't change to suit me. I adore you—I always will, no matter what you do. Yours is a splendid and brave spirit, and the truth is, you are far better than any woman, anywhere—"

She raised her hands to his shoulders and gazed up into his magnificent face. She didn't understand a great deal of what he said, it was true, but she knew how to console a man. "Let a girl lend a bit of comfort, won't you?" she said. "It won't be so bad, I promise."

He gazed into her eyes, idly smoothing the pads of his thumbs over her cheekbones. "Such charity," he marveled, and she knew by the tender despair in his voice he wasn't mocking her. "Have you no inhibitions at all?"

She was eager to lift his spirits. "I don't know," she said quickly, "but if you'll just explain how that's done—"

Valerian threw back his head and gave a shout of laughter, and when he looked at her again, it really did

seem that there might be tears glistening in his eyes.

Elisabeth flushed, closing her hands into fists against his chest. "What's the joke?" she demanded.

He lifted her until she was standing, her feet sinking into the feather ticking as her knees had done before, her face on a level with his own. "Stay here with me," he pleaded quietly. "I'll give you whatever you want—all the gowns and kirtles you could wish for—a bucket of gold to celebrate the setting of every sun—anything."

Elisabeth relaxed her hands. No man had ever spoken to her that way, as if she had the option of granting or refusing his petition, when he was willing to pay so dear a price for her company. "And I don't have to be her—that other woman?"

Valerian lifted his face for a few moments, as though silently begging some favor of heaven, and then lifted her into his arms. "You only have to be Elisabeth," he said in a husky tone. "Tomorrow, after the sun goes down, you and I will be off to London, and we'll buy you so many baubles and ribbons that you won't be able to carry them all."

"You wouldn't make a promise like that and then change your mind, would you?"

He smiled and shook his head. "No, sweet. A promise is a promise."

She thought he would lie with her at last, since he carried her around the bed and set her so gently atop the smooth covers, but instead he just stood there, looking down at her.

Elisabeth caught hold of his hand, realizing that she wanted very much for him to stay. A peculiar state of shyness had overtaken her, though, and she could not confess what she was thinking.

"Couldn't we go in the morning?" she asked eagerly. "To London Town, I mean."

"I shall be busy then," he answered, and his words had just the faintest edge. "Have your evening meal early. We'll set out as soon as the moon rises."

Something compelled her to argue, to stall, so that he might stay longer. "But there's wolves about then, ain't there?"

"I am not afraid of those poor creatures," Valerian replied, "nor should you be. They'll do you no harm."

Despite the gentle tone in which he spoke, Elisabeth knew he would not change his mind. For reasons of his own—only the saints knew what they were—he did not wish to travel the road to London by day.

In Elisabeth's opinion, it was daft to take such a chance, for there were not only wolves to lie in wait along the way, but brigands, too. She told herself it was for the gowns she was going, and the gold he'd promised—a bucketful of it for every day at sunset, he'd said! Of course, he was probably bluffing about that.

She sighed. If things didn't turn out to her liking, why, London was a big place, and it would be easy to slip away and make a new start for herself. Especially with money saved and good clothes to wear.

"Won't you stay?" she said, still clasping his hand, which felt strangely cool and hard.

Valerian bent just far enough to brush his lips, shiver-light, across her knuckles. "Some other night, my love. When you've learned to trust me. And don't think of running away once you get to London—there are creatures far deadlier than wolves wandering its streets."

Elisabeth gasped, for she'd only *thought* of losing herself in that great city—she certainly hadn't spoken of it aloud. "You're a warlock!" she accused, meaning to sit up again, to flee the room, nay, the castle itself, and take her chances with the wild animals and thieves she might well meet on the road.

She could not move. Valerian held her with nothing but his gaze, and yet she was pinioned to the bed.

"I pray you," he said evenly, "do not insult me so again. I am no such creature."

Tears, more of wonder and amazement than fear, sprang to Elisabeth's eyes. She had given up struggling beneath his invisible hold, having found it futile to do so. "What are you, then?" she persisted, barely breathing the words. "You said yourself, when first you came out of the shadows beside the window, that you are more than a man!"

"Brave, foolish Elisabeth," he said, withdrawing a little way into the darkness. "That was your fatal flaw before as well, you know. You were not wise enough to be afraid, and that's why the sea took you from me."

"What do you mean?" Elisabeth might have been bound by visible ropes; the spell he'd cast over her was that strong. "What are you, if you ain't a man or a warlock? And what do you mean, saying the sea took me away from you? What have you done to me?"

Valerian did not reply, but simply retreated another step, and then another. In the next instant he was gone, without so much as stirring a draft.

The enchantment was broken; freed from whatever mysterious power had held her pressed to the mattress, Elisabeth leaped off the bed and rushed to the place where Valerian had been until a mere heartbeat before.

Furious because she could not comprehend his trick, she stomped one foot and let loose with a string of curses that would have turned the River Thames back upon itself.

Valerian did not return that night, although Elisabeth kept her eyes open as long as she could, waiting for him.

*Daisy*

*Las Vegas, 1995*

The trip back from Telluride was never quite clear in Daisy's memory. One minute she'd been driving down the highway in the predawn darkness, sensing rather than seeing the mountains and Christmas-scented forests all around her. The next, she found herself cruising through the Nevada desert in the bright afternoon sunlight, only a few miles outside her hometown.

Either she really was losing her mind, or Valerian had come through with a version of broomstick travel after all.

Turning onto the roadside, Daisy put on the brakes and shut off the engine. Then she just sat there,

trembling, her forehead resting against the steering wheel, until she was sure she wouldn't a) hyperventilate or b) go into hysterics.

After a few moments of recovery, she reached up and wrenched the rearview mirror toward her, peering into her own eyes, noting the shadows beneath them and the pallor of her skin.

"You're not crazy, Chandler," she said aloud and with conviction. "Have you got that? If you saw a guy disappear, he damned well *disappeared* ! And if you think you made the trip between Telluride and Vegas in practically the blink of an eye, then that's what happened!"

A swirling blue light flashed across her reflected image, and she sighed and tilted her head back against the seat to take a deep breath, hold it to the count of five, and release it slowly. It was an antistress technique she'd read about in a magazine article while waiting in the dentist's office.

The state trooper approached the car on the driver's side and rapped on the window.

"You feeling all right, ma'am?" he inquired through the glass.

Daisy rolled it down. The trooper was young, and probably still convinced he could change the world, and her heart went out to him. According to the plastic tag on his uniform shirt, his name was Wilson.

She nodded and smiled. "I'm okay. I guess I'm a little tired, though—I just drove over from my sister's place in Telluride."

Okay, so that might have been a small lie, Daisy conceded to her twitching conscience. What was she supposed to have said—that she'd been zapped from Colorado to Nevada, without even touching down in Utah? Badge or no badge, she'd wind up in a room with upholstered walls if she told the truth.

"I'd like to take a look at your license and registration, please," Wilson said, with an endearing all-American smile.

Daisy reached for her purse, but slowly. She was a cop herself, after all, and she knew well enough how a quick move would look from the trooper's perspective. She handed him the requested license along with her badge and was removing the registration from the clip on the visor when he cleared his throat.

"That's all right, Detective Chandler," he said, returning the laminated card with her mug shot on it, along with the small leather folder containing her police ID and badge. He was blushing a little. "You know how it is."

"Yeah," Daisy said good-naturedly, "I do."

"I could drive you into town if you're too tired to go on."

Daisy shook her head. "I'm okay. I just needed to take a breather, that's all. Thanks."

The trooper nodded, touched the brim of his hat, and strode back to his car. Daisy watched his retreating figure in the mirror, grinning slightly and thinking there was nothing quite like a man in a uniform.

Except maybe a vampire magician in a tux and a flowing cape, she reflected, starting the ignition, signaling, and pulling back out onto the freeway.

Trooper Wilson chivalrously escorted her all the way to the Las Vegas city limits.

She sighed when he took an exit and headed back in the other direction. So much for the police escort.

At first Daisy's apartment seemed to be just the way she'd left it. She called Nadine right away, ignoring the blinking light on her answering machine, and heard her sister's cheerful "Hello?"

Daisy closed her eyes. Would Nadine remember her visit, or had Valerian wiped it out of her mind, and Freddy's, as he'd claimed? "Hi, sis," she said in a rush of breath. "How are you?"

"Daze! Hi! Freddy and I were just talking about you this morning—it's the darnedest thing. *Weboth* dreamed you showed up late last night and slept on our hide-ahed! Isn't that wild—the two of us having the same dream?"

"Wild," Daisy agreed, feeling a bit sad and very disoriented. By now she half believed she'd dreamed her part of the experience, too. "When's that baby planning to be born? When interest rates go down? When there's another Republican in the White House?"

Nadine laughed. "I'd ask her, but I think she's busy doing aerobics. This kid never sleeps."

Daisy felt bruised inside. It was, and would always be, a sharp disappointment that she couldn't be there for Nadine at this important time. "Have you and Freddy managed to agree on a name yet?"

"No," Nadine admitted. "He wants to call her Carmen Miranda. Trust me, Daisy, no child of mine is going to go around with half the produce department piled on top of her head."

Now it was Daisy who laughed. "What do you want to call her?" she asked when she'd recovered.

"Whitney," Nadine replied in a wistful voice. "It's such a classy name, don't you think? But Freddy says it's pretentious."

"I'm sure the two of you will come up with something suitable."

There was a short silence. "When are you coming over to see us?" Nadine finally asked.

Daisy's eyes burned. *When we've found this Thing, this murdering fiend, and driven a stake through its heart. Or shot it with a silver bullet.*

"Soon," she said aloud, after what she hoped was an inaudible snuffle.

"Are you catching cold?"

It was Daisy's day for telling lies, among other things. "Yeah," she said. "Maybe I'll take a few days off to drink chicken broth and watch soap operas."

"Good plan."

"You'll call? When it's time, I mean?"

"You bet," Nadine said gently. "You're destined to be Carmen Miranda's favorite aunt. Besides, I'm expecting a really good baby present from you."

Daisy smiled. "Don't worry about that," she said. "I've been poring over catalogs and prowling through malls for weeks. I'm going to send something that will make Miss *Whitney* Donaldson the envy of the disposable diaper crowd."

"Why don't you bring the gift in person?" Nadine asked.

Daisy's smile faded. "I can't get away just now, sweetie," she said. "Trust me when I tell you that some very big things are going down around here right now."

Nadine let out a long, martyrlly sigh. Evidently she figured it was her turn to be the mother hen of the pair. "I worry about you, Daze. You take too many risks. And it seems like every time I watch one of those reality shows on television, some police officer gets killed."

"Nadine? There's an easy solution to that—stop watching reality shows."

"Promise me you'll be careful. God knows where Mom is—we're probably happier not knowing. But you're all I've got, Daisy, and I can't bear to lose you."

A tear slipped down Daisy's right cheek, and she dashed it away with the back of her free hand. "I'm not all you have," she reminded her sister. "You've got Freddy and that little one doing a high-impact workout under your rib cage." Images of Jillie and Susan's bloodless bodies filled her mind and made her stomach pitch. She'd try her damndest, she vowed silently, not to end up like them. "Look, just focus on the business at hand, okay? I'll be fine."

Nadine didn't sound reassured, but they said their goodbyes and hung up. Daisy immediately called O'Halloran on his cell phone, guessing that he wouldn't be in his office if he could help it.

She was right.

"O'Halloran," he barked. "Don't tell me there's been another murder," he rushed on before Daisy could even identify herself, "because I don't want to hear it!"

"*Has* there been another murder?" she demanded.

"Shit," O'Halloran snapped. "This is Chandler, ain't it? You're already back in town."

There are moments when I'm not sure I ever left in the first place, Daisy thought, with a sort of fatalistic whimsy. "It's your winning personality and your movie-star body, O'Halloran," she said. "You drive me mad with passion. How could I stay away?"

He swore again, more creatively than before and with considerably more venom. "You're on leave, damn it!" he growled once he'd finished reciting the long list of colorful epithets and expletives he'd learned in nearly three decades of public service.

Daisy smiled into the telephone receiver. "Don't talk like that," she said sweetly. "It ain't becoming."

O'Halloran sighed heavily. It wasn't easy, the sound seemed to say, single-handedly thwarting evil and holding back the tide of crime.

"All right," he said. "You'll read it in the papers or see it on the tube anyhow. Somebody else was killed

last night."

Daisy leaned against the wall, her eyes closed. "Who?"

"It wasn't another one of that magician's showgirls, if that's what you're thinking," O'Halloran said, his voice gruff with suppressed emotion. "But the M.O. was the same. Lady named Janet Hurly."

Daisy knew her partner well. "There is a connection, though, isn't there?"

"Yes, damn it, for all the concern it is of yours right now, with your badge in limbo. You stay out of this, Chandler, or I swear to God I'll go to the chief myself and tell him you think you've been to Mars twice on an alien spaceship. And he'll believe me, too, after the way you went T.U. in the supermarket."

*"O'Halloran."*

"She was this Valerian guy's agent and business manager," he finally admitted. "The victim, I mean."

Daisy muttered a favorite swearword of her own, rubbing her right temple with two fingers. "Getting information out of you is like getting a congressman to admit he wears lacy underwear. I feel like I've just dragged Lake Tahoe with a hairnet!"

"Why should I make it easy? This one's my problem."

"That's what you think, O'Halloran."

He hung up.

"O'Halloran!" Daisy screamed into the mouthpiece. Then she disconnected with a belated bang, knowing it was useless to try to reason with the man. He thought he was protecting her.

Instantly the phone rang again, and Daisy snatched it off the hook.

"What?" she demanded, thinking it was O'Halloran calling back with another reason why she shouldn't try to do her job. He might fancy himself her knight in shining armor, but she'd be damned if she'd let him trample her career beneath the hooves of his trusty charger.

"Dai-sy." The voice was the same mechanical, androgynous drone she'd heard before.

"Time—to—die—soon—"

"Why did you kill Janet Hurly?" Daisy interrupted acidly. She was too furious to be afraid; that would come later, she supposed, when she'd had time to think. "I thought I was supposed to be next." She drew out the last words, mimicking the caller's tinny monotone.

"I left—a—message—for you," the thing said. There was no soul behind the voice, no emotion. "I'll be sending—a special gift—very soon."

Daisy felt a familiar chill. "Gee, thanks," she replied, revealing none of the cloying, elemental fear that was climbing her backbone, vertebra by vertebra. "I was beginning to think it was over between us."

"Goodbye, Dai-sy/Bren-na/Elis-a-beth/Jen-ny. See—you—soon."



Daisy hung up and dashed into the bathroom as bile surged into the back of her throat. She was bending over the toilet, shivering and retching convulsively, when out of the corner of one eye she caught a glimpse of a still form behind the shower curtain.

With a cry Daisy whirled, automatically reaching for her service revolver—which was tucked away under the front seat of her car. There was a baseball bat in the towel cupboard—she'd never really recovered from seeing *Psycho* on the late-late show—and Daisy grabbed it and prepared to swing.

The shape behind the shower curtain didn't move or speak.

Bravado was all she had, besides the baseball bat. Reason and experience told her that if she tried to run, the intruder would be on her before she got to the front door. If he happened to be bigger or stronger, she'd be in deep sewage.

"If you have a weapon," she said forcefully, "drop it. Now."

Nothing.

Daisy took a deep breath, let it out, and then, on one of those rash impulses that sometimes earn cops their own segment on the local news, reached out and wrenched the plastic curtain to one side.

A life-size blowup doll, the kind that can be purchased in any sleazy novelty shop, dangled from the shower head by a noose fashioned from the belt of Daisy's bathrobe. For a dramatic touch, two small red marks had been drawn onto the neck.

Daisy turned back to the toilet and threw up in earnest.

When the heaving stopped at last, she rinsed her mouth, washed her face, and called O'Halloran on his car phone again. "Get over here," she said calmly. "Now."

She hung up and went down to her car for the thirty-eight. While she waited for her partner to arrive, Daisy inspected the rest of the apartment. None of the windows had been forced, and she remembered clearly that the front door was locked when she'd arrived home from a trip she probably hadn't gone on in the first place.

Daisy sat down on the couch in her living room, the revolver in her lap, and heard the echo of the caller's robotic voice in her brain.

*I left a message for you...*

O'Halloran didn't bother to knock. He just walked right in. Daisy thought numbly that she should be grateful he hadn't kicked the door open, movie-cop style, weapon drawn. She might have shot him if he had.

"What's going on, Chandler?" To his credit, O'Halloran looked genuinely concerned. "You space out again or something?"

"Just go and look in my shower," she said.

*I left a message...*

O'Halloran did so and bellowed an exclamation. When he got back to the living room, his face was heart-attack gray, and sweat beaded his forehead and upper lip.

"Jesus, Joseph, and Mary," he rasped, shoving one hand through his sparse hair. "That's just plain ugly."

Daisy knew there was more. Maybe she was psychic. "And?"

O'Halloran sank into a chair, pulling his cell phone out of his jacket pocket in almost the same motion. "Janet Hurly's body was found hanging from a showerhead," he said as he dialed headquarters. "The killer used what looked like the belt of a bathrobe for a rope. What we got here, Chandler, is a real reasonable facsimile."

11

*Valerian*

*Outside Las Vegas, 1995*

The taillights of Daisy's car, glowing red as the eyes of a demon in a bad painting, dissolved into the predawn gloom. I worked a mental trick that would cause the journey to pass quickly for her and withstood the temptation to set my beloved on a path leading anywhere except back to Las Vegas.

How I yearned to lock her away in some enchanted tower—if such a place existed—or hide her like a treasure in my desert lair. The ruby ring, the harbinger of her death, would arrive soon, I knew, and I was full of terror.

I dared not attempt to shield her, though, however noble my intentions, for Daisy cherished her freedom in this life, as she had in all the others before it. I had learned from bitter experience that she would despise me for imprisoning her.

I was, by that time, utterly desperate. I had searched for my ruthless enemy, along with Maeve, and all to no avail. I think I realized, even then, that if I found the fiend I sought, I would also find the one who had stalked my beloved and me, down through the centuries, making a deadly gift of the bloodred gemstone I had come to hate and fear.

As I saw it, I had no choice but to awaken Tobias, the slumbering one, who had been among the first vampires created. The rest of that strange fellowship had perished by their own choice, in the womb of the earth, except of course for Lisette, the first queen. She'd died by Maeve's hand, and rightfully so, far away on a moonswept moor.

But those are other tales, for other vampires to tell.

I willed myself to Tobias's lair, barely reaching that gravelike pit ahead of the consuming sunlight, and sprawled beside my elder. Before I could even attempt to rouse him, by word or touch, the consuming sleep bore me down and down, into darkness.

I was trapped inside my dreams, where I saw Janet Hurly, my mortal manager and something akin to a friend, savagely murdered in her apartment. I was unable to come to her aid, mired as I was in the vampire sleep, and it was perfect torment to look on helplessly. When it was over at last, when he'd

strangled Janet, this creature I couldn't quite recognize, and then left her body hanging from the showerhead by a strip of cloth, it seemed her staring eyes were fixed on me.

Accusing. Asking why.

I flailed mentally, trying to regain consciousness and thus escape the smothering weight of the nightmare, but it was no use. Sometimes I was wakeful during the daylight hours, though I could never tolerate the sun, but it was not a feat I could perform at will. The phenomenon happened on its own, generally after I had been feeding with uncommon appetite for a long period of time.

At last, at last, the blessed caress of twilight reached me, stretching fingers of shadow down through the soil, and I was again in command of my body and mind. I sat up in Tobias's cramped coffin of a lair, pebbles and the bones of some hapless mortal scrabbling beneath me as I moved.

"Tobias!" I shook his slender shoulder. He resembled a lad, having been made while still a youth, but in fact he was, as far as I knew, the oldest vampire in existence.

He mumbled and stirred slightly, making a groping motion with one hand, to dismiss me.

I straddled him and grasped both his shoulders now, and the rotted fabric of his tunic crumbled in my hands, fragile as curls of ash on a cold hearth.

"Damn you, Tobias, wake! I need your help!"

Even in a stupor he was powerful, and with no physical effort at all, with nothing more than a half-formed thought, he cast me from him. I slammed against the side of our joint tomb with a jarring impact, mentally revising my earlier supposition that only Maeve Tremayne was stronger than I.

"Go—away," Tobias muttered.

For Daisy's sake, I would brave Tobias's rare but formidable wrath. I would plead, bargain, lie.

Anything to keep Daisy from the unknown monster.

I knelt at his side. "Please, Old One, hear me. There is a fiend, a vampire, I think, but perhaps a warlock—"

Tobias interrupted in the expressionless tones of one entranced. "Return to Dunnett's Head," he said slowly without opening his eyes. "The answer is there—and not there. That is the riddle."

With that, he settled deeper into his nest of death, looking for all the world like a child curling up on the nursery couch for his afternoon nap. I knew I would get no more from him no matter how long or how forcefully I persisted.

Dunnett's Head. My ancient home.

I sat back on my haunches. I had not been near that accursed place since the day Brenna and I left it, while I was yet mortal. Crouched there in Tobias's grave, I doubted that even a trace of the village itself had survived the passing centuries, though there might well be ruins of Baron Afton-St. Claire's austere keep.

I covered my face with both hands for a moment, hating even the thought of returning to the scene of so much tragedy and pain, knowing at the same time that I must go immediately. Tobias had said its name clearly.

*Dunnett's Head.*

I dared not even take the time to hunt and feed, for any delay might rob me of my determination to find my foe before he completed his plan of revenge. I did not need to be told that his designs included Daisy.

Daisy. She would have been doomed anyway, like Brenna and Elisabeth and Jenny and the others before her. There was no escaping the curse, no matter what I did or said or thought, but my desperate delusion was also a part of the mysterious evil that had tormented us both for six hundred years. Each time I stumbled across my beloved, in each new incarnation, I believed I could save her. *I had* to cling to that vain fancy, or go stark, screaming mad at the prospect of losing her again.

I turned the powers of my mind upon Dunnett's Head, and in the length of a mortal's heartbeat, I was there, standing among the moonlit stones that had once formed the baron's keep. I shivered in the night wind that surged upward from the sea, although a vampire does not feel that kind of chill, and turned slowly to look around me.

In a few paces I stood where the courtyard had been, in the exact spot where Brenna's father had bested me in swordplay. I bear the scar of that conflict still, a tidy line across my middle.

Soon I found the remnants of the great hall and the chapel, and there was still a ditch, though so shallow now that it was hardly discernible, where the moat had been.

Memories assailed me, striking my spirit like stones hard-flung, and I found I could not bear to stand in this place where Brenna had been and was no more.

I walked down the hillside to the site of the village, traversing the short distance as a mortal man would have done, instead of willing myself to my destination, for I was in no hurry to arrive.

Not even stones remained to mark where the cluster of humble huts and shops had been, but it didn't matter. I found the location of the bootmaker's shop, with our pitiful rooms at the back, where I'd been born as a human child, where I'd nursed at my mother's breast and endured my father's resentment as I grew. I knew the places where Krispin and I had played as boys, the spots where peddlers had sold their wares and tinkers had made their bright, noisy camps. I looked out upon the dark sea, watching the moonlight dance in ever-changing patterns of gold and silver, and wondered why Tobias had sent me here.

I had found memories, yes. But what of the answers I sought? What had I gained by returning, beyond another increase in my capacity to endure pain?

I might have left then, in frustration and disappointment, were it not for a stray thought of my poor mother. I knew that she, like my father and Krispin, like most everyone in the village, had died in the pestilence. Brenna and I had looked on from the hillside while corpses, blackened by that foul plague even before they burned, were flung onto the blazing pyre.

Someone must have buried the bones afterward, I reasoned, for the majority of our neighbors had been Christians, and they will go, I have found, to great lengths to dig proper graves and say holy words over them.

While I did not mourn my father, I had loved my mother and brother quite devotedly in my way. I wanted to find their last resting place and stand beside those long-forgotten plots for a brief interval, remembering, hoping they had fared well in the next world.

They deserved that much, I reflected, after all their suffering.

When I had made considerable explorations, striding this way and that, dredging my memory and all my senses, I divined the presence of a large, common grave, well away from the place where the village had been, and hurried toward it, gliding silently through the grass like a specter.

Standing beside that unseen tomb, with its great, dry jumble of bones, I closed my eyes and fixed my concentration on days so long past that only immortals remember their like. After a time I began to see images of the bodies in that grave as they had been before the plague struck.

I saw Old Tom, the tanner, and Ben Willy, who milled the corn into meal. I saw their wives and their children, and so many others as well—fishermen, crofters, the baron himself. They were ghosts, some joyous, others full of sorrow, and they cast dancing shadows into my mind.

I saw my mother, the uncommonly beautiful Seraphina, and knew her remains lay disjointed and brown within the pit. My father's bones were there, too, far from hers and reaching out to her even in death, but I felt no impression of Krispin, no echo of his laughter or his quick fury.

I frowned. If he did not lie here with the others, then where? Had he escaped to the sea, onboard one of the ships he was forever sighting on the horizon? Had he gone to London, or taken up the Christian cross, as the good brothers had bade me do so long ago?

I heard Tobias's voice in my head.

*Return to Dunneth's Head. The answer is there—and not there.*

I frowned, and another chill struck me, coming not from the cold and treacherous sea but rising from within my own being.

Could it be? Was this my enemy, then—my own brother, Krispin?

No, I insisted to myself. He loved me, and I loved him.

Krispin would have been unable to keep his existence from me for so long. Besides, we had been brothers, friends. He had followed me everywhere, looked up to me, laughed with me...

And wanted to do everything I did.

Everything.

I shuddered and tipped my head back to search the starry sky with eyes that burned. "No," I whispered. "Not Krispin."

But I knew even then that my brother had not returned to dust, like our father and mother. He was aboard, and he was my avowed foe. Some vampire, most likely Challes, had transformed Krispin into a blood-drinker.

My despair was absolute, all-encompassing. It drove me to my knees, there beside that mass grave, where I wept with fresh grief.

"Krispin." I whispered. "Why?"

There was, of course, no answer, for my brother, as it happened, was very busy elsewhere.

*Elisabeth*

*London, 1457*

The house was fine indeed, with a cozy fire burning in every room and paintings on the walls. Elisabeth had a chamber of her own—that was what the master called it, a "chamber," and she liked the way the word sounded—and even a servant whose task it was to look after her. The maiden, named Kate Crown, plainly disapproved of Elisabeth and her country manners, but she was a canny soul and showed her misgivings only when Valerian wasn't about.

Elisabeth saw neither hide nor hair of the master during the day, and even at night he often had business abroad. She didn't mind dealing with Kate and the other servants of the household, for she could hold her own against that lot right enough, but she'd become somewhat attached to Valerian and was always anxious for his return.

He joined her at the table most nights, and an abundance of roast meat and boiled vegetables was always served, along with fruits and potatoes, but Elisabeth never saw him take so much as a bite to eat. She asked him once why he didn't touch his food, and he said he'd had all he needed somewhere else. She didn't raise the subject again, but she'd often gone hungry in her brief and difficult life, and she still thought it was a queer thing never to take up a spoon or a knife in your own house.

There were other odd things about the household and its master.

For one, Valerian was never addressed as Mister This or Mister That—the servants called him sir or master, and kept their eyes down. His friends, of whom there were a great many, and who always visited at night, were every bit as strange as he was, and greeted him in odd ways. They scolded him indulgently, as if he were a child, and yet they seemed to revere and even fear him.

Elisabeth was frankly jealous and wished they wouldn't be so familiar. She especially hated the women, in their grand gowns and jewel-trimmed capes, for to them he was "darling" and "beautiful one," and they kissed him and smoothed his hair.

Sometimes, when he was home of an evening, he read to Elisabeth from manuscripts and bound volumes by the fire in the drawing room. He took her to see a puppet show once, and every night, when she was ready to go to bed, she found a handful of shimmering gold coins waiting on her pillow.

She hoarded them against a future that might be less bountiful, hiding them under a loose board in a corner of her room. She had learned long since that good fortune was no more trustworthy than spring weather or a tinker's promise, but there could be no denying that she was in luck.

Not that Elisabeth was entirely happy, for she wasn't. She had come to want Valerian, as a woman wants a man, but despite his generosity, he still had not come to her bed. In fact, he hadn't even entered her room since the second night, when he'd appeared as if by conjuring and asked her to stay with him.

One evening, after a month of high living in London Town, Elisabeth was alone by the drawing room fire. She kicked away her slippers to warm her toes and wished it was so easy to take the chill off her heart. She was a woman, not a child, as the master seemed to think, and she longed to be touched and held and spoken to in soft words.

Elisabeth had enjoyed her work at the Horse and Horn, both upstairs and down. It was worth enduring the occasional bad night for all the times when she'd taken comfort from the warm presence of another person.

She wanted that again.

The guest came in the early evening, when the master was out, and asked expressly for Elisabeth. He was fair and handsome in a prissy sort of way, and he would not give his name. He'd brought a packet for her, he said, a splendid gift.

The package was small, a sheet of parchment tied with a thin blue ribbon. Pleased, Elisabeth opened the bundle and found a golden ring inside, set with a great, glittering red stone.

Elisabeth closed her fingers around the jewel, wanting it for her own and yet strangely afraid, too. "What do you want in return?" she asked, for she knew the ways of the world well enough.

The stranger slipped the exquisite ring onto her finger, and the square stone winked, red as an ox's blood, in the firelight. "Only for you to wear it," he said.

Elisabeth was speechless.

He touched her forehead with light, cool fingers, and then he was gone. Within five minutes Elisabeth had no memory of the encounter, and could not explain, to herself or anyone else, how she'd come to have such a ring.

When Valerian returned home, it was late, for the moon had fitted itself into a high corner of the window, and it was so pale Elisabeth could almost see through it, like an onion skin. There were two young men with him, their eyes bright, their beautiful skin white as new milk, their clothes rich and elegantly cut. To another person, they might have seemed drunk, but Elisabeth was an expert on that, and she knew they were sober as Saint Peter, the pair of them.

The master stopped on the threshold when he saw Elisabeth curled up in his favorite chair, and she realized with a start that he was surprised to see her. That was an odd thing in itself, since he usually knew not only where she was, but what she was thinking.

The two knaves squeezed into the doorway behind Valerian, peering over his shoulders at Elisabeth.

"The rumors are true," one of them said. "What a vision she is!"

"However do you resist her?" asked the other.

Valerian's gaze was fixed on the fiery jewel gracing Elisabeth's finger, and a small frown creased his brow.

There ended the theory that the costly bauble had come from him.



She hoped she hadn't taken to stealing in her sleep.

Elisabeth rose, with a dignity she'd learned by watching the master's female guests, and put her hands on her hips. "I'll thank the both of you not to talk about me as if I had neither ears nor wits!"

Valerian's mouth twitched at one side, but Elisabeth didn't know whether he'd suppressed a smile or a scowl. And she wouldn't have cared, whichever one it was.

"Go to bed, Elisabeth. It is late," he said evenly. She noticed that he didn't move out of the doorway, but effectively blocked his friends from entering the room.

"I ain't a little girl and I won't be ordered about," Elisabeth replied with a lift of her chin.

The master raised one eyebrow. "Ah, but this is my household," he countered in the same smooth tones as before. "Here things are done as I command."

"Are they now?" Elisabeth pressed. She had doubts about the wisdom of what she was saying, but she couldn't seem to stop herself. She folded her arms and raised her chin. "For all I care, you can take your bloody commands and bugger yourself with them, one right after the other."

The lads laughed uproariously at this, but Valerian did not look pleased.

"Leave us," he said, without sparing his guests so much as a glance, but they knew he was speaking to them. Elisabeth recognized that right enough, because they almost collided with each other in their rush to back away.

"Wait!" Elisabeth called to them, not in fear, but in defiance. "I'll go with you, lads. It's that dull around this place—"

She started to pass Valerian, as if to follow them, and he caught her arm in a firm but gentle hold and stopped her. It was hard not to smile; silly of him, not to realize that she'd never leave without her store of gold coins and at least one woolen cloak.

"You're not going anywhere," he said. "And we'll discuss that little trinket you're wearing later."

Elisabeth hid her triumph, and the flash of fear that streaked through her like lightning, as she had hid her amusement. He'd read her mind often enough in the past, the master had, but he seemed to have lost the knack.

Still holding her arm, Valerian glanced at his guests and repeated his earlier request in blunter terms.

"Get out."

They obeyed without further ado, and the door slammed hard behind them.

"What is this about?" the master demanded of Elisabeth when they were alone.

Her chin quivered, and she thought she might cry. Damned if she would, she vowed in the very next instant, she who hadn't shed a single tear since the day her father died of a fever, when she was but fourteen.

"I want to go back to the Horse and Horn," she said, hugging herself tightly with both arms.

He did not release her until he'd marched her back over to the chair and pushed her into it. "You want to *dowhat*?" he rasped, pacing the length of the stone hearth several times and then stopping suddenly to stand there glaring at her. "In the name of all that's holy, why? Haven't I treated you well—given you food and coin and garments fit for a princess to wear?"

"You've treated me," Elisabeth said bravely, though in truth her courage was starting to crumble, "like I was your sister!"

The master stared down at her, clearly astounded. "My behavior has been impeccable!"

"Whatever that means!" Elisabeth flung out her arms in exclamation. "Talk like a plain man for once, damn you, and not some walking book with skin and hair and eyeballs!"

He closed his eyes for a moment. "What would you have me say?"

Elisabeth swallowed. "I wouldn't have you say nothing," she replied boldly. "You don't only talk too fancy, sir—you talk *toomuch* as well!"

He watched her in pointed silence, his arms folded.

A terrible thought occurred to Elisabeth, a reason why he had never touched her in any intimate fashion.

"No," Valerian said before she could voice the possibility, "I do not prefer boys to women."

It was almost a relief that he was reading her mind again; at least he was paying attention.

Elisabeth blushed, holding his gaze, fierce and intimidating though it was. "I need somebody to lie down with me," she said. "I need to be held real tight in somebody's arms." And then she began to cry. Noisily, with a great deal of snuffling and heaving of shoulders.

Valerian hesitated, then stepped forward and, without a word, pulled her into his embrace. She wailed into his fancy tunic, the fabric bunched in her fists.

Presently, when she'd expended most of her great sorrow, he lifted her gently off her feet and carried her up the stairway and along the passage to the door of her chamber. She was certain she wouldn't be able to stand it if he left her alone, feeling the way she did, but he stayed.

He undressed her slowly and with reverence, admiring and caressing her breasts as he bared them, lightly touching her soft white belly and the tangle of skin beneath, where her legs met.

Elisabeth lifted her hands to his face and drew his head down. When their lips touched, he moaned, somewhere deep inside himself, and for Elisabeth it was as if there were stout ale mingling with her blood, racing through her veins.

After a while he pulled back from her, just far enough to look into her eyes. His hands, though cool, seemed to set her flesh ablaze with sensation.

"Is this what you want?" he asked. "The choice must be yours, beloved, not just mine."

She nodded, frantic and feverish, and pressed herself close to him. *Beloved*. The word found its way into her very soul and tolled there, like a bell. "Yes," she whispered. "Oh, yes."

He laid her gently on the bed and took off his clothes without hurrying. Moonlight streamed in through the windows, making his splendid body glow like polished marble, and as she watched him, it occurred to Elisabeth that he was too beautiful, too perfect, to be human.

Valerian was indeed, as he himself had once told her, more than a man.

"Touch me," she said, and he lay down beside her on the soft mattress, taking her into his arms. There was a single flaw, she saw, as he poised himself above her, a long, thin scar, pink against the alabaster whiteness of his skin, spanning the width of his torso.

"I have wanted you for so long," he told her, and she believed him.

Elisabeth had never known such piercing desire, never dreamed of feeling the way she did that night. She could not lie still and, putting her arms around Valerian's neck, she moved her hips in a circular motion beneath him.

He groaned, and somewhere far off a hound bayed in primitive harmony.

Their joining, too long delayed, was neither gentle nor ordinary. One moment they were separate, the next they were a single being, with a shared heartbeat, breathing the same air, thinking with one mind, one soul entwined with the other.

There was a sense of the inevitable, of a destiny that could not have been avoided. They moved together, their pace rapid, urgent, fierce.

Elisabeth pitched beneath Valerian, her hands moving wildly over the smooth flesh of his back and the flexing muscles of his buttocks, as if to take the whole of him inside her, as she had taken his manhood. She had pretended with other men, but with Valerian there was no need; her rising cries were born of the purest pleasure.

Valerian did not try to quiet her; instead he thrust harder and deeper. Although he made no sound at all, Elisabeth saw ecstasy in the planes of his face and felt it in the way he trembled upon her.

She reached satisfaction first, sobbing and breathless, soaring into a new place, far above the reach of her own mind and soul.

When Valerian followed her into the flames, only moments later, he gave a long, low cry, and started to spill himself into her. Then his body jerked convulsively, as if to leap to some new and unexpected height of pleasure. He closed his eyes, his head thrust back, and gave a raspy, triumphant shout.

The name he called was not her own. It was Brenna's.

Elisabeth didn't care, for he'd given her what she wanted, and she had never aspired to earn his love, never so much as hoped for such a thing. She cradled him in her arms and soothed him with light fingers and whispered words while he shuddered in the aftermath of a climax that had been emotional as well as physical.

Presently he slid downward upon her warm and welcoming body, still trembling, to rest his head between her breasts, and she stroked his hair. He turned and took her nipple, tentatively at first, and then with greed. Elisabeth felt something reawaken inside her and coil itself tighter and tighter.

She moaned and arched her back, offering herself, and he took her eagerly, gratefully, running his hands down her sides and then lifting them to her breasts again.

When he claimed her for the second time, Elisabeth exploded immediately, a fiery spiral unfurling within her, the circles ever-widening, flinging light with every revolution, warming the parts of her soul she'd kept secret even from herself.

Valerian loved her over and over that night, satisfying every desire, meeting every need. Sometime just before dawn, he let her sleep at last, and when she opened her eyes at midmorning, he was gone.

She got up, washed, donned a clean gown and over-skirt, and silently dared Kate Crown, who brought her breakfast on a tray, to speak so much as a word.

Kate did not take the challenge, but the fine ring on Elisabeth's finger caught her eye, and there would be talk about it in the kitchen for sure. The maid left the food on the table next to the bed with its tangled covers and left the room again.

Elisabeth ate fruit and brown bread and some cold meat, then used her knife to pry up the loose floorboard. She took out the hoard of gold, which was tightly bundled in a bit of cloth pinched from the kitchen, and marveled at how heavy it was.

There was enough there, she guessed, to keep her for years, if she was careful, and she wouldn't have to go back to the Horse and Horn, either, or to any place like it. The night just past had changed her, in some way she didn't fully understand. She knew now that she would never lay with another man in the whole of her life. She had made a serious mistake in wooing the master to her bed, for she had fallen in love with him in the course of their time together, but she knew he couldn't return her regard.

Valerian cared for a woman named Brenna, and Elisabeth, wise in the ways of men, knew it was an eternal bond. There was no room in the master's heart, generous as it was, for the likes of Betsey Saxon.

A tear fell onto the back of Elisabeth's hand as she replaced the board in the floor. She could have stayed, if only she'd left well enough alone and contented herself with what she had. She might not have discovered what love was, might not have learned to need and want the impossible.

Everything was different now.

The servants were busy, and it was easy to creep out of the house into the shifting morning fog, with the bundle of gold coins rattling beneath her skirts and bumping against her thigh as she walked.

She didn't know which way to go, and it didn't really matter, as long as she got away.

Elisabeth wandered all that day, growing more frightened and confused with every passing moment, and finally took a room above a seedy, dockside tavern. She lay curled on the filthy bed, the gold clutched to her middle like an unborn child, and watched the eerie dance of the fog outside the high, narrow window.

She slipped into a strange reverie, and a fever followed, with terrible cramps in her bowels.

Valerian found her that night, just after sunset, and brought her home, holding her even in the carriage, and she felt his tears on her face and in her hair.

He bathed her himself, tenderly, and sent for a physician, but Elisabeth was dying. She knew it, and so did Valerian.

He asked her about the ring once when she was lucid, but she could not recall where it came from, and said she was sorry if she'd pinched it from one of his lady friends. He wept silently at her words and did not speak of the ruby again until the following night when he was feeding her spoonfuls of broth.

"Kate said a gentleman brought it, the evening before you ran away," Valerian said gently. "That would have been a fortnight ago, as of tomorrow. Do you remember a caller, Elisabeth?"

She sensed that the ring had meaning, as well as value, that it was terribly important in some way, but she couldn't recall any man. She wished she did, for that would mean she didn't have to die a thief, with the fires of hell licking at her toes.

"No," she replied, her eyes filling with tears, and she saw by Valerian's expression that he believed her.

Just before dawn Elisabeth awakened to see an angel of death standing over her. He was very beautiful, and a tear left a glittering streak on his cheek.

Despite her weakness, she became aware of a probing sensation, and felt his mind searching hers, reaching past the fever, the confusion, the pain, into that place where her spirit lived.

"We can be together for all time," he said. "Let me give you the gift—"

Elisabeth had risen out of her body, and she could see so clearly now that her physical eyes had closed. She knew what Valerian was, knew he was damned, as surely as Lucifer and his fallen angels. She loved him without reservation and without regret, but the price of that love, her very soul, was too dear.

She came back to herself briefly and with an agonizing effort. "No," she said. "I cannot."

Valerian held her tightly, and she rested her head against his shoulder, inexpressibly weary. She felt his grief and wished she could console him or simply say good-bye, but her consciousness was fading, stretching and spreading itself thin like smoke, until finally it became part of the fog stroking the window glass with white, shifting fingers.

Dying, it turned out, was easy. A simple matter of letting go...

12

*Valerian*

*Las Vegas, 1995*

I was remembering Elisabeth Saxon when I returned to Daisy at sunset of the following day, having taken my fitful rest in a burrow far beneath the ruins of the baron's keep. Remembering, with punishing clarity, that I had not watched her closely enough, not protected her. Perhaps I had even cursed her with

my lovemaking. I suffered greatly over her passing, certain that she would not have fallen ill and perished after much suffering if I had left her alone, instead of dragging her away from that wretched tavern to live in a city where disease flourished.

I forgot about the mysterious ring in my frenzy of bereavement and did not notice that it was gone until the undertaker and his helper had come to take her away.

Elisabeth's death had been my doing, of that I was certain. And now Daisy was doomed as well, if Krispin had his way.

Beneath that terrible certainty was another brier, caught in the tenderest part of my psyche and festering there—my fragile, cherubic brother, whom I had loved, despised me and wished me harm. That pup, who had frolicked at my heels, who had emulated my every word and move and aided me in all forms and fashions of mischief, had somehow become a ravaging wolf, bent on tearing out my heart.

Thus distracted, I failed to concentrate and bungled into Daisy's apartment with an ungraceful crash, finding myself in the shower stall.

The running water instantly drenched my hair and the dusty suit and cloak I was wearing, and I roared in surprise and dismay, reaching for the plastic curtain and shoving it aside. There was a simultaneous scream from beyond.

Daisy stood on the cheap pink-fluff rug, dressed in a pair of oversize pajamas, with mayhem in her eyes and a baseball bat poised at shoulder level, ready to do serious damage.

"Oh, for God's sake," she spat, "it's only you." For a moment I thought she was going to take a swing at my head anyway, and although it would not have done me any lasting injury, I was still relieved when she lowered the bat.

Belatedly, I confess, I turned off the shower spray and stepped out of the stall, snatching a towel from a nearby rack and sponging gingerly at my sodden, mud-streaked cloak.

"Who were you expecting?" I demanded somewhat impatiently. "Norman Bates?"

Some of the air seemed to go out of Daisy, and I thought I discerned the faintest glimmer of tears pooling along her lower lashes.

She recovered quickly, as she had always done, for among the many sterling qualities she tended to carry from lifetime to lifetime was a perfectly astounding capacity for resilience. There had been many occasions when, in my opinion, cowardice would have served her better. When she rode into the sea as Brenna, for one example, and she fled my house in London as Elisabeth, for another.

A corner of Daisy's mouth tipped upward in a cocky little grin. "Are you losing your touch?" she asked, looking me over with a slow impudence I wouldn't have suffered from anyone else. "Frankly, I'd come to expect a little more subtlety and grace from you."

I don't doubt that the sheer heat of my annoyance could have dried my sodden garments, but I chose instead to construct another suit of clothes entirely, by means of my will. In the figurative blink of an eye, the tails and cloak and trousers were gone, and in their place were tailored slacks and a cashmere turtleneck sweater, both black. On my feet, instead of the former water-spotted spats, were a pair of the sleek boots I have made in a certain elite shop in Milan.

I must admit I enjoyed Daisy's round-eyed reaction to the transformation, which had been virtually instantaneous.

"I'm not even going *to ask* how you did that," she informed me after closing her gaping mouth and swallowing a few times. "I don't suppose it's a trick we poor, bumbling mortals can learn?"

I touched the tip of her nose, with its faint golden trail of freckles, and smiled. "Sorry, love—I believe that particular feat will require a few more millennia of evolution. Don't feel badly, though—the ability is there, slumbering away in a rather gelatinous portion of your brain."

Daisy gave me a spook-house smile, purposely grim and humorless. "Thanks so much for setting me straight," she said with mild irony, then turned on one bare heel to march out of the bathroom. "Every once in a while I lose touch with the fact that I'm Only Human."

I had no choice but to trail after her, and I don't mind saying that it galled me. It has always been my habit, and my distinct preference, to lead, not follow.

"Is that about poor Janet?" I demanded, hastening along that shoddy little hallway behind Daisy. "Is that why you're so peevish tonight?"

She turned so quickly that I nearly collided with her at the entrance to her uninspired living room. "I'm not peevish!" she insisted, folding her arms. "I'm *scared*, damn it! I'm scared shitless!"

I hated it when she, or any woman, talked like that. Call me a male chauvinist vampire, but I miss the old-fashioned female virtues, gracious speech among them. Sometime, I vowed to myself, I will tell her about her incarnation as Jenny Wade, when she'd been so sweet-tempered and ladylike.

But this was not the time for lectures. I put my hands on Daisy's shoulders to steady her and was struck anew by the fragility of her tender flesh and delicate bones. *Ashes to ashes*, I thought with a stab of sorrow, *and dust to dust*.

"I cannot endure this again," I muttered, speaking more to myself than to her. Even then, of course, I knew I had no choice but to endure, to suffer, to pass through the very fires of hell, and, worst of all, to survive it.

Daisy reached up and touched my mouth with the fingertips of her right hand. "What do you mean by that?" she asked in tones so gentle that they splintered my dry and hollow heart. "You left out some things the other night when you told me about our past lives together, didn't you?"

"Not 'our past lives,' darling," I replied, closing my hand around hers, because I couldn't resist, and brushing her knuckles across my lower lip. "Yours. I have been who I am—Valerian Lazarus, the bootmaker's son—since my birth in the fourteenth century."

"What is it that you haven't told me?" she persisted. She might have been Elisabeth then, or Brenna, or any of the other saucy, dauntless minxes she'd been through the endless and dreary march of years that lay between our first encounter and this one. In each successive encounter I have loved her more deeply than before. "Speak up, please."

I had not told her about the curse, of course. Or about the ruby ring that always heralded the end of another bittersweet episode between us. And I would not burden her with those things now, for there



was nothing she could do to change the future.

"Do not ask," I said, and the words came hoarse from my throat, "I cannot and will not answer."

For a long moment Daisy simply stared up at me, working some old and potent magic of her own. She looked incredibly small and breakable in those blasted pajamas, and yet I sensed in her some mysterious power that I would never understand or possess.

"He was here," she said. "The killer."

I could not have been more horrified or taken aback if Daisy's bat, which she'd left in the bathroom, had suddenly materialized in her hands and slammed into my middle. How could I have failed to sense such a threat? *How?*

"When?" I rasped, grasping her shoulders again.

Daisy turned beneath my hands and walked away, into the kitchen. She took some modern horror from the freezer and slid it into the microwave before deigning to meet my gaze and answer my anguished question.

She shrugged, leaning against the counter while the oven whirred behind her. "While I was visiting—make that *not visiting*—my sister in Telluride. I came home and found a life-size doll hanging from the showerhead, with an improvised noose around its neck. There were two red marks on the throat—for dramatic effect, I suppose. It was overkill, if you'll forgive the pun."

I stopped myself just as I would have smashed one fist through the cheap plasterboard of her living room wall. "Here? Krispin was *here*?"

The bell on the oven chimed, and Daisy opened the door and took out something evidently intended to pass for a pizza. "Ah, so Super-fiend has a name now. How interesting."

I was still struggling to regain my inner—and outer—equilibrium. The scent of the wretched thing she'd cooked and was now preparing to eat—oh, yes, vampires have the sense of smell in abundance, and all the others, too—nearly gagged me.

"I discovered the truth only last night," I said, curling my lip and trying to distance myself from the culinary travesty, which Daisy was now balancing atop a folded paper towel and raising to her lips. "My brother, Krispin, lives."

Daisy took a bite and had the effrontery to chew as she answered. "So does my sister, Nadine."

I went to stand on the other side of the living room and opened a window to the still desert air. "The difference," I said coldly, "is that Krispin, like me, was born in the fourteenth century. He is a vampire."

"I take it the two of you haven't kept in touch," Daisy observed.

I thrust a hand through my hair in exasperation. "I believed him dead all these years, and he never troubled himself to disabuse me of the notion."

She shrugged again, raising just one shoulder, and gazed at me over the expanse of the half-eaten pizza.

"Maybe he didn't know about you, either," she suggested.

I glowered at her. "He veiled himself from me. He could have no honorable reason for doing that. We were brothers, after all, dragged, bloody, from the same womb."

Daisy made a face and dropped what remained of her food into the trash. "Maybe he—what was his name again?—Krispin, that's it. Maybe *Krispin* simply doesn't like you? Did you ever consider that possibility?"

She started to lick her fingers—a habit I cannot abide—but stopped when I fixed my gaze on her and projected my disapproval.

"Clearly, to say that Krispin 'doesn't like me' is an understatement of truly enormous proportions. I believed, however foolishly, that he cared for me while he lived, as I did for him."

Daisy raised an eyebrow and, to my relief, wiped her hands clean on a dishtowel hanging from the refrigerator handle. "It couldn't have been easy to be your brother," she said. "You've got to admit you can be a bit overwhelming. A hard act to follow, in more ways than one."

"Be that as it may," I said, struggling again to control my impatience, "I believe Krispin is the killer. I must find him."

She paled slightly and came a step nearer. "And then?"

Such sorrow welled up within me that I could barely withstand it. "And then I shall destroy him."

Daisy drew closer still and laid a hand on my arm. I hoped she did not feel the involuntary tremor that spilled through what passes, in a vampire, as flesh and muscle.

"How?"

I saw my brother in my mind's eye, as a small, coltish boy, with sunlight gleaming in his bright yellow hair and mischief shining in his eyes. I heard him running after me, imploring me to slow my strides so that he might keep pace.

The memories caused me pain the like of which I have known only a handful of times—always in connection with this woman—and the images of what the future might hold for me and for Krispin were so horrible that I could not hold them in my mind.

I said nothing, because I was incapable of speaking at that moment.

"Is it like in books and movies?" Daisy asked with a tenderness that made me long to lose myself in her arms for a little while, to nestle in her warm heart like a dream and hide from all that was mine to do. "Do you have to drive a stake through his heart?"

"Something like that," I managed to say. "I would almost rather destroy myself than Krispin. Great Zeus, Daisy, if you could have seen him as a child, as a youth—he was beautiful."

"Like you," she said. "But smaller, I think, and perhaps not as quick, or as bright, or as bold."

I looked into her eyes, surprised by her insight. "My father used to say I took the best of my mother's

nurturing—that my craven hungers made my brother weak and robbed the children who came after him of the very marrow of their bones and the potency of their blood."

"Father of the Year," Daisy said with gentle sarcasm, putting her hands on my shoulders.

I wanted to melt beneath her warm, soft palms and supple fingers, but there was, regrettably, no time to waste on such sweet indulgences.

"You are not safe, Daisy," I began.

"Tell me about it," she interrupted before I could go on. "I'm a cop, remember? And we've had this conversation before. There is no safe place, Valerian—maybe not for any of us."

"My brother will come for you in earnest. The thing you found in your shower was only his calling card."

She lowered her lashes briefly, then looked up at me again. I saw in her eyes the shimmering courage that was woven into the very fiber of her spirit long, long ago, at some celestial loom. "Where shall I hide, Valerian? Name the place that you, or creatures like you, cannot enter."

I could not answer her challenge, for besides heaven itself, there was nothing that could keep me out, no place I could not go if I so wished. The same, of course, applied to Krispin.

I was forlorn in those moments, filled with hopeless despair, but then a stray thought caught in my mind. "This mannequin he left for you—where is it?"

She drew back a little way. "O'Halloran—my partner—took it in for evidence. He thinks we're dealing with an ordinary human being, you see, so he wanted the thing dusted for fingerprints, after Forensics looked it over, of course."

I would get the dummy if I had to—I needed to lay my hands to something Krispin had touched—but I preferred to avoid dealings with the police for as long as possible. Now that Janet had been killed, they were almost certain to lay the crimes at my door, and it would be awkward to vanish from their midst when they attempted to detain me.

"The tie to your robe," I said. "The one that was used as a noose. Did your partner take that, too?"

She frowned and shook her head. "No. I was afraid I wouldn't get it back."

I might have laughed, had the circumstances been different, for I admit to a certain macabre amusement at her reluctance to separate a bathrobe from its matching belt. And never mind that the thing had been used like a hangman's rope.

"Where is it?" I demanded, but I did not wait for her reply. No, I was already homing in on her bedroom, and the closet within it, and the brass hook on its inside wall.

I snatched the robe from its peg and pulled the terrycloth belt through the loops, holding it in my two hands as I might have held a tame snake. Instantly I had a strong impression of Krispin, and I knew, with both elation and despair, that my theories were correct.

I felt his hatred for me in that bit of cloth, I felt his jealousy, his madness, his fury.

I was more afraid for Daisy than ever before, previous lifetimes included. My brother would not hesitate to kill her—indeed, *herelished* the prospect. He was saving that act for last, the way a child hoards a favorite sweet.

"Why?" I whispered, in case he had linked his mind to mine and could discern my words. "Why?"

Krispin did not choose to answer.

Not then, at least.

I was compelled to hunt, for I had not fed the night before, due to my visit to Dunnett's Head. But I could not bear to leave Daisy alone in that apartment, like bait in a trap, tempting Krispin to punish me with her death.

Even in those silly, oversize pajamas, which had probably been left behind by an earlier lover, Daisy was a vision. Her copper-gold hair tumbled around her shoulders, and her eyes were like antique gems I had once admired in a shop window—impossibly green, but opaque with tension. The smattering of freckles stood out against the creamy paleness of her skin.

"How can I leave you here?" I whispered, stricken to the heart.

She drew a step nearer, and I saw the flash of memories in her mind—she was recalling, of all things, the somewhat one-sided lovemaking session in that tacky motel along the road to Telluride. Her desire for me burned bright, like a flare, and such longing seized me then that I uttered a small cry of protest and need.

"Take me with you," she said. "Let me sleep where you sleep."

I had not consciously cast a spell over Daisy; to do so would have been an abominable liberty, tantamount to rape. No, it was not magic, but plain fear that made her want the scathing comfort only I could give her. "But when we spoke of safety, you said—"

"I said I would not be your prisoner," she interrupted gently, putting her arms around my neck. "But I will be your lover."

I ached to have her, even to make her into my true mate, but of course I could do neither. The recollection of Elisabeth's death, following so soon after our intimate union, was preying upon my mind. Too, the need to hunt was urgent—were I to encounter Krispin or some other enemy before feeding, I would be too weak to protect either Daisy or myself. Once I had taken sustenance, I must immediately resume the search for my brother.

"This is not the night," I told her gently. I am certain that my disappointment was greater than hers.

"Take me with you, then," Daisy urged, running one fingertip down the chilled, pale planes of my cheek and upper jaw. "Please. I can face this killer—this thing—I know I can. But not tonight."

I kissed her forehead and wrapped her in a loose embrace, and she tucked herself against me like a nestling seeking shelter beneath the wing of a larger bird. "Very well," I said and fixed my mind on the lair hidden well outside the city's bright, tattered edge, beneath the desert sands.

We were there in an instant, standing in my gracious living room. Daisy swayed a little, from shock no

doubt, and I steadied her.

"You are probably safe here, for the moment at least," I said, aware that time was passing at its usual merciless and inexorable pace. "Vampires are not gregarious creatures, and they are, therefore, most uncomfortable in a stranger's lair." I stepped back, left her teetering there in her pajamas, and moved one arm in a broad gesture intended to take in the whole of my splendid hiding place. "I must go now, Daisy. Explore to your heart's content. I'll be back an hour or so before dawn."

With that, I vanished, carrying with me the look of unadulterated surprise I had glimpsed on her face, smiling a little over it. Mortals have such a difficult time accepting new realities.

*Daisy*

*The Vampire's Lair*

*Outside Las Vegas, 1995*

At first Daisy was so overwhelmed by Valerian's latest flashy disappearance and her own recent introduction to broomstick transport that she sank onto the leather couch and stared blankly into space. Her next coherent thought, coming some time later, was the wish that she'd taken time to change her clothes.

Trust her to show up for the experience of the aeons in the pajamas O'Halloran had given her for Christmas the year before. He'd been making a point about equality between the sexes at the time, but Daisy couldn't quite recall what it was.

She levered herself off the expensive sofa, once she'd recovered the required muscle control, and stood shakily, her knees trembling. Valerian might have spurned her seduction attempt, however politely, but he had flat-out invited her to check out his house, and she wasn't about to miss the opportunity.

Daisy soon realized that the whole place was underground, a gigantic and very luxurious bomb shelter. The light was artificial, of course, but of such clear intensity that it might have sprung from the sun itself. Besides the living room, which appeared to be equipped with every modern electronic plaything in existence, there was a large, lagoonlike swimming pool and smaller hot tub, both surrounded by a jungle of lush plants, and a kitchen containing every conceivable appliance but no dishes, silverware, pots and pans, or food. There was nothing in the giant refrigerator except a lightbulb and a box of baking soda.

Daisy considered calling out for a pizza, just to see if the delivery driver could find the place.

The master bedroom was a suite, decadently appointed with antiques, paintings, and sculptures, all priceless. Besides a huge bed with a canopy and velvet draperies, and a working gas fireplace, there was a marble tub of truly decadent proportions set right into the floor. The faucet and spigots were gold, and the exquisite tiles surrounding the bath were hand-painted and very old.

Daisy found six other bedrooms opening off the same hallway, all sumptuously furnished and obviously unused, all with their own marble-and-gold bathrooms, spectacular enough to suit the most hedonistic guests. She hoped to find clothes to borrow—Daisy took care not to think too much about who might have left such garments behind, and not just because she felt proprietary about Valerian's attentions—but there was nothing.

Finally she returned to Valerian's room and helped herself to one of his pleated dress shirts. The tails

reached almost to her knees, and she finished the ensemble off by taking a tie from his vast collection and knotting it loosely around her waist for a belt.

She was just entering the living room again, planning to stretch out on the leather sofa and try to sleep, when the biggest television screen she'd ever seen—and there were some enormous ones in the casinos—slid down out of the ceiling with an electronic purr.

Daisy looked around, thinking she must have touched a button inadvertently, but there was nothing like that in sight. She stared at the screen, and a peculiar sensation of mingled terror and excitement stirred in the pit of her stomach.

She made her way to the sofa as the great expanse of glass flickered and then brightened into light. Sliding both hands along the back of the couch, Daisy made her way to one end and collapsed into the deep cushions.

A field of flowers nodded on the screen, breathtakingly beautiful, bending and bowing gracefully in a twilight breeze. Daisy waited for credits, for any explanation of what was happening, but in some half-conscious part of her brain she'd already grasped the truth.

The image she was seeing wasn't being transmitted from any television station. This was vampire magic, but the trick wasn't Valerian's. He wouldn't have frightened her like that.

She watched the flowers, daisies mostly, bathed in the lavender of approaching night and at the same time reflecting a peculiar crimson glow. When she saw someone in the upper right-hand corner of the screen, she felt tension coil in her stomach, and when that figure drew near enough to see clearly, she gasped aloud.

The woman was a stranger, a tall, brown-eyed blonde, and yet Daisy knew she was looking at herself. Valerian had not told her about this incarnation, and she suspected that was because he hadn't known about it. By some mysterious cosmic fluke, she'd gotten past him that time.

Watching the screen, fascinated and terrified at the same time, Daisy struggled to remember being this person, but not so much as a glimmer came to her.

She stood up, squinting, realizing only then that the living room, so dazzlingly bright before, was now lighted only by the flickering glow of the screen. A chill dripped down the center of her back, like a trickle of icy water, and she shivered, studying the face of that other self.

She sank down onto the cushions again a moment later, when her knees would no longer support her.

She forced herself to stay calm, to watch. Daisy was in danger, and she knew it, but her years of training and police service stood her in good stead. If she panicked, if she failed to pay close attention, she would not survive.

Daisy took careful note of the image on the screen—studied the reflection of this being who was and yet was not herself. The clothes her double wore were ragged and old, garments a peasant woman might have worn in any one of several different centuries.

She scooted forward, gripping the edge of the couch with both hands, heart thrumming, upper lip moist with perspiration.

The woman on the screen began to call out for someone, raising both hands to cup her mouth, scanning the field with worried eyes. There was no sound except for the faintest murmur of circuitry, but Daisy recognized the name on those lips so similar to her own.

Shock rocketed through Daisy, and her heart began to beat painfully fast; she barely overcame an elemental urge to cover her eyes with both hands.

The flowers were wilting, and a garish light had arisen in the background, crimson and orange, leaping, hot to the eye as it would be to the touch.

The fire was drawing nearer.

She watched herself begin to run, and realized that the flowers and grasses, all fainting beneath an undulating, glimmering tide of heat, grew in a graveyard.

Suddenly Daisy was not sitting on Valerian's couch, watching the scene—she was in it. *She* was the pretty woman-child running between tilting headstones. *She* felt the heat of the approaching fire scouring the flesh of her back, even through the rough weave of her shift. The earth was rocky and uneven beneath her feet, her lungs burned fit to burst, and she was scared enough to pass water without slowing down.

Between one instant and the next she forgot that she'd ever been called Daisy Chandler, would not have recognized the name except as one she might have heard long ago in a dream.

"Krispin!" she screamed, tripping, falling, and rising again, all in a virtually simultaneous motion. The blaze roared as it ate up cottages and fields and churches behind her, gaining on her like the fleetest of runners.

She ran on, making a whimpering sound when she wasn't choking on the rolling black smoke, until her legs gave out a second time. She toppled to the ground and crawled behind a great huge monument with a French name chiseled into its side.

It was coming on dark now—or was it just the smoke darkening the sky?—but where was her beloved? He'd promised to meet her here, to take her far away from London—perhaps to Paris, he'd said, or Rome or even Istanbul.

"Here's the truth of it, Maddie Goodtree," she whispered to herself, choking on the thick, acrid air between words. "Either he's gone up in flames like a scarecrow, your fancy man, or you've been made the fool."

Maddie leaned around the end of the monument, which felt hot as brimstone to the touch, and peered toward the line of thundering crimson on the horizon. London was gone, that it was. And at the rate the flames were traveling, they would gobble up the rest of England as well. Paris might have gone up, too, if it weren't for the waters of the channel blocking the way.

She tried to rise, to run again, but all the feeling had gone out of her knees. Other folks, fleeing the city, scrambled past, dragging carts, mewling children, and the doddering old behind them.

No one stopped to help.

The fire drew nearer, and Maddie found it more and more difficult to breathe. She managed to gain her feet at last and stumbled after the others. The sun had set, but one would never have known it, with the



sky so hellish bright.

Then suddenly he was there beside her. He smiled and took her hand, her beautiful lover, and told her not to be afraid.

There were shrieks puncturing the darkness all around them, cries of terror and of pain, and Maddie would have thought she was lost in hell itself if her beautiful, fair-haired angel hadn't been walking beside her, showing her the way.

Krispin had found her at last.

They escaped the fire in a twinkling, it seemed to Maddie, taking refuge inside cool, dank walls, where there was no light at all. He drew her close, and their lips and bodies seemed to melt into one as they celebrated the darkness...

Slowly, slowly, Daisy returned to herself.

The television screen had disappeared, and every light in the place was blazing, and she heard a soft, seductive voice that should have come from anywhere except within her own head.

"You were mine in that lifetime. Not Valerian's. *Mine* ." There was a pause, no longer than a heartbeat, followed by a throaty chuckle. "He didn't know you were alive, and you belonged to me. As you shall again."

13

*Valerian*

*Outside Las Vegas, 1995*

I returned to my underground lair just before dawn, exhausted and frustrated beyond measure. I had combed the earth, from one pole to the other, over the last few nights, and found no sign, no hair or trace, of my prey. Krispin had hidden himself very cleverly indeed.

Daisy was lying on the couch when I returned, clad in one of my handsewn shirts, artfully belted with a necktie. She was pale as a medieval snow.

I extended a hand and swayed slightly on my feet, for I was already beginning to succumb to the vampire sleep.

I had sought my brother with little regard for the thinning darkness, and dawn was only moments away.

I could barely focus my gaze on her, and speaking was a greater effort than I could manage. I struggled to regain my tenuous grip on consciousness, knowing all the while that the attempt was hopeless. Yes, there had been times in my past when the mysterious slumber had not wrestled me downward, into inner darkness, but this night I would not be spared.

Daisy rushed toward me, and I sagged against her. She supported me with surprising strength, speaking rapidly, but by then her words were no more than an unintelligible murmur. The last thing I was aware of

was the couch beneath me, still pulsing with the sweet warmth of her body.

*Daisy*

*The Vampire's Lair, 1995*

Daisy knelt on the floor beside Valerian's resting place, holding his cold hand in both of hers, both horrified and fascinated. His flesh, always unusually fair, was white as alabaster, and there was a stillness about him, so absolute that he might have been dead.

She laid her head to his chest and heard no heartbeat, felt no rise and fall of ribs and muscles and flesh. Had she not experienced Valerian's magic for herself, over and over, she would have mourned, believing she'd lost him forever. She remained as she was for a long while, her ear chilling against his hard breast, struggling with the knowledge that she not only knew a vampire personally, she'd fallen in love with one.

She cried softly, silently, her tears wetting the fine fabric of the shirt he wore. Lots of women, even when they happened to be cops, lost their hearts to practicing alcoholics, philanderers, compulsive gamblers, and assorted other losers, but falling for a vampire was carrying dysfunction to a new level.

Here was an idiosyncrasy even Geraldo hadn't encountered before.

After mourning for a time, Daisy raised her head and sat back on her heels, sinking her teeth into her lower lip. She needed to tell Valerian about Krispin, and the episode with the television set, but she dreaded the task to such an extent that she was almost glad for the respite sunrise provided.

She would be reasonably safe in the interim, she supposed, for if Valerian was incapacitated during the daylight hours, then Krispin, being a vampire himself, was surely curled up in a coffin somewhere, motionless as a corpse and temporarily harmless.

She hoped.

Daisy kept her vigil until her knees went numb, then made herself get up and walk around. There wasn't a scrap of food in the house, and she was violently hungry. To keep her mind off the problem for a little while, she went out to the pool, which, like everything else, was underground. Building that place had been a real feat of engineering, and yet Daisy, living all her life in Las Vegas, had never heard so much as a rumor of its existence.

She removed the tie belt and the shirt purloined from Valerian's vast wardrobe and slipped into the warm, sapphire-colored water. The chamber housing the pool and hot tub had a cavernlike ambience, and reflections danced across the dark ceiling, but the air was humid rather than dank and cool.

The water seemed to cradle Daisy as she turned, naked, onto her back, to float. Her hair spilled out around her, and the tips of her breasts hardened, reminding her of how desperately she had wanted—and *still* wanted—Valerian's lovemaking. The desire was deep-rooted and instinctive, a consuming need beyond explanation or understanding, something so powerful that it frightened her and so compelling that she could not resist.

It was as though some ancient vow would be fulfilled in the act, some promise made before the stars were shaped. For good or ill, they would be joined, if only for a night.

Daisy permitted herself to remember the scene she'd witnessed on the television screen earlier. She'd felt

the throbbing heat of the great fire, the rough ground beneath her feet, and with them the terror, somehow her own as well as Maddie Goodtree's. She had known relief at the sight of Krispin—or Maddie had—and experienced every nuance of their tempestuous lovemaking as well.

She blushed, floating there in Valerian's pool, to recall the sheer physical intensity of her satisfaction. And yes, she must claim that glorious, forbidden release as her own, because she had *been* Maddie Goodtree. As well as Brenna Afton-St. Claire and Elisabeth Saxon. She had vague, gauzy memories of those lifetimes, and she knew they had often touched her dreams.

Daisy sighed, lying still upon the water. As pleasurable as Krispin's intimate attentions had been, in that other life so recently recalled, they paled by comparison to the psychic sex she'd had with Valerian. He had driven her out of herself, the magician had, without even being in the same room.

She kicked her feet and tossed back her wet hair. If Valerian made love to her in person, the pleasure would probably kill her.

It would almost be worth dying young, she decided with a smile, making her way toward the tiled edge of the pool, if the last experience was anything to go by.

Daisy climbed out of the water and found a stack of fragrant white towels on a glistening brass stand next to the wall. Only then did it occur to her to wonder who cleaned this strange, hidden house—surely Valerian, vampire of legend, star of stage if not screen, did not scrub toilets and mop floors.

"Curiouser and curiouser," Daisy muttered, wrapping the towel around herself like a sarong and leaving the borrowed shirt and tie where she'd left them, flung across the back of a lounge chair.

There was a strange freedom in her confinement, though by rights the place was nothing more than a luxurious grave. She could walk about stark naked if she wanted to, and know that no one, including Valerian, would see her.

She dropped the towel at the doorway to the living room and went to stand over the exquisitely handsome vampire sleeping on the sofa. He was beyond a doubt the most beautiful creature, man or woman, she had ever seen, a subject worthy of Michelangelo or any of the masters.

How long, she wondered, had she loved him? A thousand years? Ten thousand?

Daisy turned away, the question heavy in her heart, and wandered into the kitchen, still starved. Maybe she'd overlooked a box of crackers or a can of sardines, kept on hand for that rare visit by a mortal.

The telephone caught her eye as soon as she flipped on the lights, and Daisy went to it and lifted the receiver with a slight smile playing at one corner of her mouth. She dialed O'Halloran's cellular number, knowing he was going to give her a ration for disappearing the way she had. He wouldn't be able to handle the truth—that she was standing naked in a vampire's kitchen. In fact, he'd probably go straight to the chief and have her badge pulled—permanently.

"Yeah!" he barked over the roar of air rushing past an open car window, plainly annoyed at the interruption. O'Halloran carried a cell phone, but not for status. He hated the things and tolerated them only because they helped him stay in touch with his contacts.

"O'Halloran?" Daisy asked sweetly, although she would have known that voice anywhere.

The howl diminished into nothing as O'Halloran rolled up his window. "Chandler? Is that you?" He sounded anxious. "Where the hell are you?"

"I'm staying out of sight for a few days, that's all." She thought of the layers of earth between the cool tiles beneath her feet and the surface of the Nevada desert. "Laying low, you might say. If you've been worrying about me, stop. I'm okay."

"Is somebody forcing you to say that?"

"No, O'Halloran. Nobody is forcing me to do anything. I just need a little time to get my head together, that's all. You were the one who suggested that in the first place, remember?"

"You're really all right?"

Daisy felt a surge of affection for O'Halloran; he and his wife, Eleanor, were like family to her. All she had, except for Nadine. "Yes," she said, blinking back tears because there was so much she couldn't share. "How's the investigation going?"

"No progress," O'Halloran said with a raspy sigh. "We can't find this Valerian character, for one thing. He's let his personal staff and the surviving performers go and closed down the show at the Venetian, but the management says he plans to return soon, so they haven't booked anybody else. His name is still on the marquee, and the press is clamoring for him. If I was a cynical guy, I might just figure it was all a publicity stunt."

"You think he'd murder those women just to get attention?" Daisy demanded, feeling cold all of a sudden in her birthday suit. "You can't be serious, O'Halloran. He has to know he'd be number one on the suspect list." She glanced toward the living room where Valerian was sleeping. "Nobody in his right mind would expect to commit a crime like that and then just go merrily on with his career!"

"That's just it, Chandler. You saw the bodies. We ain't dealing with somebody who's in his right mind."

Daisy wanted to tell him that it was Krispin, not Valerian, who had done the killings, but there was simply no way to explain the realities of the situation. "That's right," she agreed somewhat testily, "we're not. Look beyond the obvious, O'Halloran. Dig deeper. You're missing something."

"I wish you were here to help out," the older cop confessed. "You got good instincts, Chandler."

"I take it I'm still suspended, then?" Daisy asked, unable to hide the sadness and frustration she felt. Her work was such a large part of her identity that she wasn't sure who she was without it. "The chief hasn't blown a brass trumpet and shouted, 'Bring me Chandler, she of the good instincts and negative drug test?'"

O'Halloran was quiet. Too quiet.

"Talk to me," Daisy ordered when she could stand his silence no longer.

"The brass wants you to talk things over with a shrink."

"They think I'm crazy."

"They think you're under a lot of stress, like every other cop in the country."

"Yeah, well, they're not making 'every other cop' see a head doctor, are they?"

"Chandler? Do yourself a favor, take some advice from an old veteran. Don't fight this one. Just do what they ask. It ain't so much, you know—the doc will probably want you to look at a few ink blots and play some word association games, that's all."

Daisy swore.

"More advice," O'Halloran said crisply. "Don't use that word in front of anybody above the rank of lieutenant."

"I'll keep that in mind," Daisy allowed. It was hard, she discovered, to be naked and angry at the same time.

"Okay, Chandler, give me a number where I can reach you, and we'll wrap this conversation up. I'm on my way over to the Venetian—again—to see if I can track down this magician of theirs. I'll say one thing for this Valerian fella—he's got the disappearing act down pat."

Daisy smiled and dashed at her cheek with the back of one hand. All of the sudden she felt vulnerable, rather than free, and she was anxious to put Valerian's shirt back on. In the meantime, though, O'Halloran wanted a number.

She thought quickly. "I'm staying in a lake cabin," she lied, "and I have to use a pay phone whenever I want to make a call. I'll be in touch within a day or two."

"Just give me the name of the resort, then."

"Sorry, partner—that's a secret. I'll call again soon." With that, her stomach twisted into a knot of guilt, Daisy hung up the telephone.

Next she called her apartment. She listened patiently to her own voice, droning the usual spiel about leaving a name and number, and punched the pound sign when it was over. At the other end of the line the tape rewound with a high-pitched squeaking sound, and then the accumulated messages began to play.

The first was from Nadine, saying she was in labor and had checked into the hospital.

The second was from Freddy. Nadine was yelling a lot, he said frantically, and he wished he'd never gotten her into this mess. Could Daisy please come to Telluride as soon as possible?

Fresh tears brimmed in Daisy's eyes. She wanted desperately to be with her sister and lend what support she could, more now than ever, but it was too dangerous for Nadine and Freddy and the baby. She couldn't bear even the thought of what Krispin might do to them, for whatever insane reason of his own.

The next voice was the same painfully slow, inhuman drone she'd heard before, and she knew now that it was some trick of Krispin's—a robot, maybe, or a computer, or his own private brand of magic. "Come out, Daisy. You cannot hide from me forever. If you don't show yourself, I will kill again."

Bile surged into the back of Daisy's throat; she squeezed her eyes shut and struggled to keep her empty

stomach from convulsing. "Dear God," she whispered. "Help me."

The line went dead, and then she heard Nadine's voice again. Daisy's sister sounded weary but full of joy. "Daze? The baby came this morning, and mother and daughter are doing great. Freddy suffered so much angst over all the pain I went through that he gave a little ground on the name business. We're calling our daughter Whitney Miranda. Fruit not included. What do you think, Auntie? Call me soon—I'm going to tell you more about childbirth than any sensible woman would want to know."

That was the end of the tape, and Daisy was weeping softly as she hung up the receiver. She had a niece—her only flesh-and-blood relative besides Nadine and the long-lost Jeanine—and she couldn't even make a pilgrimage to Telluride to admire her.

It wasn't fair.

"Not much is fair in this life," a female voice observed.

Daisy was so startled that she whirled and pressed herself to the wall. She had expected some stray fiend; instead, she was faced with an attractive woman of about her own age. The visitor had short dark hair, stylishly cut, and enormous gray eyes. She was sleekly trim and clad in black corduroy slacks, a white poet's shirt, and a vest of charcoal velvet.

"Who are you?" the pixie demanded, taking in Daisy's bare body with a frown of disapproval.

Daisy swallowed. "I was going to ask the same question of you," she said, just resisting a futile urge to cover herself with both arms. "Are you a vampire?"

"Of course not," was the brisk answer. "I couldn't be abroad in the daylight if I were. But I'll give you my name in trade for yours—it's Kristina Holbrook."

The surname was faintly familiar; Daisy thought Valerian might have mentioned it in passing. "Daisy Chandler," she said. "I'm a detective with the Las Vegas Police Department." She regretted that last part the moment the words had tumbled from her mouth—in her present unclothed state, she wasn't exactly a credit to hard-working law enforcement officers everywhere.

Ms. Holbrook's lips twitched. "Perhaps you'd better call for backup, Detective Chandler. It would appear that someone has stolen your clothes."

Daisy flushed with embarrassment. "I was wearing pajamas when I came here," she blurted out. "And then I went swimming, and it just seemed, with Valerian asleep and no one else around or anything—"

"It's okay," Kristina said quickly with a full-fledged and quite dazzling smile. "I'll get you something to wear." She pondered Daisy thoughtfully again, then said with conviction, "I think blue is your color."

With that she closed her eyes, and within the instant Daisy felt cloth against her skin. She looked down, speechless with amazement, to see that she was wearing an indigo silk jumpsuit with a hammered gold belt.

"I was right," Kristina boasted with a good-natured grin. "You look fantastic."

"Who—" Daisy lapsed into incoherence for a few moments, then made another attempt. "Who are you?"

"I told you. I'm Kristina Holbrook."

"And y-you're not a vampire."

Kristina's forehead crumpled slightly as she frowned. "Definitely not. But both my parents are. It's very complicated—my father was still mortal when I was conceived, so I'm human. Mostly."

Daisy swallowed hard. "*Mostly?*"

Kristina laughed, and the sound was like the peal of distant bells. "I'm mortal, essentially. But I'm not sure when I'll get old, if ever, and I do have certain powers, as I've just illustrated." She paused for a beat or two, then took the conversation in a whole other direction. "Would you like something to eat?"

Daisy was breathless—and surprised to discover that she was still hungry. "Yes—please."

The other woman pointed dramatically at the island in the center of the kitchen, and a picnic basket appeared, accompanied by the tantalizing aromas of fried chicken and freshly baked apple pie.

"Come on and join me," Kristina urged pleasantly, pulling a stool over to the island and sitting down. "You said you were hungry, didn't you?"

Daisy hesitated a moment longer, then approached the food. The fine silk of her jumpsuit brushed softly against her skin as she moved.

"Would you like some jewelry to go with that?" Kristina asked, pulling a drumstick out of the basket and biting into it with relish.

"No, thanks," Daisy said, standing on the other side of the island and helping herself to the food. There were plates inside the elegant basket, along with sterling silver, crystal wine flutes, and a very fine Bordeaux. "The outfit's enough. Is it going to melt at midnight?"

Kristina's grin was puckish. "Are you accusing me of slipshod magic?"

Daisy didn't bother to answer. "Why are you here?" she asked between bites of delicious chicken, potato salad, and coleslaw.

"Mother has been worried about Valerian. She asked me to look in on him."

By now Daisy's head was reeling. Maybe the higher-ups on the force were right, she thought in a brief flurry of hysteria. Perhaps she was losing it, and she needed intensive therapy. But no—deep inside, where it counted, Daisy knew she was all too sane.

Delusions? Hallucinations?

She should be so lucky.

"Is he—family? Valerian, I mean?"

"He's like a godfather, I guess," Kristina answered. "Or a favorite uncle. We're quite close, he and I. He spoiled me outrageously when I was a child—take the dollhouse he gave me, for example. It's a perfect replica of the palace at Versailles, down to the last light fixture."



Daisy had been standing up, but now she groped for a stool, dragged it over, and sort of collapsed onto it. Now that she knew it wasn't romantic, she had no pressing interest in Kristina's relationship with Valerian. "So you just sort of zapped yourself here from somewhere else?"

"Seattle," Kristina said. "I own a small antiques shop there." She frowned at Daisy over the rim of a carton of mashed potatoes. "I'm sorry. We must be quite overwhelming, Valerian and I. Have you met any of the others?" She paused to shudder. "Canaan and Benecia Havermail, for instance? They're little girls, beautiful as dolls, and hardly any bigger than they were five hundred years ago, when they became vampires. What vile little creatures they are—but you needn't worry about them. They wouldn't dare bother anyone Valerian befriends."

Daisy had been left behind, like a piece of luggage tossed from a moving train. "Five hundred years—"

Kristina shrugged. "That's not uncommon," she said. "My mother was born in the eighteenth century, you know, and my father served as a surgeon in the American Civil War when he was mortal. And as for me—"

Daisy held her breath, bracing herself to absorb yet another stunning revelation.

"Well, just between us, I've been around a while myself. How old would you say I am?"

It was the kind of question Daisy hated, but she'd had a lot of experience at gauging such things as a police officer, and she was fairly confident of her abilities. "Twenty-nine or thirty, I'd say."

"Bless you." Kristina beamed. Then she leaned forward to confide in a cheerful whisper, "Lincoln was President when I was born."

"No," Daisy said, but the fall-away sensation in the pit of her stomach told her it was true.

"Yes," Kristina insisted. Then she sighed sadly. "It's hard, when your friends get old and you stay just the same, year after year, decade after decade. Naturally they wonder why."

"Naturally," Daisy croaked, at a loss for anything sensible to say.

"I take it you're completely mortal?"

"Completely," Daisy said.

"I envy you. I'd trade all my magic, you see, for a real home and a family of my own. How lovely to marry and grow old with a man you cherish and respect—"

Daisy pushed away her food. "Don't envy me," she whispered, and then she made the unthinkable confession. "I'm in love with a vampire. And that isn't the worst of it. It would seem we've been together in other lifetimes—"

"Oh, no!" Kristina interrupted, covering her mouth with one hand and widening her already huge gray eyes. "*You're* Valerian's ladylove—the one he keeps finding and losing, finding and losing!"

Daisy nodded glumly. "I think so, yes."

Tears of sympathy glistened in Kristina's dark lashes. "It's true, then—there is some sort of curse."

Valerian had told her about their star-crossed encounters in various centuries, and she was beginning to remember the odd detail, but he hadn't said anything about a curse.

"Tell me what you know," she pleaded.

Kristina shook her head. "You'll have to ask Valerian, Daisy. This is a personal matter, and I have no business interfering. Besides, the plain truth is I don't know much about it. I've heard whispers through the years, that's all."

Daisy supposed she should have been afraid of Kristina Holbrook, but instead she liked and trusted her. She wanted her for a friend, though it seemed unlikely that they'd have much in common.

"Okay, I can respect that," Daisy said. "Thanks for the food, anyway, and the jumpsuit."

Kristina got off the stool and started toward the kitchen door, and Daisy followed her into the living room. The dark-haired woman went to stand beside the couch and touched Valerian's forehead with such tenderness that Daisy felt an involuntary stab of jealousy.

"Is he all right?" Daisy asked, because it was plain that Kristina knew.

"Valerian is very strong and not a little stubborn," she replied, but there was a small, worried crease between her eyebrows. "We must all be tried and tested in the crucible, mortal or immortal, and it would seem that his time has come."

"What do you mean by that?" Daisy could barely get the words out, she was so stricken by the grisly array of possibilities invading her imagination.

Kristina withdrew her hand from Valerian's opalescent flesh, but did not look away from his face. Her expression was full of sorrow and hope, trust and fear. "Everything changes. Perhaps the curse has finally run its course—perhaps everything can be resolved, one way or the other."

Daisy thought about Krispin, and the murdered women, about the horrible dummy she'd found hanging in her shower, and the scene played out on Valerian's television screen. She'd watched those strange images and, at the same time, been a part of them.

Yes, she reflected, Kristina was right. Events were building toward some sort of crescendo, and she was caught up in it all, not only because of her past lives, but through her growing love for Valerian.

She stayed silent, because there was nothing to say.

Kristina bent again and kissed Valerian's forehead, then straightened and turned to Daisy. "Here," she said, taking a pendant from around her neck and putting it around Daisy's. It was an exquisite golden rosebud suspended from a priceless chain. "This has been in our family since my mother and her twin brother, Aidan, were mortal children. Over the centuries, it has gained power from the love of those who wore it against their hearts. You'll need all your wits, all your love, all your faith to fight the battles ahead, but this talisman will lend you strength."

The necklace felt warm beneath Daisy's fingertips. "Thank you," she said. She was aware that, in giving away the pendant, Kristina was making a sacrifice. Whether that sacrifice was large or small, Daisy could

not guess.

Kristina smiled somewhat sadly. Or so it seemed to Daisy. Almost as an afterthought, as she was preparing to leave, the pixie-witch asked, "Do you want to leave here? Or is your vigil a willing one?"

"I want to stay," Daisy said.

Kristina nodded. "Please tell Valerian when he wakes that I was here to look in on him." At Daisy's smile of acquiescence, Kristina raised both hands over her head and vanished with a showy little puff of smoke.

"Wow," Daisy couldn't help remarking. Then she stretched out beside Valerian's still form, there on that roomy leather sofa, cuddled up close, closed her eyes, and drifted into a fairy-tale sleep.

She dreamed she rested in a crumbling castle, its walls obscured by thistles and thorns, its parapets and baileys and courtyards overgrown with vines.

Only the kiss of a certain prince could awaken her.

*Valerian*

*The Vampire's Lair, 1995*

I opened my eyes at dusk to find Daisy sleeping beside me. My strength was flagging, despite the rest I'd taken and last night's hasty feeding outside one of my favorite haunts, the Last Ditch Tavern, but I could not leave her. Not yet.

I shifted slightly and brushed her lips with a tender kiss, and her eyes opened, wide and startled and so green that the sight of them made my heart clench like a fist within me.

Then she smiled and put her arms around my neck. She did not need to speak; the invitation reverberated through her supple, warm little body and pierced me like lightning.

"You don't understand," I began. My vampire senses, a thousand times more acute than those of an ordinary man, were leaping to life, pulsing beneath my skin, promising agony if I denied them, ecstasy if I gave in.

I have ever cherished my pleasures.

I made one last attempt, however. "Daisy—" I began, my voice no more than a raspy whisper.

She touched my lips with a fingertip and wriggled beneath me. "I want you," she murmured. "I don't care what comes after that."

I groaned and fell into her kiss, willing to burn in hell for her, to offer myself as a living sacrifice—anything, so long as I could taste again the joy I had mourned these many decades since I had seen her last. And I wanted the joining of our two souls even more, for I was only whole when her spirit and mine were fused by the fire of our lovemaking.

Daisy whimpered beneath my mouth as I opened the front of her garment—a curious thing it was, trousers and a blouse fastened together—and took gentle sustenance at her full breasts, one after the

other. Her fingers, buried in my hair, pressed me closer, and I felt her hips arch under mine, wooing and tempting me in the age-old way, tormenting me with the promise of pleasure so intense a mortal could not have endured it, setting my bedazzled senses ablaze.

"Take me," she pleaded, and hers was not one but a chorus of sweet voices—her own, of course, and Brenna's, and Elisabeth's, and Jenny's. And more.

I refused to grant her such easy gratification, sliding down from her quivering, well-suckled breasts, over her smooth belly, damp beneath my lips. There was much I wanted to remind Daisy of, before our joining, and much I wanted to teach her.

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*Daisy*

*The Vampire's Lair, 1995*

Daisy thrashed beneath Valerian, in a delirium of need, but he withheld satisfaction long after she had begun to plead. He tongued the peaks of her breasts until she felt her heartbeat throbbing in that taut flesh, and kissed her stomach and her hipbones, the insides of her thighs, the backs of her knees. She might have been a goddess, so thoroughly did he worship her, with tenderness and fire for his offerings.

She uttered a primitive, groaning sound when he burrowed through the veil of moist silk to take the hidden nubbin of flesh between his lips and begin to draw upon it, ever so gently. While he teased and nibbled and savored, at his leisure, Daisy writhed, soaked with perspiration, her hair clinging, in wild strands of copper, to her temples, her cheeks, her shoulders, and the upper swell of her breasts.

In desperation, she tore open Valerian's shirt, as brazen and untamed as a she-wolf in her season, and spread her hands over his marble chest. It was as if Michelangelo's *David* had come to life and was making love to her, so splendid was he, so soul-wrenchingly beautiful.

Mankind, she thought frantically, had never been meant to look as Valerian looked, or feel as he felt. Such magnificence could not be imprisoned in mortal flesh any more than lightning could be confined to a teacup or the music of a symphony to a single seashell.

Valerian groaned at her touch, and she slid her arms around him and stroked his perfectly sculpted back with warm palms. At the same time she murmured to him—softly, insensibly, for she was not capable of reason—and knew that her love was balm to his spirit as well as his body.

His clothes vanished with a mere blink of his hooded, sapphire eyes, and then Daisy's were gone, too.

"May the Fates forgive me," Valerian whispered, and then he found the entrance to her body and took her in a single deep, swift stroke.

Daisy's arousal, already ferocious, convulsed her whole being in cataclysmic release, and she screamed, not from pain, but out of a pleasure that went beyond any conceivable agony or delight. Each time she reached a new peak, she was sent spiraling upward, toward another, until the last measure of response had been wrung from her. Throughout that sweet odyssey, Valerian whispered to her, stroked her face and her breasts, smoothed her hair.

When at last, with a faint whimper, she sank back to the sofa in exhaustion, he gave her a few moments to catch her breath. Then, at long last, Valerian was overwhelmed by his own passions. He reached beneath her to grasp her buttocks in powerful hands and raise her like a sheath to the sword.

Valerian's strokes were long and slow and smooth; he plucked at Daisy's senses, tuned them, like the strings of an exquisite violin, and soon she was playing a fevered rhapsody for him. They reached the crescendo simultaneously, with hoarse shouts of beleaguered triumph, and collapsed into the stillness that lay beneath their passion.

A long time had passed when Valerian broke the mystic silence with a low chuckle. "I didn't plan for us to make love on the living room couch like a pair of teenagers," he said. "Frankly, I had something a little more romantic in mind."

Daisy nuzzled his neck, putting off the moment when she would have to tell him about her message from Krispin and the lifetime as Maddie Goodtree. "Don't give it another thought. If that had been any better, I would have gone up like a campfire doused with kerosene."

He laughed. "It was good, then?"

"It was better than good. It would be an improvement on 'perfect,' in fact."

Valerian kissed her, but lightly, mischievously. He knew, without being told, that she had given him everything she had to give, and that she would need time to recover before they made love again.

"And what secrets are you keeping from me?" he asked.

Deep within Daisy, small muscles continued to contract as the last and strongest orgasm ebbed away, and she tucked her face into his shoulder. "I'm still coming," she whispered.

"I knew that," Valerian said with a smile in his voice. "We are yet joined, in case you've forgotten, and I can feel you tightening around me. What exquisite torture it is."

Daisy whimpered and then gave a little sigh as the resonance grew softer, and more distant. "There aren't any other—secrets."

"Don't lie to me, Daisy." Valerian groaned and shifted his weight slightly, but made no move to withdraw from her. He was still hard, and she was exulted to sense a new tension rising quietly and steadily within him. This time she would be in control.

She taunted him with an almost imperceptible motion of her hips, and he threw back his head, the muscles of his neck corded with the effort of holding back.

"You will pay for that impertinence," he vowed.

Daisy drew him deeper, and his majestic body flexed once, twice upon hers. He moaned, as if in pain, and spilled himself into her a second time.

"You will pay," he repeated, but he was kissing her as he spoke, tasting her eyelids, searching out her mouth with his own.

Daisy toppled back into sleep, so sated was she; her muscles were limp, and it seemed her very bones had melted. When she awakened, she was lying in Valerian's bed in the master suite, and he was standing at its foot, clad in his magician's garb and just donning his cape. He looked gaunt somehow, and she wondered if it was her lovemaking that had sapped his strength, or some experience he'd had the night before.

"Why didn't you dress by magic?" she asked, putting off the moment when she would have to tell him about Krispin.

His smile was slight, distracted. "I sometimes enjoy the mechanics of simple tasks."

She sighed. Now or never, she thought.

"I need to tell you something before you go," Daisy said bluntly, sitting up and drawing the linen bedsheets up to cover her breasts.

Valerian crossed to the bed and uncovered them again, and a shock of fresh desire sizzled through Daisy's system as he looked at her with an expression of wry appreciation. "Your body is far too lovely to hide," he said. "Besides, it's a little late for modesty, don't you think?"

Daisy clung to her resolve, but decided to start small. She would save the news about Krispin for last.

"Kristina was here, while you were sleeping today. She gave me this." She held out the antique pendant for him to see.

"I noticed that, as it happens," Valerian said.

Daisy blushed. He'd been up close and personal—*of course* he'd noticed. "She's worried about you. Kristina, I mean. So is her mother."

He was straightening his elegant string tie. "She has always been a perceptive child," he replied evenly. "Likewise, Maeve."

Daisy dropped the bomb, blurting out the words in a rush. "There's something else. Krispin's been tampering with your television set. He played a few stirring scenes from what I assume was one of my past lives and said I belonged to him then and I would again."

Valerian's hands fell to his sides, and he stood utterly still. His expression was cold, and his eyes seemed to pierce Daisy's very soul. "Why didn't you tell me this before?" he asked evenly, and with ominous softness.

"We were busy," she reminded him, refusing to be cowed.

"Tell me what you saw."

"Myself, running away from what was probably the London Fire—1666, I think it was. My name was Maddie Goodtree, and I didn't look anything like I do now."

Valerian frowned ever so slightly. "Maddie Goodtree?"

It was as Daisy had feared; Valerian had not known about that particular lifetime. He might even hate

her when he learned the truth, and believe she'd betrayed him by loving Krispin.

"I don't know much about her," Daisy said bravely, "except that she was involved with your brother."

There followed a towering silence, much more intimidating to Daisy than any that had gone before it. "*She was what?*"

Daisy gulped. "In love with Krispin," she said miserably.

He turned away, but his rage was like a swell of heat, filling the room, pushing at the walls and the ceiling, glimmering and undulating all around him, mirage-like.

"There was a message on my machine when I called home, too," Daisy went on, wanting to finish, to get it all out in the open so they could go on from there. "He—Krispin—said he would kill again if I didn't come to him." A decision she had not consciously made rose to the surface of her thoughts. "I can't let that happen, Valerian—I can't let someone else die when it's me he wants."

Valerian turned to her again, and his face, though as beautiful as ever, was terrible to see. "*You will not go to him,*" he decreed in a furious undertone.

"It's my job," Daisy insisted, equally angry. "And blink me up some clothes, will you please? I'm tired of running around naked, like some sultan's personal plaything."

A black formal materialized on her body, fitted, with a pleated flair at the bottom and diamond clasps holding the bodice together.

"Very funny," Daisy said. "I want jeans, damn it, and a T-shirt."

Valerian complied, but grudgingly. The gown disappeared, replaced by Levi's that were two sizes too big and a lime green T-shirt with the name of a fertilizer company emblazoned across the front.

She folded her arms. "You can do better."

Scowling, he made the jeans fit and changed the shirt to a plain red one, tucked in at the waist.

"Thank you," Daisy said wearily, rising at last from the bed and looking down at her magic clothes. "I could have used your help when I was in high school. It took me forever to dress, and I was late for everything."

Valerian was seething, and he glared down at Daisy as she moved close to him and laid her hands lightly on his chest.

"Listen to reason," she pleaded quietly. "I'm a cop. Before I made detective and was assigned to the Homicide Division, I worked Bunko and Vice, and I was the bait in every kind of sting. I was damn good at what I did, too."

Valerian's frown deepened, and Daisy felt his fury and his fear coursing beneath her hands. "Do you honestly think you—or any other mortal—could prevail against a monster such as my brother surely is?"

"Not by myself," Daisy conceded. "I was counting on you to help."



Reluctantly, with a sound like a sigh, but deeper, and seeming to rise from his soul instead of his lungs, he put his arms around her. "I shall deal with Krispin alone, Daisy, and in my own way. With no interference from you. It is hard enough to concentrate now, when you are in such danger. I could not bear to take the risk you are suggesting."

"I might just do it on my own, then. I have the pendant to protect me."

"The pendant," Valerian scoffed, giving her a slight shake within his embrace. "It has no more power than a prize from a second-rate carnival."

"That isn't what Kristina said."

"Kristina is a fanciful sort, given to wild imaginings. Stay out of my way and let me handle this, Daisy, or I vow I will lock you up somewhere."

Daisy knew he meant what he was saying. She also knew she couldn't stand back and let more innocent people fall victim to Krispin's madness. "Take me with you," she begged. "At least that way you'll be able to protect me."

He closed his eyes for a moment. "Daisy, I must feed. And the places I go are unfit for a mortal woman."

"Well, I won't stay here. I don't think I could handle another one of Krispin's impromptu television productions, and besides, I'm not a vampire. I get hungry for real food, and even though I pull my share of late shifts, I'm not used to sleeping during the day."

Valerian smiled sadly. "This has ever been your flaw, Daisy—you are stubborn beyond all reason." He drew her very close, and his black silk cape encircled her like a whisper from another world. "Close your eyes and hold on tightly."

She looked up into his magnificent face. "Could I fall?"

"No," Valerian replied. "The request was strictly lascivious."

Daisy laughed despite her grief, and the sound had barely left her throat when she found herself standing in Valerian's dressing room, behind the stage of the main showroom in the Venetian Hotel. She was still safely cossetted in the magician's cloak, but she was alone.

"Valerian!" she yelled, letting the cape fall into a shimmering, inky pool at her feet and resting her hands on her hips. "You come back here, damn it!"

After fifteen minutes there was still no sign of him. Muttering, Daisy let herself out of the casino by a back way into the warm night, walked around front, and boarded one of the gondolas ferrying tourists back and forth to the hotel.

Although Valerian had eventually provided her with the requested jeans and T-shirt—he'd thoughtfully included a pair of sneakers, too—she didn't have a quarter for the telephone, let alone cab fare back to her apartment.

Once she'd reached the street, Daisy started walking toward home. With a little luck—if it could be called that—Krispin might make an appearance.

*Valerian*

*The Last Ditch, 1995*

I grew weaker, it seemed, with every passing moment, as though a cancer had taken root inside me, sapping my strength. I felt unsteady and somewhat disoriented as I made my way through the crowd of warlocks, vampires, and other monsters who filled that wretched bar. The place was outside the normal barriers of time, an anteroom to hell itself, and I despised it for a reminder of my own damnation. I went back only because I knew that, eventually, every rumor found its way there, to circulate among the creatures who sat around the tables, lined the bars, and shuffled on the dance floor.

Sooner or later there would surely be word of Krispin.

I found a place in a shadowy corner and sat down to listen and to watch.

Dathan, a warlock I particularly dislike, immediately made his way through the seedy throng to join me. I had had an impression of his presence, an instant's knowing, but I had shoved it aside, hoping the perception was in error.

With an insolent smile, not waiting for an invitation, he drew back a chair and slipped into it.

He would have made a very striking vampire with his fair hair and cherubic features, I thought, but appearances were indeed deceiving. Dathan was a warlock, with poisoned blood flowing through his veins and a stock of evil tricks comparable to my own.

"You seem sickly, my old friend—as if you've taken a draft of warlock's blood," Dathan remarked with a crooked smile.

I made no effort to hide my contempt. While it was true that Dathan and his followers had been helpful during a recent conflict between Maeve Tremayne and the late, great vampire queen, Lisette, I for one was not prepared either to suggest a truce or to accept one.

Not that the warlock intended to offer an olive branch.

"I am not a fledgling," I said coldly. "I know better than to consume so wretched a substance."

"Do you?" Dathan taunted in a soft voice. His eyes danced with mockery.

I considered my lethargic state, which had subsided temporarily, borne away on a tide of annoyance. Inside of an instant my hands were gripping the lapels of the warlock's finely tailored coat and, without leaving my chair, I had drawn him halfway across the table.

"Have you poisoned me?" I demanded in a whisper audible only to the two of us. "Confess, warlock, or I shall sunder your liver from your chest and burn both parts while they still quiver with life!"

Dathan, to his credit, was unruffled. He made no move to resist my grasp or to answer with a threat of his own. Instead, he sighed, for unlike vampires, warlocks have breath.

"I am not without defenses, blood-drinker," he said cordially. "For both our sakes, I pray you—keep that in mind."

I knew well that Dathan could ignite infernos by the power of his mind, and vampires can be destroyed by fire, as by sunlight and the point of a stake, but I was reckless, caring nothing about my own fate. Daisy's future was all that mattered.

I released Dathan with a summarial unflexing of my fingers, and he sank blithely back into his chair. There was not so much as a flush of irritation pulsing on his high, fine cheekbones, or a twitch at his temple.

Either I had not made him angry, or he was keeping his emotions veiled. I expect it was the latter, for Daman's affection for me was then, and remains, no greater than mine for him.

"You have been searching for a vampire called Krispin, have you not?" he asked, as prim and proper as an English butler.

I regarded him in silence for a few moments, pondering the fortuitousness of his appearance in that place. I had come to the Last Ditch Tavern hoping to hear even a scrap of information concerning my brother's whereabouts, and here was someone very likely to know. Still, I mistrusted all warlocks and indeed most vampires as well. If I stumbled into a trap of some sort, Daisy would be at Krispin's mercy.

"Yes," I allowed at last, offering no more.

"There is an old one who can tell you what you need to know. A vampire called Challes."

I drew back slightly, feeling as if I'd been slapped. "Challes? He was destroyed centuries ago, felled by the hand of Nemesis himself."

Dathan raised his eyebrows. "How certain you seem. And yet you believed your brother to be dead, only to learn that you were wrong. I should think such an oversight would cause even you to think twice thereafter and avoid hasty conclusions."

"Why are you telling me this?"

The warlock's smile was beatific. Had I not known him for a fiend, I might have thought he was an angel. "Rest assured, vampire," he said, laying a hand to his chest, "this heart bears you no love, but only malice, as ever. I bring you this news because I want something in return."

I relaxed a little, for this was a philosophy I understood and subscribed to myself, but with this more temperate mood came a new flagging of my vitality. I could have laid my head down on that scarred, ugly table, closed my eyes, and slept like an ingenuous child, but of course I resisted the compulsion. It would be safer to make my bed among vipers or plague-bearing rats. "Explain," I said.

"You have been careless," he scolded in an indulgent tone, letting me know it was not my curt one-word command that had moved him to reply. He and his kindred are prideful creatures, and vain. "There were warlocks among your victims. Think, twin of Lucifer—do you not recall a faint difference in the blood you've taken these past few nights?"

I did, but I wasn't about to admit it. I simply folded my arms and waited. Dathan sought a favor from me; let him pay for it in advance, in coin of appropriate value.

"Challes, the old one, wishes to talk with you. But he feared your anger with him would be too great, that you would be beyond his control, so he took steps to weaken you. He succeeded, probably

because you were distracted by the need to find your brother."

"Where is he?" I demanded. My surroundings were a thunderous void by then, and I could barely keep my head up.

"You have only to wait," Dathan answered implacably. "He will come to you."

The floor seemed to shift and roll beneath me; I feared to rise from my chair, lest I lose consciousness entirely and become yet more vulnerable to my many foes.

"Are you in league with him?"

"No," Dathan said. "Challes is a vampire, after all." He paused, and I could see that he was studying me intently, even though his image seemed to recede to a pinpoint and then rush toward me, looming and huge. "Have you fed this night, blood-drinker?" he demanded.

I had not, and I was glad. Another tainted feeding might have been the end of me—assuming I had not already taken the fatal dose.

I managed to shake my head.

"If I help you save your ladylove," Dathan said, "will you repay me by doing what I ask?"

I gripped the edge of the table with both hands. "I will do anything to break the curse," I whispered, my eyes bedazzled by flashes of bright light inside my head. "Anything."

"I have your word? Heed my warning, vampire—betray me, and I will seek out your Daisy Chandler and exact vengeance even your most rabid enemies would not wish to witness."

"My—word—" I vowed. And then I collapsed and never felt myself strike the floor.

Challes stood over me when I opened my eyes, and I knew we were back in the chamber beneath Colefield Hall. I lay on the slab that had been my bed in my earliest days as a vampire, stripped to the waist, my hands and feet lashed not by ropes or thongs of leather—those could not have held me—but by my tutor's magic.

"Why?" I asked. He had infused me with good blood while I slept; I was stronger, though still not powerful enough to break my bonds, and I felt a vague sting where his fangs had punctured my throat.

He smiled benignly and stroked my forehead and hair with a fond hand. "I have not meant to frighten you," he said in a near croon.

I was very afraid, but not of anything Challes might do to me. No, my terror was for Krispin's unguarded prey—my Daisy. "If it's true that you mean me well," I countered, "then set me free. Now."

Challes set his hands palm to palm, bringing to mind a saint or, at the least, a devout monk, and the noble sorrow in his pretended sigh told me he would refuse.

"I cannot. I am a powerful vampire, in my way, but you are youthful and filled with the passion of rage. Your body is still, but your mind prowls like a panther—do you think I haven't felt it circling, probing, ever seeking an opportunity to strike and rip out my throat?"

I closed my eyes for a moment, subduing an urge to struggle wildly. "What the devil do you want with me?"

He began to stroke my face and my hair again, and I could not hide my shudder of revulsion. "I have come to take you away, sweet child, into that other world where you shall see an end to your suffering. After all, it was I who laid the vampire curse upon your soul. It is my duty to lift the burden from you."

My interest was caught, though not by the promise of an end to pain. Was there indeed a way to change, to be redeemed, to live in the light again? I had seen a blood-drinker made mortal once, but it had been an agonizing, deadly process, and afterward the Old Ones had destroyed the means of transformation forever.

"You are mad," I whispered.

Challes smiled again, briefly, indulgently, as though dealing with a spoiled but basically good-hearted child. "I shall show you."

"Were God to forgive me for all my six hundred years of sin," I told him, "and that, as you know, is not going to happen, I would still refuse to set foot in Paradise without my beloved."

An instant after I'd spoken, I regretted mentioning Daisy, even indirectly.

My ancient tutor raised his brows again and withdrew his hand in a quick, spasmodic motion. "Leave the wench to Krispin," he said, and for the first time since he'd first brought me to Colefield Hall, and begun to train me for the vampire's life, I saw profound anger in his face.

"You made Krispin a blood-drinker," I accused, my whisper as ragged as my hopes, "even before you found me lying in that horse stall, half dead of drink. Why didn't you tell me then that my brother was alive? Why?"

"He begged me not to do that," Challes answered.

"And I, having had an elder brother myself once upon a time, was not unsympathetic to his plight. Krispin yearned to live outside your shadow, and he knew that would be impossible if you learned of his existence."

I was more wounded by these words than I would ever have allowed Challes to see. Had my brother always hated me, then? Even when we were mortal boys, playing and working together? Apparently I had only imagined that Krispin had borne me the same deep affection I had harbored for him.

In the next moment even my illusion that I had hidden my feelings from Challes was dashed.

He leaned over, so that his face was close to mine, and spoke softly. "It was because of Seraphina—she was the reason Krispin loathed you as he did. When the baron pronounced your death sentence, you see, your sweet mother offered up your brother's life in payment for yours. Krispin heard an account of it later from a servant."

"No," I murmured, but the image of Seraphina kneeling and pleading before Brenna's father was vivid in my mind, as if I had witnessed it myself. It might have been only moments past, instead of lying in the far and dusty reaches of long, long ago. "She couldn't have done such a thing."

"Ah, but she did. And there's more. After Seraphina collapsed, and the baron's men carried her home, Krispin tried to comfort her. She spat at him and screamed like a madwoman, imploring her saints one after another to take him instead of you."

No wonder Krispin had abhorred me, I thought. No doubt the other children born of our mother, the doll-like twin girls with the transparent eyelids, the boy called Royal, would have been my enemies, too, had they survived. Oh, I remembered the little ones, the lost ones, with cruel clarity, even after so many centuries, remembered my father's ravings, his insistence that I had robbed them. My cursed soul, Lazarus the bootmaker had snarled, reeling with mead, had been greedy, consuming my mother's strength to weave for its pauper-self a nobleman's body and a demon's mind...

I could not bear to remember.

"Where—where has Krispin been all these centuries?" I managed to ask with difficulty. "Surely he could not have veiled himself so completely—"

"No," Challes said. "Nor could I. You were always quite quick—about most things, if not all. There are other dimensions, pet, other worlds, if you will. Layer upon layer of them, as a matter of fact, on and on into infinity. And passages exist between them, though of course those byways are known to very few."

I was reminded of a conversation I had had with Maeve, concerning experiments her mate, Calder Holbrook, had been performing. He had found evidence of such phenomena, although I had been too concerned about other matters at the time to ask questions.

It is my curse, it would seem, to be either too curious or not curious enough.

"Is it far away, this place where you've been hiding?" I spoke softly, trying to lull Challes a little so that he might relax his mental hold on me. I was regaining my normal powers, quickening inwardly on the sustenance my tutor had given me even as I ached for all the grief my mother's misguided adoration had caused.

Challes extended a hand. "You will know soon enough," he said, dropping his voice to a whisper, as though fearing that we weren't alone in that dank, gloomy crypt under the crumbling floors of Colefield Hall.

"I have no wish to be mortal again," I confessed. The statement was purest truth, I realized, and it was shattering to face. I knew without asking that Daisy would not wish to become the very thing I gloried in being—a vampire. We were doomed, she and I, even if I managed somehow to save her from Krispin's vengeance, to be parted yet again.

"But you would not be mere flesh and bone and blood," Challes exulted quietly, laying a loosely knotted fist to his bosom. "Not you."

I was mystified. "Speak sense, vampire!" I commanded. "I have no patience for your damnable double-talk!"

Challes laughed. "It pleases me to see that you are as arrogant as ever, Valerian Lazarus. Has it escaped your notice that you are a prisoner? It is I who govern the night, not you." He paused and regarded me gently, as though memorizing my features. "Hush, now. Be not afraid. I have returned to fetch you home—we shall enter Paradise together."

15

*Daisy*

*Las Vegas, 1995*

Daisy walked quickly toward home, as though pursued.

The night was hot and dry, thrumming with sound and with silence. Las Vegas twinkled all around her, a bright, gaudy tangle of emeralds and rubies, diamonds and sapphires, tumbling over the desert sands like loot spilled from a treasure chest.

Daisy wondered if Krispin would be waiting for her when she reached her apartment. If he meant to kill her that night, he'd have to be quick about it—dawn was less than an hour away.

Loneliness and fear made a swelling ache in Daisy's throat. If there had ever been a time in her life when she needed someone to talk to, it was then, but there was nobody to confide in really, besides the elusive Valerian. She dared not tell her sister—to do so would worry Nadine and, worse, endanger her, as well as Freddy and the baby. Nor could Daisy open up to O'Halloran. One word about vampires, except in jest, and he'd personally see that she was put on medical leave.

Daisy couldn't blame her partner; if someone had come to her with a wild story like her own, just a few weeks before, she would have recommended long-term therapy, if not shock treatments.

Her apartment building was in plain sight when the shift occurred.

In an instant reality altered itself with a sickening lurch. The sidewalk beneath Daisy's feet turned to cobblestones, and the desert air was suddenly dank and somehow sour. Fog layered the ground, alive with shifting, wraithlike shapes, and Daisy made out old-fashioned street lamps and heard the rattle of carriage wheels and the clatter of horses' hooves on the pavement. The vibrations rose through the soles of her feet.

Daisy sagged against the nearest wall, the brick cold against her back, closed her eyes, and tried to slow her runaway heartbeat and rapid breathing by sheer force of will. It didn't help, knowing this wasn't real, that it was only another "spontaneous regression," as Valerian would say.

Normal, healthy people did not have experiences like this.

When she was sure she wouldn't hyperventilate, or faint dead away, Daisy opened her eyes, cherishing even then the vain hope that she would find herself back in Las Vegas where she belonged.

Nothing had changed—except to become more intense.

The stench of the gutter at her feet swelled and then broke over her in a nauseating wave, and the passersby, clad in rags like fugitives from the cast of *Les Misérables*, were still more aromatic.

Daisy swallowed a scalding rush of bile and murmured an incoherent sound, meant to be a cry for help, but Valerian did not appear as he had the last time, when she'd found herself waiting tables in a



fifteenth-century tavern.

It seemed the noxious fog was seeping through her skin, penetrating her skull, settling heavily into her mind and finally causing her memory to dissipate like steam. She was forgetting things, and remembering others that had never happened.

She clung desperately to the last shredded recollections of the person she'd been only moments before... her name had been Daisy once, in a fever or a dream, but she had no idea who she was now. Or where she was.

It was getting darker and colder by the moment.

She reached out and caught at an old woman's tattered sleeve. "Excuse me—what is this place?" she asked. "Where am I, please?"

The crone jerked free with a fierce and fearful motion and bustled on without answering, grumbling as she went.

"It's London Town, miss," said a small voice at her side. She looked down to see a child gazing up at her, an impossibly thin boy wearing torn clothing and a filthy cap. "You lost?"

She clung to the last memory, the name, repeating it to herself... *Daisy, Daisy* ... though even that was struggling to escape her, squirming in her mind like a greased pig.

"Do you know me?" she whispered, terrified. "Can you tell me who I am?"

The boy shook his head. His enormous gray eyes were at once pitying and shrewd as he regarded her from beneath a fringe of dark, shaggy hair. "The peelers'll take you away that quick," he warned with a snap of his grubby fingers, "if they hear you talkin' such ways as that. You got fine clothes on, so you must be a lady. Here—let me have a look inside that bag you're carryin'—maybe we'll find your name inside."

She extended the bag—a frilly black drawstring affair with fringe and jet beads—but before the street urchin could take it from her, an elegantly gloved hand interceded. She caught a glimpse of a dark waistcoat, a silken vest, the merest impression of pale blue eyes, and then her vision faded completely. Rather than a cruel surprise, this state of blindness seemed somehow a return to the norm, and in its way it was comforting, even empowering, in its very familiarity.

"Away with you, you thieving little wastrel, or I'll drag you off to Newgate myself," the man said in a tone that was at once refined and mildly savage, and she heard the boy's quick steps on the stones as he fled. There was a gentle reprimand in that cultured voice when he went on, and she felt his strong arm slip around her waist. "Jenny," he scolded, and with the name came a torrent of remembrances, almost too many to sort through, and all sense of disorientation left her. "How many times must I warn you not to wander off by yourself?" He paused to emit an elegant sigh. When he went on, there was an edge to his voice. "Perhaps Adela is right in her assertion that you would be better off in an institution of some sort, where allowances could be made for your affliction."

The reference to a hospital sent a little chill skittering along her spine, and she distracted herself by aligning all the things she suddenly knew about herself and the man beside her.

This was Martin, her elder brother and guardian, holding her arm so firmly, ushering her into a waiting

carriage. He was a prominent man of business who kept offices in High Street. Her name was Jenny Wade, and she lived with Martin and his wife, Adela, in a spacious town house only a few streets away. She was nineteen years old and a spinster, much to her grievous disappointment, for her greatest ambition was to marry and bear children. Her "affliction," as Martin called it, had come upon her in the course of an illness suffered when she was seven. Their parents were both dead, and the year was 1722.

Jenny heard Martin rap at the wall of the coach, and the sleek and costly vehicle jostled into motion, creaking and smelling of rich leather. "You won't send me to an asylum, so don't threaten," she said cheerfully, acutely aware of so many things—the varied texture of her gown, her gloves, her cloak among them. Over the years Jenny had learned to let her other senses compensate for the loss of her eyesight, and she could determine much from touching, hearing, smelling, and tasting.

She sensed her brother's smile, knew it contained reluctance as well as affection. "No," he confessed, "I wouldn't. But you're a scamp all the same, and I can't think why I put up with you."

"That's easy—it's because you love me," Jenny said. She was not spoiled by her brother, she reflected, but still he often indulged her. Out of affection, it was to be hoped, and not pity.

Martin laughed, but there was sorrow in the sound, and worry. Several moments passed before he spoke, and when he did, his tone was serious. "Why were you handing your bag over to that little street rat back there?"

Jenny squirmed, uneasy. She'd suffered some kind of spell, she supposed, forgetting who she was and where she lived, and behind that realization were other memories, nebulous ones she couldn't quite grasp, so fantastic that they would surely come up in her dreams.

"I was a bit confused, that's all," she said. Jenny seldom lied to Martin, for he was far more perceptive than most sighted people, and he had an almost unerring knack for recognizing an untruth. Deception by omission was another matter, however, and she often employed it. "You were too hard on the child. He only wanted to look in my bag for a name of someone who might come to my aid."

"Piffle. Do you think the little wretch can read? If you'd handed him the bag, he would have run off with it," Martin said with smooth conviction. "The world is a treacherous and deviant place, Jenny. You must be more cautious in future."

"Why?" Jenny teased as the carriage rounded a corner. The swaying sensation was unique to this particular turn in the road, and she knew they'd entered their own street. "Are these coppers all that stand between us and penury?" She gave the handbag a little shake, causing the coins inside to rattle.

Martin's reply was snappish, impatient, but Jenny was not deceived by the show of anger. She'd frightened her brother, and the thought filled her with remorse.

"Don't be silly. Do you think I give a damn about a handful of pocket change? You were *indanger*, Jenny. And now you're telling me you were 'confused.' I'm summoning the doctor as soon as Mistress Peach has given you supper and put you to bed."

Jenny's regret was swept aside by a rush of impotent fury, though she harbored an abiding affection for Mistress Peach, who had once served as her nanny and was now referred to as her companion. "I'm not a child, Martin, to be tucked up with a dolly, and no one has to 'give' me my supper. I can feed myself!"

Martin's only answer was an exasperated sigh. The carriage stopped, and cold air buffeted Jenny's

cheeks when the door was opened from the outside. She descended without waiting for help from her brother, pushing aside the coach driver's hand, and strode toward the house with the certainty of long practice.

She was greatly troubled, though she wouldn't have admitted as much to Martin and certainly not to Adela, who was bound to nag, or Mistress Peach, who would fret herself into a sick headache. Jenny had been blind for twelve years, and yet she'd *seen* the fog and the boy and even Martin, though only for a moment. Furthermore, there were things she should remember, things she desperately *needed* to remember, about the moments prior to her fit of forgetfulness, important matters struggling behind a heavy veil at the back of her mind.

Jenny's devoted companion met her in the foyer, muttering, bundling her briskly in a knitted coverlet, while Adela stood by, silent except for the slight, familiar wheezing sound she made when she was irritated.

"Where did you find her?" she demanded sharply of Martin. Adela was a fine woman and good wife to Jenny's brother, considering her somewhat intractable and obstreperous nature, but she collected disappointments, slights, and minor injustices the way some people garnered seashells or buttons or bits of bright ribbon. The habit rendered her tiresome indeed, and pettish.

Jenny stiffened inside the coverlet. "Kindly do not speak as if I were deaf, Adela, as well as blind. If you have a question, then ask it directly!"

"That will be enough, both of you," Martin said wearily, and Jenny's ears caught the faint whisper of kidskin brushing flesh as he removed his gloves—more an impression than a sound, really. She felt a draft as he removed his waistcoat with a habitual flourish that was uniquely his own. "Jenny became distracted while I was doing business with the tailor, that's all. I'm sure she merely stepped out of the carriage to get a breath of air and did not realize how far she'd strayed."

Jenny's face flamed with heat—Martin was as bad as Adela, in his way, making excuses for her behavior as though she were a slow-witted child—but it would be futile to argue. Besides, she was exhausted, and vaguely unwell in the bargain, wanting only to sit by the fire in her room and sip strong tea.

She endured Mistress Peach's seemingly interminable fussing, and when that good woman finally left her alone, Jenny's gratitude was profound. She felt oddly insubstantial, like a character in an oft-told tale, and she was deeply frightened. Pictures flashed inside her head, shifting, jewel-like images of a strange and faraway place, that pulsed with activity and with unaccountable noises. How, she wondered, could such things have found their way into the mind of a sheltered blind woman?

The sense of displacement grew as the hours passed; it was as if she were not entirely real, for all the solidity and substance of her surroundings. Jenny herself might have been a shadow, or a reflection.

Was she the dreamer—or the dream?

The doctor came at nine and was shown to her room by Adela.

Jenny did not confide in the aging physician, but endured his fumbling examinations in silence. She was, by that time, convinced that she was fading, like a figure in an old and weathered portrait, and would soon vanish entirely.

*Valerian*

*Colefield Hall, 1995*

I had almost freed myself from the unseen shackles my tutor had used to restrain me. In the meantime, while I continued the struggle I hoped was imperceptible, I spoke moderately to Challes. "Paradise," I murmured in a thoughtful tone while he loomed over me in an avid and singularly unnerving fashion. "The place where there are many mansions."

"Yes," he whispered, his face translucent with some maniacal ecstasy.

"I would not dare to cross the threshold of any one of them," I told him, and while I lent the words a regretful note, the unflattering truth was that I had no desire to be anything other than what I was—not angel or devil, specter or saint, and certainly not a mortal man.

Challes looked as though I'd struck him, and recoiled.

I had broken my bonds and bolted upright on the slab, but before Challes could react or I could get to my feet, the chamber trembled as if the very walls would give way. There was a strange, implosive feeling all around, as if the air had been replaced by a vacuum, and then he was there.

My brother.

Krispin gripped Challes from behind and flung him cruelly aside. "Fool!" he rasped.

I studied him, my head tilted slightly to one side. Krispin was not a large fiend, neither broad through the shoulders nor long of leg, like me; he had, instead, the lithe agility of a trapeze artist or a dancer. His hair was fair as moonlight, his eyes a soft, deceptively fragile blue, his skin so flawless that he appeared to have no pores.

"Enough," I said quietly when Krispin moved to stove in Challes's ribs with one booted foot. Granted, a mortal could not have done a vampire injury by such a blow, but Krispin, of course, was not human. He was plainly much stronger than the blood-drinker who had spawned us both.

Krispin listened—evidently there was still enough of the flesh-and-blood boy in him that his first instinct was to respond to an elder brother's command—and Challes crawled, crablike, into a corner, there to whimper and mewl in a manner that made me want to kick him myself.

Still seated on the slab, I spread my hands. "Here I am, Krispin," I said mildly, belying my true feelings, which were myriad and complicated, bittersweet and excruciatingly painful. "Destroy me if you can."

For a long interval Krispin simply stared at me in silence, and I watched a kaleidoscope of emotions flash across his Dresden face. I saw hatred, along with the ghostly and shimmering reflection of an adoration it shamed him to recall, and finally, a sort of terrified triumph.

He shook his seraphic head. "No, my brother," he said with the vaguest of smiles. "Your death will be neither quick nor merciful. You have much to suffer before the gates of hell swing wide to grant you entrance."

What I felt was more revulsion than fear, more sorrow than hatred. How I despised Challes in those moments for taking that naive, mischievous child Krispin had been and turning him into this monster! Had

I not been occupied, perforce, with my brother's presence, I believe I would have carried Challes to a churchyard, laid him at the feet of a holy statue, and driven a stake through his heart.

"Do you think there will be a welcoming parade?" I asked with no trace of guile. "When I finally meet with damnation, I mean?"

Krispin might have flushed, had he been mortal. I saw the anger flood his face, although it did not alter the pristine white of his flesh, but instead rendered it more transparent still, like cloth woven of spun moonlight. "You are in grave trouble, brother," he said quietly. "Pray, do not make light of it."

"You would prefer pathos? Pleading, perhaps, with copious tears? Sorry." I paused for the length of a heartbeat. "I won't be humbling myself in any significant fashion, Krispin. Pride is my curse, as well as your own. We are, after all, begotten of the same dam and sire, God rest their misguided souls."

Krispin flinched, though not, I thought, from the mention of the Supreme Being. No, I believed it was my reference to our mother, however generically, that disturbed him—and his response confirmed my suspicions.

"Do not speak her name," he warned. "Your lips, your tongue, would defile those revered syllables merely by shaping them!"

I rolled my eyes. "Great Zeus," I said on what would have been a long breath, had I been human. "You are fixated—perhaps that good woman kept you too long on the breast. Or, mayhap, not long enough—"

"Be silent!"

I stood at last and crossed the few feet that separated us with an easy, unhurried gait. "Why?" I asked, knowing he saw only the insolence and disdain I willed him to see, and not the heartbreak and confusion churning behind the facade I presented. "Why did you murder those poor women, instead of bringing your rancor straight to me in the first place?"

His lips curled slightly, and I was struck by the realization that any female, mortal or otherwise, would find him vastly appealing. He could seem ingenuous if he so wished, and even virtuous. Perhaps he had not simply killed his victims, but gotten to know them first, methodically seducing their minds. . .

"I told you before," Krispin said with elegant contempt, "I would not make this easy for you. I want you to pay."

I rested my hands on my hips, realizing only after the fact that it was an old gesture, from our days as corporeal youths, a posture of superior power for me, but a subtly daunting one for him. "Even considering my multitude of sins, mortal and otherwise," I began, "your loathing of me is somewhat disproportionate to reality, don't you think?"

Challes had risen to his feet, and he was no longer making pitiful noises, but he cowered against the wall of the vault, watching Krispin as though he were the Devil incarnate or, far worse from a vampire's perspective,

Nemesis, the angel of sublime vengeance. I began to speculate that my teacher had not been trying to usher me into Paradise at all, but merely to hide me from my brother's madness, which appeared to be even greater and more virulent than his own.

I was touched, and decided not to stake Challes after all. Not immediately, at least.

"It is more than Seraphina's betrayal," Krispin said, and I felt the searing cold of his agony flicker across my spirit, like shadows cast by flames of ice. "You have taken my mate. Over and over again, you have stolen her."

All sympathy deserted me in that moment, for it enraged me that Krispin dared to regard himself as a rival for Daisy's affections. We had been created to live side by side, she and I, through all the ages; had it not been for my transformation from man to vampire, we would have been incarnated together, again and again, until we stepped over the farthest boundary of time.

"Your mate?" I shaped the words softly, insolently, on my tongue. "You were never anything more than an interloper, Krispin. She is mine—now and forever, time without end, amen and amen."

He raised one finely shaped eyebrow, and his mocking expression made me want to close my hands around his polished marble throat and choke him. "Is she?" Krispin paused to feign a luxurious sigh. "Ah, yes—our lady of many names. How lovely she is. You call her Daisy now, but you have known her as Brenna, as Elisabeth—poor whoring little wretch—and as sweet Jenny. Unfortunate how quickly she took sick and died, wasn't it?" Another sigh, still theatrical, if almost inaudible. "And there were other lifetimes, of course—she was the fetching woman who ran the boardinghouse in that little western town, wasn't she?"

Harmony Beaucheu. I closed my eyes against the memory of that particular incarnation—for it remained acutely painful, even after more than a century—and opened them again only out of an instinct for self-preservation. "What is the point of this?" I whispered. "Are you leading up to telling me that Daisy cared for you once, when her name was Maddie Goodtree and the two of you made love in a gravedigger's cottage, with the Great Fire of London licking at your—heels?"

"So she told you," Krispin said with a self-satisfied and somewhat distant little smile. "I hoped she would, once I'd revived the memory for her."

I felt sick, just to think of Krispin's hands on Daisy's flesh, in this lifetime or any other, but I did not allow the aversion to show. I had no way of reckoning the extent of my brother's powers, but I sensed that they were formidable, and quite different from my own. Whether his abilities were greater or lesser than mine, I could not guess, but they were unquestionably heightened by my ignorance of their nature.

"You could not have her, except by trickery," I said. "So you murdered her, over and over again."

The cherubic mouth twitched with barely contained amusement. "Not the first time, when she was Brenna," he disclaimed blithely. "That happened quite on its own. But I admit to helping justice along a little, now and again, in this or that lifetime. Elisabeth's fever, for example. It's easy, you know, to plant the germ of an illness in mortal flesh. They're so fragile. So vulnerable to any passing malady."

I flung myself upon my brother, knowing all the while it was what he wanted, what he'd goaded me to do, but unable to restrain the poisonous fury swelling within me. I made a sound that was at once a guttural growl and a shriek as I throttled him; I was as frenzied as a wolf in a trap, and as dangerous.

Krispin screamed, but it was a cry of hideous pleasure, even of ecstasy, like some hell-beast in climax. Even the hurt I caused him gave him joy, however heinous; he had surely dreamed of this moment, planned and schemed for it, for nearly the whole of his existence.



He melted in my hands like vapor, and vanished, but we had renewed our brotherly bond, malevolent as it was, and I sensed his destination and pursued him, leaving a disconsolate Challes behind to weep into his palms.

Krispin took me to a high plain, somewhere on the coast of Cornwall, and the sea was within our hearing if not our sight. There were standing stones, garish in the frigid, silvery glow, casting their lengthy shadows toward the moon, instead of away, in an eerie juxtaposition of nature.

His laughter was the keening of a mad creature, and he ran between the stones, his cape trailing absurdly behind him, as if he expected to take wing and fly. I would not have been surprised if he had.

I waited until he had expended some of his demented energy, watching him spin and cavort, now perched crowlike atop the highest of the ancient stones, now pirouetting in the center of the circle, arms outstretched, head tilted back, beautiful face bathed in moonlight.

The pagan revels continued for some time. Then, at long last, Krispin was still, smiling and beckoning for me to join him inside the stones.

I did not hesitate, though I was certain a trap was about to spring. I would have followed him into the very heart of hell, anywhere, because as long as I was with him, watching him, Daisy would be safe. When the time was right, when I had discovered my brother's greatest vulnerability, I meant to destroy him.

"There were countless sacrifices on this spot," he told me when I stood beside him. "So much passion, so much terror—the place reverberates with it even after all this time. Can't you feel it?"

I kept my repugnance to myself. Temporarily. "I have terror and passion enough of my own," I said. "I do not require that of others."

Krispin smiled at me and seemed, for a moment, almost like his old self. That facet of the experience stood out in sharp relief, wholly separate and more frightening somehow than anything that had gone before. "You were always damnably self-reliant, a law unto yourself—Valerian, the archangel made flesh, the saint with fangs."

I ignored the jibe. I would not allow him to glory in my attack again until I was ready to drive a pointed stick through his crumbling, rotted little heart. He could take all the perverted pleasure he wished in that. "You want my life," I said quietly, "and I will give it to you."

He stared at me, plainly baffled, and I was relieved to know he could not read my mind the way some fiends could. "On what condition?" he asked, suspicious.

"That we face our end together," I said in all sincerity. It was, I saw, the only way to put a finish to the curse that had pursued Daisy and me for so long. If I perished, and Krispin with me, the cycle would be broken at long last. Never again would I find Daisy, fall in love with her, hold her in my arms as she gave up the ghost yet another time. She would be left to live out this life, and any others that lay ahead, in relative peace.

Krispin studied me in silence for a long time. I could feel dawn hovering beyond the hills, ready to spill over the horizon and consume us. I wanted that death, although I knew it would be agonizing, and only a prelude to the suffering waiting beyond the veil.



"Suppose there is no judgment and no hell," Krispin reflected. "Would you welcome death? Would you yearn to rest, at long last, in the dark arms of oblivion?"

I felt the sting of impending morning on my cool flesh and wondered if I would die bravely, or in a screaming, writhing frenzy of anguish. I had never seen a vampire burned to cinders by the sun, but *I had* witnessed other demises—all of them ghastly.

I shivered.

"Oblivion would certainly be preferable to eternal suffering in the flames of Hades," I confessed, "but I have no particular wish to rest forever, either."

"You care for her so much, the lovely Daisy, that you would submit yourself to any fate?" Krispin paused to smile. Then, before I could offer a reply, he went on. "How noble you are. Imagine it—Valerian Lazarus, the bootmaker's whelp, willing to sacrifice his glorious self to save a woman. Why, it's almost Arthurian!"

I hadn't been callow enough to hope that Krispin would fail to guess why I wanted him to die with me. An idiot could have figured it out. Nor had I taken any great risk in letting him see how very great my love for Daisy truly was—he had known all along. He had tormented me with it, without my ever guessing, for hundreds of years.

I glanced uneasily toward the eastern horizon. It was still dark, and yet there was enough light hidden in the gloom to sear my sensitive eyes. For the first time, it occurred to me that one of the differences between Krispin's powers and mine could be the ability to withstand sunlight. "You have made your point," I said irascibly. "I know that you hate me, that you hold me in utter contempt. And I grow weary of your self-pity. Great Scot, to grieve and wail all these centuries over the slights of a vain, selfish, and utterly ignorant woman like Seraphina—to cry over spilt mother's milk—it's madness, Krispin. It's obscene!"

The light was coming closer, getting stronger, burning. Burning.

Krispin glared at me and gave that harrowing animal shriek of rage again, but then he turned to smoke, like a movie vampire, and seeped into the ground, there in the center of the circle, which yawned around us like the jaws of some great beast.

I did the same, and found myself, along with my brother, in a pit of tangled bones covered by the hard, windswept earth. These, no doubt, were the remains of those poor scapegoats who had been sacrificed to ancient, greedy gods. I felt their emotions, especially their fear, and heard the silent, protesting cacophony of their voices.

Krispin burrowed in among them, curled into the same position I'd seen him take as a small child, and, with a beatific smile curving his lips, tumbled abruptly into the vampire sleep. I would have killed him then, despite multitudinous compunctions, using one of the martyr's bones for a stake and another for a mallet, but my own nature betrayed me—I succumbed to the dark waters swamping my mind and slipped down and down, into the valley of the shadow.

*Jenny Wade*

*London, 1722*

In her dreams Jenny could see as clearly as she had before her illness, and the images flashing through her mind were alive with clamor and bright, vibrant colors, pulsing and infused with light.

Everything moved at impossible speeds, and she was surrounded by purposeful people clad in odd, abbreviated clothing. They were strangers, and yet, conversely, she felt she knew and understood them, in a general way at least.

When she awakened, with a violent jerk, the scenes and the actors who had played them out vanished into the part of her brain where unremembered things were hidden. Her breathing was rapid and shallow, and she sank back against her pillows, willing herself to be calm. When she had achieved that, she focused her sharpened senses and discerned, by the coolness of the air against the flesh on her arms and by the deep, settled stillness of the house, that it was not yet morning.

She ached with a sudden, terrible loneliness, worse than anything she'd felt before, and was too distraught even to weep. She was young, she was blind, and she would never have a home of her own, or a loving husband to laugh with, or children to tug at her skirts and plead for sweets and stories.

Jenny waited patiently for the familiar sounds that meant the others were awake. Then she rose and washed, and was seated at her vanity table, brushing and plaiting her waist-length hair, when there came a rapid knock at her bedroom door. Before she could call out in answer, Adela swept in, her scent and the essence of her nature going before her like unseen heralds.

"Good morning, Jenny," she said without warmth.

Jenny felt a stirring of pity for her sister-in-law, for there was no poetry in her, no sunshine or humor. "Good morning," she replied and went on weaving her hair into a single thick braid.

Adela came to stand just behind her. "Martin tells me you suffered an episode yesterday."

A small muscle, hidden somewhere deep in Jenny's heart, seized with the renewed fear of being sent away to some awful place, where madwomen would be her only companions. "It was nothing," she said, hoping she sounded sane, as well as cheerful. "I was just thinking of other things, that's all."

Her sister-in-law was rigidly silent.

Jenny imagined that she could see her reflection in the vanity mirror, but the only image she could recall was that of a scrawny, red-haired girl with green eyes dominating a freckled face. She did not know how she looked now, though she often plagued Peach to describe her, and begged to know if she was beautiful.

Dear, loyal Peach always answered that she was lovely enough to capture and break the heart of any gentleman alive.

"What have I done, Adela?" Jenny asked in a soft voice, "to make you despise me so much? This is a large house—a palace by anyone's standards, and yet I invariably feel as though I'm in the way."

Adela did not answer—perhaps she did not know what to say, or refrained out of kindness—and left the room.

Jenny finished dressing, descended the broad staircase, and made her way into the parlor. There she sat down at the harpsichord and made music while a gentle rain pattered upon the windowpanes, making itself part of the song.

There were callers after luncheon, and Martin came home early from his offices and sat in the parlor with Jenny, reading aloud from a new French novel. It was during that pleasant interlude that the simple truth came to her—Adela was jealous of Martin's affection for his young sister, and no doubt wished for more attention from him.

A great sorrow filled Jenny, and when Martin had finished reading, she ventured a suggestion. "Perhaps you should take Adela to the seaside. It would be romantic, just the two of you."

"And what would become of you?"

Jenny was mildly incensed. "I have Peach to look after me, Martin," she said in a moderate tone. "And don't say you must concentrate on your work, because I know it isn't true. You could manage your business in your sleep—I've heard you complain of it before."

Martin chuckled, but there was an undercurrent of sadness in his mirth. "I must stop buying these damned sentimental novels," he said. "They give you unseemly ideas."

"Adela needs you," Jenny insisted gently. "You neglect her."

"Leave it alone, Jenny," Martin said, and his tone was sharp enough to sting. He set the book aside with a telling thump, got out of his chair, and strode out of the room.

Jenny had dinner alone that evening beside the fire, for Martin had gone off to his club, and Adela had taken to her bed with yet another headache. And still the rain fell, though it wasn't singing now, as before. It was dreary, and Jenny's loneliness was such that she wondered how she could bear a lifetime of such feelings.

After her meal she returned to the harpsichord, closing the great doors behind her to muffle the sound, and sat down to play.

It was that night, in the soft swirling center of her music, that Jenny heard the angel's voice for the first time.

"Jenny," it said softly, almost reverently, from just behind her right shoulder. Whether born of heaven or of hell, the visitor was male. To a disturbing degree.

Jenny was not afraid, but she did wonder if she was having another spell. She craved comfort and reassurance; mayhap her active imagination had conjured a being to meet that need. She knew, because her blindness had made her introspective, and she'd spent a great deal of time exploring the fascinating and mysterious corners, closets, and crevices of her own inner world, learning that the mind was capable of all sorts of trickery, pleasant and otherwise.

She did not move from the little bench, or speak, but simply stopped playing and held out one hand.

"I have found you," said the visitor, and she heard weeping in his voice, as well as joy. Felt the air stir as he bent to kiss her lightly on top of the head.

An exquisite passion swept through her, and she felt herself flush. "You're not real," she said. "You were born of my longing and my need."

His hands rested gently on her shoulders; his grasp was gentle, but not warm as Martin's would have been, or Peach's. His flesh felt as cool and smooth as a polished gem, even through the fabric of her gown, and she reasoned that heaven must of course be a temperate place, the logical opposite of hell.

"No, precious," he said. "I'm not an illusion."

"Are you an angel then?" Jenny managed to ask.

His laugh was low and richly masculine, but contained none of the mockery or mild contempt she sometimes detected in Martin's mirth. His lips brushed the side of her neck, and they were cool, too, and soft like the petals of some exotic flower. "Perish the thought," he said. "But I am not a demon, either, so please do not fear me."

Jenny was convinced now that she must be having a waking dream—she could not hope for such tender attentions in reality, given her affliction—and the realization was a keen stab of sorrow, piercing the heart.

"I can't bear to think I've imagined you," she said wretchedly.

"I'm all too real, my Jenny. And I have loved you for longer than you can imagine."

Something leaped within her, something primitive and treacherous and wildly improper. She wanted to believe, wanted desperately for this phantom lover to be genuine, formed of flesh and blood, loving her, needing her, despite her flaw. A name, she thought, would give him substance, so she asked for his in a quiet, hopeful tone.

"Valerian," he answered somewhat hoarsely, and he squeezed her shoulders with his long fingers, and once again Jenny felt a deep and unholy pleasure slamming through her veins and muscles. At last, after finding its way into every part of her, the sensation shaped itself into a fiery coil and spun, tightening with every turn, just beneath her stomach.

"I've been so lonely," Jenny confessed. It was all right, because she was surely dreaming, and because it wouldn't have done to confide such a stark truth to Martin, or Adela, or Peach. They would have thought it untoward for an innocent young woman to desire an intimacy deeper than the brisk, blithe affection they themselves displayed for her.

"As have I," Valerian replied. In her mind she could picture him—he was tall, as stately and handsome as a prince from a storybook. She imagined his eyes to be blue, intensely so, and his hair to be the warm and rich color of chestnuts—and she was quite sure of these things, though she did not know how she could have discerned them.

Jenny reached up and interlocked her fingers with his. "Will you stay with me?"

He chuckled, though the sound was like a sob, too, and raised her from the seat before the harpsichord to kiss her ever so softly on the mouth. At this contact, an entirely new experience for Jenny, the wicked flame in her depths, only then dwindling, flared once more into a brilliant, consuming blaze.

"I must go," Valerian told her while she was still swaying in his arms, giddy from the kiss. "But I'll return soon, lovely Jenny. I promise."

She put her arms around his neck, perhaps a little desperately. "Stay," she pleaded, unashamed.

He rested a fingertip on her still-tingling, slightly swollen lips. "It is almost morning, beloved—I cannot stay."

Jenny clung, but he seemed to dissolve in her very embrace, as dream people are able to do, and she was alone again, but not so sad. The beginnings of a sweet and fragile hope kindled in her breast, and she hummed softly to herself as she went upstairs, moved confidently along the passageway to her room, and got herself ready for bed.

On the morrow she awakened to the joy and prevailed upon Peach to take special care in arranging her hair, with ribbons and dried flowers woven through the plait before it was wrapped round her crown in a coronet. She donned a cheerful dress of yellow silk, too; Jenny knew the color because of its unique, buttery warmth beneath her practiced fingertips, and could recognize red and blue and green and white, when the need arose, by similar means.

Before tea that afternoon, Adela read to Jenny from a volume of classic Greek poetry, perhaps as a gesture of peace. Dinner was served at eight, and when it was over, Jenny pleaded fatigue and retired to her room, unaccompanied because it was Peach's night to visit her sister.

Jenny had not lied when she'd claimed to be tired, but beneath her weariness flowed a wild, anticipatory emotion she could not define, an elemental, unfettered *something*, careening along like a river, under no command but its own. Jenny could no more have stopped the rushing torrent than altered the course of the Thames, so she sat down in the chair by the hearth in her room and waited.

The house settled slowly around her—servants shuffled sleepily in the halls, doors opened and closed, floors creaked. She heard Martin's voice, and Adela's, as they said their good-nights and parted in the passage to enter their separate rooms.

Jenny had led a sheltered life, but she was not ignorant of the ways of men and women, thanks to Peach's frankness and the scandalous gossip she sometimes overheard the maids exchanging when they thought no one else was about. It puzzled her that Martin and Adela did not share a bed, and had never done so within her memory. Perhaps, she speculated, they did not wish to have children, like other couples of their age and means.

Guilt washed through Jenny in the wake of the great flood of indefinable excitement that had nearly drowned her moments before. Other couples did not have a blind and indigent relation to look after, she thought with chagrin.

The summons from her angel, when it came, was a trill of silent music, a burst of harp strings too subtle for the ear to catch, but something felt instead, like a feather passed closet to the skin but not quite touching. Jenny moved quietly and competently toward it, unhampered by the darkness that slowed others' steps, responding to the piper's call.

There could be no doubt that she was awake this time, she reflected with a sense of soaring joy, when she entered the misty, fragrant garden and knew that he was there waiting.

"Valerian," she said softly, and he drew her, by some faculty of mind, or perhaps by the shimmering thread of her most private desires, along the brick walk and into his arms.

It was the first of many such visits. Sometimes Valerian told wonderful tales, and on other nights they danced together in the garden, and it was as though Jenny's feet skimmed above the flat stones surrounding the fountain.

Nearly a year passed before they became lovers.

On that eve of sweet surrender Valerian wrapped her in something silken and whispering—a cloak, she thought. Jenny clung to him when they were caught up by the wind and became part of it, and of each other, and were carried away to another place.

"What are you that you can work such tricks?" she asked when Valerian laid her on a soft couch in a room she couldn't see, and she knew by sound and motion that he knelt beside her. At last, after all the courting, all the subtle preparation, she would give herself to her phantom.

It would not have mattered what reply he made to her question—be he devil or fairy prince, Jenny thought, he was the answer to all her longings. She had been waiting for him since before her first memory.

"A fallen angel," Valerian said with tenderness and sorrow mingling in his wonderful voice. He hadn't made the music that had drawn her to the garden so many nights, she realized then—*he was* that music. "Don't trouble yourself with who I am, sweet. It is enough, isn't it, that we've found each other again at long last?"

Jenny raised trembling fingers to the bodice of her gown, guided by the same inner instinct that made her heart pound and caused a heavy, aching warmth to settle over her. She undid the ribbon ties of her camisole and parted the fabric to reveal her plump breasts, because she knew that he wanted to see and touch them, because she longed to nurture him somehow.

He groaned, and the sound bore her high on fragile wings, and she soared upon it, triumphant, and murmured his beautiful name—Valerian. The utterance itself was a caress, echoing back to her, lodging in deep, forbidden places.

She felt his lips on her nipple, hungry and wet, and cried out, not in fear or in horror, but in that singular, innocent lust at which only virgins can be truly proficient. Her fingers found their way into his thick, silken hair, and she pressed him closer, whimpering, urging him on in his gentle greed.

The pleasure was unspeakable, not to be borne, exceeding even the fitful and licentious fantasies that had caused Jenny to toss restlessly in her bed when she first reached womanhood. She had never even guessed that the mating process could be so fiercely delightful.

Jenny wanted to give herself up to Valerian, wanted it more than the return of her eyesight, more than a husband or a child or a house where she was mistress, and not Adela. These last were, after all, impossible dreams, but this other pleasure was within her grasp. The joy of it would sustain her, even if he should abandon her, through all the bleak years of spinsterhood that might lay ahead.

She could barely speak, so intense was the ecstasy he offered and withdrew and then offered again, with his light, musician's fingers and his seeking mouth. "Valerian—where have we known each other before? I do not—remember—" She paused to give a shuddering sigh as he raised her far enough off the couch

to remove her clothes.

To be naked to his gaze was as heady as a surfeit of summer wine. For the first time ever, Jenny felt lushly beautiful and womanly—and whole.

Valerian was nibbling at the delicate flesh on her neck. "Your heart remembers," he said softly. "Look into your heart."

"I can't—*think*," she protested with a throaty laugh.

He gathered her breasts in his strong, gentle hands, chafing the taut peaks with his thumbs, and she wondered distractedly why she did not feel his breath upon her flesh, for his face was very near to hers. "How like a woman to want to think at such a time," he teased. "The heart does not have thoughts, beloved—only feelings. Search there, among them, and I promise you will find recollection, some shadow, of what we have been to each other."

Such a search could not be made, Jenny knew, while her blood was thundering through her veins and her breathing was racing out of control. Still, she sensed that Valerian was right—they were not strangers, but companions of old; each belonging to the other in some elemental and enigmatic way.

To lie with Valerian was to return home after a long and difficult journey, to be safe after a spell of unrelenting danger.

"Please," she said. "Make love to me."

"Yes," he replied, and after parting her legs tenderly, to either side of the couch, he mounted her. "There may be pain—"

Jenny's slim, supple form arched like a bow, taut and humming. "I don't care," she said, and it was true. Nothing mattered but their joining, the reunion of their bodies and souls.

Valerian lunged into her, and she cried out, in a virgin's distress, yes, but also in profound welcome. She was exultant, alive with sensation. At last, at last, she was truly herself.

In the meantime, Valerian murmured endearments to her, and half-formed prayers of adoration, his magnificent body flexing powerfully, reaching deep inside Jenny, causing her to sob softly even as her spirit took fire and burned.

It ended, finally, as must all joys and all sorrows, and they lay together, entwined, exhausted, reunited after a separation so long that Jenny could not remember their parting. Later, when she'd gathered her scattered wits, she would examine her heart, as Valerian had said she must, and surely she would find him there...

*Daisy*

*Las Vegas, 1995*

"Chandler!" The voice was snappish, insistent. "Damn it, Daisy, you gotta come out of it!"

She stirred. Daisy? Who the hell was Daisy?



"Open your eyes, Chandler," her tormentor commanded.

She ached all over, yet a sweet languor possessed her, as though she had just made love, and been thoroughly, skillfully satisfied. She did not want to surface, to leave the sensation behind.

"I ain't got all night, Chandler!"

Was this the man who had been her lover, who had carried her to heights she only faintly remembered?

It couldn't be, she thought. Reluctantly she opened her eyes.

Seeing O'Halloran looming over her brought everything back with all the subtlety of a train plunging off a high trestle. He had cookie crumbs on his chin, what hair he had left was standing on end, and there was a rumpled air about him, as if he hadn't changed clothes since the Carter administration.

She sighed and closed her eyes again, just for a moment. At least that much was normal—her partner was the same sweet slob he'd always been.

"Daisy, don't veg out on me now," O'Halloran rasped. "You looked right at me a second ago. I saw you."

"Super-cop," she said, trying on the name he'd called her by—Daisy—in her muddled mind and finding that it fit comfortably, like a favorite T-shirt or a roomy pair of sweat pants. "Nothing gets by you, does it, O'Halloran?" She paused, wanting to cry but too proud to give in to the urge. "Damn it, this is a hospital, isn't it?"

"University Medical Center," O'Halloran confirmed. "But don't get your panties in a wad, Chandler—it ain't the psycho ward. You collapsed on the sidewalk, that's all, and somebody called an ambulance."

Daisy's temples were throbbing, and she thought she might stick her head over the side of the bed and heave all over O'Halloran's shoes. Chances were, nobody would notice if she did.

"Am I hurt?"

"Nope," O'Halloran said proudly, as though he'd participated in her salvation or even engineered it single-handedly. "But you were definitely out of it. Talked about some guy named Martin and twitched a lot."

She raised a hand to her forehead, to push back her hair, and noticed for the first time she was on IV. "What the—?" she said, starting to sit up.

O'Halloran pushed her back onto the pillows. "Take a breath, Chandler," he said. "It's just sugar water. No big deal. And don't even think about getting up, because you ain't going noplance, not tonight."

A tear escaped, despite Daisy's determination, and zigzagged down her cheek. "They think I'm crazy or on drugs, don't they? The brass, I mean."

Her partner smiled, produced a chocolate cookie from somewhere, and bit into it with relish. The crumbs dropped onto Daisy's bedsheet.

"Nobody thinks you're using," he said. "You've already had the necessary blood and urine tests. And

you're probably only mildly deranged, which puts you in the normal category."

"I'm not having a breakdown," Daisy said. But she was remembering so many things—being blind, living in her brother and sister-in-law's house in eighteenth-century London, Valerian carrying her away by magic and making love to her, and wondering if she'd imagined all of it. She wouldn't be the first cop to crumble under stress, though that didn't make the idea any easier to deal with.

O'Halloran found her other hand, the one without the needle and tube protruding from the large vein, and gathered it awkwardly between his own. "If you say your head's on straight, Chandler, I believe you," he told her. "You just need to rest for a while, that's all."

"They've suspended me."

"You're on medical leave," O'Halloran corrected.

Daisy took a few moments to gather her composure. "Permanently?"

The other cop hesitated just a moment too long. "Until further notice," he said finally, still holding her hand. "You'll have to have some counseling and some tests, and then you'll go up before a review board. Happens all the time."

"Not to me, it doesn't."

O'Halloran shrugged in an effort to appear nonchalant, but she saw the concern in his eyes. "Okay, Chandler, so you got stepped on. Things ain't too cool just now. That's reality, and you gotta deal with it. You have sick leave, and some savings, maybe?"

Life with—or without—Jeanine had made Daisy pragmatic at a very young age. She had sick leave, vacation time, and a year's wages tucked away in the bank. "Don't sweat it, O'Halloran," she said. "I won't have to move in with you."

He laughed. "You're still a smartass. That's got to be a good sign."

"How's the case going, hotshot? And before you come back with, 'what case?', let me just say you know damn well which one I'm talking about."

"The vampire thing."

"That's the one."

O'Halloran sighed. "We ain't made a whole hell of a lot of progress with that one, Chandler." A nurse appeared on the other side of Daisy's bed and gave the veteran cop a meaningful look. "Tell you what, Ace. I'll stop by in the morning and fill you in, okay?"

Daisy had neither the strength nor the will to argue. It was late, and she felt as if she'd been trampled by a herd of tap-dancing burros. Besides, once O'Halloran and the nurse had gone and the lights were out, she'd be able to cry in private.

Her partner left, and the nurse, whose nametag read, 'Betty,' gave Daisy a pill to make her sleep, checked the flow of glucose through the tube, switched off the light, and went out.

Daisy lay perfectly still, staring up at the ceiling, trying to make sense of all that had been happening to her since that first fateful night, when she'd shelled out big bucks to watch a magic show at the Venetian Hotel. Everything had gone to hell as soon as she'd met Valerian.

He was a regular sort of guy, if you were willing to overlook the fangs and the fact that he was six hundred years old. Far be it from her to fall in love with a normal human being, somebody with a last name, at least. Oh, no. She had to lose her heart to *avampire* .

She was, for a time, so caught up in her private lament that she did not notice the elegant form leaning against the metal rail at the foot of her bed. When she did, her heart spiraled into the back of her throat, blocking the cry of alarm that would have escaped a moment later.

"It's only me," Valerian said.

Daisy's relief was so intense that it seemed to melt her bones and muscles like sunshine on snow. She squinted as he came to stand beside her, his handsome face clearly visible even in the darkness, because of its pale translucence.

"For a moment, I thought—"

"That I was Krispin, come to kill you at last?"

She could only nod.

He touched her face, and she was reminded of his lovemaking, as she'd experienced it in this lifetime, and as Jenny Wade, the blind girl. "My precious love," he said in a ragged whisper and bent to kiss her almost fitfully on the forehead. "I've come to bid you farewell."

Once or twice, since the vampire odyssey had begun, Daisy had wished she could have her old, comparatively uncomplicated life back. Now, faced with the prospect of losing Valerian forever, she discovered she was willing to risk almost anything to continue the relationship, weird as it was.

Maybe she *had* gone over the edge, and the department had been right to pull her badge.

"No," she said, her eyes filling with fresh tears. "I don't want you to go."

"Daisy," he whispered, and there was anguish in the way he said her name. "This is the only way I can protect you, and it's difficult enough—"

"*What* is the only way? What are you talking about?"

Valerian deflected the questions with a statement. "Krispin won't bother you again."

"Damn it, Valerian, I have to know what you mean. *I love* you—that alone probably qualifies me for mega-therapy—but there it is. You can't just walk out of here, or turn into a bat and fly away, or dissolve into a mist and seep through the wall—by God, you owe me more than that!"

He regarded her silently for a time, and she saw his pain clearly in those moments, though the room was as dark as ever, and felt the weight of his sorrow descend on her own heart. When he spoke, his voice was only a raspy murmur.

"All right," Valerian said tonelessly. "I've made a bargain with Krispin. We will both perish, together, and the curse will be broken. You'll be free."

Daisy wanted to blurt out a protest, but she stopped the words in her throat and swallowed them. Then she waited until she could trust herself to speak in a rational manner. "How?" She waved her good hand, precluding interruptions. "I'm not asking about the curse. I want to know how you intend to 'perish,' as you put it. What tragic elegance that word has!"

His eyes glistened as though he might be weeping, as she certainly was, but there was no tremor in his voice. "We'll be burned."

Such horror engulfed Daisy that she nearly fainted. She sat up at last and groped for the small stainless-steel pan on the bedside table, certain her stomach would fling up its contents. "*Burned?* Good God, Valerian, you can't be serious!"

He managed a brief, crooked smile, full of grief. "It's hardly a suitable subject for a joke," he pointed out.

"I won't let you!" Daisy cried and tried to scramble out of bed.

Valerian pinned her to the pillows, as surely as if he'd grasped her shoulders, though he was not physically touching her. "You can't stop this, Daisy," he said reasonably, gently. "And you wouldn't try if you really understood the situation."

Daisy's face was wet with tears, and they kept coming, as if there were no end to them, and she didn't give a damn. "That's bull, and you know it," she argued furiously. "*Ido* understand the god-damned *situation*. What I don't get is how you could be such an idiot! Can't you see that this is a trick—that Krispin has no intention of going up in smoke with you?"

In a graceful motion that was at once firm and heartbreakingly tender, Valerian gathered Daisy into his arms and held her close against his chest. "Shhhh," he said, stroking her hair with one hand as she gave way to great, silent, shuddering sobs. For a long time he rocked her gently in his embrace, and when the worst of the storm had passed, he crooked a finger under her quivering chin and made her look at him. "Why are you here, Daisy?"

She laid her head against his chest, listening for a heartbeat that wasn't there. She was kneeling on the mattress now, the IV tube still dangling from her left hand, with one arm around Valerian's neck. Haltingly she answered his question, told him how she'd been walking home from the Venetian Hotel when the second spontaneous regression had overtaken her. Daisy went on to recount her brief experience as Jenny Wade, finishing with, "You were there, too. You carried me away, and we made love. I was a virgin."

She felt him tremble. "Yes," he said.

"Did I travel through time, the way you do?"

"No," Valerian replied at length. "You were only remembering. It was all an illusion."

"Even you?"

"Especially me."

Daisy was disappointed; she'd wanted the experience to be real. "Can vampires make women pregnant?"

He stiffened but did not pull away, as it had seemed for a moment that he would. "I don't know," he answered after another long interval. "Pray that such a thing cannot happen. Any child of mine would surely be a monster."

Daisy turned her wet face into his shirtfront and indulged in a loud snuffle. "Only during the Terrible Twos," she said, because if she spoke seriously, or let go of Valerian, the world would end.

Valerian laid a hand to either side of Daisy's head and tilted it back to look into her eyes. "Stop, Daisy," he pleaded. "I know what you're trying to do, but it won't work. We can't put off the inevitable."

"Please—stay."

*"I can't."*

"It's a trap—Krispin means to let you die and save himself at the last moment!"

"I know that, Daisy," Valerian said patiently, glancing uneasily toward the window. The darkness seemed to be thinning, losing its depth. "He won't succeed."

"Yes, he will. He'll come back here and carry me off, and there'll be no one to protect me—"

Valerian laid a finger to her lips, effectively stopping the rising tide of hysteria. "I love you," he said, and then he was simply gone. It was as if she'd only imagined him, only dreamed he was there.

Daisy knelt on the bed for a few moments, frantic, her mind full of horrific images of Valerian burning. She reached for the pan again and retched convulsively.

When the spate of illness passed, Daisy switched on her reading lamp and reached for the telephone on the beside stand. She called information in Seattle and asked for Kristina's number.

Ms. Holbrook answered right away, though she sounded sleepy. "This had better be good," she said without preamble.

Daisy had had to make a lot of difficult calls in the course of her work. By comparison, telephoning the daughter of two blood-drinking monsters in the middle of the night was tame. "Valerian is in trouble," she told Kristina. "I need your help."

"Who is this?"

"Daisy Chandler. We met in Las Vegas, at Valerian's house."

"Oh, yes—the naked cop. Tell me—just what kind of fix has my Guardian Vampire gotten himself into this time? He does have a regrettable gift for generating chaos, our Valerian. Not to mention scandal, usually accompanied by high drama."

Daisy closed her eyes, gathered her courage, and began to talk.

17

*Valerian*

*London, 1875*

I found Calder Holbrook in the lab beneath the London house he shared with Maeve, his mate. Like many vampires, he preferred the century of his mortal birth and, having that option, passed much of his time there. "Valerian," the doctor greeted me, with more resignation than affection, when I appeared at his elbow. He was an ideal partner for Maeve, though like a great many doctors he tended to be taciturn to the point of abruptness. He was quiet and steady, providing a perfect counterbalance to her more spectacular personality. Though I had transformed Holbrook from mortal to fiend myself, and was thus, in a manner of speaking, his sire, and although it had been I, and no one else, who had taught him the rudiments of navigating the world of the supernatural, there was, as the saying goes, no love lost between us.

For it was I who made Maeve a vampire, albeit long before he knew her, and he was jealous of that undeniable intimacy.

I stood with my hands clasped behind my back, peering over Calder's shoulder at the concoction bubbling in a bottle heated over a small brazier. "Have you discovered the cure for what ails us?" I inquired, for I knew that was what the doctor sought—a way to circumvent a nightwalker's needs for blood-sustenance and protection from the sun, while retaining the glorious powers we possess. Unhampered by the kind of idealism that plagues men and vampires of Calder's ilk, I envisioned a plethora of such creatures ranging over the earth and, subsequent to that thought, hoped for a resounding failure.

Holbrook turned his head to regard me archly for a moment or two, one eyebrow raised, then uttered a gruff *harumph* and turned back to his work. "Mysteries, mysteries," he muttered. "Even vampirism cannot explain what ails *you*, Valerian."

I had just parted from Daisy, probably forever, and I faced an eternity of damnation—unceasing punishment so terrible, so brutal, that only a medieval mind could truly grasp its portent—and I was not in the mood to exchange jibes with the queen's consort. "Please—spare me your hysterical expressions of admiration and tender regard."

The stuff in Calder's glass vial turned to an interesting shade of amber, and he raised it high to peer through it and murmur again.

"What do you want?" he asked when he'd left me quivering on the hook a little longer.

"I have been told that you've discovered parallel dimensions and passages into those other worlds."

At long last Calder turned and granted me his full, if somewhat grudging, attention. "I have uncovered the existence of such phenomena, yes, but I have only theories as to how they are reached."

I resisted the urge to grasp the doctor's collar and haul him onto his toes as I might have done with a mortal, for I knew Calder wouldn't suffer such an affront lightly. He must have glimpsed the intent in my face before I quelled it, for the shadow of a smile fell across his mouth.

I had amused him. Oh, joy.

"The way must be sealed, whatever and wherever it is," I said at last in an angry rasp. My temper was not helped by the sense of hopelessness that pervaded me being like an unseen vapor, bruising every cell and sinew, even in their atrophy. "Don't you see? That's how he—my brother, Krispin—has been able to hide himself from me all these centuries. Suppose there are others like him? Suppose—"

"What in hell are you talking about?" Calder interrupted.

Dawn was approaching; I could feel it tugging at my consciousness, pulling me downward into a maelstrom of nothingness, although the doctor did not seem to be affected. "There is so little time!" I cried, desperate to make him understand.

"Tell me," he said, this time with a note of gentleness in his voice. I imagined that Dr. Holbrook had been a comfort to his patients, as a mortal physician. He was not generally so delicate with the sensibilities of vampires.

I told the tale, as best I was able, my words faltering and tumbling over each other as I attempted to resist the grasping, smothering darkness rising around me. I explained the danger Krispin represented, or at least I hoped that was what I had done, for it all sounded garbled to me, and disjointed. All the while I was speaking, I wondered vaguely why my fledgling was not succumbing to the great sleep as I was.

Finally the moment came when I could no longer think, or speak, or wonder. I had been dragged under, into the oblivion of my innermost being, there to slumber, witless and unstimulating, until the sun sank into westerly seas.

*Daisy*

*Las Vegas, 1995*

The sleeping pill must have taken hold soon after Daisy had finished her call to Kristina, for she awakened to full sunlight and a breakfast tray, with no conscious memory of hanging up the receiver.

The ageless Ms. Holbrook was standing by the window, her cap of dark hair gleaming richly in the dazzle of morning, clad in a cream-colored pantsuit of impeccable tailoring, Gucci shoes, and a matching bag of soft, supple leather. Her jewelry, a single heavy golden chain, was real, and Daisy wondered if she'd zapped the outfit out of thin air or simply bought everything in stores, like anyone else.

"Why didn't you awaken me?" Daisy demanded, frowning at the food on her tray and reaching reluctantly for a piece of toast. She had no appetite, but she knew she would need her strength for the challenges ahead, and that meant she had to eat.

Kristina raised one shoulder in a slight, elegant shrug. "There's really no hurry. Valerian is a vampire. He's burrowed down somewhere, sleeping off the day."

Daisy nibbled at the toast. "And Krispin?"

"Who knows? From what you told me on the telephone last night, he may be the proverbial horse of a different color. An unknown quantity, if you will."

A shiver cartwheeled down Daisy's spine, and the words she spoke were born of pure bravado. "Can



you take me to him?"

"Oh, that's a brilliant idea," Kristina muttered, ignoring the nurse who came to see if Daisy was eating her breakfast. "If this *thing* didn't kill us both for our trouble, my mother well might. Or Valerian himself." She shoved a hand through her hair, and it immediately fell back into perfect array, a soft cascade of ebony spun to silk.

In her next life Daisy wanted hair like that.

She settled against her pillow, an unwilling patient, dolefully spooning stewed peaches into her mouth. A nurse had taken the IV needle from her hand; that was some progress, at least. And O'Halloran hadn't been in with any further news flashes on the dismal state of her career. A person had to focus on the positive whenever possible. 'Okay. Then just tell me how to find the creep,' she said between bites of spongy fruit, "and I'll go by myself."

"Absolutely not," Kristina said. "I'm taking you to my place in Seattle. You can stay there until all this is settled, one way or another."

Daisy couldn't bear the thought of sitting by passively and leaving everything to fate. She had too much to lose—and besides, there was really no place to hide. Krispin would close in for the kill when he wanted to—up until now, he'd only been toying with Daisy, using her to torment Valerian.

"Hiding out is no solution, Kristina, and you know it," she replied with as much firmness as she could muster under the circumstances. "Some things can't be avoided, and this is one of them. There has to be a confrontation."

"Between Valerian and Krispin, yes," Kristina insisted. "But you should stay out of it. You can't begin to understand what you're dealing with here."

"Would *you* turn away and pretend nothing was happening? If you were in love with a man—excuse me, a vampire—could you hide out somewhere until it was all over?"

Daisy thought she saw a shadow of sadness move in Kristina's eyes, but the expression was so fleeting that she told herself she'd imagined it.

"Daisy, the important thing here is for you to stay alive. The relationship isn't going to work anyway, because in case you've forgotten, you're a mortal woman and Valerian is a vampire. How could the two of you ever hope to have anything even remotely resembling a normal life? You'll get old and die, for instance, but Valerian, if he survives, will look the same a thousand years from now as he does today." She paused to walk over and close the door on the hustle and bustle of the hospital corridor before continuing. "He wouldn't change back into a mortal, Daisy, even if such a thing were possible. Valerian *revels* in what he is. Would you be willing to become a vampire?"

Daisy shrank back, repelled by the idea and more than a little stricken because Kristina's points were valid ones. "Of course not," she said.

Kristina spread her hands wide as if to say, "Well, then?"

"I love Valerian," Daisy insisted in a fragile tone. "And I don't care if everybody thinks I'm his mother someday—or if I don't see him in the daytime, or any of that. It would be enough just to be with him."

The other woman raised one delicate eyebrow. Her eyes were an intense shade of silvery gray and so expressive that few words were needed. "Of all vampires, Daisy, Valerian is the most fickle, the most outrageous, the most flamboyant. His passions have a range you cannot begin to appreciate."

Daisy closed her eyes, just briefly, against the keenest ache she had ever felt. "If you are saying he has loved others—"

"He has," Kristina said, though not unkindly.

"Whose side are you on, anyway?" Daisy demanded, regretting that she'd turned to this woman—if indeed she *was* a woman and not some kind of spook—for help in saving Valerian from himself as well as from his brother.

"Your side, Daisy," Kristina answered sadly. "And Valerian's. Just now my only aim is to keep you both alive. Still, if you're smart, you'll take my advice, forget our splendid friend and find a nice, ordinary mortal to love."

Daisy pushed away her food and folded her arms stubbornly. "I'm afraid knowing Valerian has spoiled me for 'nice, ordinary mortals,'" she said. "Besides, there's something bigger than all of us going on here. It's as if we've come to the crux of it all, the *X* on the map, after centuries of blunders and near misses. The situation has to be resolved—I feel sure of it. There is something we're supposed to do to make things right."

"No wonder you keep reincarnating as Valerian's lover, over and over again," Kristina remarked with some irritation. "You haven't the *sense* to learn your lesson."

"Which is?" Daisy asked tartly, swinging her legs over the side of the bed and testing a privately held theory that she could stand on her own if she tried, despite the bone-melting weakness that still afflicted her.

"That you must let go of Valerian, once and for all. And the same goes for him. The two of you are obsessed, following each other from continent to continent and century to century, as if you could thwart karma by mule-headed persistence!"

Daisy stood, wavered, clutched the bed, indulging in a few deep, steadying breaths before replying. "Maybe it's just that we know we belong together," she said. "Damn it, aren't we entitled to one lifetime of happiness, after all we've been through?"

"None of us is entitled to anything," Kristina countered, folding her arms. "We're here on sufferance. Mortal and monster, saint and sinner—we could all be obliterated at the whim of heaven."

"How nice that you came to visit," Daisy said with acid sweetness. "To think I was actually depressed before!"

Kristina smiled tentatively and approached Daisy's bedside. "Sorry—I tend to be a little overrealistic sometimes," she said and laughed a little. "I get that from my father, I think. He's pragmatic to a fault."

Daisy, steadier on her feet now, began to make her way slowly around the bed, with a goal of reaching the closet. She didn't ask Kristina to blink her up an outfit, like before at Valerian's house; it had occurred to her since that the clothes might have been woven of fancy and little else, like those of the fabled emperor. There was also a possibility that the garments could vanish, being magical, like so much

smoke, leaving her standing in some public place clad only in her good intentions.

"Nothing wrong with taking a sensible approach to things," she said, because she liked Kristina and because she, being a cop, albeit a suspended one, was inclined toward a practical view herself. Her knuckles whitened where she gripped the steel rail at the foot of the mattress as she inched along. "Are you an only child?" she inquired, sensing that Kristina was about to order her back into bed and anxious to deflect any concern, however well meant, that might be coming her way.

"To say the least," Kristina answered, folding her arms and watching Daisy's slow progress with her head tilted slightly to one side. The expression on her exquisite face was at once pitying and wry. "As far as I know, my mother was the first vampire to give birth in the human fashion. Nightwalkers generally create their 'children' by transforming favorite mortals."

Daisy stopped, trembling with weakness, grasping the footrails as if to keep from dropping over a precipice. She laughed, but the sound was one of pain, not merriment. "I thought I'd heard everything, until I fell in with your crowd. The confessions of serial killers and street hoods pale by comparison."

Kristina moved silently to her side, as lithe and graceful as a cat, and put a strong arm around her. "Back into bed, Daisy," she said with kind insistence. "You're not ready to ride to the rescue quite yet."

Daisy wanted to resist, but there was a hypnotic quality to Kristina's touch, as well as her voice, and besides, she was tired. So unbelievably tired. "Can't just—give up—" she protested, amazed to find that she was already lying down again. Kristina was covering her gently with the sheet and thin blanket.

"I can't imagine you doing that," Kristina said with amusement and a touch of sorrow, too. "In fact, I don't believe you know how to quit—even when it would be the smartest thing to do."

Daisy felt the bed spinning beneath her, felt herself spiraling down and down, like Alice tumbling into the rabbit hole, to land, bouncing, on a dream...

*Valerian*

*London, 1875*

I awakened from my enforced rest to find myself sprawled ingloriously on the floor of Holbrook's laboratory, with the good doctor gone. I was not alone, however—Kristina, child of my soul, was sitting nearby, slender legs elegantly crossed and arms folded, awaiting my return to consciousness.

"Bloody hell," I rasped, sitting up and shaking my head. I felt rather like a pugilist felled by a stronger opponent.

Kristina smiled sweetly. "Hello, Lazybones."

I stood shakily, grasping the examination table with one arm to steady myself during the process. "Where the devil is that no-account father of yours?" I demanded.

She sighed. "When I turned a hundred and thirty, I stopped keeping track."

"He didn't sleep," I marveled.

"What?"

"Calder. Your father—he didn't sleep."

"I know Calder is my father," Kristina said patiently, leaning forward in her chair but not rising, as a more mannerly and respectful child might do. "And how do you know what happened after you dropped off? Papa could have willed himself to some other lair the moment you closed your eyes."

My practiced instincts, coupled with the memory of a wide-awake, completely alert Dr. Holbrook, argued against Kristina's theory. "He's found a way to circumvent the vampire sleep—by all the old gods, he's done it!" Fury scorched through me, consuming the last wisps of insensibility lingering in my brain. "And damn him, Calder means to keep the secret to himself!"

Kristina folded back the slim, tapered fingers of one hand and gazed thoughtfully at her nails. "You aren't being fair," she accused mildly. "Papa does not number among your more ardent admirers—we both know that. But he would never withhold any knowledge that could be used to accomplish something good."

I began to pace, muttering to myself as I moved. Although I had awakened refreshed, my thoughts were again jumbled and fragmentary, and I quite literally did not know which way to turn.

The woman who would, in any other society except our own, be called my goddaughter, rose at last from her chair. "I've seen Daisy," she said, stopping me in midstride. "There's a crazy scheme cooking in the back of that mortal brain, Valerian—she figures she can save you, your Daisy, if she surrenders herself to Krispin before your heroic sacrifice can be made."

The mere idea chilled me. I grasped Kristina's shoulders and hauled her onto her toes, giving her a little shake in the process. "You talked her out of it, of course," I said.

Fire kindled in Kristina's pewter-colored eyes, but she did not use her singular magic to punish me for the effort. "I tried," was her response. "Right now Daisy is too frail to try anything very dramatic, but there can be no question that she's determined. I expect she'll do something stupid the moment she's worked up the necessary stamina. Now, let me go before I turn you into a garden slug and bury you in salt."

I released her, wincing at the image, and at the same time smiling a little. "Not very imaginative," I scolded, bending forward to plant a soft kiss on her forehead. "Help me, Kristina. Please. If you know anything about Calder's experiments, I beg of you, tell me now."

She looked at me with a sheen of tears glimmering in her eyes. "You're asking me to betray my father's trust."

I shook my head. "I'm asking you to save Daisy, and others probably, from Krispin's madness. If I can find the passageway between this world and his, I can find *him*."

Kristina was silent for a time, obviously torn, but then she turned and crossed the room to a wall lined with neatly arranged volumes on sturdy shelves. She ran an index finger over the spines with affection and finally selected one particular book and took it reverently from its place among the others.

She held the tome against her chest for a moment, then extended it to me.

It was a diary of sorts, a complex record of Calder's most recent explorations of science. In it were all

his theories concerning parallel dimensions, and I absorbed the words greedily by running my right hand down every page.

When I was finished, I had a very good idea where to find my brother.

The solution, in fact, was almost ludicrously simple. I might have thought of it myself, or at least asked a certain friend who writes screenplays for horror films to suggest possibilities, if I had been in a calm frame of mind rather than a mild state of hysteria.

"Thank you," I said to Kristina and pressed the volume back into her hands.

I went from there to my favorite part of nineteenth-century London for a hasty feeding, leaving my victim anemic but otherwise ecstatic. Then I proceeded to a certain burial mound not far from modern-day Dunnett's Head, a place where Challes had taken Krispin, Brenna, and me long ago while in the throes of a scholarly passion for antiquities. We were all fascinated by the area, for the bones secreted beneath that manmade hillock of stone and rubble and grass had been ancient even in our medieval time. According to our tutor, the occupants of that underground chamber had lived and died before the Romans came to Britain.

When I reached that bleak, moon-swept monument, it looked so strange, so eerie, that it might have been the landscape of some lesser planet, knowing neither snow nor fire, catching only the chill, straying beams of some wasted star. It was difficult to believe that any cogent being, human or otherwise, had ever trod this hard, unyielding ground, let alone toiled there, and given birth, fought battles, and built small, leaky ships to brave the treacherous seas.

For me, that night, as well fed and strong as I was, it seemed to be the loneliest, most desolate place in the universe. I reminded myself of the information I'd absorbed from Calder's notes—in order to move between our world and the alternate one Krispin apparently frequented, one must undergo another birth, with the grave for a womb.

I was drawn to that particular site by an impulse born in some unexplored region of my being—no doubt there were still bonds linking Krispin and me, however tenuous they might have been. We had been brothers once, after all.

I closed my eyes as an infinite sadness encompassed me, but my resolve was not shaken. If I found Krispin before the appointed time of our mutual destruction, I would destroy him, thus evading the ambush he most assuredly planned for me and, at the same time, making certain that Daisy was safe.

I was willing to risk anything to succeed in that one aim, and with that certainty in mind, I dared to call upon the most fearsome angel in all heaven's uncounted legions.

"Nemesis!" I shouted into the night. "Pay heed to the bargain I offer!"

Even though I had just summoned him, it was still a profound shock when the night was rent by a narrow strip of light, no product of the sun or the moon, but of some inner universe. It broadened, a gleaming doorway to a realm I would never see, and the great warrior angel appeared. He was quite ordinary-looking, was Nemesis, a fact that probably served him very well during his frequent interactions with the mortal race.

The chasm vanished, but Nemesis seemed luminous, as though light flowed through his veins instead of blood. Perhaps it did.

He looked at me with contemptuous interest. "You dare to command me, Vampire, as though I were a genie in a lamp instead of a warrior of the One God? What is your purpose?"

"I seek your assistance."

Nemesis chuckled to himself, and that sound, too, was disdainful. "What perfidy is this?" he demanded after a few moments of silence. "Vampires do not seek favors of angels."

"This vampire is desperate," I replied with resignation, and then I told him my lengthy story, which was also Daisy's, leaving nothing out beyond those things that would offend a celibate creature. Aside from that, I spoke the absolute and unvarnished truth, describing Krispin and all the havoc he could wreak if he wasn't stopped.

The angel listened without interruption, I will give him that, but when I had finished, he was plainly still doubtful of my motives for calling him to that barren place and relating such a tale.

"You would ask me to help destroy this vampire?" Nemesis inquired, after considering my words in silence for a long interval. When I merely nodded, he went on. "If it were up to me," he said, "you may be certain I would put a finish to the lot of you. Abominations, that's what you are. Since I have yet to reduce you to ashes, to be swept away by the wind, it should be plain that the choice is not mine."

"You have a certain autonomy, I suspect," I ventured to insist, though quietly and very, very carefully. "Were that not so, you couldn't have risen to a position of authority."

Nemesis studied me, his eyes narrowed in distrustful curiosity, and I marveled that, for all his terrible power, he clearly could not look into my mind. Had he been able to do so, he would have known that I was sincere, and there was no treachery afoot.

"I cannot destroy any creature, save demons," he said, but with less certainty than before.

"Perhaps," I conceded moderately, "but you are allowed, I trust, to escort surrendering fiends into the welcoming arms of hell."

The statement caught him off guard, I was pleased to see, but only for a moment. "What are you saying?"

"If you will help me to capture the one who bore the name of Krispin Lazarus, as a mortal, then I shall go willingly into the pit."

"You cannot begin to guess what you are suggesting," the angel said, but I knew he was intrigued by my proposal. To rid the world of two troublesome vampires was surely, in his view, a worthy aspiration.

I recalled the things I had been taught about hell as a human child, and shivered involuntarily. "Oh, but I do," I said at last. "I was mortal in the fourteenth century, and the torments awaiting the damned were described to me in vivid detail from the time I could make sense of such matters. I know well what I shall suffer."

"And you are willing to face such punishment for the sake of one woman?"

"Yes," I answered without hesitation, but I was full of dread and sorrow, for there has never been



another creature that loved life as I did.

"Remarkable," the angel said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully between a thumb and index finger as he pondered my countenance. "Either you lie, which seems most likely, or you are indeed a rare vampire. It hardly wants saying that your kind is not noted for generosity—especially when the required sacrifice is one of such magnitude." He paused. "It is known that you have made a bargain with your brother, the renegade Krispin. You have agreed to accept the help of a warlock, as well. Why, then, do you come to me?"

I smiled sadly. "You have a remarkable intelligence system."

"The best," Nemesis agreed. "Speak, Vampire. Do you dare attempt to deceive me?"

I shook my head. "No. You are a fierce warrior, Nemesis. You will surely rejoice when I fall into the hands of Lucifer. But unlike Dathan, the warlock, unlike my misguided brother, you can be counted upon to honor any bargain you make. Truth is your nature, and there are no lies in you."

"How beautifully you speak. And what a waste that you have cast your lot with fiends and devils. Yes, Vampire—I would delight in putting an end to your evil, and that of all others like you, but you mistake me in one point. I take no pleasure in the suffering of any creature, no matter how heinous it may be. Why do you think I despise you so much? Because you cause pain and fear, because you make the sweet sanction of darkness, where humankind is meant to take rest, a foul and unholy thing."

I was not armed for a philosophical discussion, nor was I in the mood to undertake an argument. Still, Nemesis had the upper hand in this scenario; his was the power to grant or deny my entreaty, and I was merely the supplicant. "You are misinformed," I answered, maintaining my dignity but giving the words no edge of contempt or sarcasm. "The attentions of a vampire are not painful. They foster only ecstasy. Furthermore, we rarely frighten a mortal deliberately—they manage to scare themselves nicely, with their silly legends and superstitions."

Nemesis was still, measuring me with his eyes, and I could not discern from his expression whether I had roused his ire or his sympathy. Common sense caused me to dismiss the latter possibility entirely.

I waited, having said my piece, gazing back at the great angel in silence, using all my strength to veil the terror I felt. Yes, I loved Daisy—enough not only to surrender the myriad pleasures and powers of my existence, but to consign myself to eternal torment as well. And yet everything within me, every instinct, every mental pulse, clamored for life.

"Very well," the angel agreed after a long while. After a moment's hesitation, during which his distaste showed clearly in his face, Nemesis laid a hand to my shoulder.

"The covenant is made. I confer upon you the power to capture and bind your enemy, and I warn you—do not abuse this gift, for it will turn on you like a viper if you attempt such a thing. When your quest is achieved, I will come for you."



*New York, 1995*

After taking my leave of Nemesis, there on that cold and empty plain, I traveled immediately to New York, a favorite city of mine, to feed. I was greedy that night, and perhaps a bit less delicate with my "victims" than I would normally have been. The ordeal ahead, the covenant I had made with the warrior angel notwithstanding, would require the fullest use of all my powers. Proper preparation demanded that I take more blood than ever before.

I did not kill; indeed, I was not even unkind. Furthermore, knowing how Challes had tricked me into taking the wine of warlocks before, I was unusually cautious in selecting my prey.

It was an intoxicating feast—I imbibed the blood of a teenage gang member, a hot and heady brew, vibrant with youthful anger, passion, and frustration. I took sustenance from a baglady and left her swooning in the warm night, remembering me as a generous and tender lover rather than a fiend. The roll of bills I tucked into the pocket of her ragged coat would provide for her needs from then on.

There were others, too—I don't recall exactly how many, for after the youth and the old woman, I was in something of a frenzy. When the first light of dawn rimmed the New York skyline with gold and apricot and crimson, I was still bursting with energy and power.

I would not sleep this day away, I knew, and yet I dared not let the sun find me. Beneath the ebullience I could not seem to quell was the grim and ironic awareness that perdition itself, Dante's hell and my own, awaited my surrender. There I would know fires that burned eternally, but never consumed the anguished, screaming creatures writhing within their flames.

It seemed pointless, in the face of such suffering, to avoid the light of one minor star, whirling through space with nine odd and insignificant planets in its thrall.

Nonetheless, I was a prudent monster when the situation called for the virtue of circumspection. I took myself to the center of the stone circle, where Krispin had danced and reeled with such demented abandon, drunk on moonlight and evil, and I became mist, slipping into the ground only moments ahead of Old Sol's fiery fingers.

I scabbled through the bones I found there—strong and wakeful, I was—but Krispin was nowhere to be found. Even through some twelve feet of earth and rubble, roots and bones, rodents and worms, I could feel the clawing warmth of the sun, seeking and groping and prodding. Searching me out.

I had once seen a vampire who had been caught abroad in daylight, shortly after Challes transformed me, and the recollection still causes me to shudder. It was a living monstrosity, a blackened skeleton, ludicrous and pathetic. I wondered what had happened to the poor wretch in the centuries since, but only briefly. I reminded myself that I must focus and find Krispin.

I closed my eyes and concentrated on my brother. In my mind I saw him in the same way I always had: as a fragile, eager boy, forever following me about, admiring me despite my arrogance, desperately tolerant of my impatience with him. A tear slipped down my face as I mourned that child, lost to me for all time, and the remorse I felt for the way I'd treated him made me heartsore.

My musings took me to Krispin's side, as I had hoped they would. Imagine my amazement in finding him not only awake, but standing on the darkened stage of the showroom in the Venetian Hotel, examining the carriage I used in my magic act.

He did not seem surprised by my appearance, but then, he wouldn't have been, would he, for he had surely expected me. I had a peculiar idea that, indeed, he might actually have *summoned* me there somehow.

"Did you think to find me lying on a slab somewhere, Valerian?" he asked with amusement, running an artist's hand over the fancy gilded cupids and flowers carved into the coach door. "Just waiting for you to plunge a stake through my heart and put an end to me for all time?"

"Yes," I said, for there was utterly no point in lying. "How is it that you, a vampire, are up and about while the sun shines?"

"I took a great deal of blood over the past night or two, as you undoubtedly did," Krispin replied, sounding almost bored. He crouched beside a wheel now, touching it with those white minstrel's fingers and tipped his head back briefly to gaze upward into the rigging for the stage lights. "It's so dark and cool here," he mused. "One wouldn't guess that the morning has come."

I did not take a step closer to him, as reflex bade me to do, but instead folded my arms. My posture was idle, shoulders at a slight slant, head tilted to one side, but I doubt Krispin was fooled by these mannerisms. Being my sibling, he knew all my ruses, shams, and affectations.

"Tell me about this place where you've been hiding all these centuries."

Krispin smiled, met my eyes for a moment, then returned to his thoughtful examination of the carriage. Such things had fascinated him as a lad, I remembered with a vague pang; he'd loved carts and coaches and wagons as a mortal, as well as ships.

"It's a world almost indiscernible from this one. Rather like passing through Alice's looking glass. Everything here has a counterpart there."

"You have no special powers, then?"

Krispin laughed, stroking the ornate spokes of one wheel as a mortal lover might stroke a shapely limb. "I have many unique qualities, Valerian, as you do. Like most vampires, I sleep during the day and cannot bear the light of the sun. I must take blood or perish of a truly agonizing hunger. I can travel through time, change my shape, veil myself from all but the most discerning eyes—the usual."

"And move between dimensions."

He feigned a sigh and straightened, hands in the pockets of his impeccably tailored tuxedo slacks. There was a look of the 1920s about him, a certain dissolute elegance. With his slicked-back blond hair and lithe figure, he resembled a character from one of F. Scott Fitzgerald's novels.

"Yes," he said, "I can move between dimensions. Even a mortal can do that, albeit usually by accident. Many of your so-called missing persons have merely slipped over onto our side." Krispin paused to smile indulgently, reminding me of a fond uncle recalling an outing with a precocious niece or nephew. "Their reactions are interesting—oft-times they don't realize they've made a transition and try to return home as if nothing had happened. They make odd little discoveries along the way. Their house is suddenly to be found on the opposite side of the street from where it was before, that sort of thing. Of course, that's nothing compared to the shock of opening the front door and encountering their equally bewildered double on the other side."

I was fascinated, in spite of myself. I was also vigilant, expecting treachery at any moment and, I admit, watching for any opportunity to execute a trick of my own. "Interesting," I said. "When someone dies in this dimension, does his counterpart in the other world perish as well?"

"Not necessarily. The two planes are quite separate, even though they seem to reflect each other. If that weren't the case, then a person who disappears here would immediately vanish there, too."

"Do immortals have counterparts, as humans do?"

Again Krispin smiled. He kicked the carriage wheel lightly with the toe of one gleaming shoe, as if testing a tire. "Not exactly. Your reflection died some five hundred and sixty-eight years ago, as well he should have, being mere flesh and blood. You might be interested to know that he lived quite a saintly life, for his time. He was all you might have been, without your greed and arrogance."

I felt an empathy with that long-gone Valerian Lazarus, a soft but poignant wrenching sensation, as if we had shared a soul, he and I. The two of us, I knew, had been one being, even though we had never guessed at the other's existence, and it gave me a certain comfort to know he had been a force for good in his world. Perhaps some mercy would be extended to me, when I presented myself to Lucifer for punishment, on account of that other Valerian's fruitful life.

"And your counterpart?" I inquired.

Another sigh. "I'm afraid he died as a small child. His elder brother—your other self, if you will—was strong and smart and very healthy, like you. And like you, he left his mother with little or nothing for the children who came after him." Krispin stiffened, and his eyes glinted with a hatred he took no trouble to disguise. "You took it all, Valerian. You sapped the very marrow of Mother's bones. You had her complete devotion—by the gods, it was unholy the way she cared for you!"

"Stop," I warned quietly, "before you say too much."

He swayed slightly, as though buffeted from within by the sheer force of his emotions, and covered his eyes for a moment. When he looked at me again, however, he seemed strong again and utterly defiant, thriving on some poison of the soul even as it consumed his sanity. "If she could have rid herself of our father and me, and lived only with and for you, she would have done it."

Disgust raised a scalding gorge to the back of my throat. "Enough," I reiterated. "There can be no profit in such talk."

"No profit?" Krispin came nearer, moving as silently and sinuously as a cat. When he was within my reach, he stopped and gave a hoarse, harrowing cry of laughter. "May Apollo and Zeus and all the old gods of Olympus forbid! No profit, indeed!"

"You are mad." I could not keep the contempt from my tone. Among our kind, madness is a choice, not a sentence conferred by a random fate or an illness, as it is with humankind. This particular aberration requires careful, vigilant nurturing, for our wounds, be they emotional or physical, are quick to heal. Barring blood-starvation, sunlight, fire, or the point of a stake, wooden or otherwise, driven through its heart, a vampire cannot be killed.

Krispin reached out to straighten my lapel, as any brother might do, and his hand lingered lightly on my chest. I felt the hard chill of it even through my clothes. "Alas," he said, "I have not been able to put the grief of Seraphina's negligence behind me. Do you realize that she never kissed me good night, or ruffled

my hair as she passed, or told me she loved me? Not even once?"

I recalled many instances when our mother had shown me those simple affections, and I knew that Krispin did, too. In a way, I understood his obsession with that deluded woman—fiend or mortal, we always long for that which is withheld from us.

"I'm sorry," I said, and I meant it. I regretted all he had suffered, on my account and on that of our mother. "If I could change things, Krispin, so that you were the favored one, the beloved, I would. But even we cannot go back that far, as you know. It is done. Over."

For the merest flicker of a moment I saw Krispin's true self in his pale blue eyes and knew the cosmic extent of his loneliness and his yearning for a time and a love that would unknot the ancient, ever-tightening ache inside him. "That's the worst irony of all, you know," he said in a voice so soft it might have been a breath or the faintest of sighs. "For all Seraphina's adoration of you, you never loved her at all. I think, in fact, that she amused you, with her foolish fascination and never-ending attempts to please you."

Krispin's words were close enough to the truth to wound me a little, but he was not entirely correct in his assumptions. "I did love our mother," I said quietly, and it was true. "But she expected too much of me. I was her son, not her husband or her lover. Her fixation with me was tantamount to emotional incest!"

Although my brother had implied this very thing himself, he clearly could not bear to hear the words spoken aloud. He drew back one of those slim, ethereal hands and struck me a blow that sent pain trammeling through me.

I did not move to retaliate; indeed, I did not move at all. Nor did I speak. I felt a grinding pity for Krispin, but it was not sympathy that motivated me then. I knew my brother's weakness lay in his volatile emotions, and I sought, God forgive me, to undermine him further.

The offending fist knotted at his side now, Krispin gazed up at me, weeping silently and without shame, porcelain flesh aflame with color. Like me, he had fed well in preparation for this skirmish, and the blush beneath his skin was not truly his own, but that of his most recent victims.

"It wasn't enough," he went on after a long time, "that Mother worshiped you. You had to have Brenna, too."

My voice, when I spoke, was hoarse with disuse and with sorrow. "Yes," I agreed. "Of all creatures, on earth or in hell or heaven, I love Brenna best. It has ever been so."

"You would die for her, in fact."

I smiled, though there was no mirth in me. It was a reflex, I think, a grimace masquerading as a grin. "Dying would be a merciful end, in comparison to what I would—and will—do for milady."

"Daisy," Krispin mused distractedly. "She's called Daisy now."

I did not reply, knowing as I did that Krispin was not communicating, but simply thinking aloud.

"I'm going to kill her, you know," he announced presently in a conversational tone. We might have been discussing the prospect of snow or the price of a good cigar for all the animation he displayed in those moments.

I shook my head. "I won't allow it, Krispin," I said. And then I put my right hand to his throat, at first caressing, regretting what I must do. My fingers tightened, however, when I thought of Daisy dying by his whim, and of those other women—Jillie, Janet, and Susan. Their only crime had been working for and with me.

Again Krispin gave that ghastly shriek of mingled pleasure and pain, seeming to enjoy the punishment I meted out. I felt his throat crumple like papier-mâché beneath the pressure of my fingers, and yet he did not collapse, or even struggle. His mad, glistening eyes were fixed upon my face as I crushed his windpipe, at once adoring and despising me.

I let him go, shaken and revolted, and he sank, coughing, onto the floor, there to kneel like some forlorn supplicant.

"You forget," he said after several seconds had passed, "that we are not mortal. I cannot be killed by strangling."

Violence surged up within me; I yearned to kick Krispin, to stab and tear and pummel him. I suppressed my rage, but it quaked and burned within me, like lava roiling deep in the bowels and belly of a mountain, and I knew it would rise soon and spew out of me, destroying everything in its path.

My brother half reclined on the floor now, supported by one elbow, his mouth bleeding, his right cheekbone bruised purple, watching me.

"You're right," I said at last. "As much as I enjoyed the exercise, any attempt to choke you is, of course, futile." I crossed to a chest standing in the shadows, raised the lid, and took out the jeweled sword I used in the performance of one of my favorite illusions. The blade made a whispering sound as I pulled it from its scabbard and went back to stand over Krispin.

Even in my state of agitation I found his calm attitude remarkable. It wasn't like him simply to lie there, like a concubine on a sultan's couch, awaiting his fate. Which meant, of course, that he was up to something.

I raised the sword, clasping the handle in both hands, so that the point was suspended an inch or so above Krispin's chest.

"Go ahead," he chided softly. "Kill me."

I cannot explain my hesitation even now. By that time, all filial sentiment had been exorcised from me; I neither loved nor hated Krispin. I was as coldly indifferent as if he'd been a snake, writhing beneath the tip of my blade.

He laughed suddenly, and then to my amazement the sword turned to silvery flames in my hands. I gasped at the pain, and the flames became sparks, showering the floor. My weapon was gone.

Krispin was on his feet in an instant. "Does it hurt, Big Brother?" he crooned. "Oh, I do hope it does."

The injury had been excruciating, but it is the nature of vampire flesh to heal rapidly, as I have already recorded, and the wounds were little more than memories by then. Likewise, Krispin's throat, crushed in my hands only minutes before, was whole again. Neither was he bleeding any longer, and the bruise that had marred his perfect face was gone as well.

"No, Krispin," I said quietly. "The flames did me no lasting harm. It is your hatred that hurts most."

He laid splayed fingers to his bosom in a theatrical gesture of chagrin, truly meant, of course, as mockery. "And yet you would take me to hell with you, if you could, and endure that loathing, along with the unceasing torment, for eternity? And all to save your ladylove?"

"Yes," I answered.

He laughed again. "So noble," he said. "And so vain a notion. You *will* go to hell, Valerian, but alone. That will be part of your punishment, won't it? Knowing that I'm with your beloved—bedding her and finally dispensing just punishment for her betrayals?" Krispin paused to reflect. "Who knows? Perhaps your Daisy-Brenna has been a bad girl and will end up burning beside you. It's a romantic picture, isn't it?"

I might have been ill, had I been mortal, so vile was the image of Daisy suffering that way. I had earned my damnation, even before the bargain with Nemesis, but she was an innocent and deserved none of what I had brought upon her.

"Your jealousy has made you ugly, Krispin," I said moderately. "You've wasted your life, your looks, your power, everything. You could have known such pleasures, and yet you threw it all away in order to spin your petty plots and schemes of vengeance."

Krispin's fine features contorted for a moment, and I knew that I'd been right. Even in that shining other world, the one where Challes expected to find salvation for us both, my brother had nursed his grievances and counted the injustices he'd suffered. Thus he had squandered six centuries that might have been given over to adventure, to beauty, to laughter, to love.

"Damn you," he rasped. "Do not presume to pity me!"

"I cannot help it. You are the most wretched of beings." I took the lapels of his fine coat in my hands and raised him slightly. "We shall both spend eternity in hell," I told my brother in a furious whisper, "but I, at least, will have the comfort of knowing that I have *lived*! I have loved, sometimes unwisely, but always with verve and passion. I have explored the world, known angels and warlocks, felt agony and ecstasy and everything in between. *I used* the gifts that were given me. I drank the wine."

When I released him, Krispin straightened his clothes and produced a crooked, cocky grin. "As I shall do, when you have gone to reap the harvest you have sown. But never fear, cherished brother—I will send pretty Daisy along to you, probably somewhat the worse for wear, when I am through with her."

I moved to advance upon him again, but before I could cross even the small distance between us, he raised both hands, palms out. The words he said rendered me as stiff and still as a mastodon surprised by the first Ice Age.

"Before you make another of your hasty and awkward attempts, Valerian," he said, "allow me to tell you that I have already visited Daisy, during the night just past. She was released from the hospital in the afternoon, you know. Unfortunately our lady of the badge has, as they say, taken a turn for the worse."

I could not speak.

Krispin smiled, pleased by my paralysis, temporary though it was. Hands clasped behind his back, he



rocked on his heels and watched me like a mischievous child who has just played an exceedingly clever prank.

We passed several moments thus, before I found my voice.

"What have you done?" I demanded.

"Do you recall the fable about the sleeping princess?" he countered. "Daisy is—asleep. In her apartment, I mean. The doctors, of course, will think she's in a coma."

I whirled away from him, ready to will myself to Daisy's quaint little home, realizing only at the last instant that I could not take the risk. After all, the sun could reach me there, and a shrieking vampire, wreathed in flames, would hardly improve matters.

I have rarely felt more desperate.

Alas, when I remembered my brother's presence and turned again to confront him, he had vanished.

*Daisy*

*Las Vegas, 1995*

Daisy had known him, of course, when he entered her apartment with no more fanfare than a summer breeze ruffling the curtains. He had come to kill her at last.

She waited, expecting to hear herself scream, oddly detached from the situation, and found that she wasn't even especially afraid. She did, however, reach for her thirty-eight, which was lying loaded on the bedside table.

Krispin chuckled, folding his arms. Moonlight glimmered in his hair and flashed from his strange, pale eyes as if they were mirrors. "That won't do anything but alarm the neighbors," he said, nodding toward the pistol wavering in Daisy's hands.

"Get out of here. Right now."

He stood still in the middle of her bedroom floor, smiling. "What a splendidly audacious thing you are. No wonder my brother finds you so endlessly fascinating."

"I've been wanting to speak with you anyway," she said, as if Krispin hadn't spoken, amazed by the steadiness of her voice. "I guess now's as good a time as any."

"How interesting," Krispin responded smoothly, taking something small from the pocket of his vest and tossing it once, triumphantly, before tucking it away again. "I do hope you aren't trying to trick me, though. There's no forestalling the inevitable. I shall have to put you out of commission, just temporarily, while I settle things with Valerian."

Daisy lowered the pistol to her lap. "You want me, don't you?" she asked in a matter-of-fact tone.

"Oh, yes," Krispin admitted. Although Daisy had not actually seen him move, he was no longer standing, but sitting on the foot of her bed.



"Then why don't you take me away with you—to your den or lair or whatever it is?"

There was a barely discernible but very frightening change in Krispin's face; too late, Daisy realized she'd made a mistake. In the next instant he lunged at her, and she managed nothing more than a single hoarse gasp before he was upon her.

"Whore!" he growled, hurting her everywhere, crushing her beneath him. "You would sacrifice anything to save my wretch of a brother!"

Daisy struggled fiercely, and she was strong, but her efforts to fling the vampire off were in vain. Her last conscious emotion was fury, the final physical sensation that of sharp teeth puncturing her throat...

Daisy sank down and down, deeper and deeper into herself, and found shelter and sanction in the memories tucked away there, like keepsakes...

She was that other woman again, standing at a window, gazing out on a vista her blind eyes could not see. She had the ruby ring he'd sent her a fortnight before; surely it meant he would return...

*Jenny Wade*

*London, 1722*

Jenny had no more than formed the thought when she heard his voice, heard him whisper her name.

Joy surged through her. Her angel had returned to her, her Valerian. She did not need her eyes to recognize him, or any of her other senses, either, for her heart knew him as its own. She turned to face him, unconcerned by his sudden arrival in her room. He had always come and gone like a ghost.

Jenny had almost succumbed to despair in days past, but now that he was here, everything would surely be all right. He would take her away with him, marry her, give their child a name.

There need be no scandal now, as Martin and Adela feared.

She turned to face her beloved, realizing only as he took her into his arms that something was very different. Instead of discerning him by her own senses, as she usually did, it seemed that impressions were being forced upon her mind.

"You've been unfaithful," he murmured, stroking her hair. "That was very foolish indeed. What possessed you to betray me the way you did?"

Jenny trembled, too stricken by the accusations to speak. It didn't occur to her to call for help, for a part of her still believed that this was her beloved, the mate of her soul. He would never do her harm.

He drew her head back, very gently, and kissed her with a heartrending tenderness. "Do you love me, my Jenny?" he whispered.

"Y-Yes," she replied. Her strength had drained away, and she felt as though she might swoon, and that was quite unlike her. Jenny prided herself on her vigor and resilience; she was not given to spells of fainting and weeping, like so many females of her acquaintance. "Of course I love you, Valerian. How can you say—how can you even think—?"

"Then why did you do it? Why did you lie with another?"

Jenny's heart was racing, though not in the pleasant way it usually did when her lover held her close, and she was wildly dizzy. "I did no such thing," she managed to say.

"You did." His voice was so quiet, so calm, the same one she knew so well, and yet so terrifyingly different. "You're carrying someone's child. And it isn't mine."

She wanted to thrust herself away from him, for she was angry, but although she had the will to do it, she did not have the strength. Instead, to her horror, she found herself clutching his coat to keep from sinking to the floor. "That's reprehensible," Jenny said. "Leave me, please. And don't ever come back."

He did not release her. "You don't mean that."

Jenny was trembling, and the despised tears were threatening. It was not in her nature to love a man who was cruel to her, but she mourned the beautiful feelings she'd once had for him, the dreams she'd cherished... All her hopes for a home and children and simple happiness lay in pieces at her feet, like shards of stained glass from a church window.

"I do mean it," she insisted, struggling now to pull away from him. "I don't need you, nor does our child. Go away now, before I call my brother in to give you a thrashing and hand you over to the police."

He laughed. "Call for him, it will do you no good. This night, at least, your dear Martin is as deaf as the fabled post, and so are Peach and that irritating sister-in-law of yours. We have business to settle, Jenny-love, and we will not be interrupted."

She began to be terribly afraid. She was barely conscious, such was her mental state, and yet she found a scream within her brave heart and released it. Her lover was amused by the effort, and as he'd predicted, it brought no one rushing to her aid.

He swept her up into his arms, and though his embrace felt like the one she knew so well, she had a curious feeling that the perception was not her own, that it had been suggested to her somehow.

"Such a pity, a beautiful, intelligent young woman like yourself, hurling herself from an upstairs window," he said calmly. "Of course, everyone will be sorely grieved, and the gossips will say it's no wonder, is it, considering the shame and scandal the poor girl was facing."

Jenny stiffened and tried again to free herself, but it was no use. He was too strong.

"Don't do this," she whispered, barely conscious, wanting desperately to stay alive, to protect the unborn child nestled within her. "Please—"

She heard the window creak on its hinges, felt the cool night air touch her.

"Don't beg, my sweet. It's demeaning, and altogether futile in the bargain."

Jenny felt her nightgown brush the window ledge, felt the yawning space beneath her, and uttered a sob, clutching at his coat. He kissed her once, very lightly, and then, with considerable reluctance, flung her from him.

She fell, flailing her arms and legs, and struck the cobblestones in the courtyard below with an impact

that shattered her bones. Her death was instantaneous, but she perished with a name quivering in her heart like an arrow.

Valerian.

Her lover. Her murderer.

It was Peach who found the body lying broken and bloody on the stones of the courtyard, early the next morning when she went out for the master's newspaper. Her screams were heard all over the neighborhood, shrill as fire-bells, and brought a passing constable through the front gate on a run.

Martin was the next to arrive on the scene, followed by a pale Adela. She stayed back a little distance, one bony hand pressed to her throat, while Martin let out a low, plaintive groan of sorrow and dropped to his knees beside Jenny. He gripped her shoulders in both hands, as if he expected to awaken her.

The constable looked up and saw the second-story window, still open. He'd seen such things often enough in his line of work, and he had an idea or two about what might drive the daughter of a wealthy household to take her own life. Probably she'd had a dalliance with a groom or a footman, and nature had taken its course.

Poor girl.

"It's a shame, that's what it is," he said, for he was not without compassion, nor was he a man inclined toward the judgment of others.

Peach continued to shriek and wail and blubber, while Martin, seemingly aware of nothing and no one else, gathered his dead sister into his arms and, holding her close against his breast, carried her into the house without a word to anyone.

The funeral was held two days later, and the church was brimming with mourners, for Jenny had been a kindly, cheerful girl, well liked by those who knew her.

Rain fell hard all that morning, and well into the afternoon, too, and Mistress Peach said it was only fitting that the very heavens should weep when an angel was put into the ground to molder away to nothing. Adela stayed at home, taking to her bed with a violent headache, but Martin went doggedly from home to the church to the cemetery, heedless of the downpour, and would not leave his sister, even when the coffin had been lowered into the earth on ropes.

Several concerned gentlemen from his club had to lead him away in the end, so that the gravediggers might finish their labors.

They shoveled hastily, these unwashed and unsavory men. for they were superstitious, and despite their vocation, they had no wish to be found among the dead, recently passed-on and otherwise, when darkness fell. They'd heard so many stories, and made up a few to give their friends a turn, that they no longer knew which were fable and which might possibly be true.

It was just as well, for their sakes and for his own, that the vampire did not arrive until they'd gone, to grieve in solitude for the woman he had loved and lost, again.

Through discreet inquiries over the coming nights, he learned that Jenny Wade had disgraced herself by taking a lover. He'd given her a fine ruby ring, so he must have been a man of means, but it had

disappeared before the poor girl was even buried.

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*Valerian*

*Las Vegas, 1995*

I hurried to Daisy the instant the last feeble rays of sunlight had faded into darkness, and found her sprawled, unconscious, on the floor of her bedroom. Kristina's pendant, intended as a talisman of protection, lay coiled on the carpet beside her, offering mute testimony that my brother would not be thwarted by such fragile magic.

Krispin's ring was upon her finger; I removed it and cast it aside.

"Daisy, sweetheart—" I gathered her up and held her close, breathing in the scent of her. She was alive, but pale as wax and deeply unconscious. It would require more than a kiss of a prince to awaken my sleeping beauty, for Krispin had taken blood from her, as vampires do before transformation. He had only to infuse Daisy with that same fluid, which had surely undergone the mysterious change while flowing through his veins, to make her a fiend.

I stroked her hair back from her gray-white face with a gentle motion of one hand. He planned to turn her into one of us, thus consigning her to the eternal damnation that awaited all our race. Perhaps, I concluded in my despondency, we vampires were in reality no less fragile than humans, but merely a little better at staving off the inevitable.

Carefully I lifted my beloved into my arms and stood. She was clad only in an oversize shirt, and fearing that she might catch a chill, I wrapped her in my cloak and pressed her close against my chest. How I wished in those moments that I had a mortal's warmth to offer her, but my flesh was as cold and ungiving as that of a statue.

Closing my eyes, I took myself, and Daisy, to the only vampire I knew who might be able to help. Calder Holbrook.

His laboratory was empty when I reached it, for this was modern-day London, and Calder, of course, favored the nineteenth-century. I would not have risked taking Daisy back through time, for mortals have yet to evolve the ability to make such journeys in safety, and I might have lost her somewhere along the way.

I laid her tenderly on the examination table, still cosseted in my cloak, and began rummaging for blankets.

Calder sensed my presence in his domain, as I had hoped he would, and appeared posthaste, wearing a scowl that would surely have intimidated a lesser vampire than myself. "What the—?"

"I've brought you a patient," I interrupted, finding a covering that looked like a relic from the American Civil War and giving it a shake before draping it over Daisy's motionless form. "I'd like you to save her."

The good doctor flung an irritated glance in my direction, but his attention was soon centered on the

slender nymph lying, near death, on his table. I saw what I had hoped for in his face—a physician's compassion. "What happened?" Calder asked, though he must have guessed some of the tale, for he had already laid gentle fingers to the marks of Krispin's fangs defiling her throat.

I told him what my brother had done, and why, sparing no detail.

Calder worked on Daisy as he listened, examining her for other injuries, listening to her heart through a stethoscope, taking her blood pressure. This laboratory, unlike its counterpart in the last century, of course, was equipped with a number of modern medical implements.

While I watched, in vigilant silence, Calder took plasma from a refrigerator in the corner and administered the initial transfusion. For the first time since I had found her, Daisy made a sound and stirred slightly.

My eyes blurred with tears, for I knew it was pain that had moved her, and finding myself powerless to spare her this suffering, however subliminal, was agony.

I tried to mask my emotions with words, for I was not at ease in Calder's company, nor he in mine. I could not wail and sob in despair, as I needed to do, as I might have done in Maeve's presence, or even Kristina's. "Human plasma," I observed as the precious liquid dripped slowly through a tube and into Daisy's veins. "Do you keep it around for those nights when you just don't feel like hunting?"

Calder did not look at me; he had produced a small penlight from his pocket and was peering into one of Daisy's glazed and sightless eyes. "Hardly," he replied with quiet disdain. "I have a supply on hand because I am a doctor, and because the occasional hapless human being finds his or her way here and has need of it."

"How did you know her blood type?"

Now he did meet my eyes. With a scathing glare. "Being a vampire, I am an expert on the stuff," he said pointedly and with intolerance. "If you must blather to distract yourself from your worries, Valerian, at least find something worthwhile to say."

I swallowed a cry of grief and fear and fury. "Will she die?" I asked when I felt I could speak coherently.

"Perhaps," Calder said, going back to the refrigerator and rummaging through a number of clear plastic pouches filled with blood. "We know the alternative—allowing your brother to finish the process he began—and somehow I don't think that's what you want for her. Or what she would wish for herself." He turned to look at me curiously. "Could it be, Valerian, that for once in your debauched and utterly self-serving life, you are actually putting the desires of another before your own?"

I did not refute his assessment of my character; it was, after all, accurate. "Daisy has never wanted to become a vampire," I said, defeated. The multiple feedings I have taken in New York were beginning to wear off, and my strength was flagging. "And while I would like nothing better than to have her at my side forever, as you have your glorious Maeve, and show her all the wonders we are heir to, I won't change Daisy against her will."

Calder made a sighlike sound. "Suppose that is your only choice? Would she prefer a mortal's death to the everlasting life of a vampire?"

I found a stool and perched upon it, lowering my face to one hand. "Yes," I said. "I have offered her the

gift before, in other incarnations. I cannot think her wishes have changed. Daisy's is a pure and noble spirit, unwilling to be counted among the damned."

The doctor said nothing, but simply stood beside the table, watching his patient with a solemn and thoughtful expression. I would have given all the considerable wealth I had accrued over the centuries to know what he believed Daisy's true prognosis to be.

We kept our vigil in silence after that, with Calder giving Daisy more blood at intervals. Slowly her color began to improve, and she stirred more often beneath her blanket, and made soft, disconsolate sounds that wounded me as nothing else could have done.

I had to feed, for Calder's store of plasma, while life-giving for Daisy, was but thin gruel in relation to my hunger. With the greatest reluctance I left her in the doctor's care and went out to hunt.

As before in New York, I was gluttonous, prowling the dark streets of London and filling myself, like a leech, until my tissues were swollen with the stuff.

When I returned to Calder's laboratory to resume my watch at Daisy's side, I found her virtually restored and sleeping soundly. The doctor had gone, probably to take his rest in some dark vault in the bowels of that very house, as dawn would soon be upon us, but Kristina was there, the talisman pendant clutched in one hand.

The last time I'd fed so copiously, I had not succumbed to the vampire slumber, but this occasion was different. I felt myself fading, losing my grip on consciousness. Stubbornly I lay down on the table beside Daisy and drew her into my arms, flinging Kristina a glance that dared her to protest.

"Sleep, Valerian," Maeve's child said quietly. "I will keep watch for you."

I struggled to remain awake those few extra moments, nodding toward the pendant Kristina grasped. "A fat lot of help that was," I complained. "Why didn't you just make her a necklace of garlic?"

"Don't be tiresome," Kristina said. "The pendant would have protected Daisy if she'd been wearing it."

It was then that Daisy opened her wonderful, fathomless eyes and looked straight into my hell-bound soul.

"*You*," she said in an odd voice. "You killed me." I had no chance to reply before the darkness overtook me.

*Daisy*

*Seattle, 1995*

The room where Daisy awakened was filled with light and color. She did not know where she was, nor did she have any idea how she'd gotten there.

She sat up in the strange bed, with its linen sheets and exquisite lace spread, and looked around in amazement. There were six floor-to-ceiling windows opposite, affording a stunning view of dark blue waters and snow-draped mountains, and the furniture was light, lacquered stuff, painted with flowers. Italian antiques, probably, and beyond expensive.

Before Daisy could toss back the covers and rise, Kristina appeared in the doorway. She was wearing jeans and a loose white shirt with flowing sleeves and a cut-work collar.

"Welcome to Seattle," she said with a smile.

"How did I—what—?"

"I brought you here, from my father's lab in London. How are you feeling?"

Daisy settled back against the pillows, reassured by the presence of her friend and the normality of her surroundings. "Confused, light-headed, and hungry."

Kristina laughed. "I can't do much about the confusion and the dizziness, I'm afraid. But food I've got. Sit tight, and I'll bring you a tray."

"You're not going to zap it up out of nowhere?" Daisy asked, a little disappointed.

Her hostess sighed. "I only do that in emergencies. I like to cook, and besides, I try to live as normal a life as my predicament allows." She nodded toward another door. "The guest bath is that way."

Fifteen minutes later, when Daisy had used the facilities, washed her face and hands, and made her somewhat shaky way back to bed, Kristina returned with the promised food.

The dishes were heavy squares of brightly colored pottery, painted with whimsical flowers and checks and stripes. There was a tiny pot of steaming tea, along with pasta, warm bread, and green salad.

While Daisy ate, Kristina pulled up a large blue hassock, imprinted with smiling golden suns sporting pointed rays, and sat down.

"Papa and I discussed the situation and decided you would be better off here, in a more familiar environment."

Daisy poured tea with a somewhat unsteady hand and raised the cup to her lips. The brew was strong and sweet, laced with milk. Just the way she liked it. "He can still get to me here, you know," she said after several bracing sips. "Krispin, I mean."

"Yes," Kristina answered. "I'm sure he can. But he won't find you alone and defenseless, like before."

"No," Daisy said with a mild note of irony. "This time he'll be able to attack you, as well as me." She shuddered, remembering Krispin's assault in her apartment. She'd honestly thought, in those moments of violence just before losing consciousness, that she was about to die.

Seeing that Daisy didn't intend to eat any more of her meal, Kristina rose from her perch on the hassock, took the tray, and carried it out of the room. She returned almost immediately, this time taking a seat on the edge of Daisy's bed.

"I'll do everything I can to keep you safe," she promised.

"Why? Why would you put yourself in so much danger?"

"Because I care about Valerian, and about you, Daisy. Do you realize you're the only friend I have who



knows who and what I am? How do you think my neighbors and business associates would react if I suddenly announced that my parents are vampires, for instance? Imagine me confiding, say at a chamber of commerce luncheon, that I'm well into my second century." She paused to smile sadly. "You're not going to bail out on me now, are you, Daisy? Just when I've started to think I might have run across somebody I can really talk to?"

Daisy's heart warmed, despite the mess she was in. She'd never had a close female friend, except for Nadine and their late grandmother, and she found the prospect appealing. "No," she said. "I'm not going to 'bail out,' as you put it. If you want to talk, I'm ready to listen."

Kristina smiled and squeezed Daisy's hand briefly. "Thanks, friend, but even listening is work, and right now you need to rest. Go back to sleep."

There were a lot of questions Daisy wanted to ask Kristina, but she had apparently lost a lot of blood during the incident with Krispin, and she was exhausted. She stretched out, closed her eyes, and tumbled into a waiting memory...

Her name was Harmony Beaucheu, and she was twenty-three years old. The year was 1878, and the town was called Poplar Hill, though it stood in a dusty corner of the Arizona Territory and boasted neither poplar nor hill.

Oh, damn it, thought that part of her that was still Daisy. Here we go again.

Harmony was standing in front of a cracked mirror, and with some relief Daisy saw herself looking back from the glass. She was wearing a worn dress of brown calico with a high neck, and her reddish-brown hair was pinned up in a loose, fluffy style. Stubborn tendrils trailed at her neck and on her temples and cheeks.

She turned away from the mirror and from all consciousness of herself as Daisy Chandler. Reluctantly Harmony left her small, sparsely furnished room and made her way down the narrow passageway leading to the stairs. The saloon below was filled with swirling blue-gray smoke, tinny music from the piano, which was missing a few vital parts, and the raucous, vulgar talk of cowboys, drifters, and various locals. There were a handful of tawdry women, too—they entertained men in private, and Harmony herself paid their wages.

She hesitated on the stairs, one hand resting on the crude rail, and sighed. Harmony was not a whore, and never would be, for she'd been raised in Boston by a maiden aunt and educated to be a lady. Before she could marry, however, her elderly guardian had passed away, and when dear Aunt Millicent had been properly buried, and all accounts settled, there was a small but respectable sum of money remaining.

Harmony had barely recovered from Millicent Beaucheu's death when an old friend of the family appeared, bearing a packet of old letters. In them was irrefutable proof that Millicent had been Harmony's mother, and not her aunt, and in staid Boston to be illegitimate was hardly a social advantage.

Despite her fine looks, cultivated mind, and more than adequate dowry, no one who knew the truth was going to marry the likes of Harmony Beaucheu. She was tainted forever.

A resilient sort, Harmony had taken herself to an establishment dealing in properties. These were the very people who had sold Millicent's house, which, it turned out, had been bought for her by her lover and not bequeathed by a doting father, as she'd always maintained, and Harmony had no reason to

mistrust them.

She had inquired about the West and promptly purchased a hotel, sight unseen, in the Arizona Territory. On her arrival, Harmony discovered that she'd bought a brothel, not an inn, and used her last nickel in the process. The place was thriving—that was one consolation.

Still lingering on the stairs, Harmony scanned the saloon with eyes squinted against the smoke, and a smile broke over her face. He was there again, playing faro at the table nearest the door, the handsome gambler with the fancy name.

Valerian, he called himself. Harmony was already half in love with him, and practical as she was, she'd had no success in disabusing herself of the fancy. Men like him never stayed in one place long; they dallied a while, drank and gambled and told lies, and then moved on.

He was wearing a long duster made of soft leather, high black boots, well-cut trousers, and the kind of shirt only a man like him could get away with. His hat was pushed to the back of his head, and he sensed Harmony's presence somehow, for all the hubbub between them, and raised his fathomless indigo eyes slowly to her face.

She felt a charge of emotion go through her, feelings so complicated, so tangled and interwoven with each other, that she could not begin to sort them through. She had never seen Valerian before his appearance in Poplar Hill one night a month or so before, and yet it was as though she'd always known him. She knew, for instance, how his hands would feel on her body, and his mouth on hers. She, who was a virgin despite her spoiled reputation, knew the powerful flex of his hips as he took her, and the tug of his lips on her nipples...

Harmony went to him, like a creature enthralled, and her life began that very night. He vanished often, her lover, often for days at a time, and she never once saw him when the sun came up. When he was with her, in her ugly little room, they made love, but he told her stories, too, about other countries and other times in history, and he was full of poetry.

She knew he loved her truly—he admired her strong spirit and asked her opinion on important things, something no man had ever done before. And although his lovemaking transported her, she suspected its absence would not have changed her feelings or his. There was an old bond between them, as though their souls had been fused by some ancient and forgotten god, and if there were many mysteries about her Valerian, she didn't care.

He had been away nearly a month when the ruby ring arrived by stage with three weeks' worth of mail. It was wrapped in gold foil and tied with a scarlet ribbon trimmed in lace, and Harmony's heart brimmed with happiness as she slid it onto the ring finger of her left hand. Surely this was his pledge that they would be together, ever after...

But Valerian did not return, although Harmony watched for him every night on the tiny balcony outside one of the upstairs rooms, anxiously scanning the moonlit trail that snaked away into the desert.

It had been two more weeks, and she was beginning to despair. Perhaps the wonderful ring had not been a promise, after all, but a farewell.

That night three men rode into town, liquored up and shooting. Harmony got her shotgun out from behind the bar and stepped out onto the sidewalk, her jaw set and her eyes narrowed. There was no law in Poplar Hill, not yet, and folks had to look after their own property and their own hide, whether they

were women or men.

The drunks howled and carried on, firing their six guns and spurring their terrified horses onto the sidewalk. They were headed for Harmony's saloon, and she was ready for them...

Daisy sat bolt upright, gasping and drenched in perspiration, clutching her chest. A bullet had struck Harmony, exploding in the center of her heart, and Daisy had felt it as though it had penetrated her own flesh.

"Oh, God," she whispered, falling back against the pillows, her face wet with tears of sorrow and fear. She was strong, though, and presently the trembling stopped and she drifted back to sleep, this time finding only sweet oblivion.

She did not awaken again until sometime after the moon had risen.

The house was quiet, except for a low murmur of conversation in a nearby room and the soft strains of a Mozart concerto flowing from the stereo system.

Daisy rose, relieved to find herself stronger, and donned the terrycloth robe she found lying across the foot of the bed. She walked slowly out of the bedroom and found herself in a well-lit hallway with a shining oak floor.

Kristina and Valerian were in the living room. The vampire stood, imperious and grim, beside the cold fireplace. Kristina sat cross-legged on an overstuffed sofa, a glass of wine in her hands. Their quiet but earnest exchange ended abruptly when they realized that Daisy had joined them.

Valerian came slowly toward her, took her hands in his, and gazed down into her eyes. "Kristina told me you were better," he said hoarsely, "but it is good to see for myself."

Daisy wanted to hurl her arms around him and cling in a very un-Daisy-like way, but she resisted the urge. "Yes," she said, thinking how well she had loved him, not only in the present, but during her lifetimes as Brenna and Elisabeth and Jenny and Harmony as well. "I'm almost myself again, if you'll forgive the expression."

He smiled and cupped a hand under her chin, and Daisy closed her eyes for a moment, against a rush of emotion. He brushed her lips with his thumb, and sent liquid fire surging through her system.

"I must know, Daisy," Valerian said with tender sorrow, "what you meant in Dr. Holbrook's lab when you said I killed you. Come, sit down and talk to me."

Daisy nodded, for suddenly she recalled uttering those words, recalled the experience that had made her speak them. She knew now, too, that it had been Krispin who had murdered Jenny Wade, Krispin pretending to be Valerian. And he had been behind Harmony's shooting, too, and Elisabeth's fever.

Kristina left the room, and Valerian settled Daisy into a comfortable chair and carefully covered her legs with a knitted afghan. How could she have believed, in this lifetime or the one lived as Jenny Wade, that this tender creature would ever do her deliberate harm?

Daisy spoke softly, hesitantly, as she related what she knew of Jenny's story. Valerian, seated on the arm of her chair, listened in absorbed silence.

When she'd finished the tale, he did not speak for a long time. The expression on his aristocratic face was one of quiet torment.

"I'm sorry," Valerian said at last. "I should have guessed that you were in danger, and been there to protect you."

Daisy rested her head against his arm. "Did you believe the stories? That Jenny ended her own life, I mean?"

He met her gaze. "Yes," he replied. "I was unable to visit her—you—for a considerable length of time. She—forgive me, but I find I cannot say 'you' when we are speaking of death—she was a porcelain rose, my Jenny, though she fancied herself to be as sturdy as a summer weed. I was convinced that she had sunk into despair because of my neglect."

Daisy bit her lower lip, then spoke quickly before she could lose her courage. At the same time, though, she touched Valerian's hand in an effort to reassure him a little. "There was something else. Something Krispin knew, but you apparently did not."

Valerian did not speak, but simply waited for her to go on, one eyebrow slightly elevated.

"There was to be a baby," she blurted. "You and Jenny—you and I, Valerian—conceived a child together."

"No," he said, quickly, gruffly. It was a plea, that solitary word, echoing with regret and incomprehensible pain. "That couldn't be—" He stopped, glancing in the direction of the doorway through which Kristina had disappeared minutes before. Obviously he was recalling the circumstances of another birth—Maeve Tremayne, a vampire, and Calder Holbrook, still mortal then, had had a daughter.

Daisy gave Valerian a few moments to collect himself before going on. "Times being what they were," she said quietly, "Jenny's family feared there would be a ruinous scandal. They were going to send her away somewhere, I think, but she never doubted that you would come back for her."

"And she died thinking I had murdered her. Along with our child." The controlled agony, so visible in Valerian's face as he spoke, found its way into Daisy's heart and burrowed down deep.

"Jenny sensed that something was wrong," Daisy said, for that flimsy assurance was all the solace she had to offer him just then. "I think she knew, on some level at least, that it wasn't you who visited her that awful night."

Valerian threaded his fingers through hers, and his attempt at a smile was even more painful to look upon than his stark grief had been before it. "Krispin," he muttered, making a curse of the name by his tone and manner. His gaze, as he stared into the fireplace contained such sulphurous fury that Daisy fully expected flames to leap from the ashes in the grate. "Flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone, soul of my soul—Krispin, Krispin. *What have you done ?*"

Daisy shivered. An unspoken vow coursed beneath the anger and despair of the vampire's words. Valerian meant to destroy Krispin—but at what cost?

Before she could give voice to her concerns, however, another visitor joined them, nearly startling Daisy out of her skin.

He appeared in the middle of the room, with no smoke or fire to herald his coming, but for all the strange experiences she'd had since meeting Valerian, Daisy still wasn't used to such surprises. She longed for the company of other mortals, human beings who knocked on doors and telephoned and wrote letters but never, *never* simply materialized out of the ether!

Valerian stood, but he seemed annoyed, rather than afraid. Daisy was touched—and irritated at the same time—by the way he put himself between her and the unexpected guest, like a barrier.

"Explain yourself," he snapped.

Daisy leaned out over the arm of her chair to get a better look at the new arrival. He was remarkably good-looking, she decided, with his golden hair and soft brown eyes. His clothes were courtly and old-fashioned, and formidably expensive, like Valerian's—he wore a splendid cape of dark blue wool, high boots, breeches, and a frilly shirt. In one gloved hand he grasped the handle of a carved walking stick—a weapon, Daisy decided, not merely an addition to his costume.

He smiled at her, and at the watchful Kristina, and bowed, ever so slightly and ever so gracefully to each, pointedly ignoring the seething Valerian.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am called Dathan, and I do apologize for making an unannounced entrance. I trust I am forgiven?"

Kristina replied with a brief, tentative smile, but Daisy was too fascinated to respond to him at all—except, of course, to stare.

"You left out your title, Dathan," Valerian interceded in an acidic tone. "Warlock."

Daisy was now so far out over the chair arm that she nearly fell. At her quick, scrambling motion of self-rescue, Valerian turned to glower down at her over one shoulder. The look was unmistakably a warning, and it both angered and intimidated Daisy.

She subsided a little, though only temporarily.

"Yes," Dathan allowed, only then acknowledging the vampire looming within pouncing distance. "I am indeed a warlock." The twinkling brown gaze found Daisy's face, despite Valerian, and lingered for a moment, admiring. When he looked at Valerian, however, there was no gentleness anywhere in his countenance, and the mischievous, cherubic eyes were suddenly hard. "I grow weary, blood-drinker, of waiting. Did we not speak of a bargain?"

Valerian glanced back at Daisy again, then returned his gaze to the warlock. "I will not discuss this here."

"Oh, yes, you will," Daisy argued, tugging at the back of his coat. "I want to know what's going on."

"We don't always get what we want, do we?" Valerian retorted, frowning again, this time with such heat that she felt like paraffin going soft in the sun. "Stay out of this, Daisy, or I swear by all the old gods that I will stop up your ears and still your tongue for a fortnight!"

Daisy was furious, but she was still too tired to wage a proper battle, verbal or otherwise, so she sank back in the chair, trembling. Kristina flung her a sympathetic look but contributed nothing to the conversation.

It was Dathan who broke the oppressive silence. "You know where to find me," he told Valerian cheerfully, tugging at his elegant gloves and then bowing once more to the ladies. "I shall expect you forthwith."

With that, he vanished without sound or flurry, just as he had appeared.

Valerian did not bid Daisy farewell or even look at her again. In the blink of an eye he was simply gone.

*Valerian*

*Last Ditch Tavern, 1995*

I arrived in the back room of the Last Ditch Tavern a fraction of a second after Dathan, and found him seated at one of the felt-covered poker tables, hat and cloak tossed onto a chair, feet up and crossed at the ankle.

"What took you so long?" he asked with a grin.

I overcame a whimsical desire to kick his chair over. I had not wanted him to see Daisy, to know her, for he represented yet another danger to her. Too, warlocks are notorious seducers, and while I held Daisy's personal scruples in high esteem, I wondered what use they could be against the charm of such a fetching monster.

"How dare you intrude that way?" I rasped.

Dathan cocked an eyebrow. "Intrude? I'm trying to do you a favor, Vampire. But it seems you no longer want my help."

I drew up a chair, probably with more clatter than necessary, and dropped into it. *Ididn't* want the warlock's help, had never wanted it, but I was in this instance a beggar, not a chooser. I could no longer afford to indulge my dislike of this particular antagonist.

"What can you do?" I asked with a dismal lack of faith in Dathan's powers. "After all, if you could destroy vampires, you would have wiped out every blood-drinker in the universe by this time."

Dathan chuckled fondly at the image. "Yes," he agreed. "With the possible exception of Maeve Tremayne. Splendid female. Her daughter is very like her—beautiful, brave, intelligent—"

"Leave Kristina alone," I warned. The warlock now had my undivided attention. "If you go near her, I'll drain every drop of your poisoned blood into the nearest gutter!"

He took a glass of whiskey from the table, without putting his feet down, and indulged in a thoughtful sip before replying. "Let us confine ourselves, for the moment, to the business at hand. The two of us, I fear, are prone to endless disagreement on an infinite number of points. Do you still want my help in destroying your brother?"

I did, but the very necessity of the act struck me like a blow to the solar plexus. Would I never get used to it? Would I grieve for Krispin even as I burned among the very coals and embers of hell?

"Yes," I said in a miserable whisper.

"Then let us lay a plan."

My eyes were narrowed, for I was recalling the previous encounter with Dathan, there in the Last Ditch. He wanted something in return for his assistance, of course, but he had yet to say what it was he meant to require of me, in the event of our success. "First," I said, "tell me what you hope to gain by this."

He took another draft of the whiskey, and I envied him the warlock's ability to eat and drink like a mortal, momentarily at least. A glass of wine—nay, a tubful of the stuff—would have been a blessed comfort just then.

"It is time," he said at considerable length, "to join our two races. To produce a being that is part vampire and part warlock."

I was so horrified that I forgot the craving for wine that had been clawing at my core only a moment ago. "Great Zeus—it's an unspeakable thing you're suggesting!"

"Is it? Consider a creature with your powers and mine. A vampire able to walk in daylight, for instance. A warlock with the propensity for time-travel. The possibilities are truly staggering."

"You've lost your mind, such as it was!"

Dathan laughed and raised his glass in a mocking toast. "There are those of both our species who will hasten to agree. To hell with them all." He drank again and made a sound of satisfaction afterward that grated on my every nerve. "Here's the bargain, blood-drinker: take it or leave it, as the mortals say. Inventive, these humans, and oft-times amusing, though given to the odd cliché. In any case, as payment for my help, I want a vampire for a mate."

I shot to my feet. "What blood-drinker would have a warlock?" I demanded. Alas, tact, even in situations where it was crucial, had never been my forte.

Dathan's brown eyes, which could shine with a saintly glow when he looked upon a woman, flashed with restrained temper. "Sit down and listen, you incredible fool. My own kind isn't going to rejoice over the union, either, after all. But it must be done."

"Why?"

"Because I want it."

This, for better or worse, was an attitude I understood. I sat down again despondently, reminded that I had no choice in the matter. With Dathan's assistance I might succeed in tracking down and destroying Krispin. Without it, though it galled me to acknowledge the fact even to myself, I could very well lose the battle.

And Daisy.

"So I am to become a matchmaker," I muttered. "By the gods, though, I don't know how I'll manage it."

Dathan laughed. "Am I so wretched, so offensive, as all that?"

"Yes," I answered.



The warlock smiled. "Never fear. You are the most persuasive of creatures—and you have so very much at stake, don't you?"

Again I thought of Daisy. "Oh, yes," I replied, reaching for a deck of cards that lay in the center of the table, among neat pillars of blue, white and red poker chips. "Everything, in fact."

"You also have an agreement with Nemesis, I understand."

I began to deal. "You've done your homework," I said. "He promised me the power to put an end to Krispin, though I must admit I haven't seen any sign of it yet. Which, of course, accounts for my willingness to cooperate with the likes of you." The warlock took up his cards, and I gathered mine, frowning as I pondered the possibilities they presented. "Our bargain, warlock, will not hold good unless you are instrumental in my brother's destruction. And I believe you can be, or I would not be sitting here now."

"I'll take two cards," Dathan replied. "And none of your tricks."

I smiled. "You expect too much of a mere vampire," I replied. And while I systematically divested him of two castles, a horse, and a pocket watch, we discussed our strategy.

20

*Valerian*

*Colefield Hall, 1995*

The warlock and I found Challes at Colefield Hall, half buried by the stacks of musty books he had left to me so many years before, along with the property itself. At his side sat a magnificent white wolf with pale blue eyes.

Upon our appearance, the beast raised himself to his haunches and growled.

"Be still, Barabbas," Challes said with firm affection, and the wolf whimpered once and dropped at his master's feet, resting his muzzle on his paws. "These are friends."

I did not correct Challes on this point, though I certainly wouldn't have counted myself among his friends just then, and I felt no fear of the great wolf, only admiration. Had my business not been so urgent, in fact, I think I might have envied my tutor the company of such a fantastic creature and wanted Barabbas for my own.

"It is time to make restitution," I said without expression in voice or in manner. "We know from Calder Holbrook's experiments that it is possible to track Krispin into the other dimension through a grave. You will show me where that particular tomb is, please. Now."

Still seated, with the wolf lying watchful at his side, Challes looked up at me with mingled sorrow and amusement. "Still the same officious, haughty brat you always were. Ah, but what—or who—could ever have changed you? Nothing and no one, that is certain. And I think I should not have wanted you to be different—you would have been so much less interesting."

An ancient clock ticked loudly on the mantel, reminding me of the need for haste, and I was mindful, too, of Dathan's impatience. "Please," I said again. I would kneel to him if I had to, and beg, but of course I hoped to be spared that humiliation.

"At one time I wanted to take you through the looking glass, Valerian, and show you the other world. You refused—quite adamantly, as I recall."

"I was afraid."

"Poppycock. You've never been truly afraid in your life. But you will be. Your bowels will turn to water, beautiful one, when you see what awaits you beyond the veil, where Nemesis will take you." He spoke without rancor, and he took no pleasure, it seemed, in my fate. He was, however, resigned, and he made that sighlike sound that I had learned from him long before. "I am so tired, Valerian. So very tired."

I went to Challes's chair and crouched beside it, opposite the wolf. The animal raised his head, then lowered it again, having decided, apparently, that I represented no significant threat to his master. "Will you make me plead?" I asked softly. "Is that what you want?"

Challes's face, once beloved, crumpled with some emotion I could not recognize. "No." He reached down to pat the wolf's huge, silvery head. "It is wrong to humble such creatures as you, and as Barabbas here."

"Take me to Krispin's hiding place. Or simply direct me there. I implore you."

He put aside the volume that had been resting in his lap and stood at long last. A muttered command kept the wolf from springing up with him, but the beast gave a low, chilling whine to declare his displeasure.

"It is day in that other world," Challes warned. "Krispin lies resting in a vault, deep beneath the earth, but I cannot promise the light will not reach you there."

I was willing to take that chance—to take any chance. My smile, I fear, was on the rueful side. "Do not worry, Master," I said. "I cannot be destroyed. I must survive to endure my damnation, remember?"

Tears glittered in Challes's eyes, and I remembered when I had loved and admired him. "Nemesis is to have the both of us, then."

"Both of us?"

Challes smiled, though the tears had not lessened. "I made a bargain of my own long ago with the great Warrior Angel. I have eluded him, thus far, by trickery, but I daresay he will prevail." He took one of my hands in both of his. "Forgive me, Valerian, for making you what you are."

"Forgive you? I will always be grateful, Challes. Even in hell."

"Come, then," he said with another sigh. And we were gone from that place in an instant, leaving the wolf to snooze placidly on the hearth.

When we materialized again, we were inside a tomb whose headstone had long since crumbled to dust. Still, I was chagrined to recognize the place, for I sensed immediately that it was at Dunnett's Head, on the grounds where the baron's keep had once stood.

"By Apollo," Dathan grumbled, making a fruitless and disgruntled attempt to shake the dust from his costly cape. "Who but a vampire would pass even a moment in such a place?"

"Feel free to leave at any time," I offered with biting politeness.

"We must make of ourselves a single mist," Challes said, taking no notice of the tension between Dathan and me.

"Is the warlock capable of such a trick?" I asked of my teacher, not to bait Dathan, but merely because I was curious.

"The warlock," Dathan interjected in an angry whisper, "is quite capable!"

I said nothing further, but simply concentrated on Challes's instructions. We became as one entity, we three, in the moments that followed, and solidified again, mercifully separate once more, in a vast dark chamber beneath a great castle or fortress of some sort.

"Where are we?" Dathan asked, sounding for the first time in our acquaintance as though he might be suffering a few doubts where his conviction of eminent superiority was concerned.

"Second Earth," Challes replied in a weary tone. For one who had once wanted so badly to bring me to this place that he would hold me prisoner and try to force me to accompany him, my tutor seemed reticent.

I offered no response, for I was drawn to the dusty silver outline of a large mirror covering the whole of a nearby wall. I crossed to it, touched the glass with splayed fingers, and gave a cry of alarm when, in the length of a heartbeat, it was filled with dazzling light.

"This looking glass once graced the ballroom on the third level of the castle," Challes said, standing beside me. As he spoke, the light faded a little, and I saw dancers beyond the smooth surface. Women in colorful, full-skirted frocks whose hems swept the floor, men in waistcoats and breeches and ascots. I could almost hear the music to which they whirled, smiling, talking, full of joy.

"They are of this world—Second Earth?" I wondered aloud, somehow stricken by the tableau, and sorrowing that I was not among those happy dancers, with Daisy beaming in my arms. Oh, to be mortal, for just one lifetime!

Challes touched my shoulder, as if to console a mourner. "No, lovely one. They are of the world we just left. Come—we must reach Krispin before he awakens."

Although I was as intent on the task ahead as ever, I found I did not wish to leave that mirror. I wanted to go on looking at those people, sharing vicariously in their innocent felicity.

Challes led the way out of the chamber, with Dathan following after him. I brought up the rear, reluctantly, gazing back often at the fading images in the glass.

It was remarkably easy to find Krispin's resting place.

Too easy.

He was lying, like a slain statesman in the rotunda of some great government edifice, with his arms crossed over his breast and candles burning all around. He wore a white suit, reminiscent of *The Great Gatsby*, and his golden head gleamed in the dim light.

I stood over him, remembering so many things.

"Make haste, Valerian!" Challes muttered. "If Krispin awakens, he will make a formidable foe."

I was trembling as I held out my hand for the stake and mallet Dathan provided. Whether the warlock had carried those implements with him, conjured them, or simply found them along the way, I shall never know. Never care to know.

I took the stake first and placed the point over my brother's heart, holding it there with my left hand. In my right I held the mallet.

"Do it," Dathan said. "Kill him!"

We had underestimated Krispin's cleverness, for beneath my stake and raised hammer, he suddenly became the little fair-haired boy I had known as a mortal. He looked as peaceful as a sleeping cherub, the child of angels.

"Do not be fooled," Challes warned quietly.

I was weeping now, though in silence. I prepared myself to drive in the stake, and Krispin changed shape again. This time he took on the image of our mother, Seraphina. I had forgotten how lovely she was, how fragile and small.

"Valerian!" Challes spoke more sternly this time. "Can't you see what's happening? He is a chameleon—there is no end to the forms he can take! In the names of all the old gods, *destroy him* before—"

I was about to wield the mallet at last when Krispin took on still another guise. This time he was the perfect image of Daisy, and he had awakened to gaze up at me, imploring, with her emerald eyes.

I gave a roar of rage and torment. I could not plunge a stake through Daisy's heart—I could not!

Dathan spoke. "This is not your beloved," he said with uncommon gentleness. "If you cannot kill the dragon, then pray, step aside and allow me."

I dropped the stake and the mallet, though I had made no conscious decision to do so. I was beginning to feel the first biting sting of the sun, despite the thick walls and floors that sheltered us, just as Challes had warned I might. I was, however, oblivious to the pain; it was nothing beside my horror and grief.

"Stand back," Dathan commanded, and Challes grasped my arms and pulled me away from the high marble slab where Krispin lay, posing as Daisy, pleading with me now, in her voice, to save her.

I had seen the warlock work his magic before, but nothing could have prepared me for what happened next. He glared down at the lovely monster, still prone on the slab, and murmured some kind of incantation.

Fire seemed to explode in that chamber, to leap from the candles and catch on

Daisy's—Krispin's—clothes. He shrieked, did Krispin, more in fury than in pain, as the fire enveloped him, leaping, crackling, consuming. He abandoned Daisy's shape, and became himself again, but the spectacle was still torture to watch.

I felt a scream of my own swell, shrill and sharp-edged, in my throat, and I struggled, compelled by some animal instinct to go to my brother's aid, but Dathan and Challes restrained me.

Krispin writhed and shrieked upon his pyre, his gaze fixed on me all the while, hating, using even his agony to taunt me.

I cried out again, hoarsely, and fought to free myself, but my tutor and my unlikely ally were stronger. I sank at last to my knees, sobbing, as the warlock's fire devoured the monster in flames of ever-changing colors.

And there were other flames, too—the invisible ones, spawned by the sun around which Second Earth revolved. I, too, was burning, and it was an unspeakable agony, but I did not care. I wanted to suffer, to atone for the anguish my brother had endured.

I was soon to have the opportunity, as it happened.

*Daisy*

*Seattle, 1995*

After three days at Kristina's house, being spoiled, coddled, and overfed, Daisy was, for all practical intents and purposes, completely recovered. There had been no sign of Krispin, and she had not seen Valerian since he and the warlock, Dathan, had vanished in tandem from Kristina's living room.

"I'm going back to Las Vegas," Daisy announced that sunny morning, finding her friend on the large deck overlooking the waters of Puget Sound, a magazine resting in her lap. "I've got some loose ends to tie up there, but then I'd like to come back."

Kristina looked surprised and pleased, then solemn. "You've felt it, then. That Krispin is gone?"

Daisy nodded, fighting back tears. "Yes. Valerian is gone, too, in a different way. I don't know how to explain it, but—it's as though he has died."

"I know," Kristina said. She had less success in suppressing her tears; her silver eyes glistened with them. "Maybe he's only resting somewhere."

"And maybe not," Daisy replied. She supposed she was in shock—she'd dreamed a horrid death scene in the night and watched Krispin burn, twisting and turning like a twig, but the cries of torment she had heard had been Valerian's...

Kristina stood facing her. "What made you decide you want to live here in Seattle?" she asked. Gulls squawked in the sky, and in the distance a ferry horn sounded.

"I need a change," Daisy said, moving to stand at the rail. She'd regained most of her strength, but it helped to lean on something. "I figured out one thing, at least. I don't want to be a cop anymore."

Kristina was beside her, looking at the view. "What then?" she asked.

"You'll laugh."

"I promise I won't."

Daisy sighed. "I've got some money saved, and it would be a shame to let my talents and all that training and experience go to waste. I'm going to rent an office somewhere and hire myself out as a private investigator."

Kristina grinned. "I can see you doing that," she said. "You know you're welcome to stay here until you find a place to live."

Daisy shook her head. "Thanks, Kris, but I don't want to wear out my welcome. After all, you're the only friend I've got in Seattle, and I'm going to need somebody to talk to. Somebody who believes in vampires, for instance."

Kristina slipped a friendly arm around Daisy's shoulders. "I also believe in ghosts, werewolves, warlocks, and a few other dysfunctional types, but I don't suppose you're up to hearing all of that just yet."

Daisy smiled, though she wanted more than ever to cry. "Save it until I get back," she said. "Unless, of course, you're going to tell me that Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, and the Easter Bunny really exist?"

"Sorry," Kristina said, and they both laughed.

*Valerian*

*Colefield Hall, 1995*

"Remember," Dathan told me the instant I opened my eyes, "you owe me."

I was lying on a cool slab in that familiar cellar where I had spent many nights, following my transformation. I lifted my arms, and that gesture raised a storm of pain that reached deep into my flesh like the white-hot claws of a million ravening rats. My hands were scarred and misshapen, and I must have made a pitiful sound at this discovery, for Challes appeared, fussing like an obsessed nanny, to give me blood in a silver cup.

"Don't fret," Dathan taunted me as I drew the desperately needed fluid in through my fangs. "You look like the ugliest of Lon Chaney's thousand faces, but you'll be your usual pretty self again soon enough, I vow."

I might have spat at him if I hadn't needed the blood so badly. The worst of my ordeal—an eternity in hell—still lay ahead of me. I spared no grief over my lost beauty.

"Krispin—?" I spoke to Challes when the cup had been taken away.

"His body was destroyed," my tutor replied. He looked shrunken, did Challes, as though he were dissolving from the inside, caving in upon himself like an ancient mummy, disturbed by some bumbling archaeologist, callously subjected to sunlight and air. "Krispin's soul, on the other hand, surely awaits us both in hell."

"Yes," I said. I would have given much to see Daisy then, but I knew I would only grieve her, especially in my present repugnant state. I wanted her love, not her pity. "Nemesis will be here soon, no doubt."

"You can't go to hell without keeping your end of the bargain," Dathan protested vigorously. He'd been leaning against the wall, but with these words he sprang at me like a wire coil released from a matchbox. "Damn you, vampire, you must pay this debt!"

I smiled at him and saw in his pitying eyes what a ludicrous picture I made, with my distorted face and hairless head. "Very well," I said. "There is a vampire—Roxanne Havermail is her name. Her mate has left her for a fledgling, I hear—and I think she'd grown weary of him anyway, given the number of times she's tried to seduce me. Go to her, warlock, and make your monster children—if you can."

He looked as though he might stretch out his hands and strangle me for a moment, but then he must have realized the futility of such a gesture, for he whirled away with a curse, and struck the wall with one fist.

I laughed—there were so few pleasures left to me at that juncture that I could not spare even one—and the warlock came back to my side, seething with fury.

"You'd damn well better go to hell, vampire," he spat, "for no other place will hide you from my revenge!"

"Tut-tut," I scolded, groaning a little as the tide of pain rose up within me again. "You have no one to blame but yourself. 'Never trust a vampire.' Was that not your motto, your credo, the very litany of your black heart? Besides, I gave you the female you requested. It is not my fault if poor Roxanne is not to your liking."

Dathan did not reply, for he was too angry—with himself, I suspect, as well as me—but simply shoved splayed fingers through his hair and turned away again.

I groped for Challes's hand. I was weakening again, slipping into sleep, but even there I could not escape the relentless pain of my burns. "The murders—in Las Vegas—the police will never understand about Krispin—must be some resolution—"

My tutor smiled and smoothed my scarred forehead with gentle fingers. "A few memories erased, a few changes made in the department's central computer, an idea planted here and there—"

I nodded, murmured a few disjointed suggestions of my own, and gave myself up, once again, to the ravenous, tearing teeth of torment.

*Daisy*

*Las Vegas, 1995*

Daisy arrived in Las Vegas at five-thirty in the afternoon, climbed into a cab at the airport, and headed straight for the police department. Do not pass Go, she thought, do not collect two hundred dollars.

O'Halloran was in his office, laboring over a stack of paperwork, when she walked in. He beamed at the sight of her, shot out of his chair like a dolphin going for a hoop at Sea World, and threw both arms around her. "Chandler! Damn, it's good to see you." Daisy gave him an awkward kiss on the cheek, and they stepped apart. "How's the vampire case going?"



O'Halloran's smile grew broader, if that was possible. He gestured for Daisy to take a seat and sat down in his desk chair, making a steeple of his plump, unmanicured fingers. "Don't you read the papers no more, Chandler? We got the psycho, dead to rights. Already arraigned."

Daisy knew the man behind bars wasn't the real killer—Krispin had gone on to his reward—but she had a hunch that he was guilty of other murders, whoever he was. The situation smacked of vampire justice, but there was no point in trying to tell O'Halloran that, of course.

More important, if her theory was right, it meant Valerian was around somewhere. Didn't it? The tricks would be simple to him—a memory or two wiped clean of certain facts, a couple of strokes to a computer keyboard, linked by modem to the department's mainframe, a deserving criminal to take the rap for a certain renegade vampire. Easy stuff.

*Don't risk it, Chandler. Don't let yourself hope.*

"That was good police work," she said with a purposeful smile of congratulations and admiration. "I wish I'd been part of it."

"So do I," O'Halloran said. "I missed you, partner."

Daisy's smile faded. She hadn't thought it would be so hard, explaining her change of plans. "I've turned in my letter of resignation," she said. "I need to do other things—have a change of scene. You know."

"Yeah," O'Halloran replied sadly. "I know. Sometimes I wonder why I hang around myself. For every creep we nail, it seems like there's fifty who get off on a technicality or something."

Daisy told him about her plans to open a detective agency in Seattle and finished with, "I can always use a good partner. If you get burned out on the beat, give me a call."

O'Halloran grinned, and his chair creaked as he sat back, hands clasped behind his head. "You know, Chandler, I can see myself as a gumshoe. The question is, can my Eleanor? She's been after me to retire for a long time, but I don't think living with Sam Spade is exactly what she had in mind."

Daisy stood, ready to leave, and O'Halloran stood, too, offering his hand across the cluttered desk.

"Why don't you ask her?" she retorted as they shook hands. It was as close as they came to saying good-bye.

*Valerian*

*Colefield Hall, 1995*

There was no fanfare when Nemesis came to collect me, no bolts of lightning, no crashing thunder, and certainly no trumpet. He simply appeared in the vault at Colefield Hall one night, standing patiently beside the bolted door until I took note of his presence. Or, more properly, until I ceased pretending I didn't know he was there.

I was quite alone, as are we all, I daresay, when we face our unique doom.

Challes, having brought me blood like a mother bird nurturing a nestling and flown off again, on some errand of my invention, would not return for many hours.

Dathan, for his part, had decamped sometime before, I think to pursue the deceitful Roxanne Havermail. It was a great comfort, knowing that those two, who deserved each other so richly, were very likely careening, even then, along a collision course. My deepest solace naturally came from the knowledge that I had broken the curse and saved Daisy from Krispin and his madness.

She might mourn me for a while, my Daisy... Brenna—I would surely grieve the loss of her throughout eternity—but our tragic dance through the corridors of time had ended forever, and the orchestra was silent.

Alas, I digress. I was recounting Nemesis's arrival.

The most feared of all angels found me reading peacefully in my underground chamber, and looked at me with obvious pity, though I was by that time quite myself again. My hair had grown back, and my flesh and features were as flawless as ever, except for a stubborn scar here and there.

I closed the book. "It is time to go?" I said. It was an observation, a statement, more than a question.

"Yes," Nemesis replied. I thought I saw regret in his unremarkable face, then dismissed the idea as pure fancy. There would be no reprieve for me.

I rose from my chair, and the angel reached out and touched my forehead, very lightly. I remember that his fingertips felt cool, and that the contact was strangely soothing, considering all that lay ahead.

We were transported, the two of us, in a way much like the means I had employed since my transformation in the fourteenth century, except that it was somehow swifter and more graceful.

We stood on a dark ledge, looking down upon a pit of fire that seemed to have no bottom and no borders, but to be infinite. I felt its heat and heard the screams and shrieks of its inhabitants, and I admit that my very heart quailed with fear. I recall a sense of mild hysteria, and a flurry of meaningless thoughts bursting from my head like a flock of crows. I know I told myself it was good that, as a vampire, I had no bladder.

Nemesis gestured toward the inferno. "Hell," he said, raising his voice a little, to be heard over the hideous din, "is what each man or woman decides it should be. This, Valerian Lazarus, is your hell. It is an illusion, in truth, but it will be no less real for that."

I thought of Daisy and took a faltering step toward the fires, ready to hurl myself in, but Nemesis caught my arm in one hand and stopped me. I felt his great strength and knew then that neither Challes nor I had ever deceived or eluded him; he had merely been biding his time until the appointed moment.

"You would truly suffer torment, throughout eternity, for the love of one mortal woman?"

I did not hesitate. "Yes," I replied.

Nemesis did not release me but instead stared deep into my eyes. I felt him probing my very soul, exploring every corner and shadow, seeking I knew not what. The only thing that was really plain to me, besides the terrible fear gnawing at my gut, was the fact that I could hide nothing from him.

"You speak the truth," he said, marveling. He raised his free arm, still gazing at me, and in one gesture caused my spectacular medieval hell to vanish in a twinkling. We were back in the vault, at Colefield Hall,

before I could quite credit that I had been spared.

"Why?" I whispered, trembling, when I realized I was safe. The memory of that dreadful place we'd visited together would haunt me for all I knew of time. "Why did you bring me here instead of—?"

"There is truth in you," Nemesis said. "For all your evil, there is an element of good, though I confess I like you no better than I ever did."

I could not contain my joy, my relief. But my delight was quick to fade as I felt again the unceasing heat of hell, heard the shrieks of the damned, saw the hungry flames leaping against the darkness.

"That place—will I have to go back there someday?"

Nemesis gave me another searching look. "Perhaps. Perhaps not. What really matters, vampire, is the moment at hand. Nothing else is real."

Having made this pronouncement, the angel vanished, and I was alone once more.

I wanted to will myself to Daisy's side, but I was far too shaken. After all, I'd just had a close call, one of truly cosmic proportions, and the next few minutes were given over to gratitude.

*Valerian*

*Las Vegas, 1995*

Jerry Grover, assistant manager of the Venetian Hotel and Casino, trembled in his expensive leather shoes as the magician loomed over him. "What the devil do you mean?" Valerian demanded in a lethal undertone, looking damned scary in those Count Dracula clothes of his. "How could she have left town without telling me?"

Grover swallowed. All around, slot machines whirred and clinked, swallowing tokens with melodic greed. Bells clamored and lights flashed, and Jerry wished he didn't have to dance attendance like a flunky, but Valerian was a headliner, and the board of directors wanted to keep him happy. Nobody packed in the paying customers like this guy, and what the star wanted, the star got. Or somebody's head, specifically Jerry's, was going to roll.

"I checked on Miss Chandler, as you asked me to do, sir," Grover said in a squeaky voice. God, he hated it when he sounded weak and effeminate like that. "My contact in the police department told me she's resigned and moved to Seattle."

The magician glowered down at him for a long moment, during which time Jerry honestly thought his best suit might spontaneously combust, then whirled and stormed off through the casino, his black cape trailing majestically behind him. As he passed, every slot machine in the place suddenly went berserk, clanking like old-fashioned fire bells and spewing coins into the trays and onto the floor. Happy gamblers shouted for joy, scooping up their winnings with both hands.

It was the damndest thing Jerry Grover had ever seen, and he didn't even want to think about trying to explain it to the corporation.

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*Daisy*

*Seattle, 1995*

The ancient elevator in Daisy's office building clanked and jerked as it made its dogged climb to the twelfth floor. It was late, and there was probably nobody else on the premises except the janitor, but that didn't matter. Since coming to Seattle two weeks before, it seemed to Daisy that she did her best work at night.

That, she thought, with a pang and a rueful smile, was what she got for hanging around with vampires.

The cage lurched ominously, and Daisy looked up at the numbers above the ornate iron bars, feeling the first flicker of fear. If the cables were to snap...

She gave herself a mental shake. Since encountering Valerian and some of his crowd, she'd become fanciful, even skittish. If she wanted to succeed as a private investigator, and she most assuredly did, then she would have to put all that behind her and get back her old pragmatic nature.

The lights blinked off, then came right back on again. The needle on the indicator above the door bounced between two brass digits—seven and eight.

Daisy bit her lip. After arranging the move from Las Vegas, she'd driven to Nadine and Freddy's place in Telluride and spent a week there, fussing over the baby and playing Auntie Mame to the hilt. All the while, she admitted to herself in the privacy of that antique elevator, she'd been waiting to hear from Valerian, to see him again.

He was alive and well and back at the Venetian Hotel, drawing crowds like never before—the newspapers and magazines were full of him. Daisy could only conclude that, after dealing with Krispin he had decided a mortal lover was a troublesome lover. Perhaps he had taken up with one of his many old flames, some splendid monster like himself.

There was a grinding sound, and then the elevator stopped completely, and the lights went out.

"Shit," Daisy muttered.

"Not very ladylike," Valerian's voice responded.

Daisy's heart stopped, much as the elevator had, then started again. *Valerian*. Had she only imagined hearing him speak to her? The cubicle was dark, but she could see well enough to know that she was still alone.

She felt a sweet heat stir in the depths of her femininity. She'd been alone in that motel room, too, midway between Las Vegas and Telluride.

"Do you love me, Daisy?"

There was no mistaking it. Valerian was speaking to her, if only inside her head.

The stress of the past few weeks had finally caught up with her.

"Yes," she murmured nonetheless. "Do you love me in return?"

"Let me show you," he responded.

The files fluttered to the floor as Daisy felt his lips touch hers, lightly at first, and then with passion. His hands caressed her everywhere at once, stroking her back, cupping her buttocks, weighing her breasts, teasing the nubbin of flesh between her legs.

"Damn you," she whispered when he'd freed her mouth to let her take a breath. "Why can't you make love to me in person?"

"Do you want me to stop?"

Daisy's pride battled needs too long unfulfilled, and suffered a resounding defeat. "No—please—don't stop."

She felt her clothes dissolve like smoke, felt the heat of her desire in every tissue and fiber and pore, and sobbed for joy when he entered her in a single powerful thrust. He was neither tentative nor gentle, seeming to sense that Daisy needed a primal mating.

Satisfaction came swiftly, tumultuous and fierce, and left Daisy clinging to the handrail in the elevator with all ten fingers, barely able to breathe. The lights came back on, and the lumbering box resumed its climb to the twelfth floor with a shuddering jerk.

Daisy was still alone and frankly surprised to find her jeans and T-shirt on her body instead of in a crumpled heap on the floor. She knelt, blushing, and hastily gathered up the files scattered at her feet. All the while, satisfaction thrummed within her, deep and abiding and utterly undeniable.

Reaching her office, she was forced to lie down on the couch where clients were meant to sit, for small, sweet explosions were still rocking her from within, and she could not trust her knees to support her.

She fell asleep, bathed in silver light and feeling the lack of her lover's presence, and was awakened sometime later by a shadow crossing the moon.

Daisy sat bolt upright with a little cry, for seated on the edge of her desk, resplendent in his magician's garb, was Valerian himself.

"You should have been here for the lovemaking," she said. "It was pretty good."

He smiled and raised one aristocratic eyebrow. "Only 'pretty good'? Maybe I'd better try again."

"No!" Daisy said quickly and with conviction. "Another session like that, and I'll be stimulated to death."

Valerian laughed and opened his arms, and against her better judgment Daisy went to him.

"Where the hell have you been?" she whispered. It was safe to be angry within his embrace.

He laughed again. "Exactly," he said.

Daisy reared back to look into his eyes. "What—?"

He laid a finger to her lips. "Shh," he whispered. "It's over now, and we can be together. If you still want me, that is."

"I was thinking you didn't want me," Daisy said, stiffening a bit but making no move to withdraw from his arms. "What kept you so long, damn it?"

Valerian smiled and kissed her forehead lightly. "I had a few scars that I didn't want you to see, and I thought we both needed a little time to regain our balance."

Daisy nodded. "I'd gotten mine back, but you just threw me off again. Now what?"

"Now we go about making some sort of life together."

"I'm going to get old," Daisy reminded him. "And when I'm ninety, you'll still look just as you do tonight. People will think I'm your great-grandmother."

"I have never cared, overmuch, what mortals think. Or immortals, either, come to that. Such things don't matter, Daisy, when two lovers have been torn apart as often as we have in the past several centuries."

Daisy rested her forehead against his chin. "Okay. But how exactly are we going to work this? I like it here, and you like Las Vegas—"

"In case you haven't noticed, I find it easy enough to commute."

This time it was Daisy who laughed, but there were tears blurring her vision when she looked up at him again. "What about that guy the Las Vegas police department arrested for the murders Krispin committed? Isn't he a scapegoat, of sorts?"

Valerian shrugged elegantly. "I guess that depends on your perspective. The fellow has killed eight people, three of them children, and he's always prided himself on pulling off the perfect crimes. Some might say that justice was done here, however indirectly."

Daisy accepted that reply, although she knew it could have been debated for a long time to come, and returned to the original subject. "I don't see how we're going to manage a relationship," she fretted. "Do vampires even marry?"

"They mate, though to a much more profound degree than you probably think. Ours would be an eternal pledge, understand. Yes, you will grow old and eventually die. Then you will be born again, and I will be nearby, waiting for you to grow up and rejoin me."

The idea was bittersweet. "What about kids? What about a house and a dog and all that?"

Valerian feigned a sigh. "Any natural child of mine, Daisy love, would be a monster in both the subjective and literal senses of the word. Still, there are plenty of children alone in the world who would be happy enough to join our unconventional little family. As for a house, you have only to tell me what you want, and I will provide it." He paused. "The pet can be managed, too. It just so happens that an old friend has recently given me a splendid animal as a gift. You'll like him—his name is Barabbas."

Daisy considered her beloved's checkered past and the multitude of romantic involvements he readily admitted he'd enjoyed. "You won't get—restless? I should think a mortal might be pretty dull, over the

long haul, when a guy's used to lady vampires."

He brushed her lips with his own. "If you knew what I have been through, just to be with you, you would never doubt my fidelity," he answered at his leisure. "One day—or one night, rather—I shall tell you all about it. Furthermore, while usually beautiful and always fascinating, 'lady vampires,' as you so generously describe them, can be the coldest and most heartless beings in all creation."

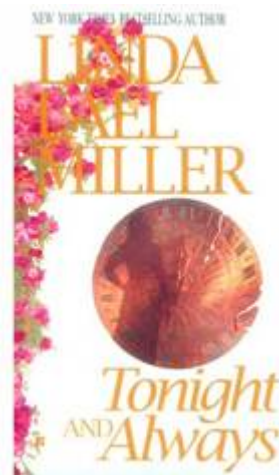
Daisy didn't reply, but simply slid her arms around his neck and raised her face in the shimmering moonlight to invite the vampire's kiss.

"Remember this night," she whispered.

"Because we can be together at long last?"

She smiled. "And because it's the beginning of always."

# Tonight and Always (1996)



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FOR JUDITH STERN PALAIS,

THE CONSUMMATE PRO AND A LOYAL FRIEND,

WITH LOVE, APPRECIATION, AND

GREAT ADMIRATION.

THANK YOU.

*For love is a smoke raised with the fume of sighs;*

*Being purged, a fire sparkling in lovers' eyes;*

*Being vex'd, a sea nourish'd with lovers' tears:*

*What is it else? a madness most discreet,*

*A choking gall and a preserving sweet.*

Romeo and Juliet

## **Prologue**

**LONDON**

**WINTER, 1872**

The new governess leaned down from what seemed to the child a great height, smiling her brash American smile. The woman was pretty enough, with her auburn hair and shining green eyes, and smart, too, or Mummy wouldn't have engaged her in the first place. Still, a stranger was a stranger.

"Kristina Tremayne Holbrook, is it?" Miss Phillips inquired in a nonobjectionable tone of voice. "Such a big name for so small a girl."

Kristina came out of the voluminous folds of her nanny's skirts to correct an apparent misconception on the part of the newcomer. "I am not so very little," she said. "I'm five—six next April—and I can already read and count to a hundred. You may be on your way now—we won't be needing you because I shall learn all I need to know from Mama and Papa and Valerian."

Mrs. Eldridge, the plump nurse with whom Kristina spent the majority of her time, laid a fond and encouraging hand atop her charge's head. "Hush now, child," she scolded benignly. Then, to the governess she confided, "You mustn't mind our Kristina. She's too bright by half, she is, and sometimes it makes her a mite saucy, but she's good through and through." She paused to emit a heartfelt sigh. "Now, come right in and settle yourself next to the drawing room fire, Miss Phillips, and welcome to you. It's a blustery day out, isn't it, and I daresay a nice cup of tea would go well with you just now."

"Thank you, Mrs. Eldridge," Miss Phillips said, removing her dowdy bonnet and cloak, both of which were dappled with snow, and handing them off to Delia, the handsome downstairs maid, whose duty it was to greet and announce guests and look after their belongings while they were being entertained. Delia collected Miss Phillips's battered carpet satchel—it was dripping on the Persian rug—and bore that away as well.

Kristina lagged behind as Mrs. Eldridge and Miss Phillips hurried into the drawing room, arms linked, whispering to each other. She lingered just inside the double doors, half hidden behind the marble pedestal that supported a bust of Socrates, while Miss Phillips was made comfortable beside the coal fire.

When Mrs. Eldridge went out to arrange for tea to be served, Miss Phillips put her small feet in their scuffed black boots on the chrome rail edging the hearth, and sighed contentedly.

"I do like to toast my toes on a winter's day," she said cheerfully. "Don't you, Kristina?"

Kristina had believed herself invisible, dwarfed as she was by Socrates and his pillar, and was both disgruntled and pleased that her new teacher had taken notice of her. Mama and Papa were loving and attentive, but they were never about during the daylight hours, and both of them were very busy—Papa worked in his laboratory below-stairs, and Mama was the queen of something, though Kristina didn't know exactly what.

"Yes," she said tentatively, drawn to the young woman with bright hair and shabby clothes and a gentle voice.

"Won't you join me by the fire? I feel a little lonely, sitting here all by myself."

Kristina understood loneliness well, though she was but five. It was a mysterious ache in one small corner of her heart, and always with her, even when Mama or Papa or Valerian or Mrs. Eldridge was

nearby. Most of the time she felt as though she were lost from someone she did not yet know, and must find that person to be truly happy. Given her age and size, and the fact that she was not allowed to go farther than the wall at the rear of the garden by herself, the objective seemed very daunting indeed.

She stepped nearer to the hearth, leaning on the arm of Papa's wing-back chair. Miss Phillips sat smiling in the matching seat, which was Mama's. The approach was concession enough, for the moment—Kristina did not speak.

Miss Phillips smoothed her skirts, which were clean but frayed at the hem and mended in at least two places. "I do not think you are really so shy as you pretend to be," she said. "Are you afraid of me, Kristina?"

"No," Kristina said in a sturdy voice. "Not now. I was for a few moments, though."

"Why?"

"Because I don't know you," Kristina responded reasonably. "I've been told never to speak to strangers."

"Good advice," Miss Phillips agreed. "We shall be fast friends, you and I, as well as student and tutor. I think you like to learn, and there is much I can teach you. I would like to begin our association by taking you to St. Regent's Lecture Hall tomorrow afternoon. The topic is the mythology of ancient Greece."

Kristina felt her eyes widen. She rarely left the house, except with Mrs. Eldridge for carriage rides through the park in good weather, and she loved the sights and sounds and smells and people—*so many* people—that made up the great city of London.

"I don't know anything at all about Greece," she confessed solemnly. "Or mistology, either."

"All the more reason to attend a lecture," replied Miss Phillips, tucking away a smile.

That night, after Mrs. Eldridge and Miss Phillips and Kristina had taken their supper by the nursery fire, the nanny and the governess went off to their own quarters, and Mama came to help Kristina get ready for bed.

It was her favorite time of the day, for Mama was beautiful, and full of stories, and she could do all sorts of marvelous tricks, like making dolls dance with each other, or causing real snow to drift down from the ceiling. She never entered or left the room in the customary fashion, either, but simply appeared and disappeared. Kristina wondered, when she took the time to ponder such questions, why Mrs. Eldridge and the maids didn't move from place to place the way Mama did, instead of bothering with stairs and doors and other such ordinary things.

"I'm going to hear a lecture on ancient Greece tomorrow with Miss Phillips!" Kristina blurted, so excited that she bounced on her feather bed and wheeled her arms.

Mama laughed as she wrestled Kristina's warm flannel nightgown over her small head, which was dark like her own. "Well, now," she said. "I shall want to hear all about that adventure." She paused to smooth Kristina's silken hair. "Do you like Miss Phillips, darling?"

"Oh, yes. She's wonderful." Kristina's happiness faded a little as she considered a possibility that had not occurred to her before. "Will Mrs. Eldridge be going away, now that I'm big enough to have a governess?"

Mama kissed her forehead, her blue eyes shining with love, and embraced her daughter tightly. "No, sweetheart—she'll stay. Since Papa and I can't be with you in the daytime, it's important that Mrs. Eldridge be here."

Kristina was relieved, for the nanny had been her constant companion for as long as she could remember, and it would be terrible indeed if she ever went away. "Why is that, Mama?" she ventured to ask. "Why are you and Papa never at home before dark?"

Mama hesitated, then answered in a soft and somewhat wistful voice, "I'll explain that soon, when you're just a little older. In the meantime, you must be patient."

After a grave nod, Kristina sat down on the bed and pulled the warm covers up to her chest. "All right," she said. "But I want to know *theinstant* I'm old enough."

Her mother laughed again, and Kristina was struck anew by her loveliness; she was a magical creature, with her pale, flawless skin, her flowing ebony hair, her exquisitely fitted white gown. "I promise to tell you all the family secrets as soon as I think you're ready to hear them," she said.

Kristina snuggled deeper into the bedclothes, already fighting sleep but determined to make the time with Mama last. "Make the puppets tell a story," she whispered. "Please?"

Mama drew a chair up beside Kristina's bed, sat down, and gestured grandly toward the ornate toy puppet theater, a gift from Kristina's Uncle Valerian, which stood on the window seat. Instantly the tiny stage was flooded with light, and the small, colorful figures rattled to loose-jointed life and began to perform.

Kristina was asleep before the end of the first act.

The lecture was fascinating, full of gods and goddesses, minotaurs and mazes. Kristina perched on the edge of her chair throughout, and even though she did not understand much of what was said, she left the public hall with a storm of bright, strange images raging in her mind.

She and Miss Phillips rode home together in the carriage, with a heavy quilt over their laps and warm bricks tucked beneath their feet, chattering excitedly about all they'd heard.

It was that night after supper, and after Papa had come to the nursery to read a chapter from a novel by Mr. Mark Twain in his deep and somehow reassuring voice, that Kristina first realized that she was different from other children.

She'd been sleeping, and dreaming of Athens, the city that had figured so prominently in the lecture, when the warmth of her bed was suddenly gone, replaced by a chill that seemed to wrap itself around her very bones. She opened her eyes and found herself standing in the middle of a vast marble pavilion, an eerie place, splashed with cold silver moonlight and utterly silent.

This, Kristina knew, was no dream. The cool stone beneath her bare feet was solid and real, and so

were the chipped columns and fractured statues looming all around her. This was certainly not London, and she did not know how to get home.

She cried out in fear.

Instantly Mama appeared and knelt to draw a trembling Kristina into her arms. "It's all right, darling," she whispered. "Don't be afraid."

Kristina clung tightly to her mother. "How did I get here?" she pleaded. "What is this place?"

Mama cupped Kristina's face in her cool, soft fingers and looked into her eyes. "This is Greece, my love. You were dreaming about it, weren't you? And your thoughts brought you here."

"My thoughts?"

Mama smiled and gave Kristina a tight hug before rising to her full height again and taking her daughter's hand. "Yes. Come, let's go home—think hard about your room and your toys, sweetheart, and we'll be there in a trice."

It happened just as Mama said; in a twinkling the two of them were safe in the nursery, and Greece was far away, where it belonged.

"The time to speak of magic and mysteries came sooner than I expected," Mama began, sitting down by the dying fire and lifting Kristina onto her lap. They rocked together, Kristina's head resting against her mother's shoulder. "A long time ago there were two small children, your uncle Aidan and me. One day our mother took us to see a gypsy, and we had our fortunes told..."

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **SEATTLE, WASHINGTON**

#### **PRESENT DAY**

Kristina found the packet of letters tucked inside a small cedar box, in a far corner of her attic, while searching for a ceramic jack-o'-lantern to set out on the front porch in honor of Halloween. In an instant the witches' holiday was forgotten; the mere sight of those heavy vellum envelopes, with their faded, curling stamps, struck her a bittersweet blow to the heart. She had not thought of her beloved governess, Miss Eudocia Phillips, in at least fifty years.

Now, in that cramped and dusty chamber where bits and fragments of the past were stored, memories nearly overwhelmed Kristina. She sat down on the arched lid of an old steamer trunk, heedless of potential damage to her white silk slacks, and was only mildly surprised to find the ribbon-bound stack of letters clasped with fevered gentleness in her hands. She did not recall reaching for it.

For a long time she simply sat there, holding the letters, remembering. There was no real need to read the words, some penned in her own handwriting, some in Miss Phillips's ornate Victorian script. Just

touching the paper evoked those vibrant, colorful, and often painful days with breathtaking clarity, bringing tears to Kristina's eyes and stealing her breath.

Presently Kristina looked up, blinked several times, and saw her reflection in the murky surface of the large antique I mirror she'd purchased in Hong Kong. She looked just as she had for upwards of a hundred years, except that she'd worn her dark hair long before the nineteen-twenties, like everyone else. Her skin was still unwrinkled, and her figure remained slender and supple.

*Pretty good*, she thought, with a slight and rueful smile, *for a woman of my maturity* .

Kristina shifted her attention from her image to the ornately ugly contours of the mirror itself, pressing the back of one hand to her face. She'd gone traveling after her husband Michael's death in the 1890s, roaming the world like a restless wind, never staying in one place for long. One bleak and rainy afternoon she'd found the piece in a seedy back-street shop and bought it.

To this day Kristina had no idea why she'd wanted the monstrosity. She'd done a number of strange things after Michael was killed—and many of her experiences and emotions were recorded, in great detail, in the letters she held. Miss Phillips's private nurse, engaged by Kristina, had returned her letters after the old woman succumbed to pneumonia in 1934.

A distracted thought flitted through Kristina's mind: She ought to clean the mirror and have it moved to her exclusive and suitably snobbish little antiques and fine art shop on Western Avenue. One woman's junk invariably proved to be another's treasure, as the success of Kristina's business proved.

The correspondence resting in her fingers reclaimed her attention, and with uncommonly awkward fingers she opened the first envelope. The fragile paper was turning to dust, and Kristina held it carefully. Reverently.

The faintest scent of lemon verbena, the fragrance she'd favored then, rose delicately from the vellum, arousing other remembrances, effectively carrying Kristina back to a time that no longer existed for her. . .

*Cheltingham Castle*

*Somerset*

*June 14, 1897*

*My very dear Phillie,*

*By now, I know you will have heard of Michael's death, but I find I must recount all of it, as I could to no one else, in order to lay down some of the burden. A mortal's death is a mere trifle to my parents, though they have respected my pain and grief and done what they could to lend me comfort, but their kindness does not reach deep enough to soothe the bruises upon my spirit. As for Valerian, who is, as you are well aware, my confidante and friend—well, suffice it to say I believe he secretly thinks me better off without Michael. He always believed my husband was weak, and thus utterly unworthy of my affections. He would, of course, have had that same opinion of virtually anyone, for such is his devotion to me.*

*Valerian could never understand, as you always have, beloved Phillie, that one need not be*

*especially worthy to be cherished by another. So often love simply occurs, all on its own, like an earthquake or a case of the grippe, and to seek rhyme or reason in such an event is to seek in vain. That, of course, is how it was with Michael and me.*

*But I must start at the beginning, if I am to tell the tale properly...*

*My memories spin so beautifully in my mind just now, Phillie, bright-hued and vivid, brimming with sorrow and joy and all the emotions in between. Life is, as you always asserted, rife with paradoxes.*

*I was already twenty-two the day I met Michael Bradford, an old maid by anyone's standards. You had long since gone to live with your sister, far away in Boston, and I had completed my formal education in Switzerland and London. I visited you sometimes, though I was careful not to draw your notice, out of fear that I might frighten you. I had not yet learned to trust my magic in those days, and there are times when I doubt it still.*

*But I digress.*

*I was alone at Refuge, my parents' cottage near Cheltingham Castle, except for the servants, and it had been raining all that morning. The house, spacious as it was, seemed close and dark, and I was fitful, with the beginnings of a headache throbbing in my temples. Just after lunch the blessed sun came out at last, and I asked a groom to saddle my pony, Pan, thinking a ride would clear my muddled brain.*

*Pan, you may recall, was a wretched beast, spawned no doubt in some corner of hell where the devil himself will not venture, and we hadn't traveled a mile before he'd pitched me headlong into the ditch alongside the road. I was not injured, but my favorite riding habit, a lovely gray velvet with a divided skirt to match, was torn and muddied beyond repair.*

*I was livid and barely resisted the impulse to turn that odious creature into a tree stump teeming with termites as he raced back toward the stables at Refuge, where the stable hands would no doubt reward him for his villainy with grain and perhaps even a lump of sugar. It was the way of grooms, I supposed, standing there covered in wet din, my hair straggling and my hat still floating in the ditch, to care more for horses than for people.*

*I could have willed myself home, or exchanged my spoiled garments for fresh ones in a twinkling, of course, but even then I liked to do things in the ordinary human way, wherever possible. You taught me that, Phillie, that I was more mortal than monster, and may heaven bless you for it. (And for so many other kindnesses that I can't begin to count them.)*

*Michael came round a bend in the track, mounted on a spectacular dapple gray gelding, just moments after I'd shouted a particularly ungracious malediction to the retreating Pan. I had known Michael to be a pest and a bully when we were children—he was the second son of the Duke of Cheltingham, and his resentment of his elder brother Gilbert's splendid prospects had fostered a corresponding nastiness in his nature—but there could be no denying now that he had changed.*

*Or so I thought, at the time, in my naïveté. Even though I was unquestionably a woman grown by then, I had led a very sheltered life, as you are certainly aware, and there was so much I did not know.*



*Michael had grown into a spectacular man, with golden hair and eyes of the palest green—just the color of the tree-shaded pond behind our house. He sat his horse well, for he, like most young men of his social class, had spent virtually every free moment in the saddle from earliest childhood, and was an expert rider. I knew from the servants' gossip that he won every race he entered, that he drank and gambled with a vengeance, and had been put out of several schools for unseemly behavior.*

*He had many shortcomings, my Michael—there is no denying that. Being apprised of these imperfections, I should have fled the scene with all haste and spared myself much suffering, but in that curious way of females, I was instantly and powerfully attracted to him instead. I am otherwise quite intelligent, as Valerian has since and often pointed out, always with a telling emphasis on the word otherwise.*

*Michael reined in his horse just short of trampling me and smiled indulgently at my dishabille. "Are you hurt?" he inquired with what I deemed an unnecessary note of delight in his voice. I did not think, from his tone and manner, that it would dampen his spirits in the slightest if I said I'd fractured every bone in my skeleton, and I was stung to flushing fury. A few weeks spent as a toad, I reflected uncharitably, might have a salutary effect upon his character.*

*"No," I said, giving him one of my most quelling looks. "I'm fine, though it's no credit to you that I wasn't stomped to a bloody pulp in the mud! How dare you ride in so reckless a fashion?"*

*Michael laughed, and his steed danced beneath him, but he managed the beast with no more conscious effort than he would have ascribed to breathing or causing his heart to beat. "You were in no danger from me, Miss Holbrook. I am, after all, an accomplished rider." He leaned down, the rich leather of his saddle creaking as he moved, to offer me his hand. "Come along, then, and I'll see you safely home."*

*"I can take myself home," I insisted, still blushing. My heart pounded like the hooves of a great horse passing over hard ground, and I thought I'd be violently ill, right there in the road. For all of it, I knew a rash and heated pleasure at the prospect of pressing my person against his.*

*I gave him my hand, after wiping it hastily on my skirts—I can hear your voice now, Phillie dear, saying, *Life is paradox, Kristina*—and I confess I used just a smidgeon of magic to mount the horse behind Michael, thus allowing him to fancy that he'd raised me up by means of manly strength alone. Little is required, I have discovered, to surfeit the masculine ego, but once again I stray from my subject.*

*We rode back to Refuge, and my arms were round Michael's lean waist, and that innocent contact stirred the most wondrously wicked feelings within me, desires that I had only read about and imagined until then. And alas, Phillie, knowing better all the while, I began to fall in love...*

"Not one of your more salient moments," a male voice intruded, wrenching Kristina out of her reverie and back to the dusty attic.

She looked up to see Valerian towering between her and the mirror, then glanced toward the fanlight set high in the outside wall. Sure enough, full darkness had come, without her noticing. Where had the time gone?

The vampire was majestic, as always, clad in his magician's cape and impeccably tailored tuxedo and carrying a walking stick that doubled as a wand when he was onstage. His Las Vegas act was sold out for a full year in advance, and he obviously planned to perform that night. A mortal would have been justifiably concerned, being in Seattle with curtain time only minutes away, but for Valerian the commute was no more difficult than a blink of his sapphire eyes.

"Falling in love with Michael, I mean," he clarified when Kristina failed to respond to his original remark. "I can't think what happened to your judgment."

"How fortunate," Kristina said dryly, "that I did not require your approval then any more than I do now."

The vampire smiled, his shaggy chestnut hair gleaming in the moonlight. "It is a relief to find you as insolent and willful as ever. I should not know how to react if you were the least bit sensible."

Carefully Kristina folded the letter she had been holding and slipped it back into its envelope. She did not set the packet aside, but instead held it close against her middle, as if she feared her formidable friend would snatch it from her. "I have gotten by these many years," she commented, "despite my ineptitude."

"I did not say you were inept," Valerian pointed out, twirling the wand idly between his long fingers, like a baton. "Never that. You know full well, Kristina, that I could not adore you more if you were my own child."

She stood and felt an odd and unaccustomed ache in her knees. Was she beginning to age at last, like a normal woman? She dared not hope it was so; she hadn't changed significantly, after all, since she was thirty.

Except to become lonelier.

"What brings you here?" she asked, making her way toward the stairs.

Behind her Valerian muttered and grumbled. He, like her mother—and even her more practical father, to some extent—could not comprehend why she so seldom used her powers to move from place to place. To want mortality was an enigma to them, she knew, though her uncle Aidan would certainly have been sympathetic.

"I sensed that you were in a melancholy mood," he replied, "and I came to see what could be done about it. You're very lonely, aren't you. Kristina?"

She felt her shoulders slump a little, despite her effort to be strong. Valerian had recently found his soul mate, a mortal by the delightful name of Daisy Chandler, and the experience had turned him into something of a romantic. "What good would it do to deny it?" she asked, gaining the second floor landing and taking the rear stairway that led to the kitchen. "You know me better than I know myself. Tell me, O Guardian Vampire—what is your sage advice?"

Valerian loomed near the table, looking pensive, imperious, and vaguely annoyed, while Kristina took a pot from the cupboard and filled it with water for pasta. "Find yourself a nice mortal and settle down," he said at length.

Kristina laughed, but she was painfully conscious of her heart, which felt cracked and brittle, and as fragile as translucent porcelain. "Don't look now, but *I am* a nice mortal, and I have long since settled down. Look around you." She gestured with a distracted wave of one hand. "I have a house filled with

antiques and exquisite art. I have a successful business."

"You are not a mortal," Valerian insisted quietly, disregarding everything else she'd said.

Kristina felt fresh tears sting her eyes. "Then what am I, will you tell me that? Not a vampire, not a woman. Neither witch nor angel, fish nor fowl—"

The magician's magician crossed the room in his faster-than-light fashion and enfolded her in his arms, and she wept disconsolately onto the white linen ruffles of his shirt. "You are unique, Kristina," he told her tenderly. "There is no other like you."

"But I want to be a woman!" Kristina wailed, tilting her head back to look up into the aristocratic face. "I want to love and be loved, to marry and have a baby and gain too much weight and get stretch marks. I want to grow old with someone special and die when it's my turn and be mourned by my children and grandchildren and greatgrandchildren!"

"I know," Valerian replied, and this time his voice was sorrowful. He was almost certainly thinking of Kristina's uncle, Aidan Tremayne, whom he had loved with devotion and singular passion. Aidan, made a vampire against his will in the eighteenth century, had wanted nothing so much as to be a flesh-and-blood man again. His transformation had separated him forever from those who had known him as a fiend, for he had no memory of his original existence.

Kristina collected herself quickly, sniffing and turning from Valerian's fatherly embrace. He could do nothing to change her situation, and it was not only wrong but unkind to burden him with her grief.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Valerian was silent for a long moment. Then he made the pretense of a sigh—being an immortal, he had no breath—and said, "You're bound to meet someone—or something. Just be more careful this time, if you don't mind. I will not tolerate another wenching wastrel like Michael Bradford."

Kristina welcomed the anger that surged through her, knew Valerian had deliberately inspired it in an effort to give her a way out of her gloomy mood, if only for a little while. "*You* won't be asked to tolerate anybody," she said, dumping a handful of tortellini into the water boiling on the stove and slamming the lid onto the pot with a heartening, cymbal-like crash. "My love life, pitiful as it may be, is none of your damned business!"

The vampire shook an imperious finger under her nose, but she saw fond amusement in his eyes. "You only wish it were so," he warned sternly. "And see that you don't take up with that warlock Dathan, either!"

"Go to hell!" Kristina yelled, vastly cheered.

"I've been there!" Valerian retorted at equal volume, his nose within an inch of hers. "It's overrated and they *don't* take American Express. Good-bye!"

With that, he vanished.

As always, it was an impressive exit, smoky and sudden.

Kristina smiled, shook her head, and turned back to her tortellini. Just this one night, she decided, she

would indulge herself and have pesto with her pasta instead of marinara.

It was beyond a doubt the most ferociously hideous piece of furniture he'd ever seen, Max Kilcarragh reflected, circling the antique mirror once more. It would do nicely.

He reached for the price tag, turned it over, and winced.

A woman came into the main part of the shop from a back room, and Max caught his breath when he saw her image in the highly polished looking glass. She was truly lovely, with her short ebony hair and intelligent silver eyes, and he couldn't help thinking that her reflection had transformed the awful mirror into a thing of beauty.

He smiled as she approached. Attractive she definitely was, but she wasn't his type. He liked wholesome, athletic women, and this one exuded sophistication and class. She looked, he decided, sort of art deco, as though she'd just slinked out of an Erte print.

"May I help you?" she asked. Her voice reminded him of the tiny silver chimes Sandy had hung in a corner of the girls' bedroom, just weeks before she died. Musical, delicate, somehow magical.

Max cleared his throat. *Get a grip*, he told himself. *Even if she was your type, which she isn't, a woman like this wouldn't be attracted to a high school football coach.*

"I think I may be beyond help," he confided. "Anyone who would even consider buying this mirror definitely qualifies as a serious case."

She raised one dark eyebrow, and he watched the hint of a smile tug at one corner of her heart-shaped mouth. "Oh? *I* bought it, a long time ago, and I hardly consider myself a lost cause."

Max raked his brown hair with one hand, oddly nervous. It was just plain ridiculous, he thought impatiently, to be so damned edgy. After all, he'd never see this woman again after today.

"It's a vengeance present," he said.

"I beg your pardon?"

Max grinned, feeling awkward and even bigger than his six-foot, four-inch frame. "The mirror, I mean. I'm thinking of giving it to my sister Gweneth for her birthday. To pay her back for the moth-eaten moose head she gave me at Christmas."

Now she didn't suppress the smile, and Max felt as though he'd just run, at full speed and head down, into a goalpost. "I see. On gift-giving occasions each of you tries to present the other with a truly ugly object."

Suddenly the tradition seemed slightly sophomoric, though the antiques dealer had not implied that in any way. "Yes," Max said wretchedly, wishing he'd gone somewhere else to shop, like that store down the street, with the rubber snakes and the souvenirs and the mummy on display. A nice, tacky ashtray in the shape of Washington State would have been just the ticket, or maybe one of those floating plastic eyeballs.

She laughed, and the sound made something ache, deep down in Max's gut. "That's wonderful," she said. "Tell you what. It just so happens that I share your opinion of this particular piece, though it's quite old and—mercifully, I think—rare. I'm willing to let you have it on a very slim profit margin."

"How slim?" Max inquired. He wanted to ask her name, if she was married or otherwise involved, if she liked Chinese food and old movies and Christmas. But he didn't. If there was one thing Max prided himself on, besides his daughters, it was self-control.

She named a price, and he agreed to it, producing a credit card.

While she was writing up the purchase and arranging for delivery, Max idly took a business card from a small brass holder on the counter and scanned it. *Kristina's*, the raised script read. *Antiques and Fine Art for the Discerning. Kristina Holbrook, Prop.* This was followed by the shop's address and a phone number, and Max tucked the information into the pocket of his brown sports jacket.

"Max Kilcarragh," Ms. Holbrook read aloud from his Visa card. "That's a very unusual last name. I don't believe I've ever heard it before."

Was she trying to prolong the conversation?

He couldn't be that lucky.

"It's Irish," he volunteered, and immediately felt stupid. Anybody with a brain in his head would know *that*, for God's sake. He just hoped he wasn't blushing, like some pimply second-stringer with a bad case.

She smiled. "Yes," she said, handing back his card along with a receipt. "I'll have the mirror delivered to your sister's house this afternoon, if that's suitable. Heaven help the poor woman."

The wisecrack put Max at ease again, but he felt giddy, as if he'd just downed a six-pack of Corona in a few gulps. He grinned like a fool and leaned against the counter, his big linebacker's hands leaving smudges on the gleaming glass.

"Was there something else?" Kristina Holbrook asked.

Max cleared his throat again and realized he was sweating. "No," he said hoarsely and turned to leave the shop.

"Thank you," Ms. Holbrook called after him, soft laughter playing like a chorus of distant harps in her voice. "Come back soon."

*Come back soon.* The words were innocent, ordinary—merchants said them to departing customers every hour of every day. Especially the ones who were dense enough to pay good money for a mirror so ugly that even Sleeping Beauty's stepmother wouldn't have believed a word it said.

Max went to the door and pulled it open, feeling the late-October chill rush up from the busy sidewalk to turn his perspiration to ice. The little brass bell overhead tinkled merrily to indicate that the big, bad jock was leaving at last, but Max just stood there.

Kristina was at his side before he'd finished telling himself he was an idiot.

"Are you all right?" she asked. She really cared, really wanted to know, he could see that. And he was so touched by that one small sign of tenderness that the backs of his eyes began to burn.

"Yes," he replied, closing the door. "No. I don't really know."

Kristina touched his arm, and he fancied that he could feel her warm fingertips even through the fabric and lining of his jacket and shirt. "Maybe you'd better sit down for a few minutes. Or I could call someone—your wife, perhaps?"

The word *wife* wounded Max like an arrow fired from a crossbow at close range. It had been two years, and he'd worked through his grief. When, he wondered, would he stop stepping into emotional booby traps?

"Sandy is dead," he said, as though he were telling Kristina that it was about to rain.

"I'm sorry," she replied.

"So am I," he answered, and then he opened the door again, stepped over the threshold, and strode off down the sidewalk.

He hadn't gone a block when he found himself turning around and retracing his steps to the door of Kristina's shop. He hesitated for a moment, then stepped inside.

"I'm back," he announced.

"Good," Kristina said, with a smile that tugged at Max's insides. "I rather expected you."

He looked around, out of his element and yet wishing to be nowhere but exactly where he was. "Do you have a husband?" he asked bluntly, for it was not his nature to beat around the proverbial bush. "Or a boyfriend?"

"Neither," Kristina responded, gesturing toward an elegant old wing-back chair upholstered in dark crimson velvet. "Sit down. I'll make tea—or would you prefer coffee?"

Max had that bull-in-a-china-shop feeling again; he was a big man, broad in the shoulders and muscular, and he was afraid he'd smash the spindly legs of the chair. "I'll stand, if you don't mind," he said.

*Way to go, Max, he mocked himself silently. You've got all the style of a high school freshman trying to make time with a cheerleader.*

"If you're worried about breaking the chair," Kristina said from the doorway that led into the rear of the store, "don't be. They don't make 'em like that anymore, as the saying goes. That thing would support a Sumo wrestler."

Max figured he'd only imagined that she'd read his mind, and sank gingerly into the seat of an antique that probably cost more than he made in a month. He was pleasantly surprised when it withstood his weight without so much as a creak.

"I'll take coffee," he said belatedly in answer to her question. "Please."

She smiled and left him alone with the paintings and chairs and breakfronts and figurines.

He felt clumsy, off balance, as if there should have been prom tickets in his pocket and a corsage wilting in his hands. It was crazy; even Sandy hadn't affected him like this, and he'd loved her as much as any man had ever loved a woman. Even now, two long years after her death, he would have surrendered his own life gladly if that would bring her back.

Kristina returned, carrying a tray with two steaming cups on it, and sat down on a footstool with a fancy needlepoint cover. She handed Max his coffee and sipped from a mug of her own, surveying him with those remarkable silvery eyes of hers.

He tasted the brew and was startled to find that just the right amount of sugar had been added, along with a little milk. "How did you know how I take my coffee?" he asked.

She took her time answering, still watching him with that expression of gentle speculation. "I'm a good guesser," she finally replied, and he had an odd and completely unfounded suspicion that she knew all his secrets. Right down to the fact that he wore his wedding band on a chain around his neck, tucked under his shirt.

"You're very kind." Max drank more coffee and was almost his old self again.

Kristina's wide eyes twinkled. "It's the least I could do, now that you've taken that dreadful mirror off my hands. Your sister can return it if she really hates it."

Max beamed. "She will," he said. "Hate it, I mean. But she won't bring it back because that's against the rules. The only legitimate way to unload a vengeance gift is to find somebody who really wants it and give it to them."

"A tall order, in this case," Kristina observed.

"I got rid of the moose head," Max boasted with a shrug and spontaneous grin.

Kristina leaned forward slightly, and Max basked shamelessly in her warmth and her innate femininity, breathing in the faintly spicy scent of her hair and skin. "Who would want something like that?" she demanded, eyes narrowed, hair glistening like onyx in the muted light of the shop.

Max couldn't remember for the life of him.

## CHAPTER 2

Kristina was working out on the stair climber in her family room the next morning when Daisy Chandler arrived, wearing blue jeans, worn-out running shoes, a pink-and-white-striped shirt, and an oversize letterman's jacket with the name Walt stitched onto one sleeve. Her beautiful copper-gold hair was pulled into a ponytail, which cascaded through the hole in the back of her blue baseball cap in a wild profusion of curls.

"You're demented," she told Kristina, who was still diligently climbing, and sweating in the bargain. "You couldn't get fat if you tried. Why exercise?"



Kristina was asking herself that same question just about then, but she kept going. "You know why. I want to be normal."

Daisy flung her arms out in a gesture of exclamation. Looking at her in those crazy clothes, it seemed ironic that she was the center of a certain very sophisticated vampire's life. "What's normal?" she railed with good-natured irritation. "I haven't met anybody yet who really qualifies."

Kristina was in no mood to discuss her penchant for doing everything she could in the ordinary human way. She'd been thinking about Max Kilcarragh ever since their encounter at the shop the day before, and the temptation to use her singular powers to explore every nook and corner of his life and psyche had been nearly overwhelming.

"I have," she replied in a somewhat bleak tone. Mr. Kilcarragh was *wonderfully* normal, sound and stable and genuine, yet strong, too, and utterly masculine.

Drying her hairline with the white towel draped around her neck, Kristina continued the workout and changed the subject. Daisy was her best friend, but she wasn't ready to talk to anyone about Max because there was too much—and nothing at all—to say. "I trust Mrs. Prine let you in," she said. "Or did you pick the locks?"

Daisy, who had been a police detective, now ran a thriving private investigation service. She beamed, shrugged out of the second-hand athletic jacket, and tossed it onto the couch. Her cap sailed after it. "I'm still working on basic breaking and entering. In this case, your housekeeper is the culprit." She crossed to the refrigerator in the small kitchenette and helped herself to a bottle of sparkling water. She frowned. "I must have rung the doorbell ten times. Does Prine always go around with earphones stuck to her head?"

"Yes." The timer on Kristina's stair climber started to beep, and she shut it off and stepped gratefully down from the machine. Mrs. Prine's name didn't suit her; she was not a plump and proper matron, as one might expect. She appeared to be in her late forties, had a body like Jane Fonda's, wore well-scuffed cowboy boots and big belt buckles with an assortment of old jeans and tank tops, and had a tattoo on her upper right arm that read *Garth Forever*. She bleached her hair and probably hadn't said more than half a dozen sentences to Kristina in the five years she'd worked for her.

Daisy watched Kristina towel her leotard-clad body and shook her head once in apparent disbelief. "Aren't you going to ask if there's a point to my visit?" the gumshoe inquired, plunking down on the overstuffed sofa with her bottle of water.

Kristina shrugged. "You're my closest friend. Friends drop in on each other." She sighed and hung the towel over the handrest on the stair climber. "But since it seems important to you, I'll ask. What are you doing here, Daisy?"

"Tonight is Halloween," Daisy said, "and I've decided I want to have a party for some of the kids in our neighborhood."

Daisy's neighborhood was one of Seattle's poshest; she and Valerian shared a marvelous, spooky old mansion with seven gables and at least that many secret rooms. The property was surrounded by a high brick wall, and there were gardens and fountains everywhere. Instead of being intimidated by the place, however, children came from blocks around to peer through the high wrought-iron gates, waiting for Daisy or Valerian to appear. They fed the white wolf, Barabbas, tidbits from their brightly colored lunch boxes and tucked letters written in crayon into the ornate mailbox out front.

What delicious irony, Kristina thought. The vampire and his ladylove throwing a Halloween party for a horde of miniature mortals. "It's a terrific idea," she said in all sincerity. "I suppose Valerian plans to set a coffin in the center of the parlor and lie in state?"

Daisy made a rueful face. "I suggested it, and he nearly bit my head off, if you'll forgive the expression. Once I'd really thought the thing through, I had to admit that a coffin with a real vampire in it would probably be a touch too scary."

"A touch," Kristina agreed with a slight twitch of the lips. "I have to shower and hie myself to the shop. Could we fast forward to the part of this that has something to do with me?"

Daisy reached for her baseball cap and jacket. "I'd like you to be there, that's all," she said happily.

"And do what?"

Daisy bit her lower lip. "Stir a cauldron. And it would help if you wore something long and black—"

"No doubt I could borrow an outfit from Morticia Addams," Kristina teased. "But where would I get a big pot of foul and bubbling brew?"

"I thought you could conjure one up," Daisy said, pulling on her jacket.

"You know how I feel about doing things like that."

"Come on, Kristina—you don't have to be stuffy just because you're old."

"Thanks."

"Will you do it?"

"I must be crazy," Kristina said with a nod of acquiescence. Daisy was a hard person to refuse.

"Great!" Daisy cried, adding the cap to her jaunty ensemble. Then she gave her friend a quick hug. "Come at four-thirty if you can. It'll be dark by then."

Kristina promised to be on time, suitably garbed and in possession of a large cast iron pot emitting green steam. When Daisy had gone, she asked herself why she didn't spend Halloween in seclusion, as did most of the vampires, warlocks, and other supernatural creatures she knew.

As she stepped under a shower of hot water minutes later, Kristina answered her own question. She participated in mortal holidays for the same reason she exercised, traveled by car, cooked her own meals, and bought her clothes in stores. When she did those things, she could pretend to be fully human.

The old Tarrington estate was a great place for a Halloween party, Max thought as he led his small daughters, in their masks and costumes, through the open gates and up the long brick driveway to the front door. Eliette, seven years old and dressed as Princess Jasmine, chattered happily about any number of things, while Sabrina, better known as Bree, age four and garbed as a clown, was unusually quiet.

"Everything okay, Shortstop?" Max asked, crouching to tweak Bree's red foam nose when they'd

reached the front steps.

Bree glanced nervously in one direction and then the other. "They have a big dog," she confided. "*I think it's a wolf.*"

"That's only Barabbas," said Eliette, who feared neither man nor beast. Her reckless acceptance of everyone and everything worried Max; for obvious reasons, he wished she were not quite so brave.

"Listen," Max said, holding Bree's gaze with his own. "If you're scared, I'll take you home. You can help Aunt Elaine pass out treats while your sister the party animal and I bob for apples and swig cider."

The tiny clown shifted from one floppy orange foot to the other and cast a yearning glance toward the elegant brick porch, which was lined with the flickering smiles of at least a dozen jack-o'lanterns. "What about Bob's apples?"

Max suppressed a grin. "That's*sobbing* for apples, honey—"

"It's a game, stupid," Eliette grumbled, impatient to get in on the action. The house emitted an intriguing combination of moans, shrieks, and maniacal laughter—none of which seemed to frighten Eliette in the least.

"Bad choice of words," Max told his older daughter. "Your sister isn't stupid."

"Sorry," Eliette said with limited conviction.

"I guess I want go in," Bree announced. "But if we see that dog—"

Eliette had forged ahead and was already stomping up the steps. "I already told you Barabbas wouldn't hurt you," she reiterated.

Bree slipped her tiny hand into Max's and looked up at him with Sandy's solemn brown eyes. "You'll save me if the wolf comes, won't you, Daddy? You won't let him gobble me up?"

Max swallowed, and though he tried to sound casual, his voice came out hoarse. "Count on it, Babe," he said. "You're safe with me."

He was thinking, while Eliette rang the doorbell with verve, that Barabbas was a damned strange name to give a mutt.

One of the twelve-foot double doors swung open with a theatrical creak, and just like that she was there—Kristina Holbrook, the woman he'd been thinking about almost nonstop since yesterday.

Even with green paint on her hands and face she was elegant, and her gray eyes sparked with surprise, then humor, as she recognized Max.

"Come iiiiiin," she said in a very witchy voice. Eliette went past her like a shot, eager to join her friends, but Bree stood still at Max's side, staring up at Kristina in awe.

"You can do magic," the child said without a trace of fear.

"Yes," Kristina replied simply. Max had a brief, odd flash that she wasn't kidding. "Won't you come in?"

Bree released her sweaty hold on Max's thumb and padded past Kristina into the shadowy hall.

The lovely witch smiled and gestured for Max to step inside as well. "Hello, again. Did your sister hate the mirror as much as you hoped?"

Max grinned, getting over the shock of seeing her again so easily, and so soon. He wondered, as he had for the past twenty-four hours, what she'd say if he asked her out for dinner. "More," he replied. "Gweneth has sworn vengeance."

Kristina laughed. "I'd watch it if I were you," she told him. "It's Halloween, after all. She might find a way to cast a spell over you."

Max took a chance. "Somebody already did that," he told her quietly. "You're looking at an enchanted man."

She might have blushed—he couldn't tell, because of the dim light and her green makeup—but she did lower her eyes for a moment. "Do you like it?" she asked in a voice so soft he barely heard it. "Being under a spell, that is?"

"Yes," Max answered. "Which isn't to say I'm not scared."

Before Kristina could say anything in reply, the doorbell rang again, and she went back to being a witch and greeting guests. Max stood and watched her for a few seconds, then found an assemblage of adults in a nearby room, where a mob of noisy, delighted kids was watching a magician perform.

After helping himself to an hors d'oeuvre and a cup of mulled wine, Max chatted amiably with a few neighbors and then went to the doorway of the parlor to watch the magician. All the while his mind was full of Kristina—her scent, her voice, her supple, shapely body.

Their host and hostess hadn't spared any expense, he thought, watching the conjurer. This was no hobbyist or clever college kid moonlighting; the guy was a definite pro. His tuxedo was custom made and probably cost about as much as a midsize car. Over it he wore a black silk cape, lined in glistening red, and his skin had a pearlescent quality Max had never seen before. His hair was brown and somewhat shaggy, lending him an oddly old-fashioned look, as if he actually belonged to another time and was just visiting the present.

While Max watched, the wizard gestured toward a tall vase of carved jade, which was probably priceless, with a graceful, white-gloved hand. A sparkling light surrounded the piece, which stood alone in the middle of the floor, glowing more and more brightly until it dazzled the eyes. The children—Max had long since located Eliette and Bree—were spellbound and utterly silent. A feat in itself, he thought with amusement.

The curious, electrical mist dissipated as Max watched, and a small monkey wearing a red velvet fez and a matching vest perched where the vase had been.

The kids shrieked and clapped with joy, believing. Accepting it all at face value.

Max frowned, stumped. No trapdoor, no table, no box on wheels. How the hell had he done that?

"It's a night for magic," commented a feminine voice, and he saw Kristina standing beside him.

"Who is that?" Max demanded in a whisper as the fog of light returned and the vase reappeared. There was, of course, no sign of the monkey.

"His name is Valerian," Kristina said, watching the magician with pride and affection shimmering in her eyes.

"He's damn good," Max allowed, but he felt grumpy all of a sudden. Especially when all the kids, including his own, turned as one to shush him.

Kristina took his arm and pulled him away, into the hall. Her cauldron was there, doubling and bubbling, toiling and troubling. "I didn't realize you lived in this neighborhood," she said.

Max felt a surge of crazy, drunken joy. God, it was pathetic when a thirty-five-year-old man could be this grateful just because an attractive woman made small talk with him. He needed to get out more.

"Our house isn't quite this fancy," he replied. "It's just an ordinary colonial with green shutters and a fanlight over the door."

"Your wife must have loved it," she said dreamily. Then she put a hand to her shapely chest, plainly embarrassed, and gave a sigh. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I said that."

Max wanted to put her at ease, and more. He wanted to ford rivers and scale peaks for her, to slay dragons and build cities of gold that she could rule over.

*Get a grip*, he told himself. "It's okay," he said aloud. "Sandy never saw the house—we lived in a condo on Queen Anne Hill when she was killed. After—afterward, well, Eliette and I seemed to stumble over a memory every time we turned around, and we weren't making much progress with the grief, so I bought this place—" He stopped, flustered, wishing he could refill his cup. He hadn't said that much about the move to his parents, his closest friends, or even Gweneth. "I guess I told you more than you wanted to know."

She touched his arm with gentle albeit green fingers and smiled. "No," she said softly. There was a brief, tender pause, then she went on. "Eliette is a beautiful name—I don't think I've ever heard it before."

"My wife's father was with the diplomatic corps, and the family spent a lot of time in France. Sandy spoke the language fluently and loved everything about the place—the people, the food, the music, the art. We were going to take a trip to Paris the next summer—"

Damn it, he'd done it again.

"It's all right," Kristina insisted. "What about your other daughter—the little one?"

Max smiled. "That's Sabrina—we call her Bree," he said. "She thinks you can do magic."

"Maybe I can," Kristina replied with a smile and the slightest of shrugs. "Unlike most adults, children know enchantment when they see it. The lucky ones have yet to be blinded by disbelief—they still trust themselves."

Max cleared his throat, went to take a sip of his wine, remembered that the cup was empty, and blurted out, "I like you." He was wondering if there was such a thing as classes for the dating-impaired. "I

mean—"

She laughed that wonderful, chiming laugh. "I like you, too, Max," she said, and waited, her eyes dancing, her makeup beginning to run. Beneath the green grease-paint, her skin was very fair and cameo-perfect.

"I thought maybe we could go out to dinner somewhere. Tomorrow night, I mean." He held his breath.

"I'd enjoy that," she said. "I keep the shop open until seven on Friday nights. Would you like to pick me up there, or should I meet you at the restaurant?"

Max was wildly pleased and wanted to run outside and dance on the lawn like a kid celebrating the first snowfall. Fortunately he managed to subdue those urges. "I'm an old-fashioned guy," he answered. "I'll pick you up at the shop."

"I knew that."

"That I'd pick you up at the shop?"

"No," she said with a twinkle. "That you were an old-fashioned guy."

It sounded like a compliment, so Max took it as such.

Kristina waved stained fingers as Max left the party sometime later, carrying a sleepy Bree in the curve of one strong arm. His free hand rested lightly, affectionately, on Eliette's small head. He nodded to Kristina, and she felt a sweet pull, deep down, that was both physical and emotional.

Daisy, aka Marie Antoinette, stood next to her, holding her head in the curve of one elbow. Her green eyes peered at Kristina from inside the French queen's latex bosom, above which rose a stump of a neck.

"Good looking guy," said Marie's cleavage.

Kristina sighed. She didn't know why she was letting herself dream about dating Max Kilcarragh, let alone marrying him and having children by him. He was mortal, and she was God-only-knew-what. Things could never work out between them.

"Yeah," she said sadly. "He's good-looking all right. Even better, he's decent, and funny, and kind."

Daisy shifted the plastic head from one arm to the other and shifted uncomfortably. Evidently Marie's dainty satin slippers were beginning to pinch. "Shall I run a check on him for you? You know, find out if he's got any bad habits—more than one wife—stuff like that?"

"Don't you dare," Kristina said, prodding at the bloody stump of Her Highness's neck with one finger and frowning. "Max and I are having dinner together, not getting married. If he's got any bad habits—and I doubt it—I don't want to know about them."

Daisy pulled off the top part of her costume, to Kristina's relief, so that her own unsevered head was revealed, and tossed the debris onto the hall table. "Don't you read pop psychology or watch talk

shows?" she demanded. Her copper hair was wildly disarrayed, and the look in her green eyes said she was serious. "You can't go around *ignoring* bad habits in a man. That's denial!"

The house was empty except for the two of them and Barabbas, who was upstairs somewhere, sleeping under a bed. Valerian had already done his vanishing act; he would want to feed before materializing in his dressing room at the Venetian Hotel, in Las Vegas, to prepare for that night's performance. So Kristina spoke freely. "Don't talk to me about denial, my friend," she said cheerfully, taking her coat and purse from the hall closet. "The love of your life is a real, live, card-carrying, neck-munching *vampire*, remember? Talk about bad habits!"

Daisy shoved fingers stained with novelty-store blood through her hair and grinned. It had been hot inside that costume, apparently, for her face glistened with perspiration. "I never said I wasn't kinky," she said, and they both laughed.

"Good night," Kristina said moments later, pulling on her coat and rummaging through her drawstring bag for her car keys. "And thanks for a sensational party."

"Thank you," Daisy countered. "You made a really great witch. But, uh—" she glanced back at the cauldron. "What am I supposed to do with the brew? Is it toxic, or can I pore it down the storm drain?"

"Not to worry." Kristina looked at the pot and snapped her fingers, and it obediently disappeared.

Daisy smiled. "You've got a future with the Environmental Protection Agency," she said, following Kristina out onto the porch, where the jack-o'lanterns still projected gleaming grins into the darkness. "Could you just make the stuff in the landfills disappear, for a start?"

Kristina wagged a finger at her friend, walking backward while she spoke. "You know the rules, Dase. No interfering with the course of history."

Daisy leaned against one of the pillars supporting the porch roof. "At least your attitude is better than Valerian's—when I ask him questions like that, he says something like, 'You mortals made your bed, you can lie in it.' Who makes these rules, anyway?"

Standing beside her car, a white Mercedes 450SL, Kristina shrugged and pushed a key into the lock on the driver's side. "I haven't the faintest idea," she called back. "All I can tell you is, I was born knowing I'd better obey them. Good night again, Daisy. I'll see you soon."

"Let me know how the date goes," Daisy replied with a nod and a wave.

When Kristina looked into her rearview mirror, as she drove down the driveway, she saw the white wolf join Daisy on the porch, its coat gleaming in the moonlight. One by one, the faces of the jack-o'lanterns winked out.

The girls had both washed their faces, brushed their teeth, said their prayers, and gone to sleep. No doubt they were already dreaming magic dreams, Max thought as he closed the door of the room they shared, and turned to go back down the hall to the head of the stairs.

Elaine, Sandy's sister, was standing by the front door, wearing her coat. She was wrapping a muffler around her neck when Max reached the bottom step.



"Thanks," he said. "For holding down the fort while we were visiting the neighbors tonight, I mean. Did you get a lot of trick-or-treaters?"

Elaine resembled her late sister, but only physically. She was shy and uncertain, while Sandy had been a dynamo, full of opinions and ideas and eager to express them. "Not so many," she said, pulling the muffler up over her head like a shawl. "I guess most of the kids were at the party."

Max nodded. He always felt vaguely guilty around Elaine, as though there was something he was supposed to do or say or notice—something that eluded him completely. "I'll walk you to your car," he said.

Elaine smiled, and for a moment she was almost pretty. "It's in the driveway. Just watch me from the porch, if you would—"

Max opened the door and took her elbow lightly in one hand. He saw Elaine to the late-model Toyota parked behind his red Blazer, despite her earlier suggestion, and waited until she'd locked the doors, started the engine, and driven away. The neighborhood was a peaceful one, but crime was on the rise in Seattle like everywhere else.

Turning to go back inside, Max saw the sleek, silvery-white form of a dog streak across the lawn next door. In mere moments the animal leaped the fence, trotted over, and sat on its haunches on Max's front walk.

Standing still, more fascinated than afraid, Max saw that this was no dog, after all, but a wolf. The creature's eyes were an uncanny blue, and they glinted with an unnerving intelligence.

"If you aren't the infamous Barabbas," Max said, slipping his hands into the pockets of his brown corduroy slacks, "you're certainly a candidate for the all-around best costume."

A shrill whistle pierced the night, and Barabbas perked up his ears in response.

"Damn it, Barabbas," a female voice called, "do you want to end up in the pound?"

Barabbas made a whimpering sound and then uttered a dutiful yelp, and an attractive woman in jeans and a plaid flannel jacket appeared on the sidewalk in front of Max's house. He recognized her immediately as his neighbor, the party-giver, and he was happy to see her. Relieved, too.

The wolf trotted over, took the fence in another graceful bound, and proceeded to lick one of the woman's hands.

"I'm Daisy Chandler," she said, holding out the other hand over the fence. "I saw you at the party tonight, but we didn't get a chance to talk."

Max walked to the gate and shook her hand. "Max Kilcarragh," he said. "It was a terrific setup—especially the witch." He was embarrassed all of a sudden, fearing he'd revealed too much about his attraction to Kristina. "The magician wasn't bad, either."

She laughed. "I guess that's a matter of viewpoint," she said. "Sorry about Barabbas, here. I hope he didn't scare you."

Max saw the humor of the situation, now that White Fang was on the other side of the fence and completely enthralled by his mistress. "It was the first time I ever had an aerobic experience without moving anything on the outside of my body," he said. Mindful of recent chilling headlines concerning wolves kept as pets, and of Bree's fear of the animal, Max turned serious. "Maybe it isn't—well, maybe it's dangerous, keeping a wild animal in a residential area."

"Oh, Barabbas isn't wild," Ms. Chandler said with supreme confidence. "He wouldn't hurt anybody unless they deserved it."

Eliette had said a similar thing earlier, Max recalled. He wondered what made his daughter—and Ms. Chandler—so sure the wolf was tame. "All the same, I wonder—"

"Trust me, it's okay," Ms. Chandler broke in, speaking as cheerfully as before, and Max found that he wanted very much to believe her. Some instinct, born long, long ago in the mind of some distant ancestor and passed down to him through uncountable generations, told him that this woman was a friend. "Barabbas loves children."

Max felt his mouth slant into a grin. "That's what I'm afraid of," he said. But in truth he really wasn't worried about the wolf any longer. Maybe some passing witch had cast a spell over him. "My daughters enjoyed the party, and so did I. Thanks for inviting us."

"Thanks for coming," she said. "It was a nice turnout, wasn't it? I would have been disappointed if nobody had showed up." She flashed him another smile. "Well, Barabbas and I had better be getting back now. See you around, Mr. Kilcarragh."

"Max," he corrected, starting toward the house. No need to fear for Ms. Chandler's safe passage home, with a wolf to escort her.

"Daisy," she answered and went her way, with the Hound of the Baskervilles trotting along behind her like a puppy.

Max went back inside and wandered into the living room, which had been cluttered when he left for the party earlier in the evening. Now, thanks to Elaine, the place was as tidy as an old maid's parlor—except for the pumpkin.

The jack-o'-lantern, which he had carved a week before, with close supervision by Eliette and Bree, sat forlornly in the middle of the coffee table, caving in on itself and smelling like what it was—a scorched squash.

Max took it in both hands, carried it into the kitchen, and dropped it into the trash. "Sorry," he told the discarded vegetable as he washed his hands at the sink, "but that's life. Ask last year's Christmas tree."

"Who are you talking to, Daddy?"

Max turned to see Bree standing in the doorway, clutching her "blankie." "Myself," he said, scooping the child into his arms and giving her a quick hug. "What are you doing up, anyway? It's late."

"I was thinking about the witch lady," Bree answered, rubbing one eye with the back of a dimpled hand. "The pretty one we saw at the white wolf's house. Do you think she's green all over?"

Max started up the rear stairway, still carrying Bree. "No," he replied, hiding a smile. "She isn't green

anywhere, Poppet. She's a regular woman, not a witch. Her name is Kristina, and she's very, very nice."

Bree laid her head on Max's shoulder and sighed sleepily. "Maybe she isn't green, and maybe she's nice, too. Maybe she's even regular, but she's a witch."

Max kissed his daughter's downy temple. "No, honey. She was only pretending. For Halloween."

Bree yawned big and gave his cheek a sympathetic pat. "Grown-ups," she said with another sigh. With that, she promptly fell asleep again.

## CHAPTER 3

After blitzing her costume back into the nothingness from whence it came, and scrubbing off the green greasepaint in the shower, Kristina brewed herself a cup of herbal tea. Bundled in the comfortable cocoon of her favorite robe, a pink terry-cloth number with deep pockets and a zipper in front, she sat in her darkened living room, watching the moon through the huge leaded-glass windows opposite her chair.

"Here's to you," she said, raising her teacup in a friendly salute to all things lunar. The massive translucent disk almost seemed to be hovering just beyond the glass, hoping for an invitation to tea.

Kristina settled back in her chair and closed her eyes, haunted by images of Max and his beautiful children. Her yearning to be mortal was, in those moments, so poignant, so deeply rooted in the center of her being, that it threatened to splinter her very soul.

If indeed she *had* a soul, Kristina thought as one tear slipped down her cheek.

"Depressed, my darling?"

Kristina jumped and opened her eyes wide to see Dathan, the golden-haired warlock, standing next to the fireplace.

Of late, he had taken to wearing capes and tuxedos, a la Valerian, though the two politely despised each other.

"Don't call me 'darling,'" Kristina snapped, nearly upsetting her tea as angry adrenaline surged through her system. "And I won't have you just *appearing* in my house, either. It's bad enough when my mother and Valerian do it."

Dathan's smile was charmingly rueful and quite heartrending—if one didn't know him for the scheming wastrel he was. Despite his guileless brown eyes and choir-boy looks, his capacity for devilment rivaled Valerian's own. "Sorry," he said. "I was passing by and—"

"Flying across the moon, you mean," Kristina scoffed. She remained in her chair and held her teacup in both hands to keep from spilling the contents on her bathrobe.

He pressed one palm to his chest and splayed his fine, tapered fingers. "You wound me," he said. "I'm here out of concern for you, Kristina."

"Right."

"And it is Halloween, after all. Surely I can be forgiven for popping in on a friend." He crossed to a table inlaid with marble, a piece Kristina had acquired at Sotheby's in 1921, and helped himself to a handful of brightly colored candies.

"You are not a friend," Kristina pointed out coolly. "I hope the candy corn will suit. We're fresh out of dead rats and flies' wings."

"A second blow," Dathan cried around a mouthful of treats, clutching his chest again. "More crippling even than the first!" He swallowed with a tragic gulp. "I've come here expressly to save you from making a dreadful error, and how do you repay me? With insults!"

Kristina sighed. "Please do not add bad acting to your other crimes," she said. "Just tell me what you want and get out."

He executed a sweeping bow, eyes twinkling, and began to pace the length of the room in long, aristocratic strides, showing off his cape to excellent advantage and putting away more candy corn with every step. "You may know that I seek a vampire bride," he said. "Imagine the possibilities, the powers that might result, if a warlock and a blood-drinker were to mate!"

Kristina rubbed her temple. "Well, you're barking up the wrong tombstone this time," she said wearily. "Despite my illustrious heritage, I'm definitely not a vampire. And even if I were—"

"Stop," Dathan warned, halting, with a majestic, rustling swirl of silk in the center of the room. "You've made your disinterest in my romantic attentions plain enough already. I wasn't suggesting that we get together, I merely hoped that you might have a friend—"

"Ah," Kristina said, her headache intensifying. "You want me to fix you up. I thought you and Roxanne Havermail were an item. How's the family, by the way?"

Color surged into Dathan's face. "Kindly do not mention that creature, or her horrible children, again!"

Kristina smiled, recalling Benecia and Canaan Havermail, Roxanne's five-hundred-year-old babies, who were vampires in their own right and all the more savage for their doll-like, little-girl beauty. "Valerian will be disappointed that his matchmaking didn't work out," she said. "And since Avery Havermail ran off with that fledgling a few years ago, Roxanne and the girls have been—lost."

Dathan seethed in silence for a few moments, then, with admirable resolve, regained control of his temper and spoke in a moderate, even cordial, tone. "Kristina," he began again, in slow, measured tones. "Do you know any unattached vampires?"

She couldn't help it—she laughed. His phrasing had been unfortunate but highly visual. "No," she said when she'd recovered. "Except for my mother—who is madly in love with my father and will be for all eternity—and the Havermails, I am not acquainted with any female nightwalkers." Her tea had turned cold, but she took a sip anyway. "Now, before you go, please explain that comment you made earlier, about saving me from making a terrible mistake."

The warlock looked so defeated and so forlorn that Kristina almost felt sorry for him. Almost, but not quite. She'd been around long enough to know a first-class flimflam artist when she saw one. "You shouldn't become involved with the mortal," he said. "Max Kilcarragh, I mean."

Kristina stiffened. Valerian, her parents, the Havermails—all of them could defend themselves against the warlock if the need arose—but Max was different, of course. He had no magical powers and would thus be no match for the likes of Dathan. "What do you know about Max?"

The magnificent warlock toyed with one of the emerald cufflinks glittering at his wrists. "Enough," he replied gruffly, "and stop worrying. I'm no threat to him or to his children. It's just that he can't give you his heart, my dear—it's buried with his dead wife. He adored her, you see."

Kristina's eyes stung, and she blinked a couple of times in an effort to hold back tears. "Stay away from Max Kilcarragh," she said evenly and quietly. "If you dare to bother him in any way—"

Dathan held up both hands, immaculately gloved, in a bid for peace. "I give you my word, Kristina. I mean him no harm."

"Valerian has told me about the word of warlocks."

The splendid, graceful creature sighed. "Your friend the vampire is hardly objective where we are concerned, is he? Be fair, Kristina—what have I ever done to deserve your rancor, except admire you and make a fool of myself over you?"

Kristina was not good at holding grudges, especially against beings, human or otherwise, who had never hurt her in any way. She let Dathan's plaintive question pass unanswered, however, and countered, "How would you know anything about the state of Max Kilcarragh's heart?"

He shrugged. "I saw you with him earlier, and flipped through a few mental files, that's all. Poor Max. He'd give up his own life, even after two years, if it would bring his Sandy back."

Kristina ached inside, because she understood Max's pain, had felt something similar herself, once upon a time. Far from putting her off, Max's devotion to his lost wife increased his appeal. Along with all his other fine characteristics, he was loyal.

"Yes," she said softly, "I'm sure he would do that. That's part of what makes him Max. Now, if you don't mind—"

Dathan uttered another sigh, gave his cape a dashing swirl, and vanished.

Kristina carried her teacup into the kitchen and set it on the drainboard. Then she climbed the rear stairway and moved along the hall toward her bedroom. On the way she passed one of her favorite pieces of furniture, a small lacquered chest purchased long ago in Florence, and ran her fingers lightly over its smooth surface.

The thick packet of letters from the attic waited on the nightstand in Kristina's bedroom, in the cedar box, and she did not need to open them, or even touch the dried, crumbling paper, to bring their contents flooding into her mind, word for word...

*... and you can probably imagine, Phillie dear, how my beloved parents reacted to the news that I was in love with Michael Bradford. Why, they hardly took it better than Valerian did—he was in a terrible rage for weeks, and when that finally passed, he remained inconsolable for some time.*

*But I'm getting ahead of myself again. I'm afraid I've never quite broken that habit, despite all my*

efforts to slow down and take matters one by one.

*It began to rain again, that afternoon when Michael brought me home to Refuge after my tumble from Pan's back, and we were quite drenched by the time we reached the stables. Naturally I offered the hospitality of our cozy drawing room, where there would be a warm fire burning, with hot tea and biscuits close at hand, and Michael accepted graciously.*

*I still recall the mingled and not unpleasant scents of damp wool, brandy, horseflesh, and some manly cologne as my childhood enemy stood before the hearth, smiling down at me while he waited for his clothes and hair to dry.*

*"You've grown up to be a very lovely woman, Kristina," he said.*

*My heart rate quickened at his words and so, however imperceptibly, did my breathing. I wondered how lovely I could be, sitting there on Papa's leather hassock with my garments torn and wet and covered in mud, and my tresses straggling untidily from their pins. Only then did it occur to me that I might have gone to my room to wash and change and do something with my hair before sitting down to tea with a gentleman.*

*I fear the social graces were not emphasized in our home after your time with us came to an end. Mama would have thought it demeaning for a woman to prink and preen for a man, and Papa was only interested in Mama, then as now, and in his endless scientific experiments. Manners and conventions seem silly to him, I'm sure.*

*But Michael had paid me a compliment, and I was charmed and quite smitten even then. I had to set my tea aside, for fear of spillage, and my face felt much too warm, considering the distance between myself and the fire.*

*"Thank you," I said, as you taught me, keeping my eyes down.*

*"You're here all alone, in this vast house?"*

*I made myself look at Michael and replied, "Not really. The servants are here, and it's not a large place, really. Not like Cheltingham."*

*"That haunted ruin," Michael scoffed, dismissing several centuries of very distinctive history with the wave of a hand. "It's a cold dungeon of a place, filled with drafts and dust motes and wailing specters, and I abhor it."*

*The word haunted did not intrigue me, as it might have done another girl, for I knew a thing or two about such phenomena, of course, and in fact found them so commonplace as to be boring. "But Cheltingham is your home," I protested. "Your family lives there, after all."*

*Too late I recalled Michael's antipathy toward his elder brother, Gilbert, the future Duke of Cheltingham. He turned away quickly, ostensibly fascinated by a small figurine on the mantelpiece, but not before I saw the look of wretched misery flickering like dark flames in his eyes. "So they do," he said, trying to sound disinterested and failing utterly.*

*I rose from my hassock and went to lay a bold hand on his arm, whispering his name, wanting to offer him some small comfort, some reassurance.*



*He turned suddenly and took me into his arms and held me close, out of some secret desperation rather than passion. I felt him tremble against me as he struggled to contain his emotions, and although I am ashamed to admit it, I wanted him to go on holding me like that forever.*

*Alas, Michael remembered himself and released me within a few moments, and I stood tottering on the hearth, speechless and flushed, while he stepped away, shoving a hand through his rain-dampened hair. "I'm sorry, Kristina," he said. "I had no right to take such a liberty."*

*I did not speak; I could not have done so for anything, for my foolish heart was wedged into my throat, and my eyes were filled with the tears of a besotted virgin. Which, of course, is exactly what I was.*

*He apologized again and promptly took his leave, and I was left behind to adore him in hopeless solitude, as I would be many times in the future. But I knew nothing of heartache then, nothing of suffering.*

*I was so very innocent.*

*The following day, Phillie, he was back—Michael, I mean—to bring me a blue hair ribbon and invite me to go riding with him. I accepted happily and sent a maid to the stables to speak to one of the grooms. I would not ride Pan again, I had decided. The fractious beast could just stay in his stall until he'd learned to behave himself, as far as I was concerned. If he toppled over from old age first, so be it.*

*A fine palomino mare was brought around for my inspection—Mama had probably acquired it for one of her adventures—and I was more than pleased. Here was a mount that would not embarrass me.*

*I allowed Michael to assist me onto the saddle—being in the company of a gentleman, I did not sit astride as I normally would have done but perched demurely on the animal's back, hoping I looked pretty.*

*I was such a fool in those days, but I don't mind it so much now—looking back on that time, I mean. I was absurdly happy, you see, and the dazzling sunshine of that day will surely warm my heart whenever I remember how it was.*

*Michael came to call often in the weeks and months that followed, and on those occasions when he was occupied with other things, I missed him so badly that I could not eat or sleep. I might have gone to him, by means of my powers, but even then I was determined not to take unfair advantage of those around me.*

*Since then, as you might imagine when you've heard the whole account, I have often wished I had not been so noble.*

*Michael proposed marriage exactly eight weeks after our first rainy encounter on the road between Refuge and Cheltingham, and I accepted eagerly.*

*I did not need to go searching for Mama and Papa to tell them my news; they appeared that very night in the drawing room, where I was sipping tea and sketching wedding gowns for the dressmaker in the village.*



"Kristina Holbrook!" Mama said, so sternly that I started in my chair. I had not noticed my parents' arrival until she spoke, for they had long since foresworn the flamboyant entrances and exits Valerian generally employed.

"What is this nonsense about your marrying Cheltingham's younger son?" Papa demanded.

I held out my hand to show the promise ring—a sizable sapphire brought from some far-off country many years before, for Michael's great-grandmother to wear—and smiled. I was pleased to see my mother and father, and not even faintly intimidated by their obvious displeasure. "His name is Michael," I said, well aware that a certain stubborn light had come into my eyes. "And I love him very much."

"This will not do!" my father informed me. "The boy is a waste of skin—Cheltingham's been threatening to make a remittance man of him for years!"

"I shall be his salvation," I said.

I recall that my beautiful mother rolled her indigo-blue eyes at this pronouncement. "All he needs is the love of a good woman," she muttered in clear disdain.

"Well, it's true!" I cried, leaping to my feet.

Papa folded his arms. "Kristina, I forbid you to see this young man again. Do you understand? I forbid it."

"Don't be a fool, Colder," Mama said, nudging him lightly with one elbow. "Kristina is an adult. You cannot forbid her to do anything." She drew close to me and laid cool, calming white hands on my cheeks. "You are infatuated with the lad, darling," she reasoned. "But that will pass in time, I promise. In the meanwhile, you mustn't do anything rash."

I was to think of my mother's wise counsel often in the years to come, but at the time I thought she only wanted to spoil my fun and keep me a spinster forever.

"I'm tired of being alone," I said with some bitterness, pulling away and establishing a little distance between myself and the splendid vampires who had raised me with love. "Good heavens, I'm already older than most girls are when they marry."

"We're not saying you shouldn't take a mate, my dear," Mama said cautiously. Papa was glowering at me in silence, his hands in the pockets of his trousers, his sleeves rolled up for laboratory work, as always. "It's simply that Michael is—"

"A mortal?" I demanded rudely. "May I remind you, Mama, that Papa was human, too, when I was conceived?"

"Kristina," my father warned in a quiet voice I had long since learned to obey. "Have a care what you say. No one, not even you, is permitted to address your mother without respect."

I swallowed hard, closer to tears now than tantrums. "I'm sorry. It's just that I do love Michael and I want my own life. I've waited long enough."

We had the same conversation many times in the following weeks, but I was immovable. Finally,

*in despair, my parents gave up the cause of dissuading me from marrying Michael Bradford and told me sadly that they loved me, that I had only to summon them if I needed anything.*

*They did not attend the wedding, nor did Valerian, whom I had adopted as an uncle when I was very small. I wept secret tears, before and after the ceremony, because my cherished family refused to share my joy.*

*I confess, Phillie, that I went so far as to hire a man and woman from a neighboring village to pose as my parents, lest I be shamed before my bridegroom's kin. Yes, I know it was a cheap and even reprehensible deception, but what else should I have done, old friend? Should I have told the aging duke and duchess, the heir apparent, and my own proud young husband, before their friends and relations, that my mother and father never went abroad during the daylight hours because they were vampires?*

*Of course I could not. And I must close this letter now, dear, before it becomes too fat for its envelope. I shall write more soon, and I warn you, Phillie, I mean to leave nothing out. You must brace yourself for some ugly truths.*

*Love Always,*

*Kristina*

Max paused outside the door of Kristina's shop at exactly seven o'clock the next evening, loosened his tie, which felt like a noose, and asked himself what had made him think he had anything in common with this woman. He was an exceptional father, a good football coach, a loyal American, and an all around regular guy, but Kristina Holbrook was way out of his league. He wasn't even sure what to say to her.

He forced himself to cross the threshold, and the tinkling of the small brass bell heralding his entrance vibrated in his head like the toll of an enormous gong.

Kristina was standing behind the counter, wrapping an exquisite rosewood music box for an upscale woman with a stylish haircut. The silly thought flashed in Max's mind that Bree would be glad to hear that Kristina was no longer green.

"Hi, Max," she called with a friendly wave. "I'll be with you in a moment."

"No hurry," he said, and turned away to browse while Kristina and the customer finished their business.

He was pondering a grotesque bronze monkey when Kristina joined him a few minutes later.

"This might be perfect for Gweneth," he mused. "Christmas is coming, after all."

To Max's surprise, Kristina snatched up the monstrosity and carried it into the back room. She was pale when she returned, and there was a stubborn set to her jaw.

"That thing is not for sale," she said.

"Why not?" Max asked, puzzled. He didn't know Kristina well—there hadn't been time for that—but he *had* figured out that she wasn't given to mood swings.

"Because it's evil, that's why," Kristina replied, and immediately looked as though she regretted explaining.

"Evil?"

"Never mind, Max," she said, her silver eyes softening with some old sorrow as she linked her arm with his. "It's late, and I'm hungry and very anxious to lock up and leave."

He smiled down at her, noting the lingering sadness he saw in her delicate features and wondering what he could do, or say, to drive it away. "I tend to be too curious for my own good sometimes," he said. "Come on, let's go get something to eat."

He took her to his favorite restaurant, just off Pioneer Square, where a jazz band played on weekends and the food was Creole and Cajun. It was a loud jumble of waiters and customers, always jammed to the baseboards. The wooden floors were uneven, and the pipes in the rest rooms were exposed and you had to pass the supply closet to find them.

As they followed the hostess through the throng, Max felt a wild stab of doubt. What had he been thinking, bringing a woman like Kristina to a place like this? She was probably used to quiet, elegant restaurants with sweeping views and parchment menus with no prices.

He glanced down at her face, and his heart hurtled upward on a swell of relief because her smile was brilliant. She *liked* the noise, the crowds, the rickety tables, and the vinyl-backed chairs.

Glory be.

Max put a hand to the small of Kristina's back, and his touch was light but undeniably protective. Perhaps even a little possessive.

He wished to God he knew how to act.

Kristina was still smiling when they were seated at their table. Although there were plenty of well-dressed people in the restaurant, along with the jeans-and-T-shirt crowd, she stood out in her slim dress of glimmering gray velvet. Her hair was like polished onyx, catching the light, and Max wanted to slip his fingers through it, find out if it felt as silky-soft as it looked.

"This is great!" she shouted across the Formica tabletop, opening the menu.

"I'm glad you like it!" Max yelled back, smiling, but he was thinking about the music, which was so loud that he felt his liver quivering. Why hadn't he noticed that before, when he came here with the kids, or Gweneth, or his buddies from school and the gym? He reached for his own menu and pretended to examine it carefully, even though he always had the Seafood Etouffe.

Kristina ordered first and chose the special, Craw-Dad pie. It was impossible to talk with all the noise, and Max wondered if he hadn't subconsciously chosen the place for just that reason. He hadn't been this fascinated by a woman since he and Sandy had met and fallen in love when they were in college, and he was scared because the depths of what he felt were uncharted ones. Because he didn't want to say something stupid that would make her dislike him.

They ate, and Kristina smiled and moved her head in time with the music, and Max thought, *Even if this*

*is all there is, it's enough. Just let it last forever .*

It didn't, of course. They finished their meal, Max paid the bill, and they left the restaurant, making their way through a crowd of new customers swelling in from the sidewalk.

"Nice night," Max said.

Kristina pulled her camel-hair coat closer and laughed. "I was about to say it was unseasonably cold, even for the first of November."

Max debated with himself. Should he slip an arm around her, or was it too soon to touch her at all? "Well," he said from the horns of his dilemma, determined to strike a positive note, "at least the stars are out."

"You're an optimist, Max Kilcarragh," Kristina told him as he took her hand and pulled her across the street, between honking cabs, smoking clunkers with dragging mufflers, and BMWs polished to a blinding shine.

They reached the opposite sidewalk safely, but Max didn't let go of Kristina's hand. There were a lot of pan-handlers on the street, he reasoned, and even though most of the poor devils were harmless, you couldn't be too careful. Not these days.

It was ironic, his thinking thoughts like that when Kristina had just accused him of being an optimist. "What's wrong with looking on the bright side?" he asked as they approached the parking lot where he'd parked the Blazer earlier.

Her expression was serious in the neon glow of Pioneer Square and the streetlights. "It can be so dazzling that it blinds you, that's what," she said.

Frowning, Max opened the passenger door, helped Kristina in, and walked around to the other side. He was behind the wheel, with the engine started, when he spoke again. "Where did that come from?" he asked.

She settled back against the seat with a sigh so deep and so weary that Max wanted to put his arms around her. Even more than he had before, that is. "I found some old letters in the attic the other day," she said. "I guess they've brought back a few feelings I thought I'd already dealt with."

"The past can sneak up on a person, all right," Max agreed, switching on the lights and pulling out into the brisk Friday-night traffic. "Sometimes it's tough to stay in the present."

"Yes," Kristina said, turning her head and looking at him with those spectacular gray eyes of hers. They reminded Max of the sparklers he always bought for the kids on the Fourth of July. "You're a nice guy, Max Kilcarragh."

"Thanks," he answered with a touch of regret in his voice. "Just once, though, I'd like some woman to say I was—"

"What?" she prompted, grinning, as they drove up one of Seattle's many one-way streets.

"Dangerous," Max admitted with a grin of his own. "I'd like for mothers to say to their daughters, 'Watch out for that one. He's trouble.'"

Kristina's laughter pealed through the car like the chiming of a celebratory bell. "No, you wouldn't," she said when she'd calmed herself a little. "You're sweet and you're strong and you're good, and trouble, my friend, is definitely *not* your middle name."

Max was mildly insulted. "You make me sound like a real wimp, to use today's vernacular."

She touched his arm, and Max felt the proverbial electric shock snake through his veins and explode in his biceps. "Never," she said quietly. "Don't you understand, Max? You're the complete opposite of a wimp. You're a genuine, grown-up, secure-in-his-masculinity *man* ."

He was grateful that it was dark inside the Blazer, because he blushed. He hadn't reacted quite like that since the beginning of adolescence, when his hormones, dormant one moment, had been running amok the next.

"Max?" She wasn't going to give him time to think of something clever to say, which was just as well, because it might have taken the rest of his life.

He cleared his throat. "Yeah?"

Kristina's fingers brushed the side of his face, so lightly, so briefly, that he was afraid he'd only dreamed it. "I'm not what you think I am."

Max turned his head, smiling with his eyes as well as his mouth. "You used to be a man," he teased. "You were born on another planet." He snapped his fingers, as if struck by a sudden revelation. "I've got it. Bree was right—you're a witch."

Kristina's silver eyes shimmered, and when she answered, her voice was hardly more than a whisper. "Close," she said. "You almost guessed it, Max."

## CHAPTER 4

Kristina turned in the passenger seat of Max's car and regarded him solemnly, so he'd know she hadn't been joking when she'd said his guess that she was a witch was close to the truth. Their brief evening together was about to end, she thought with dismal resignation, and once he'd heard what she had to say, there wouldn't be another date.

The thought stirred an unbearable sadness in Kristina. How had she come to want so much from this man, so soon?

Max glanced at her, navigating the traffic with a skill born of long practice. He was a good driver, yet another trait Kristina admired in him, for she herself had never really gotten the knack of motoring. Probably because of her nineteenth-century beginnings, she still yearned for horse-drawn carriages and spirited riding ponies.

"What is it?" he prompted in a gentle voice.

Kristina sighed. "I'm different," she said.

Max kept driving, but he was plainly listening, waiting for her to go on. There was something very nurturing in his attentiveness, something Kristina had craved all her adult life, without being aware of it until that moment.

She folded her arms, gnawed briefly on her lower lip.

"A moving vehicle is hardly the place to discuss something like this," she observed, thinking aloud more than addressing Max in any specific way. "Could we go to my place for coffee?"

"I'd like that," Max answered simply, apparently ascribing no other meaning to the invitation, as many men might have done. Another point in his favor: He didn't think buying dinner entitled him to spend the rest of the night in Kristina's bed.

She murmured directions, and they soon pulled into the driveway of her house. Without thinking, she turned on both the interior and exterior lights with the flip of a mental switch. Despite her unique heritage, or perhaps because of it, Kristina did not care for dark places.

A bright glow spilled around them, pouring through virtually every window. Max, in the midst of helping Kristina out of the Blazer, merely grinned. "These electronic motion-detectors are great, aren't they?"

Kristina nodded in reply. Her resolve to tell all was already waning. The deep, unutterable loneliness that had plagued her since her disastrous marriage to Michael would surely return, once Max had taken his inevitable leave, and she dreaded that empty ache the way mortals dreaded death.

She did not normally lock her front door; vampires and other immortals could not be kept out by such simple means, and she was more than a match for human criminals. Kristina gave a moment of thought to a certain doorstop on display at the shop, an ugly brass monkey that had once been a living, breathing man—a thief and a would-be rapist. He'd broken into her store one night when she was working late, going over the books, and threatened her with a knife. She'd dealt with him accordingly.

One of these days, of course, she would have to change him back and hand him over to the authorities. For the time being, though, he could remain a brass monkey, quietly contemplating the error of his ways.

Kristina pretended to use a key, for Max's benefit, and stepped into the house. "This way," she said, and set out for the kitchen.

Max followed. "This is a beautiful place," he remarked as they passed through the large living room, with its elegantly faded Persian rugs and French antique furniture.

"Thank you," Kristina replied, proud of her possessions, which she had gathered from all over the world, in nearly a century of travel. "That writing desk in the corner next to the fireplace belonged to Marie Antoinette." Naturally she did not add that Valerian, whom Max knew only as a neighbor and a magician, had been personally acquainted with the queen and indeed been a member of her court until, inevitably, he'd managed to offend her.

Max gave a low whistle of appreciation, pausing to examine the workmanship of the piece, and then they proceeded into the kitchen, where lights blazed and the large refrigerator, with its stainless-steel door, hummed.

"Have a seat," Kristina said, gesturing toward the tall stools lining the breakfast bar, which overlooked

the family room. It was there that she exercised, read, and occasionally watched television. "What will you have—coffee or tea?"

He perched on one of the stools, looking a little awkward there because of his size, though he was not an ungainly man.

"Coffee sounds good," he said quietly, watching her. He was surely waiting for her to confide in him, as she had promised to do earlier, but he didn't press. There was something so restful about him, so easy. With Max, Kristina thought, there would be no games, no subterfuge, no guessing. He was exactly who he appeared to be.

She sighed inwardly, envying him a little. If she were ever so open about herself, her life would become a circus in short order. "Regular or decaf?" she asked in order to fill the silence, comfortable though it was, opening cupboard doors and taking down cups with brisk clatters and clinks.

"Regular," he answered with a smile in his voice. "Nothing keeps me awake."

A vivid image came to Kristina's mind, unbidden and fierce; she saw herself and Max making love, and sudden heat suffused her, beginning in the very core of her being, in regions at once physical and spiritual, and surging to the surface to throb beneath her skin. She was very glad that her back was turned to Max, that he couldn't see her high color or trembling hands. "You're lucky," she said, hoping she sounded even remotely normal.

"Kristina." Max spoke calmly but firmly, causing her to turn toward him before she'd thought about it. "What is your terrible secret?"

She hesitated, imagining herself saying, "Well, both my parents are vampires, you see. I'm a hundred and thirty years old, and I have magical powers. Except for those things, I'm perfectly normal."

Her considerable courage failed her in that instant, and she said the first thing that came to mind. "I was married once."

Hardly a shocking confession in this day and age, she reflected, wishing she'd thought of something more dramatic.

Max shrugged, his hands still resting comfortably on the countertop, fingers loosely intertwined. "So was I," he said.

The four-cup coffeemaker began to chortle and hiss. "I know," Kristina answered, thinking of his beautiful children, the little girls she'd seen at Daisy and Valerian's Halloween party. "Please—tell me about her."

"I thought we were going to talk about you." It was an unvarnished statement, with no underlying meaning and no hint of secrecy or irritation.

"We will," Kristina said. She felt shame, because she wasn't sure she could manage complete honesty with this man. Not if it meant driving him away.

"Her name was Sandy," Max said, and a certain sorrow came into his brown eyes, as though he were looking inward, seeing some tragic scene. And no doubt he was. "She was killed two years ago, just before Christmas, in a car accident."



Kristina felt his pain in a shattering rush, making it her own, and steadied herself by moving close to the breakfast bar and grasping the counter's edge in both hands. "You loved her," she said. It wasn't a question, or an accusation, or a protest. Just a plain fact.

"Yes," Max answered. "We were very happy together. I met Sandy in college, and we were together from then on."

The coffee had finished brewing, but Kristina did not move to fill the cups. "I'm sorry," she said and then blushed again. "Not that you were happy, of course—I only meant—"

Max smiled and reached over to brush calloused fingertips across the backs of her knuckles. "Relax, Kristina," he said. "I know what you meant."

She looked down at his hand, now resting lightly upon hers, and marveled that such an innocent contact could rouse so many violent sensations. Nerve endings crackled in every part of Kristina's body, as if she'd grasped a lightning bolt, and her heart felt like a smooth stone, skittering over ice.

"It's just that—well—I don't want to say the wrong thing," she admitted. That much, at least, was true. Kristina could not remember a time when making a good impression had been so important to her.

"I don't think you could," he replied. "You have to be the most elegant, well-spoken woman I have ever met." With that, Max got off the stool, came around the end of the breakfast bar, and took Kristina's arm. Once he'd seated her at the table in the family room, he went back to the kitchen, poured coffee into the two cups Kristina had gotten out earlier, and then rejoined her.

These small ordinary courtesies pleased her to a ridiculous degree, and so did the compliment. In all her long life Kristina had never known a man quite like Max Kilcarragh. She thanked him for bringing the coffee, lowering her eyes, feeling shy and awkward and anything but well spoken.

"I'd like to see you again, Kristina," Max said when a long but untroubled silence had unfurled between them.

Kristina met his eyes, swallowed hard. *Tell him*, commanded some sensible inner voice, but she couldn't bring herself to comply. "I'm a pretty good cook," she said. "Would you like to come to dinner tomorrow night with the girls?"

He grinned. "Just tell me what time to be here," he said.

"Seven-thirty?" Kristina replied, even as she called herself a reckless fool. It was bad enough to risk her own heart, but there was much more at stake than that. Through her, Max and his children would be exposed to creatures they couldn't begin to imagine—vampires and warlocks for certain, and possibly other monsters, too. She did not have the right to unleash such forces, she knew that, and yet she seemed unable to stop herself.

"Seven-thirty," Max confirmed. Then, glancing at his watch, he sighed and rose from his chair. "I'd better go. It's a school night, and I don't want to keep the babysitter out late."

Kristina stood up, too, and walked with him to the front door. There he kissed her gently on the forehead, said good night, and went out. She watched until he'd gotten into the Blazer and backed out of the driveway, her heart brimming with contradictions—guilt, longing, sorrow, and hope.

Once Max was gone, Kristina climbed the stairs to her bedroom and took the packet containing her old letters to Phillie, her governess, from the top drawer of her writing desk. Then, after mentally shutting off all the lights in the house, except for the lamp beside her chintz-covered chaise lounge, she sat down and began to read...

*My dearest Phillie,*

*I am certain that my last letter must have caused you considerable worry, and I do regret any anxiety you may have felt while waiting for me to continue my tale.*

*Michael and I were married in the family chapel at Cheltingham, under a shower of colors from the splendid medieval windows of stained glass that grace the wall behind the altar. My fraudulent "parents," engaged by Valerian (because I pleaded and wept until he gave in), sat on the bride's side of the church, along with the servants from Refuge and a few mortal friends I'd managed to make along the way. They were well behaved and fashionably dressed, this hired mother and father, but given the circles Valerian travels in, I shudder even now to think who, or what, they might have been.*

*But that is beside the point. Our vows were exchanged, and there was music and great merriment on the south lawn of Cheltingham, my new home, where pavilions of silk had been erected for the occasion. Never, since the days of the dissolute Romans, has there ever been so much food and wine arrayed in one place. There was dancing and laughter, and I felt welcome and wanted, despite the fact that most of the wedding guests had been invited by Michael's family. I actually believed that I belonged, at long last.*

*After the sun went down, I began to look for Mama and Papa and Valerian, though I knew none of them would appear. They did not approve of the marriage, and besides, they were notably different from everyone else and would have attracted unwanted attention.*

*Still, I was wretchedly disappointed.*

*Michael's brother, Gilbert, Lord Cheltingham, had arranged for fireworks. When the last of the day's light had truly gone, and only the stars and the red and blue and yellow Chinese lanterns suspended from wires crisscrossing the lawn offered any illumination at all, Gilbert gave the order for the fuses to be lit.*

*Oh, Phillie, it was splendid! The sky was black and cloudless, and suddenly there were great bursts of brilliantly colored light blooming overhead, like massive celestial flowers. I was awestruck, my arm linked with Michael's as we, like everyone else, gazed up at that incredible spectacle.*

*Michael was a bit drunk by then, for he and his friends had been offering toasts to marital bliss ever since the ceremony ended, but I didn't think much of it until later. I had only one concern, as I have told you, and that was the marked absence of my own, true family.*

*The fireworks ended, and Michael staggered off somewhere, leaving me quite alone. Before I knew what to make of that—it was our wedding night, after all, and I had been looking forward to being deflowered, though I admit I was fearful, too—an argument erupted between my bridegroom and one of his guests.*

*I could not have guessed then how serious the repercussions of what seemed like a simple disagreement would turn out to be. Gilbert broke up the shouting match before it could become a brawl, and gave his younger brother a subtle push in my direction.*

*I suppose it is indelicate to speak of what happened next, but I must if I am to tell the story in an accurate fashion. Michael put his arm around my waist and guided me toward the darkened house, with only a candle, plucked from one of the Chinese lanterns, to guide our steps.*

*I was shivering with excitement and the peculiar sort of dread all innocent brides must feel, and by the time we had entered the castle and gained Michael's room on the second floor, my husband had sobered considerably.*

*In light of future events, I suppose it would make more sense if the evening had brought disillusion, even pain, but it did not. I loved Michael thoroughly, and I believe he felt the same toward me, insofar as he was capable of tender sentiments. He was uncommonly gentle as he removed my wedding gown and all the many troublesome garments beneath, each in its turn and its own good time. He caressed me, and whispered pretty words, and though there was some hurt when, at last, he took me as a husband takes a wife, pleasure soon followed. Am I wanton, Phillie? I enjoyed the things Michael did to me in his bed that night—I thrashed upon the mattress. I moaned when he promised that strange, sweet satisfaction I craved without understanding, cried out when at long last he gave it.*

*I understood, after that introduction to marriage, the tremendous passion my parents felt for each other, a caring that transcended time and space, existing in a dimension of its own creation. I actually believed, in my naïveté, that Michael and I shared such a love.*

*When I awakened, my bridegroom was gone, though it was not yet dawn. I had sublimated my powers in my desire to be human, but that morning my intuition would not be ignored. I threw back the covers, full of a sick and sudden terror, and pulled on my silk wrapper. I might have gone to him then, disregarding all the care I had taken to hide my magic, but for the sound of a single shot echoing through the air.*

*I froze, there in the bedroom I was to share with my husband while the whole terrible scene unfolded before my eyes, as clearly as if I'd been on that fog-shrouded hillside to witness the tragedy...*

"And still the rascal wasn't dead," said an imperious male voice, startling Kristina out of the lost world of the letter. "More's the pity."

Kristina folded the fragile vellum pages carefully and put them aside on the lamp table. Her father, Calder Holbrook, stood at the foot of the chaise, looking both spectacular and miserable in his formal evening clothes. He fiddled with one of his diamond cufflinks—a gift from her mother, of course, since he would never have purchased or conjured such a frippery for himself—and glowered down at his daughter.

"Mother often appears unannounced," Kristina said, with a wry, affectionate smile, while he took off his top hat and laid aside his heavy silk cape. "Valerian, too. But this isn't like you, Papa. Is something wrong?"

He was beside her in much less than an instant, bending to kiss the top of her head in greeting. "I simply wanted to look in on you, that's all," he said, drawing up another chair to sit down. Calder glanced uneasily at the letter Kristina had been immersed in when he arrived. "I didn't mean to intrude, but your thoughts were so plain that you might as well have been reading those words into a bullhorn."

Kristina smiled. She did not want to discuss the letter. "How is Mama? Or should I ask *where* is Mama?"

Calder sighed, looking exasperated. "There is a ball tonight, to honor Dimity. I have promised to meet your mother there, though I dislike the prospect heartily."

She laughed. "If it weren't for Mama," she pointed out, "you would never leave that laboratory of yours, except to feed. Tell me, Papa—have you found what you've been looking for all these years?"

At the mention of his singular quest—to find a means of curing vampirism, while retaining the best of that creature's powers—Calder Holbrook beamed, and Kristina was struck by how handsome he was, with his dark hair and patrician features. He had been a doctor in mortal life, and a good one, serving in the American Civil War. He'd become a vampire, according to her mother, because he wanted to explore a blood-drinker's singular gifts and use them, if possible, for the good of his beloved humans. Kristina knew that had only been part of the reason; Calder adored Maeve and could not have borne being parted from her.

"I am making progress," he said.

Kristina thought of Max and his children, and the babies she wanted so much but would probably never have. "If you come across a way to make me normal, let me know, will you?"

Calder's smile faded to an expression of intense concern. "Normal?" he echoed. "You of all people, Kristina, should know that no such blissful state exists." He regarded her even more closely. "You've met someone. A mortal."

There was no sense in denying it. Vampires were perceptive creatures, and they read the secrets of those with lesser powers easily. "Yes," Kristina admitted, bracing herself for the same sort of censure she'd gotten when she fell in love with Michael, over a century before. "His name is Max Kilcarragh," she said almost defiantly, "and he's a high school football coach."

To her surprise, Calder looked excited, even happy. "That's wonderful!" he enthused. "Just wait until I tell your mother."

"Tell her mother what?" demanded Maeve Tremayne Holbrook, appearing out of nowhere in typical fashion. She too was dressed for Dimity's ball, in a white gown shimmering with thousands of tiny diamonds. Her black hair, showing not a strand of gray, flowed down her back in a gleaming fall of curls, and she stood imperially erect, as always, with her hands resting on her hips.

"Kristina has fallen in love," Calder announced before his daughter could move, let alone offer a greeting. He was already on his feet, in that quicker-than-a-wink way vampires had, gazing with fond triumph upon his wife.

The Queen of all Vampires turned slightly, to regard her daughter with thoughtful, ink-blue eyes. In a trice she'd read the complete story from Kristina's mind, just as Calder had moments before.

Kristina loved both her parents beyond measure, but she resented the lack of privacy their tremendous powers afforded her. Rising at last from the chaise, she faced her mother, her stance as regal, in its way, as Maeve's own. "I hope neither of you will take it upon yourselves to interfere," she said.

As if she had any recourse should these two magnificently beautiful monsters decide to turn her entire life inside out and upside down! Her magic, though formidable by mortal standards, was nothing in comparison to theirs. They could travel back in time, for one thing, which meant they could change the present significantly, and that was only the beginning of their abilities.

Maeve drew herself up, looking more queenlike than ever. "If we didn't step in when you married that wretch Michael," she pointed out, "what makes you think we would involve ourselves in this new romance?"

"It isn't a romance," Kristina said wearily.

Calder cleared his throat to get his wife's attention and offered his arm in that elegant, old-fashioned way so rare in modern times. "We are late for the ball, are we not?" he inquired.

The tension was broken, for both Maeve and Kristina knew he had no wish to attend the event, and they laughed.

Maeve linked her arm with Calder's. "So we are," she said, smiling up at him in plain adoration. A moment later her gaze shifted to Kristina. "We are not through discussing this situation," she warned. Then, in the merest shadow of a moment, the two vampires vanished.

Kristina felt more alone than ever. She was neither vampire nor mortal, and in certain ways both worlds were closed to her because of that.

She glanced back at the letter she had been reading before her father's arrival, but she suddenly felt too downhearted to go back to it. She'd been kidding herself, inviting Max and his daughters to dinner, letting her heart go wandering where it would, dreaming dreams that could never come true.

What had she been thinking of? Her attraction to Max Kilcarragh meant trouble at best and, at worst, absolute calamity for all of them.

Tomorrow, Kristina promised herself, she would telephone Max, make up some excuse, call the whole thing off before any harm had been done.

The trouble was, she suspected that it was already too late.

"Daddy?"

Max was standing in front of the living room fireplace, staring at a framed photograph of Sandy, the children, and himself, and he turned at the sound of his youngest daughter's voice.

Bree was in the doorway, clad in pink footed pajamas, her dark hair a-tumble, clasping her beloved teddy bear in one arm.

"What is it, sweetheart?" he asked. "Bad dream?"

Bree shook her head. "How long till Christmas?" she asked.

Max shoved a hand through his hair, feeling mildly exasperated. Halloween was barely over, and Thanksgiving was almost a month off, but the commercials on TV were already pushing toys at every opportunity. "It's quite a while," he answered, crossing the room to lift the child into his arms, teddy bear and all. "Why?"

"I have to get in touch with Santa Claus," Bree said with the special urgency of a four-year-old. "Do you think we could send him a fax?"

Max grinned, already mounting the stairs, Bree solid in his arms. "When I was a kid," he said, "we just wrote the old boy a letter."

"A fax is quicker," Bree reasoned. "Besides, this is an emergency."

He wondered where she'd picked up a fancy word like *emergency*, but only for a moment. Bree was smart, like her sister, and she spent most of her time with adults. "Okay," he said. "You tell me what you want to say, and I'll get a message to the North Pole first thing in the morning. There's a fax machine in the office at school."

They had reached the upstairs hallway. Bree yawned in spite of herself, then rested her head on Max's shoulder. "Ask Santa to please bring back Mommy," she said. She yawned again, more broadly. "Do you know his number?"

Max could barely speak. He'd been ambushed by his emotions again; his throat was thick with tears he dared not shed, and his eyes burned. Where had Bree gotten the idea of asking for something like that? She'd been barely two when the accident happened and couldn't possibly remember Sandy the way Eliette did. "Sure," he said gruffly. "I know his number. But there's a problem here, Button."

Bree raised her head and looked at him with Sandy's eyes. "What?"

Max swallowed hard and blinked. "Nobody can bring Mommy back, honey. Not even Santa."

"Oh," Bree said.

"Shhh," he whispered, carrying the child into the room she shared with Eliette, putting her gently back into bed, tucking the covers under her chin and kissing her forehead. "You don't want to wake your sister, do you?"

Bree shook her head. "What do you want Santa to bring you, Daddy?" she asked, barely breathing the words.

Max thought of Kristina Holbrook. Try as he might, he couldn't imagine her living in this spacious but essentially ordinary house, sharing his life, helping to raise two little girls. Nor could he picture her accompanying him to high school football games and social gatherings for the faculty members.

"I've got everything I want," he answered. "Now go back to sleep."

Obediently Bree closed her eyes and snuggled down into her pillow with a soft sigh. Max checked Eliette, who was sleeping soundly, and then slipped out of the room, closing the door softly behind him.



In the hallway he stood still, collecting himself. He'd told Bree he had everything he wanted—two fantastic kids called him Daddy, his health was good, his extended family really cared, and he worked at a job he loved—but he had to admit, at least to himself, that he'd stretched the truth a little. For a year after the accident he'd concentrated on just getting through the days and nights without cracking up from grief. Then, at his friends' insistence, he'd started to date again.

God, that had been terrible at first. He'd felt awkward and somehow guilty, as though he were cheating on Sandy. Dating had become tolerable, though, little by little, and then he'd actually begun to enjoy it. He hadn't expected to care deeply about any woman, ever again, however. He'd thought he'd lost the capacity for the kind of passionate, romantic love he and Sandy had shared.

Now, after one evening with Kristina, he wondered.

He made his way down the hall to his own room. They'd moved to this house after Sandy's funeral, when the memories at the condo had become too much for him and for Eliette, and no one had ever slept in his new bed except him. He was grateful now that there were no memories lurking there, because that night it wasn't Sandy he was thinking about, it was Kristina.

Max hauled his sweater off over his head and tossed it onto a chair. He'd been faithful to Sandy, from the day he met her, and even though he'd dated several women in the last year, he'd never gone to bed with any of them. Now he wanted someone else, and the fact was difficult to face and even harder to square with his personal code.

He took off the rest of his clothes and stepped into his bathroom, reaching for the shower spigot. After just a moment's hesitation, Max turned on the cold water, full blast, and stepped under the spray.

The next morning, despite a restless night, rife with disturbing dreams, things looked brighter to Kristina. She was simply cooking a meal for Max, not marrying him and promising to raise his children, and she'd made too much of the whole matter. Surely there was no danger from the supernatural world, either—the vast majority of mortals lived their whole lives without encountering anything but other human beings.

Coolly, while she got ready to go to the shop, Kristina considered the menu for that evening's meal.

Pasta, she decided, donning a loose dress of rose-colored silk, purchased on a buying trip to the Orient. After studying her reflection in the vanity mirror, she added a long strand of pearls and touched her lips with soft pink lipstick.

A person had to keep things in perspective, that was all, she thought. Max was an attractive man, and there was no denying that she was drawn to him, but they really didn't have much in common, and after a few dates they would probably lose interest in each other.

Half an hour later Kristina entered the shop. The weather was cold, but the day was unusually bright for Seattle in November, and as she was opening the cash register, a stray beam of sunshine struck the brass doorstep.

Kristina frowned. Valerian had warned her that such flamboyant spells were unpredictable; he'd said that the ugly monkey might turn back into a criminal at an inconvenient moment. Suppose that happened, he'd asked, and her magic failed, as magic sometimes will, just when she needed it most?



She took a moment to ponder again the foibles of the justice system, which would probably set the man free to hurt other, more defenseless people, and promptly put the whole matter out of her mind.

Business was brisk that morning, with Christmas just appearing on the far horizon. By noon Kristina had sold a set of sterling silver combs, a lacquered bureau made in China in the eighteenth century, and a painting of two young girls in frilly gowns, weaving flower crowns in a Victorian garden.

She was just beginning to think about lunch when Daisy came in, wearing her customary jeans, letterman's jacket, T-shirt, sneakers, and baseball cap. It amused Kristina that, for all his sophistication and incredible power, Valerian loved this particular woman. Every time she thought about it, in fact, she gave thanks for his good judgment.

"I hope that contains food," Kristina said, indicating the large, greasy bag Daisy carried with a nod of her head.

Daisy smiled. "Fish and chips," she said. "With extra tartar sauce."

"Let me at it," Kristina answered. She put the *Closed* sign in the window, locked the door, and led the way to the back room, where a gracious old table stood, surrounded by crates and boxes.

"I resent the fact that you can eat stuff like this without worrying about the fat content," Daisy said a few minutes later, holding up a french fry as Exhibit A. "Some of us can actually gain weight from what we eat!"

Kristina didn't laugh, as she might have done another time. Her thoughts had taken a serious turn again, because food had reminded her that Max and his daughters were coming to her house for dinner that night. "You and Valerian seem to be making your relationship work," she mused, swirling a piece of deep-fried fish in the tartar sauce. "Even though he's immortal and you're human."

Daisy widened her eyes at Kristina in mock surprise. "Now, there's a quick change of subject," she said. Then she sighed in a way that revealed deep contentment and caused a flash of envy in Kristina. Her smile was dreamy and faintly wicked. "Yeah," she went on after a moment of mysterious reflection. "It works, all right."

"How?" Kristina pressed. "You're so different from each other."

"An understatement if I've ever heard one. You know the story, Kris," Daisy replied gently. "It was fate. Valerian and I have been together before, in other lifetimes and all that mystical stuff." She paused and grinned devilishly. "Of course, it helps that the sex is only terrific."

Kristina blushed. "I don't even want to know about that, so don't tell me."

Daisy laughed. "Okay, I won't."

"It doesn't bother you that he—that he's a vampire?"

"I think of it as a mixed marriage," Daisy said, eyes twinkling. "As for the thing about his having to stay out of the sun, well, I just tell people my husband works the graveyard shift."

Kristina thought about Max again—actually, she'd been thinking about him all along, on some level—and

tried to imagine making a life with him. It seemed impossible, given the fact that he was a down-to-earth sort of guy who probably didn't believe that vampires and other such creatures existed, outside of movies and books. Meeting up with one, an inevitability if he spent much time with her, would probably have him rushing out to consult the nearest mental health professional.

And he certainly wouldn't want his children to encounter such monsters.

Suddenly tears sprang to Kristina's eyes, and she covered her face with both hands and sobbed.

"What's the matter?" Daisy asked quickly, full of concern. "Kris, what is it?"

Kristina struggled to compose herself, but the effort was a failure. "The most awful thing has happened," she wailed. "I've met a wonderful man, and I think I'm falling in love with him!"

Daisy raised her eyebrows in mock horror. "That's terrible," she teased. Then she went to the water cooler, filled a paper cup, and brought it back to the table for Kristina. "Drink up, kiddo," she said. "There's no 'I think' about it. You're crazy about the guy, whoever he is. And all I can say is, it's about time."

## CHAPTER 5

Max surveyed his varsity football squad with pride as they finished their daily laps and trotted off the field toward the locker rooms. None of them would ever play college ball, let alone get a crack at the pros, but they were good kids who knew how to set goals, think on their feet, and work as a team. To Max, implanting those qualities in his students was the most important part of his job. Winning was a secondary consideration, as far as he was concerned, but because the boys were so focused and so dedicated, they took their share of games.

Max himself had been preoccupied for much of that day—once he'd gotten Eliette and Bree off to school and play group respectively, he'd found his thoughts continually turning to Kristina Holbrook. Although he loved his children more than his own life, he found himself wishing they weren't invited to that night's dinner.

It wasn't that he was ashamed of his daughters or afraid they would misbehave. It was pure selfishness on his part; he wanted Kristina to himself, wanted to concentrate on getting to know her, with no distractions.

Inside the locker room, Max ignored the noise, towel-snapping, and good-natured bickering—it was standard adolescent stuff—and walked through to his office. A pink message slip lay on his desk amid the general clutter of diagrams of potential plays, evaluation forms, magazines and mail.

Max picked it up, feeling a small tremor of fear as he did so. Since the accident, and Sandy's instantaneous death, he had been well aware of the fragility of human life. On some level he was always braced for disaster, and knew it could come from any direction. Even a simple telephone message could sometimes shake him up.

"Dr. Kwo called," one of the clerks in the high school's reception office had written in a neat, loopy hand. "Don't forget your appointment."

Max realized that he *had* forgotten, probably because he'd been thinking about Kristina all day. He glanced at his watch and considered foregoing the visit to his chiropractor because he still had to pick the girls up and get them ready to go out again. Then he thought of the pain he might suffer in his neck and shoulders—residual effects of the wreck, after which he had spent more than a month in the hospital—and rummaged for the telephone.

Fortunately his mother, who was in her third year of law school at the University of Washington, happened to be at home. She agreed to collect Bree and Eliette, take them to Max's place, and wait with them until he arrived.

He thanked her with genuine sincerity—if it hadn't been for his mother and Gweneth and Elaine, Sandy's sister, the transition to single parent would have been even more difficult and wrenching than it was.

When he arrived at his chiropractor's professional building, Stan Kwo was ready for him. They were old friends, having gone to college together, and Max had been visiting Stan's office ever since the accident. Kwo's treatments, which he called adjustments, had enabled Max to recover without an undue dependence on drugs. He had begun with three adjustments per week and was now down to a couple of sessions a month.

"You seem to be doing well," Stan observed, watching Max through the lenses of his wire-rimmed glasses. "The last few years have been rough, but maybe now you are coming out on the other side of your grief?"

Max sighed, remembering the way Bree's inquiry about faxing Santa Claus had broadsided him the night before. "Sometimes I think so," he agreed. "Other times?" He shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe you never get over it completely."

"Maybe not," Stan allowed. "But I see something new in you, old buddy. There's a light in the back of your eyes that hasn't been there since before Sandy died."

Because of Kristina, Max thought, but he wasn't ready to talk about her yet, even with a close friend. Things were still delicate, and he sensed in Kristina a reluctance to let down her guard that was equal to, or even greater than, his own trepidation. "One day at a time, allowing for a step back every once in a while, things get better," he said.

Stan slapped him on the shoulder. "See you again in two weeks. I'll have Doreen call with a reminder. And how about a game of racquetball one of these evenings?"

Max grinned. "Sounds good," he said and took his leave.

Traffic was thick, since it was the height of the rush hour, but Max was in no hurry. He'd called the house on his cell phone as soon as he climbed into the Blazer, and the kids were home, having milk and fruit with their grandmother, Alison Kilcarragh, future attorney.

When Max pulled into the driveway, Bree burst out of the house to hurl herself toward him, her little face bright with joy. He swept her up in his arms and swung her around once, before planting a smacking kiss on her forehead. "Hi, Monkey," he said. "How's my girl?"

Bree wrapped her arms around Max's neck and held on tightly. "I'm being *really* good," she said. "Because Santa Claus is coming to this very house!"

Max hoped they weren't going to have a discussion like the one the night before; he wasn't sure he could handle explaining again that Santa couldn't bring Sandy back. "I'd say it's a safe bet that he'll show up," he answered. "But Christmas is still a ways off. Why don't we think about Thanksgiving first? Aren't you painting turkeys or pilgrims at play group?"

They had reached the gaping front door, where Eliette stood, reticent and serious. Max suspected his elder daughter was already wise to the Santa gambit and hoped she wouldn't spill the beans to her little sister. Kids had to give up believing in magic all too soon, he reflected, saddened by the thought. Maybe he'd go to the video store, a week or two after Thanksgiving, and rent a copy of *Miracle on 34th Street*...

"Can we go out for pizza tonight?" Eliette asked as they went inside.

Max ruffled her mop of curly brown hair. "Sorry, sweetnik," he replied. "We're invited to have dinner with a friend of mine."

Eliette wrinkled her freckled nose. "Who?"

Max's mom appeared in the doorway that led to the dining room, chin-length silver hair sleekly cut, clad in a beige wool skirt, a long maroon sweater, and high boots. Her arms were folded and her brown eyes were twinkling.

"Yeah," she said with an inquisitive smile. "Who?"

"Her name is Kristina Holbrook," Max replied, setting Bree down and getting out of his jacket. He met Eliette's piercing gaze. "You met her the other night at the Halloween party. She was dressed as a witch."

"The green lady!" Bree crowed, obviously delighted.

Eliette said nothing, but merely looked thoughtful. She was a very bright kid, and damnably perceptive at times. Max suspected there was a wicked-stepmother scenario going on in that little head.

"I take it she's only green when she's dressed as a witch?" Alison inquired of her son, putting an arm around Eliette and holding the child close against her side for a moment. Perception ran in the family, at least on the female side.

Max gave his mother a look in reply and rubbed the back of his neck with one hand. Again he wished he'd hired a sitter, or arranged for the girls to spend the evening with Gweneth or Elaine. Alison had class that night, had probably brought her textbooks along, so that she could go straight to school.

"I don't want to go," Eliette announced. "To dinner, I mean."

Here was a convenient out, but Max's instincts told him not to take it. In his experience, things that seemed easy in the beginning often turned into major snags later on. He stifled Bree's rising protest by laying a gentle hand on top of her head and addressed the eldest of his daughters.

"Why not?"

"Because my stomach hurts."

Max glanced at Alison, but her expression said, *You're on your own with this one* .

"Is that really true," he began, "or are you just trying to get out of going to dinner at Ms. Holbrook's place?"

Eliette lowered her gaze for a moment. She was an honest child, and Max could usually get to the bottom of whatever happened to be bugging her by simply asking a few direct questions. He sat down on the lower part of the curved stairway and made room beside him for Eliette. Alison took Bree by the hand and led her back toward the kitchen.

"It's really true," Eliette said in a very small voice.

Max put an arm around his daughter. "Are you just nervous, or do you figure you're coming down with something?"

Eliette scooted a little closer to her father and looked up at him with wide, worried eyes. "I don't know," she confessed.

Max gave her a gentle squeeze. "Fair enough," he said. "Ms. Holbrook is a very nice person, you know. There's no need to be afraid of her."

"She's not Mommy," Eliette pointed out.

Another stab of mingled pain and guilt struck Max's heart and splintered into shards. "No," he said gruffly. "Mommy's gone, and there's never going to be anybody just like her."

"Are you going to marry Ms. Holbrook?"

Max frowned. Kristina certainly wasn't the first woman he'd dated, and yet Eliette had never asked that particular question before. "I don't know," he replied presently. "Why?"

"Marcy Hilcrest's dad got married last summer. Now Marcy doesn't get to visit him as much as before, because he's always busy. She says he doesn't love her anymore—that he only cares about his new wife."

"Ah," Max said, understanding at last. "You must be worried that I wouldn't love you and your sister as much if I got married."

Eliette swallowed hard, then nodded.

"That isn't going to happen, sweetheart. Whether I get married or not."

The child smiled tentatively. "Marcy's dad is a jerk," she said.

"Yeah," Max agreed. "I think you're probably right about that. But don't quote me, okay? That would only make Marcy feel worse."

Eliette leaned close and whispered. "I won't tell."

Max kissed her forehead. "I'll give you a dollar," he whispered back, "if you can persuade your sister to take a bath and put on a dress."

Delighted to be a part of the conspiracy, Eliette nodded again and bounced to her feet. "Bree!" she shouted, hurrying into the kitchen.

Both his daughters were upstairs when Alison got into her coat, with Max's help, then gathered her purse, notebook, and books.

"You are a good father, Max Kilcarragh," she declared, pausing beside the kitchen door.

Max thrust a hand through his hair and sighed. "Thanks."

"Gweneth showed me the mirror you gave her," Alison said, grinning as she reached for the doorknob. "It truly is ugly. I think you should know your sister has sworn revenge."

He chuckled. "Has she found anybody to palm the thing off on yet?"

Alison shook her head. "That little rule about the other person having to want the item is getting in her way," she answered. "Have a good evening, Max."

He went to her and kissed her forehead. "Thanks, Mom. For everything."

She patted his cheek. "I think it would be wonderful if you fell in love with the mysterious Green Lady," she said. With that, she left, carrying her books. Max watched through the kitchen window until he saw her get into her silver Volvo and back out of the driveway.

For perhaps the thousandth time that day, Kristina's image took shape in Max's mind. He could hardly wait to see her again.

The last customer of the day entered the shop at 4:45, just fifteen minutes before closing time. Kristina, anxious to get to the Pike Place Market for fresh pasta, vegetables, and a bouquet of fresh flowers, wished she'd put the *Closed* sign in the window of the front door at 4:30, as she'd been tempted to do.

The woman was well dressed, perhaps forty years old, with graying blond hair and dark, inquisitive eyes. Kristina did not need her magic to guess that the visitor was related to Max; despite the difference in hair color and her diminutive size, the resemblance was marked.

"May I help you?" Kristina asked. Family relationships and resemblances had always fascinated her. As the only child of supernatural parents, she had been lonely for much of her life, even though Maeve and Calder had given her all the love and guidance anyone could want.

"My name is Gweneth Peterson," the woman said, holding out a gloved hand. Her cloth coat was beautifully made, and her general appearance implied an upscale profession, such as medicine, academics, or law. "I'm Max Kilcarragh's sister. I believe he bought that terrible mirror from you?"

Kristina couldn't help smiling a little, though she suspected Ms. Peterson was about to ask for an exchange, if not a refund. "Yes," she said. "He told me you would hate it."

Gweneth laughed. "And of course he was right."

"Perhaps you'd like to choose something else," Kristina offered, gesturing toward her large and varied stock of antiques.

Gweneth sighed, but her eyes were still sparkling. "Alas, that's against the rules. I came here seeking something equally hideous—a present for my dear brother, naturally. What do you have?"

Kristina was amused; Max had this coming, after inflicting that monstrosity of a mirror on his own sister. "Believe it or not, Ms. Peterson, I don't specialize in horrendous merchandise. But if you look around—"

"Please—call me Gwen," she said.

"And I'm Kristina."

Gwen scanned the shop, her attractive features narrowed into a speculative frown. Then, as luck would have it, she zeroed in on the brass-monkey doorstop, the one item in the place that Kristina wouldn't have sold.

"Perfect!" Gwen cried, bending over to hoist the thing from the floor and set it carefully on a table to examine. "It's dreadful, isn't it?" she marveled. "What possesses people to make such atrocious things?"

Kristina remembered the vicious young man who had broken into her shop, intending to rob, rape, and perhaps even kill her. "You might be surprised," she replied, hovering. Valerian was something of an alarmist, and he enjoyed pondering the unthinkable, but if he was right in maintaining this thing could come back to life unexpectedly...

"I'm afraid the doorstop isn't for sale. I've—I've promised it to another client."

The next time Kristina saw Valerian, she would ask him to dispose of the brass monkey, no questions asked.

Gwen looked disappointed, but took the refusal sportingly. "Do you mean to say there are other people in this world who play the same game Max and I do? Surely no one would actually *want* to own it."

"There's no accounting for taste," Kristina answered, carrying the heavy piece into the back room. Was it her imagination, or did the thing feel slightly warm to the touch? When she returned to the shop, Gwen was still there, pondering a vase with the roller coaster at Coney Island painted on one side. After a moment Max's sister shook her head and turned back to Kristina.

"I can see surpassing that mirror Max bought is going to take some real effort," she said.

Kristina smiled. "I think you're up to the challenge," she said. "Max told me about the moose head you gave him in the last round. How did this contest get started, anyway?"

"It was Max's bright idea," Gwen replied, tugging at her gloves and lifting the collar of her coat against the twilight chill outside. Her smile was genuine, full of happy, hilarious memories. "When he was eleven and I was turning fifteen, he gave me a neon beer sign he'd bought at a flea market as a birthday present. I was about to throw it away—or better yet, break the thing over his head—but Mom and Dad wouldn't let me. They said a gift was a gift, and I had to find someone who wanted it. I did, though it wasn't easy. And after that I prowled the thrift shops and souvenir stores, a woman with a mission. I retaliated at Christmas with a bronze statue of a hula dancer with a clock in her belly. Our little competition became a family tradition."



Once again Kristina felt a whisper of envy, far back in the darkest reaches of her heart. Then she brought herself up short, ashamed. Her own childhood might have been unconventional, to say the least, but she'd been deeply loved, and she'd had everything she needed and most of what she wanted.

She almost confided that she was having dinner with Max and his daughters that night, but in the end she held her tongue. It was fragile, this thing with Max, and she didn't want to jinx it with too many words, too many expectations.

Gwen took a card from her handbag and laid it on the polished counter. "Here's my number," she said. "Please call immediately if you get something in that I might be interested in." She glanced wistfully toward the storeroom.

"Or if that misguided soul who bought the monkey doesn't come back for it."

Kristina barely suppressed a shudder as she reached for the card. "That particular client is pretty reliable," she lied. "But I will keep an eye out for something that would suit."

Gwen, according to the card, was a CPA with a highly respected Seattle firm. She smiled and raised one hand in farewell before leaving the shop.

Kristina glanced at the clock on the shelf behind the cash register—five-fifteen. She still needed to stop at the market, and there was a good chance she would be caught in traffic on her way home. She drew a deep breath and released it slowly, in order to calm herself. It was silly to be so stressed out over a simple dinner.

Hastily she reversed the *Open* sign to say *Closed*, then locked the door. She put the day's cash and checks in her purse, snatched her coat from the peg in the storeroom and almost tripped over the brass monkey as she passed it. Yes, indeed, it was time to get rid of the reprehensible thing once and for all.

She'd speak to Valerian soon.

"You're not wearing your green makeup," the smaller of Max's daughters remarked, the moment Kristina opened the front door to her guests. The child sounded somewhat disappointed.

Kristina exchanged a grin with Max and stepped back to admit the Kilcarragh family to the warmth of her living room. It was chilly out that night, though the sky was clear, with a few determined stars winking through smog and city lights. Once the door was closed, she stooped to offer her hand, careful to speak as she would to an adult.

"I'm afraid I've run out of green makeup," she confided, as though sharing a secret, noticing that the elder sister was just as interested as the younger one, though not so willing to trust. "I used it all up on Halloween."

"For what it's worth, I think you look terrific, even without the greasepaint," Max offered quietly as Kristina straightened again, tugging self-consciously at the hem of her white angora sweater. Her tailored wool slacks matched perfectly and her only jewelry was a polished sterling medallion on a long chain.

"Thanks," she said and blushed. It was such a small compliment, and yet she felt as moved as if Max had

knelt at her feet, like a knight pledging fealty to his queen. "Is everybody hungry?"

The girls nodded shyly, and Max helped them out of their coats. Kristina summoned their names from her memory—the little one was Bree, short for Sabrina, and the eldest was Eliette.

Kristina had set the glass-topped table next to the breakfast bar, instead of the formal one in the dining room. She wanted Max and his children to be comfortable, rather than impressed.

Bree and Eliette were well behaved during the meal, though it was soon apparent that tortellini in pesto sauce was not their favorite dish. Max didn't urge them to eat, but it was all Kristina could do to keep from offering them sugared cereal, pizza, or hamburgers. Whatever it was that kids liked—she hadn't had enough experience with them to know.

Max seemed to sense her concern; at one point, while they were talking about a recent development in local politics, he touched her arm lightly and said, "Relax, Kristina. They won't starve."

The remark took the pressure off; Kristina let out a mental breath and stopped worrying. Max was right; his daughters were well nourished and would no doubt survive one scanty meal.

"May we be excused, please?" Eliette asked, her expression sweet as she took in both Kristina and her father in a single glance.

Max deferred to Kristina with a slight inclination of his head.

"Of course," Kristina said.

"Sit quietly," Max told his daughters with another nod, this time toward the family room sofa. "An in-depth report on any goofing off will be faxed to Santa the minute I get to work tomorrow morning."

Eliette smiled coyly at this threat, but Bree looked impressed.

Kristina and Max finished their meal in peace, chatting cordially, and then cleared the table together. Once Kristina had convinced Max that the dishes could wait until morning, she approached the two little girls, perched side by side on the couch. Eliette was paging through a travel magazine, while Bree peered over her shoulder, her tiny brow furrowed with concentration.

"I have something I'd like to show you," Kristina said.

Both children looked up with interest.

"Is it magic?" Bree asked, brightening.

"Don't be silly," Eliette scolded.

Kristina felt, rather than heard, Max's inward sigh. He didn't say anything, though, but simply waited.

"I think we'll save the magic for another time," Kristina replied. "Follow me, and I'll show you the things I played with when I was your age."

Both Bree and Eliette complied eagerly, and Max trailed behind them. When Kristina glanced back at him once, as they all mounted the rear stairway leading to the second floor, their gazes met and held, and

Kristina felt a powerful jolt of emotion.

Upstairs, she opened the door of the attic-like room where she kept the priceless memorabilia of her childhood.

There were dozens of dolls, most with painted china heads and elaborate dresses, along with miniature furniture of the finest craftsmanship. One end of the room was dominated by the magnificent dollhouse Valerian had given her for her seventh birthday—it was a close replica of the Palace of Versailles, complete with a Hall of Mirrors and the Queen's sumptuous boudoir. The creation was seven feet wide and over five feet tall, and it dwarfed the intricately made puppet theater resting on the floor beside it.

Bree and Eliette were plainly enchanted, but Kristina felt immediate chagrin. Maybe it was macabre for a grown woman to have a room full of toys, however precious they might be. Suddenly her treasures seemed more like artifacts in a museum or an ancient tomb than the innocent belongings that had brought her so much joy as a little girl.

"Wow," Max said.

"Can we touch something?" Bree cried, almost breathless with excitement.

"Please, Ms. Holbrook?" Eliette added in a soft, awed voice.

"Everything is very sturdy," Kristina said, "specifically made to hold and touch." She sounded a little shaky, to herself at least—she had referred to these things as her own, mentioned playing with them when she was small. How was she going to explain the rather obvious fact that they were priceless antiques?

Max bent to look inside the gigantic dollhouse, with its paintings and marble fireplaces and velvet-draped windows. Bree lifted a porcelain baby doll from its hand-carved cradle and held it as gently as if it were a newborn, while Eliette crouched to examine the puppet theater, her eyes wide and luminous with wonder.

"Where did you get this?" Eliette asked, touching the tiny stage curtain, made of heavy blue velvet and trimmed in shimmering gold fringe.

"It was a gift from my mother. I had the measles and couldn't leave my nur—my room, so she put on puppet shows for me." Kristina didn't add, of course, that Maeve had made the puppets move and speak and dance without touching them.

"Our mommy died," Bree confided, holding the baby doll, in its exquisitely embroidered christening gown and matching bonnet, close against her little chest. "I don't remember her face."

Kristina's throat tightened, and her eyes stung. "I'm—I'm sorry," she managed to say.

Max, standing just behind her, laid a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"All you have to do to see Mommy's face is look at her picture, silly," Eliette taunted, still concentrating on her examination of the puppet theater, but the words were spoken with affection, not rancor.

"Is your mommy still alive?" Bree asked, standing very close to Kristina now, and gazing up into her face. She continued to cradle the doll.

If the situation hadn't been so touching, Kristina might have smiled at the singular irony of that question.

*Alive* was probably not the precise word to describe the reigning Queen of the Vampires, but it was close enough, she supposed.

"Yes," she said simply.

"This stuff is really old," Eliette commented. There was nothing critical in her tone; she was merely making an observation. A very astute one, for such a small child. "You couldn't get these things at Toys R Us."

Both Kristina and Max laughed at that, and Kristina's tension eased significantly.

"Some people like old things better than new ones," Max told his daughter a moment later. "And I think it's time you yahoos were home in bed." Both girls joined him in comical chorus to finish the statement with, "Tomorrow is a school day, after all."

Kristina laughed again, wondering why she was so dangerously close to tears. It had been a wonderful evening, even if it was ending too quickly. For this little while, she'd felt part of a normal mortal family, and the sensation was sweet and warm.

"I've raised a couple of smart alecks," Max confided out of the corner of his mouth, to the enormous delight of his daughters.

Kristina led the way back downstairs, blinking hard and sniffing once or twice, so Max wouldn't guess what a sentimental fool she was. "I'm sorry to see you leave so soon," she said in the entry way, while Max helped Bree into her coat. Eliette would have scorned assistance with such a task, Kristina thought—she was trying very hard to be a big girl.

"We had a great time," Max said, straightening, towering over Kristina now and looking straight down into her eyes. "I'd like to see you again—without the entourage."

"He means us," Eliette said.

Max rolled his eyes, and Kristina found herself laughing yet again. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt such a range of emotions in such a short interval.

Bree tugged at her dad's leather jacket. "I want Santa to bring me a doll like that one upstairs," she crowed. "*Exactly* like it!"

"Oh, great," Max murmured, but his eyes hadn't strayed from Kristina's face. There was something so strong in his expression, and yet so tender. What manner of man was this, managing two small girls with such love and skill? Kristina had been married to a mortal, and had dated any number of others, over a very long period of time, but Max Kilcarragh was different from them all. Evidently he was so confident of his masculinity that he didn't need to assert it at every turn.

Charming, Kristina reflected, more intrigued than ever.

Max caught her by surprise when he bent his head and brushed her lips lightly with his own. The girls, already out the door and headed for Max's Blazer, which was parked at the curb, were engaged in a lively conversation of their own.

"Thank you," he said in a low voice. "May I call you?"

Kristina wondered if there were stars in her eyes. "If you don't," she said, "I'll call you."

He grinned and turned away to follow Bree and Eliette, who were arguing by that time over who got to sit in the front seat.

"The answer is: nobody but me," Max told them in a game-show host's exuberant tone of voice.

Kristina watched, smiling, until he'd settled both children in the backseat and made sure their seat belts were fastened. Then, after a wave to her, Max got into the Blazer and drove away.

Suddenly the big house echoed around her, full of nothing. At that moment, as she closed the door, Kristina would have given all her possessions and the fortune she'd accrued over the decades for a family of her own.

She allowed herself to dream as she winked off the lights.

Oh, to be getting children off to bed, reading them a story, making sure they'd brushed their teeth and washed their faces and said their prayers. And once they were asleep, to talk quietly with a man like Max, to share the events of the day with him. to be held in his arms...

"Stop it," Kristina whispered brokenly, standing there in the darkness, alone, just as she would always be alone.

There was no place for her in the flesh-and-blood world of mortals, nor in the realm of supernatural beings, for she was neither one nor the other. Forgetting that fact would not only be rash, but also dangerous.

## CHAPTER 6

The nightmare was upon Max, like some monster lying in wait, the moment he drifted off to sleep. He knew he was not awake, and yet the dream was excruciatingly vivid, in color and dimension and sound. He struggled to escape its hold, to rise to the surface of consciousness, but he was trapped, entangled, like a diver flailing in seaweed...

He was riding in the passenger seat of the late-model van he and Sandy had just bought, to accommodate their growing family. It was a Saturday in mid-December, around seven o'clock in the evening. They'd spent the day shopping at one of the area's major malls, and the rear of the vehicle was jammed with Christmas presents, mostly toys and clothes for Bree and Eliette, who were with Sandy's parents for the weekend.

Max and Sandy were tired, triumphant, and very, very happy. They were fortunate people; they knew that and were grateful. They had each other, their children, their career plans and personal goals, their home. And in six months Sandy was going to have another baby.

Max was hoping for a boy.

They'd had dinner at their favorite Mexican restaurant after braving the crowded stores, and Max,

feeling unusually festive, had consumed two sizable margaritas along with a plate of enchiladas. After the meal, they'd discussed stopping off to see a movie, but in the end they'd decided to spend a romantic evening at home instead.

Although Max did not feel drunk, he and Sandy had agreed that it would be best if she drove home, and she had gotten behind the wheel. He recalled that she'd adjusted the seat and the mirrors before carefully fastening her seat belt.

That was Sandy—responsible, conscientious, competent. The best of wives, the most devoted of mothers, somebody who took being a good citizen very seriously. Although she'd taken a few years off from her own career as an elementary school teacher, she made a point of keeping up with every new development in the field of education. When the time came to go back to work, she would be ready. Max had not only loved Sandy, he'd admired her, too.

Again he tried to wake up, to break out of the dream. Again he was unsuccessful. Sandy was about to die, and there was nothing he could do to prevent it. No way to warn her, or even to say good-bye.

He was caught inside his smiling, dreaming self. He tried to memorize the look of her—slender, tall, with laughing eyes and curly light brown hair—the clean, fresh-air scent of her, the sweet sound of her voice.

They left the restaurant parking lot, cruised along city streets, pulled onto the freeway. Traffic was fairly heavy and moving at a moderate pace as a consequence.

She winked at him and checked the rearview before signaling and changing lanes. There was no rain, no thick fog, no ice on the pavement.

It should have been perfectly safe.

Should have been.

Waking and sleeping, Max wanted to weep at the serenity he saw in Sandy's face in those final moments of her life, of their life together. She looked so happy, so trusting. She had no reason to think the future was about to be canceled.

The semi-truck, loaded with Christmas trees, roared up beside them, appearing suddenly, then pulled out to pass. In the next instant there was a terrible metallic screech, the only warning they had, followed by a fleeting interval, surely only seconds long, of what seemed like suspended animation. That pulsing void was shattered by a thunderous crash, a bone-jarring impact, a spinning sensation so violent that Max did not have the breath to cry out.

And then, darkness. Pain, fierce and heavy.

Voices—horrified, reassuring. Disembodied.

*Sandy.*

The grief and terror gave Max the impetus he needed; he lunged upward out of the nightmare, breathing hard, his flesh chilled beneath a cold sweat. Groping for the switch, he turned on the bedside lamp and lay gasping in its thin light for several moments, waiting for the shock to subside. Finally, when he was no longer trembling, when he had freed himself from the last tentacles of the dream, he got up, reached for his robe, and pulled it on.

He hadn't had that particular nightmare in months, but its return wasn't exactly a surprise he thought, as he descended the rear stairs leading to the kitchen. Max didn't need a shrink to explain the situation—he was deeply attracted to Kristina Holbrook, and he had some conflicts about it.

He flipped on the light over the sink, poured himself a glass of milk, and leaned against the counter. He still felt the chill of the dream, and there was a lingering ache in the pit of his stomach. His strongest instinct was to push the memories out of his mind, but he made himself walk through them instead.

Max had awakened in the Intensive Care Unit of a Seattle hospital some four days after the crash. His parents had been there when he opened his eyes, his mother on one side of his bed, his father on the other. And the sorrow he'd seen in their faces had been far worse than the relentless pain in his body.

He'd known before either of them spoke that Sandy was gone. His dad had wept unashamedly as he related the grim facts of the accident. Sandy had died instantly.

Max had spent what seemed like an eternity in the hospital, staring up at the ceiling, enduring, undergoing constant physical therapy. He'd missed Sandy's funeral, and Christmas, and when he was finally able to go home, he needed crutches to walk. It would have been easier to go under, body and soul, in those dark days and even darker nights, if it hadn't been for his daughters. Eliette, only five but formidably bright, had been bewildered and hollow-eyed. Bree was just a baby then, barely two, and she'd cried for Sandy at night, and searched every room and closet of the condo by day, as though hoping this was only a game. She clearly expected her mother to pop out of some hiding place and say "Boo!", the way she'd done when they played.

Max had done his share of weeping, though always in private, so that the children wouldn't see or hear. And it had often seemed to him that Sandy *couldn't* be dead—that she would breeze in one morning or afternoon or evening, saying it had all been a mistake, making everything all right just by being back.

He finished the milk and set the glass in the sink, but he wasn't really seeing the spacious kitchen around him. Instead he saw himself going through Sandy's things with help from Elaine and Gweneth and his mother, giving some of her possessions away, keeping others for the girls to have when they were older. He'd finally sold the condo, when he knew in his heart, as well as in his reasoning mind, that Sandy was never coming home. It was simply too painful to stay.

Even now, as he remembered, Max's throat tightened, and his eyes burned. If he had problems squaring whatever he felt for Kristina with all he and Sandy had shared, it was his own fault. Had his wife lived, Max was sure they would have grown old together, for their commitment to each other had been the kind that lasts. But Sandy was gone, and he knew that she would want him to find someone else.

"You're not cut out to be alone, Max," he recalled her saying, one winter night when they were newly weds, snuggled before the cheap fireplace in their first apartment, neither one guessing how brief their time together would be. "You need somebody to love and protect."

Max flipped off the light. There was no question that he'd loved Sandy, but in the end, when it really counted, he hadn't been able to protect her or their unborn child. He climbed the stairs slowly. If he'd been driving the night of the accident, instead of Sandy, maybe she would have survived. He would have gladly died in her place.

Pausing on the threshold of his empty bedroom, Max sighed and shoved a hand through his hair. He'd been over the tragedy a million times, second-guessing fate, tormenting himself with the inevitable



regrets—if only he hadn't had drinks with dinner he would have been the one driving. If only they'd lingered in the restaurant for even another five minutes, or gone to the movies instead of heading straight home.

If only, if only, if only.

As Max climbed back into bed and stretched to turn off the lamp, however, he found himself thinking about Kristina again, and wondered if he was ready for all the things she made him feel.

After Max and the children had gone, the house seemed emptier than ever. Kristina, though fond of her elegant home, suddenly felt a need to leave it, at least for a little while.

She focused her thoughts on her parents' London residence, the stately mansion where she had passed much of her childhood, and arrived there in the blink of an eye. It was around five a.m. in England, and dawn was not far off.

Her mother might still be hunting, Kristina knew, but her father would have fed early, in order to spend as much time as possible in his lab.

Having assembled herself in the kitchen, still empty at that early hour, Kristina reverted to human habits, went to the cellar door and descended the steep stone steps. There was grillwork on the windows, which were just above ground level, and the area was in no way spooky, as a more fanciful soul might expect. No cobwebs, no coffins, no candelabras or ghostly shrouded furniture.

"Papa?" Kristina rapped at the door of Calder's lab as she called to him. Only her mother and possibly Valerian would have dared to enter unannounced.

The heavy panel swung open on well-oiled hinges, and Dr. Holbrook stood in the opening, wearing a lab coat, his dark hair ruffled. He was plainly surprised to see her, which in turn surprised Kristina, for vampires are perceptive creatures, rarely caught off guard.

"Hello, sweetheart," Calder said, a glorious smile dawning in his handsome face as he took her hand and drew her into his inner sanctum. He kissed her forehead. "What are you doing here?"

"I couldn't sleep," she said.

Calder glanced at his watch, hastily drawn from his vest pocket, and frowned. In truth, he did not need such a mechanism to discern the time for, as a blood-drinker, he was always intuitively aware of approaching daylight. Dr. Holbrook still practiced many small, mortal rituals, though whether out of habit or preference Kristina didn't know. "What I wouldn't give for the luxury of insomnia," he said, and his serious expression was replaced in an instant by a wry grin. "I could accomplish so much."

Kristina raised herself on tiptoe to kiss her father's cheek. He had not aged, since becoming a vampire in his mid-thirties, and thus did not look much older than his daughter. "You work so hard," she chided gently. "Why can't you be self-indulgent, like Valerian? Or adventurous, like Mother?"

Calder chuckled and shook his head. There was no love lost between her father and the vampire she thought of as an uncle, although he had been the one to transform Calder to an immortal more than a century before. "Heaven forbid," he said, "that I should be anything like Valerian, beguiling monster that

he is. As for adventure—I get all I need just living with Maeve Tremayne."

Kristina saw that Calder was growing wearier by the moment as morning drew near; he spoke slowly and seemed unusually distracted. She smiled. "You need to rest now," she said, "so I won't keep you from your bed. It's all right, isn't it, if I spend some time here?"

He squeezed her shoulders lightly. "Of course it is—this is your home." Discreetly he guided her toward the door of the lab. "Perhaps you'll still be here at sunset, and we can talk further."

Eased out of her father's private domain, Kristina waggled her fingers in temporary farewell. "Sleep tight, Papa," she said and took herself back up the stairs to the kitchen.

Mrs. Fullywub, the housekeeper, was there, standing in front of the open door of the refrigerator. She was clad in a yellow chenille robe, and her gray hair was tied up in the old-fashioned way, with many little strips of cloth.

"Mercy, child," she protested, laying one hand to her heart, "you scared me!"

Kristina was fond of the woman; though mortal, Mrs. F. had been with the family for many years, and she knew what was what in that unconventional household. "I would have thought you'd be used to people appearing and disappearing by now," she observed. The refrigerator was still open, and she reached past the housekeeper for a bottle of mineral water. "I use the word *people* loosely, of course."

Mrs. F. took packages of sliced cheese and cold cuts from the shelves and carried them to the counter, where she began making a sandwich. "It's very good to see you again, Miss Holbrook," the old woman said warmly. "I hope I didn't make you feel unwelcome or anything like that."

Sipping her water, Kristina pulled back one of the stools at the breakfast bar and sat. "I could never feel unwelcome here," she replied. "And I'm sorry for startling you."

Mrs. F. rolled her wise, merry eyes. "I'm getting too old for this job," she confessed, still busy with her snack. "A body never knows who—or what—she'll meet in the passage."

Kristina chuckled. "Valerian, perhaps?"

"Oh, him," Mrs. F. muttered, discounting one of the most powerful vampires in existence with a motion of one hand. "He's gentle as a lamb, that one, if you know how to manage him." She paused and shivered. "It's creatures like those dreadful Havermail children—Benecia and Canaan, I believe they're called—that I dread."

Kristina's amusement faded; she felt a flicker of alarm. Benecia and Canaan were hardly children, as each had lived more than five centuries as a vampire. "They've been here?" she asked in surprise.

"Oh, yes," Mrs. F. answered. "Are you hungry, dear?"

I must be sleep-fogged—it only occurs to me now that you might like something to eat as well."

"No, thank you," Kristina said automatically. Her mind was still on the Havermails—two ghouls all the more hideous for their appearance. They looked like little girls, exquisitely beautiful ones at that, because they had been transformed as children. "When were Benecia and Canaan in this house?"

Mrs. F. trundled across the kitchen and took a seat at the table, a few feet from where Kristina sat, her sandwich on a china plate before her. "Just the other night, dear," she answered after pausing to make mental calculations. "Don't you worry, though—they came in response to a summons from your mother. I doubt they'd dare to show their awful little faces under this roof unless Maeve invited them, though I admit it gave me a turn to stumble across them the way I did."

Kristina was not reassured. Benecia and Canaan might be afraid of Maeve, the acknowledged queen of all blood-drinkers, but they probably wouldn't fear a half-mortal like herself. Suppose their deadly attention was drawn to Max and Bree and Eliette through Kristina? Just the thought of that made her raise one hand to her mouth in a mute expression of horror.

"Oh, dear," Mrs. F. fretted, pushing away her food. "You mustn't be frightened, Kristina—horrid as they are, those creatures wouldn't have the gall to trouble you. They know your mother would finish them if they did, and she'd have to get to the little demons before Valerian found them, at that."

Kristina swallowed hard, her eyes burning with hot, sudden tears. "If only it were that simple," she murmured. She wanted desperately to speak to Maeve, but by now the sun had risen, and her mother would be sleeping, probably side by side with Calder in the special vault beneath the house. "It's not myself I fear for, Mrs. F. There are—there are mortals I've come to care about. And by that caring, I've made them vulnerable."

Mrs. F. rose and went to stand beside Kristina, patting her hand once with cool, aged fingers. "Here, now. Human beings are *born* vulnerable. Yes, your love may endanger these special mortals of yours, but you are also in a unique position to protect them. You must not forget your own powers."

"I've sublimated my magic," Kristina confessed, still near tears. "All this time I've wanted so much to be fully human—I've pretended—"

"Then you must become strong again. You must be what you are, Kristina, and stop resisting your own nature."

Kristina nodded. "Yes," she said after a long, reflective silence. "You're right, Mrs. F. It's time I explored my powers, found out what I can and cannot do."

"Your mother will help," the housekeeper agreed gently. "And I have no doubt that Valerian could advise you in the matter, too."

Valerian. It was eight hours earlier in the western United States. He would still be awake, if he had not gone abroad to hunt.

Yes, Valerian was definitely the vampire of the hour. Kristina stood, stepped back from Mrs. F. and the breakfast bar, smiled, and gave the old woman a nod of farewell.

Her thoughts took her not to Seattle, as she had expected, or even to Las Vegas, where Valerian still mystified the masses with his magic act four times per week, at the Venetian Hotel. Instead she found herself on a moonlit street, in a tropical clime. The paving stones were broken and uneven, the houses squalid and close together. The stench of raw sewage mingled with that of ripe garbage, and Kristina wrinkled her nose.

There was no sign of the vampire, no sign of anyone, though she sensed the slumbering residents of the hovels crowding both sides of the narrow street. She heard rats rummaging in the mountains of refuse

crammed into every alleyway, piled outside every door. Somewhere, a couple made sleepy love; from another direction came the faint mewling of a hungry baby.

*What is this place?* Kristina asked herself, standing still on the street, waiting, listening to her intuition.

"This is Rio," a familiar voice answered from just behind her. "Great Zeus, Kristina—you *are* rusty."

She turned to see Valerian an arm's length away, looking spectacular and arrogant, as usual. Perhaps for the drama of it—he was impervious, of course, to the smothering heat—he wore one of his many tailored tuxedos and a voluminous cape lined with cobalt blue satin.

"This is a really depressing place to hunt, if that was what you were doing," she said, in a futile effort to deflect his attention from her neglected skills.

"*All* the places where I hunt are depressing," Valerian retorted, looming over her now, his patrician nose nearly touching hers. "Did you think I would go to Disneyland?"

Kristina felt uncomfortable, though she had traveled to virtually every part of the world, sometimes with the aid of a train or airplane, sometimes without. "I don't like it here."

"The answer to that is so obvious I can't bring myself to utter it."

She sighed, then a new thought occurred to her, and she studied the imperious vampire with narrowed eyes. "So help me, Valerian, if you're hunting something besides your dinner—"

He drew himself up, so that he seemed even taller than his already intimidating height, folded his arms and glared. "Have a care, Snippet," he said, seething. "To insult me in that manner—or any other—is most imprudent."

"Before Daisy came into your life, you were a notorious rake," Kristina reminded him.

"The key words in that statement," Valerian replied evenly, his tone no less lethal for its softness, "were *before Daisy*. I am here, if you must know, because there is a child—"

Kristina's eyes widened in surprise. "*You've* sired a child?"

Valerian bristled, then smoothed his countenance by means of his will, like a majestic bird settling ruffled feathers into sleek array. "Please," he snapped, thereby dispensing with the possibility, as though his word were universal law.

"Well, you can't just snatch one off the streets," Kristina retorted, growing impatient. "Kids are people, you know, and they have rights."

Valerian arched one eyebrow, which made him look, if possible, even more imposing. Then, a moment later he relented, and Kristina saw sorrow in his magnificent face. He might have been sculpted by Michelangelo, a statue brought to life at the whim of a favored angel, so perfect were his features, his build, his graceful manner. "Thank you for that sermon," he said, but then he took Kristina's hand and drew her along the street, through an alleyway, up a set of crumbling stone steps to a wretched, attic-like room.

The heat was sweltering, the air close and fetid.

On the floor sat a little boy, probably three or four years of age, though it was hard to tell. His clothes were mere rags, he was filthy, and he raised great, luminous brown eyes to the vampire.

"His mother is a prostitute," Valerian said to Kristina, without taking his eyes from the child. "Tonight, in a cantina not far from here, she sold him, her own son, to a procurer who specializes in pretty boys. They'll be coming to fetch him at any moment."

Kristina felt sick. Her own problems were forgotten, at least temporarily. "What are you going to do?"

Valerian did not reply. Instead he dropped to one knee and addressed the boy in rapid, facile Portuguese. The child raised his arms to the vampire, obviously wanting to be held. He spoke to Valerian in the same language, and although Kristina did not speak it, she got the general drift.

Valerian meant to take the boy away, perhaps even home to Daisy in Seattle, to be raised as their son.

As Kristina watched, the magnificent vampire drew the little boy into his arms and rose to his feet.

"His name is Esteban," he said to Kristina as the lad nestled against Valerian's broad shoulder and buried his face in his neck. With a shudder of relief, Esteban gave himself up to sleep.

She was moved by the sight of the monster cradling the frightened child. "Valerian," she whispered, "he's *mortal*. This is very dangerous—"

"Are you implying that I would do him harm—this—this baby?"

"Of course not," Kristina replied, annoyed. The situation had reminded her, however, of her own concern for Max and his daughters, and the singular dangers she might have brought into their lives. "But you have enemies. He could be hurt."

"Would any fate be worse than what awaits him this night, at the hands of his mother?" Valerian affected a sigh, having no breath to fuel a real one. "He will be my son," the vampire added patiently. "The fiend who dares to touch him will suffer a reprisal that would make hell itself seem trivial by comparison."

Kristina had no answer, for she knew that Esteban's world was a place where children such as he could be shot in the streets like vermin. Despite the perils he might face, even with Valerian to protect him, he would undoubtedly be better off in Seattle.

A woman's laughter sounded from the street outside, shrill and somehow ugly. Instinctively Kristina took a step closer to Valerian and touched the child's matted ebony hair with a tender, protective hand.

Valerian gave Kristina a meaningful glance, covered the sleeping child with his cape, and vanished. She had no choice but to follow on the vampire's coattails.

They popped into the mansion in Seattle simultaneously, and Esteban was still sleeping, undisturbed, when Valerian laid him gently on the plush sofa in the large front room Kristina thought of as a parlor. There was a fire crackling in the grate of the beautiful chiseled marble fireplace, and Barabbas lay on the hearth, his muzzle resting on his paws, his eerie eyes watchful.

There was no sign of Daisy, but it was a vast house, and both Valerian and Kristina knew she was around somewhere.

Kristina felt awkward, but she held her ground. It was important that she speak with Valerian.

"What is it?" the vampire asked without looking at her, covering Esteban's small, thin body with a cashmere afghan as he spoke. "I know you didn't seek me out for nothing."

"I wanted to speak to you because I'm—I'm afraid."

That statement drew Valerian's gaze straight to Kristina's face. "Afraid? Of what?"

"Of Benecia and Canaan Havermail, to name just two of a great many ogres."

He raised an eyebrow in that familiar expression of irritation. "If those soulless chits have threatened you, I shall put stakes through their miserable, atrophied hearts!"

Barabbas rose from his warm resting place on the hearth to pad over to the couch and sniff the little boy's grubby face. Kristina shook her head. "I'm not afraid for myself," she said. "It's Max and his children. Without meaning to, I've made them vulnerable."

"Without meaning to?" Valerian echoed, somewhat skeptically. "Come now, Kristina—you may have let your powers go to an alarming degree, but you are not stupid. You must have known, from the moment you met this man, that he was only a mortal, and thus prey to all manner of fiends, human and otherwise."

Kristina could not refute Valerian's claim. She had been selfish, wanting Max and the girls to be part of her life, however briefly, but she had not admitted them unwittingly. "All right!" she snapped, panicked. "I knew! I was lonely—Max is so gentle and kind and intelligent and—"

"Shhh," Valerian said, taking her shoulders in his hands, as her father had done earlier in London. "You needn't justify what you feel, my sweet."

"But what about the dangers? It will be my fault if—"

"It is your task to protect those you love, Kristina. And you have the means to do so—you were born with a great deal of your mother's magic."

Before Kristina could argue that she was no match for ancient vampires like the Havermails, Daisy entered the room, clad in a blue and white flannel nightshirt and fuzzy slippers. Her gaze went straight to Esteban, as though drawn there by a magnet, and Kristina marveled that she had not seen how much her friend wanted a child until now.

"Who is this?" Daisy asked in the softest of voices, kneeling by the couch and smoothing the boy's hair back from his forehead with feather-light fingers. He stirred and made a fearful, whimpering sound, but did not awaken.

Valerian was watching Daisy with a tenderness so poignant that it wrenched Kristina's heart. She knew she could not stay another moment; to do so would be an inexcusable intrusion.

She did not feel like blinking herself back to London, however. She'd done enough traveling for one day, and wanted only to return to her own house.

She used no magic to do so, but simply let herself out and walked the short distance. Once there, she

gathered all the letters she'd written to her aged governess over the years, settled herself in the big, cozy chair in the family room, and began to read.

Max entered the shop at four-twenty the following afternoon, carrying a bouquet of snow-white peonies in one hand.

"For you," he said, laying the perfect flowers in front of Kristina. The glass counter was a barrier between them. He spoke shyly, though there was something in his brown eyes—an invitation, or perhaps a promise—that roused desires in her that she'd thought she'd forgotten how to feel.

Kristina could not resist the peonies. She gathered them up, held them to her nose for a moment, enjoying their scent. "Thank you," she said, and went to fetch a small crystal vase to put them in.

Max followed her into the back room, watched as she filled the vase with water at the sink, then arranged the flowers. They were breathtakingly beautiful, in their simplicity and purity, and Kristina felt another surge of emotion as she admired them.

"I thought all the peonies were gone for the season," she said. The comment was the least of what was in her heart, but all she could manage at the moment.

"My sister has a greenhouse," Max answered, standing in the doorway with his hands braced on either side of the frame. As big as he was, he did not look intimidating, only solid and strong. "I stole them from her."

"Great," Kristina replied with a smile, carrying the vase in both hands as she approached, meaning to go back to the main part of the shop.

Max did not step aside, as she had expected him to do. Instead he took the flowers from her and set them on a shelf next to the door. "Kristina, there's something I need to say," he told her. "The problem is, I'm not sure you want to hear it."

Kristina's heart missed one beat, then careened into the next. She couldn't speak, so she nodded, looking up into Max's eyes.

"I care about you, Kristina," he said quietly, returning her gaze unflinchingly. "I don't know if what I feel is love, or if it will ever turn into that, but it's there, and I can't ignore it, even though I've tried." He paused, as if gathering his courage, and then went on. "I'm a high school football coach and I like what I do, but I'm never going to make a lot of money. I have two kids, one of whom still misses her mother very much. I guess what I need to know is, do I have a chance with you?"

Here was her chance to do the noble thing, to end a potentially disastrous romance with Max Kilcarragh before it got started. Kristina took a step closer, when she knew she should retreat, and put her arms around Max's neck.

"Oh, yes," she answered. "You've got a chance. In fact, I'd say you're a sure thing."

He smiled and bent his head to kiss her, tentatively at first, then in earnest. And all that had slept within Kristina awakened, full of yearning.



## CHAPTER 7

To Kristina, Max's kiss seemed like a miniature eternity, during which she was born as a new creature, to live, to die, and then to begin the magical cycle all over again. She was breathless when the intimate contact ended at last, and clutched Max's upper arms with both hands to steady herself. Her heart was thundering, as if to escape her chest and take wing, and there was a vibrant quickening in all her nerve endings and pulse points, accompanied by a warm, tightening sensation deep between her pelvic bones.

She had never felt so much before, even in her wildest, most abandoned moments with Michael, and did not know what to make of this new capacity, this new depth of response. If a simple kiss could stir her so profoundly, what would happen when—if—she and Max made love? The thought was both worrisome and alluring, for while Kristina yearned for the sort of soul fusion she knew Daisy and Valerian shared, she was also afraid of baring not just her body, but her very being, to another person.

Max sighed, his brown eyes dancing with mischief and undisguised pleasure. "Wow," he said, and wrapped his arms loosely around her waist, keeping her close but not crushing her.

Kristina let her forehead rest against his rock-hard shoulder. He was wearing a corduroy sports jacket, and the fabric smelled pleasantly of cologne, misty rain, and man. She was moved, almost overwhelmed, by the realization that Max had found the kiss special, too.

He rested the fingertips of one large but incredibly gentle hand at her nape, sending a tremor through her entire system. "Kristina," he murmured. That was all, just her name, and yet she was stricken with joy, as though some part of herself, long missing, had been restored.

She struggled not to weep from happiness and wonder, and with effort looked up at Max, her eyes shimmering. "Oh, Max," she said softly, "it is dangerous to care for me—I'm not what you think—"

Max cupped her chin firmly in one hand, ran a calloused thumb over her mouth in a way that sent sharp quivers of sensation into every part of her body. He spoke tenderly, but his eyes were dark with passion—Kristina knew that, like her, he wanted very much to make love, then and there.

"What are you, Kristina Holbrook, if not a beautiful, intelligent, fascinating woman?"

She did not want to tell him, could not bear the prospect of his horror, his rejection, but she had already let things go too far. "You'll think I'm mad when I tell you," she said fearfully. She had known Max for such a short time, but already he had a place in her life, and when he left, she would be devastated.

The shop bell tinkled before Max could reply; he looked exasperated and amused at the same time.

"I'll—I'll take care of this customer and then close up," Kristina promised. "We have to talk."

Max didn't reply verbally, but the sparkle in his eyes indicated that he had more than conversation in mind. Clearly he did not expect Kristina's impending confession to be anything too dire.

Still feeling aftershocks from the kiss and at the same time dreading the task that lay ahead, Kristina left Max in the back room and proceeded into the main part of the shop.

She stopped in her tracks when she found the warlock, Dathan, standing next to the counter. He looked quite ordinary, despite his suave good looks, like a lawyer or an accountant or perhaps a professor. He wore a beautifully tailored camel-hair coat over a dark suit, and carried an umbrella and a briefcase. His guileless eyes twinkled as he met Kristina's startled gaze; he knew he had taken her unaware, and he was enjoying that small triumph.

Kristina stifled an impulse to turn him into a piece of bric-a-brac—he would surely resist, and his magic, unlike her own, was state-of-the-art.

"May I help you?" she asked, for Max's benefit rather than Dathan's or her own. With her thoughts, she warned the warlock not to make a scene, unless he wanted yet another eternal enemy. "We were just about to close, but if you have something particular in mind—"

Dathan's gaze slipped past Kristina, went unerringly to the door of the back room. He smiled impishly and had probably known Max was with her even before his badly timed arrival.

"My card," he said, extending one expensively gloved hand. "I was hoping to find a silver snuffbox, like one I'd seen in London. It was inlaid with ground malachite and the interior of conch shells, in the fashion of Italian marble."

Kristina accepted the bit of heavy card stock, frowning. Reading it, she realized that, of course, Dathan had conjured it for the occasion. *I must speak to you in private*, it read. *I will visit you this evening*.

Kristina shook her head. "I'm sorry," she said in the most ordinary tone she could manage. "I don't have anything like that in stock." She had several similar items, but that was beside the point. "I'll get in touch with you if I ever have reason."

She hoped the message was clear. *Don't call me. I'll call you*.

Dathan merely smiled and inclined his head slightly, indicating the card Kristina still held. The print had been changed. *This is serious, Kristina. I will arrive at midnight*.

Kristina let out a long breath in frustration. If Dathan wanted to pop in on her at the witching hour, there wasn't a great deal she could do to prevent him. Here was yet another obstacle between herself and any reasonable life she might have shared with Max or any other mortal man—gregarious warlocks who couldn't take a hint.

"You arrived just at closing time," she said sweetly, ushering Dathan toward the door.

His eyes twinkled merrily. "What a pity," he replied, and went out.

Kristina promptly locked the door behind him—a useless gesture if ever there was one—and glanced once again at the card. *Be there*, it said.

She crumpled the bit of paper and tossed it into the trash, where it dissolved with a chiming sound, like the thinnest crystal.

*Show-off*, Kristina thought, and made another vow to practice her magic.

Max was sipping herbal tea from a mug as he came out of the storeroom. Just looking at him reawakened all the physical hungers Kristina had felt before when they kissed. Obviously their

relationship—if indeed it *was* a relationship—had undergone some subtle but very important change.

The knowledge filled her with a strange mingling of joy and guilt. There was no question that she loved Max Kilcarragh, but it was a selfish love, promising fulfillment and even rapture for Kristina, and terrible danger for Max and his daughters.

She had no choice but to give him up, she knew, and she was swamped with sorrow at the thought. Once he knew the truth, he would no longer want her—in fact, he might well recoil in disgust and horror.

Kristina gazed up at Max with tears of grief welling in her eyes. She could not help thinking of her uncle Aidan, her mother's twin, who had been made a vampire against his will, and so hated what he was that he had undergone a truly torturous process in the hope of becoming human again. He had succeeded, though barely, and made a life for himself with the mortal woman he loved, but he was forever separated from Maeve, from Valerian, from Kristina herself. All memory of his existence as a vampire had been eradicated from his mind for all time.

She thought she understood now, longing for complete union with Max, why Aidan Tremayne had been willing, even eager, to make such a sacrifice.

She took his hand, led him to a corner of the shop and the lovely Victorian settee that was part of a nineteenth-century parlor display. It was a private place; they could not be seen from the shop windows.

When Kristina would have withdrawn her hand from Max's, out of a nervous need to smooth her lightweight woolen skirt, he did not let her go. His patient expression nearly broke her heart.

She drew a deep breath, let it out slowly, and began. "You remember the first time we went out—I started to tell you how I was different—"

Max merely nodded. The shop telephone rang, but neither of them paid any attention; they were, for that brief interval at least, in a world of their own.

Kristina forced herself to go on, dreading the inevitable reaction with her whole soul. Michael, she recalled, had laughed at her when she finally confessed her secret, and accused her of taking too much laudanum.

"I have never been as attracted to another man as I am to you," she said.

"That's good news," Max interjected quietly.

Kristina shook her head. "No. No, it isn't," she replied. "I'm not human, Max—not exactly."

Now he looked worried. It would be a short leap from there to outright abhorrence—or mockery—or, worst of all, pity. His grasp on her hand tightened ever so slightly, and he waited in silence for her to go on.

"It's all too incredible for any sensible person to believe—I know that—but it's very important that I tell you because—because being closely associated with me could be deadly." She paused and closed her eyes for a moment while she gathered her courage. When she looked at Max she saw only compassion in his rugged face, and incredible tenderness. "My father was mortal when I was conceived, but now, like my mother, he's—he's—" Max squeezed her hand again, lending encouragement. "He's a vampire."

Max stared at her; his expression revealed amazement, but no other emotion. No revulsion, no judgment—yet. "A vampire?"

"I know how it sounds," she said miserably, feeling as though she would shatter, fall apart into a thousand irretrievable pieces. "Ridiculous, impossible, even ludicrous. But nevertheless, Max, it's true. I'm a sort of half-breed—I have powers, but I'm not a—I'm not like my parents—"

He let out a long sigh and shoved a hand through his hair. "You're right, Kristina. It's hard to comprehend. I mean, *vampires*?"

"Yes." She waited a beat, struggling to hold on to her composure. "I know that most people don't even believe in such creatures, and in most cases the vampires prefer that. But they are real, Max—as real, maybe more so, than you or I."

Max didn't bolt and run, or jump to his feet and form a protective cross with his index fingers, but he was plainly confounded all the same. He had surely decided that Kristina was deluded, and therefore to be avoided from then on. He was right on one count, anyway.

"My God," he said.

"You don't believe me," Kristina replied with resignation. "You must think I'm insane. Sometimes, Max, I truly wish I were."

Slowly, Max Kilcarragh shook his head. "No," he insisted calmly, still making no effort to flee or even to release Kristina's hand. "No, you're no more insane than I am. Still—"

She was going to have to prove that she was telling the truth; it was, after all, the least she could do under the circumstances. Focusing her attention on a small Dresden figurine, standing on an intricately crocheted doily in the center of the coffee table before them, she raised it several inches off the green marble surface, let it hover in midair for a few moments, then carefully lowered it.

Max frowned and raised his eyes toward the ceiling, clearly looking for a string of fishing line or some other form of trickery. Kristina knew, without invading the privacy of his mind, that he was thinking of Valerian's magic act at the party on Halloween night, no doubt concluding that hers was a family of necromancers.

"Impressive," he said.

"But obviously not enough to convince you," Kristina said with another sigh.

He laced his fingers through hers. "I'm a skeptic," he conceded mildly.

"Brace yourself," she murmured. Then, by mental means alone, she raised Max himself some six inches off the settee.

To say he was surprised would be a supreme understatement, but, to his credit, Max did not flail or cry out as another man might have done. He had to know Kristina would never hurt him—not intentionally, at least.

Gently she lowered him back to the cushioned seat of the small sofa.

He was pale and understandably somewhat ruffled. "I know this is a mundane question, but I have to ask it. How in hell did you do that?"

"By what you would call magic," Kristina answered with great reluctance.

"And what would *you* call it?"

Kristina shrugged slightly. "Actually, such things are natural functions of the human brain. It's just that most mortals haven't evolved the ability to utilize all their faculties."

Max's dark brows came together in a thoughtful frown. "Are you saying that we all have the potential to do things like that?"

She nodded. "Some mortals naturally use more of their mental capacities than others, of course—and can do things that would appear magical to the average person. The Russians, in fact, were making significant strides in opening new frontiers of the mind until their political structure finally collapsed under its own weight."

Max narrowed his eyes. "This is truly fantastic."

"You do believe me, then?" A brief, shining hope lighted Kristina's spirit before logic snuffed it out. "By your association with me, Max," she forced herself to say, "you and your children would be in peril from other supernatural beings. I would of course do everything I possibly could to protect you, but—"

He laid an index finger to her mouth to quiet her. "It isn't your job to protect me, Kristina, or my daughters. I have no idea what I'm dealing with here, but I do know from personal experience that life can be very fragile, and that all human beings are in constant jeopardy. But evil isn't the only force in the world—there is good as well."

Kristina didn't know what to say, so she just sat back against the settee and looked at Max, waiting for him to go on.

"Obviously my first priority is to make sure Eliette and Bree are as safe as possible. We're going to have to take this situation one step at a time and move slowly. But I care about you, Kristina, and I'm not willing to just walk away—it's too late for that."

Kristina's eyes were beginning to smart, but she didn't cry. "Where do we go from here?" she asked, letting her head rest against his shoulder.

He chuckled ruefully. "I guess I don't need to tell you where I *like* to go from here," he replied, "but I don't want to scare you off."

She laughed at the amazing irony of that statement, but her heart felt tremulous and very, very fragile, like a bubble of newly blown glass, still shivering and insubstantial. "There is so much I need to explain," she said. "To begin with, there's my age. Then my marriage. And my family."

"I think my brain circuits are overloaded," he said with a grin. "Let's have some dinner in some quiet place and talk about ordinary things, just for a little while. I'm still getting over my first experience with personal levitation."

She watched him, marveling, wondering at her good fortune in encountering such a man.

"I hope you weren't frightened," she said.

"More like baffled," Max admitted. "That was a really weird feeling." He stood and offered his hand to Kristina, helping her up.

They had an early supper in a small, secluded restaurant down the street from Kristina's shop—Bree and Eliette were spending the evening with their aunt Gweneth—and after coffee they drove in separate cars back to Kristina's house.

After starting a cheery fire in the family room fireplace and offering Max a seat at the table, she went upstairs for the stack of letters she'd written to her governess, Miss Phillips, over a span of some fifty years. Reading them would explain more to Max about who—and what—Kristina was than anything she might say.

Noting the date on the initial page of the first letter, and probably the worn, fragile state of the paper, Max looked at Kristina and grinned. "There's a slight age difference between us," he remarked.

"Almost a century," Kristina confirmed. She wasn't smiling.

"This is incredible," Max muttered, and turned his attention back to the letters before him. He read through her meeting with Michael, her marriage, the account of her wedding night, all without flinching. Kristina, for her part, was painfully aware of one particular passage.

*... He was uncommonly gentle as he removed my wedding gown and all the many troublesome garments beneath, each in its turn and its own good time. He caressed me and whispered pretty words, and though there was some hurt when, at last, he took me as a husband takes a wife, pleasure soon followed. Am I wanton, Phillie? I enjoyed the things Michael did to me in his bed that night—I thrashed upon the mattress. I moaned when he promised that strange, sweet satisfaction I craved without understanding, cried out when at long last he gave it.*

*Finally Max reached the incident of the shooting, and Kristina, seated across the table from him, saw those neatly penned words as clearly as if she were reading over Max's shoulder...*

*... with the blast of a pistol still thundering in my head, I dressed hastily in a simple chemise, slippers, and a loose gown—I could not trouble myself with corsets and the like—and raced out into the passageway and down the main staircase.*

*The great house was abuzz with consternation, for it seemed that all within those thick, august walls had heard the report of gunfire, though it was still so early that the sun had not yet risen. At that hour even the servants would not have arisen, but for that dreadful, singularly ominous noise.*

*I encountered Gilbert in the entry hall—Lord and Lady Cheltingham, my mother- and father-in-law, were nowhere to be seen. Gilbert wore rough huntsman's clothes, and his brown hair had not been tied back but instead fell loose around his face. I glimpsed pity in his eyes when he spared me a glance, and despair.*

*"There has been a duel," I said, grasping one of his arms as though I thought he could somehow*



*undo the morning's tragedy. I knew that was impossible, of course, and I had seen the incident by means of my magic, even before leaving the bedchamber. "Michael is hurt—"*

*For a moment Gilbert's strong jaw tightened, but his mind was veiled from me, and I could not discern his thoughts. "You must stay here, Kristina," he told me. "It is unseasonably cold this morning and raining. Besides, there may be more trouble."*

*With that, he turned and hurried out, joined by several rumpled male wedding guests summoned from their beds by the clarion of calamity.*

*I obeyed my brother-in-law's edict, not because I was daunted by his authority, but because I knew I could be of no real help on that dismal knoll behind the parish church, where two men lay bleeding on the dew-dampened grass. One was dead, having taken a bullet through the heart; the other, my Michael, had been shot in the right knee.*

*I hurried back upstairs, breathless in my urgency, went straight to the main linen cupboard, and began pulling out Lady Cheltenham's finely stitched sheets with their borders of Irish and Italian lace. When I had torn a sufficient supply of bandages, I carried these back into our bedroom and sent a mewling maid to fetch hot water, a large basin, and a selection of whiskey from the cabinet in Gilbert's study belowstairs.*

*While she was gone, I stripped the linens from our marriage bed and replaced them. Then I ran back downstairs again and waited fitfully by the stables, heedless of the drizzling rain, for the men to return.*

*Michael was astride his own horse when they arrived, drenched with blood and rain, plainly only half-conscious. After reining in the great stallion, my husband promptly collapsed and would have landed in the mud of the stableyard if Gilbert and another man hadn't been there to catch him, A litter was brought from one of the sheds, and Michael was placed upon it, out of his head now and raving.*

*Concern for my badly injured husband was, of course, my paramount emotion, but I did not fail to notice the other man, draped over the back of a horse led by one of the other guests. I recognized him with a pang of sorrow—he was the eighteen-year-old cousin, come all the way from London to celebrate the marriage, with whom Michael had argued so vociferously on the lawn. His sister, even younger at fifteen, ran sobbing through the rain in bare feet and a wrapper, her hair unbound, trailing and sodden, her pretty face twisted into a mask of unfathomable anguish. She flung herself at the lad's narrow, lifeless back and clung to him, wailing.*

*Gently one of the men drew her away, lifted her into his arms, and carried her back toward the house.*

*I returned my attention to Michael, prostrate on his litter, but I knew I would never forget what I had just seen. I believe my feelings toward my husband began to change in that very moment, Phillie, for I had seen the confrontation between the two men, remember; I was well aware that Michael had been the instigator of these sorrows.*

*They carried Michael to our room, where Gilbert and I stripped away his coat and boots, his muddy shirt, and bloodstained breeches. My new husband was groaning, and though he could not have left our bed more than an hour before, and the sun was just then topping the eastern horizon, he reeked of ardent spirits.*



*"Damn you," Gilbert said to his brother, soaking one of the cloths I'd torn earlier in the basin the maid had brought, as requested. He sat on the edge of the plump feather mattress and began gingerly to clean the terrible wound to Michael's knee. "You've killed poor young Justin, and for what cause? In the process, it appears that you've made a cripple of yourself!"*

*I could not feel anger toward Gilbert, righteous or otherwise. "Has the doctor been sent for?" I asked stupidly—for of course the village physician would have been summoned immediately—and moved to the opposite side of the bed, where I knelt and held Michael's pale, long-fingered hand in both my own. I desperately wished for my father in those moments, for there was no finer surgeon in all of creation, but daylight had come, and I knew that Papa would have gone underground to sleep, as all but the oldest vampires do...*

Max stopped reading to rub his eyes with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. Kristina had made a fresh pot of coffee, and she carried two cups to the family room table, once again sitting down across from him. There must have been a thousand questions he wanted to ask; Kristina watched his expressive eyes as he sifted through his thoughts, sorting, trying to assign reasonable priorities.

"What kind of man was your husband?" he asked at last. It would have been unnecessary to ask if she had loved Michael, for it was obvious that she had—just as Max himself had cherished his lost wife, Sandy.

"He was rich and handsome and very spoiled." Privately Kristina compared the two men—Max was attractive, but in a rugged, straightforward and intensely masculine way. Michael had been the boyish type, charming and superficial and selfish.

"I'm surprised you were interested in him," Max said without rancor before taking a sip of his coffee.

Kristina smiled; remorse might come later, but for now she was happy because Max had heard her terrible secret, and he was still around. "I was younger then," she said.

Max laughed. "I'll say," he replied, squinting at her. "But you're very well preserved." Some of his amusement faded. "Will you ever age, Kristina? I mean—and this is hypothetical, of course—if you and I were married, would you get old, as I will?"

"I don't know," Kristina replied, and suddenly she felt like crying again. She sipped some coffee to steady herself. "Vampires, theoretically, that is, are immortal. I don't—er—hunt, or sleep during the day, and I can't travel through time the way my parents and Valerian do—"

Max held up one hand. "One second, please. Valerian is a vampire? That guy who was doing magic tricks for the kids on Halloween night?"

Kristina drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Yes," she answered. She thought of Esteban, the urchin Valerian had rescued from the mean streets of Rio only the night before. She would never forget the sight of the illustrious vampire cradling that scared, wretched little boy against his shoulder. "But you needn't worry—he would never harm a child."

"I had already figured that out," Max said. "You're obviously fond of him, and that is as good a character reference as I need. But knowing what Valerian is explains how he pulled off all those fantastic tricks at

the party the other night."

"You're in on a world-class secret now," Kristina said, feeling a bit less weary, a bit less ancient. She leaned across the table a little way. "But you must swear not to tell, for your own sake—no one will believe you, and your sanity will be suspect—and because magicians fly in from all over the world to watch Valerian's act in Las Vegas and try to figure out how he manages such fantastic feats. It's all part of his mystique."

Max frowned, looking down at the letters scattered before him in peculiar neatness. "This is all so personal—are you sure you want to share it?"

Except for her feelings for Max, Kristina could not recall the last time she had been so certain of anything. "It's important for you to understand," she said.

He began to read again, taking up where he had left off.

*... and while I knew a great many pretty tricks, levitation, altering the form of things, making objects and people disappear and then appear again, I was ignorant of the healing arts.*

*Michael started to come round, once the doctor had arrived and set himself to sorting out that shattered knee. Gilbert, for all his fury with his younger brother, looked as though he would have changed places with him in a moment and borne the pain himself. I know I would gladly have done that, but I wonder if it was generosity that prompted me. Watching a loved one suffer is perhaps the greater agony, making the desire to usurp that pain an act of cowardice, rather than nobility. It was no comfort that Michael had brought this anguish upon himself, that he might even have deserved to bear it, after taking another man's life.*

*I do not know.*

*The surgery was dreadful to witness, and yet I could not leave Michael's side. I absorbed each scream, each moan and curse, in my spirit, every one like a violent shock, and when it was over, and he collapsed again, however mercifully, into a near comatose state, I also swooned.*

*Gilbert, poor, beleaguered, stricken Gilbert, carried me to another room, where I was to be looked after by a maid. I was exhausted by Michael's ordeal, and went immediately to sleep.*

*But I must leave the tale here for a little while, dear Phillie, for I fear I have run on too long, and my story, while dramatic, is also grim. I do not wish to tire you overmuch, so I shall wait a week or so before I write another letter.*

*Thank you, beloved friend, for your understanding heart and gentle comments. You cannot know what comfort your wise letters have brought me.*

*Love always,*

*Kristina*

Max folded the aged vellum pages carefully, almost reverently, and tucked them back into the appropriate envelope. Instead of reaching for another, he looked at Kristina, seeming to see into the farthest corner of her bruised heart, and she knew he saw her loneliness, her pain, her doubts. He pushed back his chair a little way.

"Come here," he said gently. "You look like somebody who needs to be held."

Kristina didn't require a second invitation. She was around the table and seated on Max's lap, with her arms encircling his neck and her head resting on his shoulder, almost before her next heartbeat.

Max held her tightly. He smelled good, and felt good, too—hard and strong and yet incredibly tender. Although Kristina wanted him powerfully, she appreciated that he did nothing in those moments except to keep her within the warm circle of his embrace.

"You're too good to be true, Max Kilcarragh," she said against his neck.

He chuckled. "I wish I could keep you thinking that for the rest of your life," he replied, his breath a soft caress at her temple as he spoke, one that set her tingling and roused the legion of needs that had been slumbering within her. "Unfortunately it won't be long before you find out the truth. I have a temper. I'm opinionated, especially when it comes to politics. And somewhere deep inside, I have to admit, I wish women still wanted to stay home, cook, and raise kids. How's that for a shocking confession?"

Kristina sat back far enough to look into Max's face, albeit reluctantly. No man had ever held her so lovingly without expecting, even demanding, something in return, and she loved the intimacy of it. "In comparison to my being one hundred and thirty years old and having vampires for parents, you mean?"

Max sighed heavily, but his eyes were still warm, still smiling. "I don't think I've absorbed that yet," he confessed.

"When you do," Kristina predicted, suddenly sorrowful again, "you'll never want to see me again. You'll tell me to stay away from you and your beautiful children." He brushed her mouth with his. "It's more likely, lovely Kristina, that you will become bored with me one day." The sound of clapping and the chiming of the mantel clock in the parlor were simultaneous. It was midnight—where had the evening gone?—and Dathan stood in the kitchen doorway, still applauding.

"An accurate prediction, I'm sure," the warlock said, ignoring Kristina's murderous glare. "What, I pray you, is duller than a mortal?"

## CHAPTER 8

Max, always so unflappable, in Kristina's experience at least, tensed at the sight of the warlock and moved without hesitation to confront him. Kristina put out an arm to prevent that. There were any number of ways an immortal could defend himself against a human being, no matter how brave that feckless mortal might be, and most of them were unthinkable. Especially in connection with Max.

Dathan was at his most charming—but with an edge. "Oh, dear," he said with a sly glint in his eyes and a soft exhalation of breath. "Here we have that most foolhardy of all creatures—*abrupt* mortal. Perhaps I was too hasty, Mr. Kilcarragh, in declaring you to be dull. Though you would be oh-so-much better off as a dullard than a martyr, it's true."

"Enough," Kristina said firmly, her gaze never leaving Dathan's face. She still had the back of one hand pressed against Max's chest, as though that would stop him if he decided to pounce.

"Who the hell is this guy?" Max demanded.

Dathan chuckled. "Who indeed?"

Kristina sighed. "Max Kilcarragh," she said, "meet Dathan—warlock among warlocks."

Max seemed to feel a grudging fascination, rather than fear. He narrowed his eyes, studying the splendid beast who stood before him; Dathan's manner was almost as imperious as that of Valerian. "Is that your religious persuasion," Max asked, "or were you born that way?"

Dathan's deceptively soft brown eyes gleamed with delighted amusement. "Religion has nothing to do with it," he replied at some length. "And, yes, I suppose I was born a warlock, but I couldn't say when that momentous event occurred. I've quite forgotten."

"Vampires are made," Kristina explained, looking back at Max over one shoulder. A deep sorrow possessed her; the understanding he had displayed earlier would be shortlived, once he really comprehended the full spectrum of fiends he might encounter, just by association with Kristina. "Created by other vampires, I mean. Warlocks"—she tossed a malevolent glance toward Dathan—"probably *hatch*, like reptiles."

"I'm getting a headache," Max said. He looked as though every muscle in his body was poised for a fight. "Just tell me, Kristina—is this guy welcome here?"

"*Welcome* is hardly the word I would use," Kristina answered, and Dathan pretended to be wounded by her remark. "He's quite harmless, however. Where I'm concerned, at least."

Max looked skeptical, assessing Dathan again with undisguised dislike and suspicion in his eyes. "Are you sure?"

Kristina spoke lightly, her tone, as well as her words, calculated to irritate the arrogant warlock. "Dathan wouldn't dare do me mischief," she said. "If he did, he would have my mother to contend with, not to mention Valerian."

Dathan flushed. "I am not afraid of that—that *stage magician!*" he snapped. He and Valerian were sworn adversaries, actively antagonistic toward each other.

Kristina noticed that he had not raised the same protest in regard to Maeve. As queen of the nightwalkers, she was among the most powerful beings in this dimension and several others. Dathan, while an accomplished necromancer, was no match for the legendary vampire, and he was smart enough to know it.

She linked her arm with Max's. "It would be better if you left," she said. "I'm in no danger, and the sooner I hear Dathan out, the sooner he will leave me alone."

The warlock adjusted his diamond cufflinks, somewhat huffily, but offered no comment.

"You're sure?" Max asked, looking deeply into Kristina's eyes.

She nodded and stood on tiptoe to kiss him lightly on the mouth. "We'll talk tomorrow," she said.

"Count on it," Max replied. Then, with the utmost reluctance, he collected his coat from the back of one of the chairs at the table in the family room, gave Dathan a long, unfriendly once-over, and left.

"The nerve," Dathan complained when Max was gone.

"Go near him," Kristina answered evenly, "ruffle one hair on his head, bother him in any way, and I promise you, Dathan, I will find a way to destroy you if it takes my share of eternity. Do not take my warning lightly, thinking my magic small, either, for I have not begun to explore the extent of my powers."

"A stirring speech," Dathan said, removing his cloak with a graceful gesture. "Though, alas, all for naught. You have nothing to fear from me, Kristina—I shall not trouble your mortal."

"Then what do you want?"

"You touched upon the purpose of my visit yourself, just a moment ago. Your magic is rusty, and woe betide you, my dear, if you find yourself in need of it, without your mother, myself, or a certain ill-tempered vampire within rescuing distance. I have appointed myself your tutor."

The idea was not without merit, though Kristina would have dearly loved to hurl the suggestion right back in his face. The nearly unpalatable truth was that she desperately needed to polish her skills. "What's in this for you?" she asked warily. "And don't say you're willing to offer your time out of simple generosity. You're not the charitable type, and we both know it."

Dathan released a long sigh. Unlike Valerian's sighs, which were always feigned, for vampires do not breathe, Dathan's was quite genuine. Warlocks, unlike their blood-drinking counterparts, had beating hearts and functioning lungs, among other humanlike appurtenances.

"I wish to find a mate," he said.

Kristina recalled that Dathan had once made some unholy bargain with Valerian, to that end. The warlock did not wish a union with another witch, or even a mortal; he sought a vampire. Part of the antipathy between the two was based in the indisputable fact that Valerian had tricked Dathan.

She felt herself softening a little toward the warlock, for she certainly understood what it was to be lonely, to yearn for love. "I don't know how you think I can help," she said, after mulling Dathan's announcement over for a few more moments. "It may have escaped your notice, but I don't exactly have a wide circle of friends—or even acquaintances—in the world of nightwalkers. And I'd prefer to keep it that way."

"You are your mother's daughter," Dathan insisted with a quiet earnestness Kristina did not think was a pretense. "As such, there are doors open to you that would be closed to me."

Kristina turned away, went to the table where she and Max had been reading the letters she had written so long before about her marriage to Michael Bradford, and began gathering them together. She felt a need to be busy.

"Why don't you take a witch for a mate?"

"Witches are notoriously independent," Dathan answered in a vaguely defensive tone. "They tend to regard intimate relationships as bothersome."

Kristina barely suppressed an urge to roll her eyes. She was not without sympathy—toward the viewpoint of the female of the species, that is. If Dathan was a representation of the average warlock, they could be obnoxious creatures.

But then, so could vampires. And men.

"What can you teach me?" she asked.

"Virtually everything, with the probable exception of time travel. That is quite tricky—requiring either a great age or a conversion from mortal to blood-drinker, as in the case of your parents, for example."

Kristina raised one eyebrow slightly and indulged in a crooked smile. "I'm a hundred and thirty," she said. "Isn't that a great age?"

"Not in this crowd," Dathan replied, folding his arms. His cloak lay over the back of the family room couch in a familiar way, as though he'd tossed it there a thousand times. Which, of course, he hadn't. "Put an end to my suspense, Kristina. Do we have an agreement or not?"

"With reservations," she answered, standing still now, the gathered letters in her hands, watching him. "I run an antiques shop, not a preternatural dating service. I'll do my best to help you out, but I can't promise miracles."

Dathan snatched up his cloak in a practiced motion of one hand. "I hardly think it should be that difficult," he said. "I am not, after all, ugly or otherwise objectionable."

"You are definitely not ugly," Kristina agreed, sensing that, at least temporarily, she had the upper hand. "Whether or not you could be described as objectionable is certainly open to debate. But if finding a mate were not difficult, you would have done it yourself by now, wouldn't you?"

The warlock donned the cape in a theatrical swirling motion reminiscent of Valerian, although Kristina judiciously refrained from pointing out the similarity. "As you know," he said coolly, "vampires and warlocks do not commonly interact."

"Perhaps because the blood of warlocks is poisonous to nightwalkers, and so many have been tricked into partaking," Kristina commented. "Why are you set on attaining this? Vampires are among your oldest and most ardent enemies."

"It does not have to be so," Dathan replied with faint umbrage rather than acquiescence. "Between us we could create a new race of beings." There was a hint of the crusader in the warlock's bearing, putting Kristina in mind of her father, who spent practically every spare moment in his laboratory, searching for a way to enhance the positive side of vampirism while eliminating the negative aspects.

"I'm not sure I want to participate," Kristina said.

"Consider my proposition well," Dathan advised. "I will return for your answer tomorrow."

Kristina inclined her head in silent agreement, and Dathan vanished within the instant.

She went slowly up the stairs, carrying the letters, tucking all but one away in the drawer of the night table beside her bed. She wanted very much to consult with her mother, but it was eight hours later in London, which meant that Maeve had taken refuge in her lair.



Leaving the letter that took up where the account of the duel, Michael's terrible injuries, and poor Justin's death, had left off, Kristina went into her bathroom to indulge in a long, soothing shower.

The flow of warm water calmed her, helped her to think more clearly. She faced a paradox in considering Dathan's bargain; on the one hand, she would be better able to protect Max and his children, not to mention herself, if she took instruction from the warlock. On the other hand, that same crucial training would inevitably lead her deeper into the very world she found so threatening and so abhorrent.

She might have asked her mother for help, of course, or even Valerian, but Kristina had lived thirteen decades, not thirteen years. She had loved and lost, she had traveled the world, she had built a highly respected and lucrative business. Always, always, Kristina had steered her own ship, albeit with more success at some times than others. Now she found that she did not relish the prospect of asking either vampire to lead her through the elementary steps of magic like a preadolescent stumbling through a lesson in ballroom dance.

As she stepped out of the shower, towed her body and her hair dry, Kristina allowed herself the indulgence of thinking about Max again. He could not have guessed what it meant to her, his readiness to believe in her, to share her memories by reading the letters. While he had certainly been shocked by her revelations—who wouldn't be?—he had also gone to remarkable lengths to understand. Even more important, he hadn't shown disgust, or any sort of judgment.

Nothing had really rattled Max, she reflected, until Dathan had materialized. At that point, Max had been ready to protect her, a noble if highly imprudent act.

While the memory definitely troubled her—the range of horrible things Dathan might have done in response was almost unlimited—Kristina couldn't help feeling a little pleased by Max's gallantry. She did not recall another instance, in all her adult life, when she'd been the object of such reckless chivalry.

She pulled on her white terry-cloth robe and ran a comb through her cap of sleek, dark hair, which was already drying nicely. She was smiling as she went through her bedroom and into the hallway, intending to brew a cup of herbal tea.

Her amusement faded as she passed the room where she had taken Max and Bree and Eliette, to show them the toys from her childhood. She heard two chilling, little-girl voices through the door.

Kristina froze in the hall, almost too startled to think, let alone act. Then, summoning all her paltry powers, she reached for the knob.

The lock clicked before her hand closed on the brass handle and the heavy wooden panel swung silently open. An eerie wash of moonlight lit the otherwise darkened room, but Kristina could see only too clearly.

She stood on the threshold, torn between fury and terror, unable, for the moment, even to speak.

Benecia Havermail, demon-child, all blond, blue-eyed perfection, with her ringlets and ruffled dress, was perched on the cushioned window seat, holding the very baby doll Bree had so favored during her visit. She smiled, showing tiny, perfect white teeth. Teeth capable of tearing the throat out of a rhinoceros.

"Hello, Kristina," she chimed.



Canaan, the younger of the two monsters, was dark-haired and smaller than her sister, though just as exquisitely beautiful. And just as deadly. She was seated cross-legged on the floor, in front of the toy theater, while the puppets whirled in a ludicrous, drunken dance. This, like Benecia's attentions to the baby doll, was a subtle but effective parody of the Kilcarragh children's visit, for Eliette had been fascinated by the little stage, with its colorful, inanimate players.

"What are you doing here?" Kristina managed to croak. She knew it was unwise to show fear—and fear wasn't precisely what she felt—but hiding her emotions from these two ancient blood-drinkers was more than she could manage at the moment. "How dare you?"

Benecia smiled sweetly, but did not stir herself from the window seat. She might have been a mannequin, a model of Alice in Wonderland come to life, Kristina thought with an involuntary shiver. So flawless were her features. "You mustn't be rude," Benecia scolded in that musical voice. She glanced toward the array of priceless porcelain dolls Kristina had collected, displayed in a cabinet on one wall, behind glass doors.

Silently the doors opened. The dolls climbed daintily down from their shelves, murmuring among themselves.

"Stop it!" Kristina gasped.

The treasured dolls joined hands and made a circle, going round and round in a stiff-jointed caricature of some schoolyard game. Their voices were a singsong, chantlike sound that made the hairs on Kristina's nape stand upright.

"Stop!" she said again. "Now!"

Canaan only laughed, but Benecia gave a somewhat petulant sigh, and, at some mental command from her, the dolls returned to their cases, closing the doors behind them, striking their familiar poses. Their small voices, however, seemed to echo in the room for a long time.

"We didn't mean to frighten you," Benecia said.

"The hell you didn't," Kristina shot back. "I want you out of my house—now. And don't ever come back!"

"What will you do—complain to Valerian? Or to your mother? Or perhaps to your father, the mad scientist?"

Kristina ignored the jibe at Calder Holbrook's fascination with mysterious experiments, but she was incensed by the idea that she needed Valerian or Maeve to protect her. Even though that was, in essence, the truth of the matter. "Valerian is just looking for an excuse to drive a stake through your rotten little hearts, and as for my mother—"

Canaan got to her feet. "Valerian won't have time for you now that he has Daisy, and that filthy, awful little street urchin he's brought home from Brazil," she said. "And Maeve happens to be quite busy, if you haven't noticed. There is another political problem, you see, between vampires and angels, and Her Majesty"—she gave these last two words a note of mockery—"spends every waking moment trying to resolve it."

Kristina felt a stab of guilt, as well as trepidation. Relations between the realms of darkness and light

were always dubious, of course, but a conflagration, if serious enough, might well bring on the cataclysm mortals referred to as Armageddon. Kristina had not even suspected that her mother was facing another such crisis. "Why did you come here?" she asked. If she could not keep the panic out of her psyche, perhaps she could at least sound normal. "What do you want?"

As usual, Benecia, being the eldest, was the spokesperson for the dreadful duo. "We have heard that the warlock, Dathan, desires a vampire wife."

Kristina's stomach rolled. Surely even such fiends, such ghouls as these two, would not *could* not, suggest...

"I should like to offer myself," Benecia said.

Kristina barely kept her dinner down. "You have the body of a child," she pointed out in what she hoped was an even, reasonable tone.

"I am nearly as old as Valerian," argued the ancient woman imprisoned forever in the size and form of a little girl.

"No," Kristina said, retreating a step.

"Do you know what it is like, Kristina?" Benecia demanded bitterly, advancing with a delicate tread. "Can you even guess what it means to be trapped for all of time? If I had been left alone, I would have grown to womanhood, married, lived, and died, and then been born again, through a procession of lives. Instead I must spend eternity just as I am!"

Kristina stopped retreating; this was her house, damn it. But before she could say anything, Canaan entered the conversation, addressing her sister. It was well known among immortals and their consorts that the two, though invariably together, were not always in accord.

"Do stop being so dramatic about it, Benecia," Canaan said without a trace of tenderness or sympathy. "It's not as though you were made a vampire against your will, like poor Aidan Tremayne. You begged Papa until he changed you, and you knew full well what you were doing!"

Kristina stood her ground, frantically trying to figure out a way to use the sisters' antipathy toward each other in order to defend herself. "I have no desire to listen to an account of the Havermail family history," she said with bravado. "You will both leave this house immediately and stay away."

Benecia and Canaan looked at each other and laughed. The sound was like crystal chimes, dancing in a soft breeze, and it raised a cold sweat on Kristina's skin.

"If you don't do as I say," Benecia said sweetly, patiently, as though explaining something elemental to a slaving idiot, "Canaan and I shall simply have to strike up a friendship with—what were their names again?—oh, yes. Bree and Eliette. I'm sure we could convince them we were angels—mortals are such gullible creatures, and we've made good use of that trick in the past."

Kristina was outraged. She was also more convinced than ever that she needed to bring her magic skills up to speed ASAP. "Dathan is a warlock," she said when she could trust herself to speak without shrieking in uncontrollable fury, "but he is not a deviate. If I suggested such a vile thing to him, he would be as revolted as I am."

Benecia had evidently fed copiously earlier in the evening, for a blush rose beneath her nearly transparent ivory skin. "I have told you. I am not a child, I am an adult!"

"Then go find someone else whose development was arrested in a similar fashion," Kristina replied. She did not know where she got the audacity, for here was a creature who could burn her to cinders with a mere glance. And that would be one of her more merciful punishments.

"We could transform a small boy," Canaan said thoughtfully.

"Fool," Benecia spat. "I have the mind of a woman. I desire a mature mate, not a child! Besides, the making of vampires is forbidden, by Maeve's order."

Kristina was silent, hoping the argument would escalate, carrying the Havermail sisters away—*far* away—on a swell of indignation or at least sibling rivalry.

"I thought you weren't afraid of Maeve," Canaan taunted.

*So far, so good*, Kristina thought.

"You know, Canaan, sometimes I wish I'd been an only child."

Unfortunately the phrase *only child* turned their attention back to Kristina. They assessed her with glittering, gemlike eyes.

"I am not going to forget this, Kristina Holbrook," Benecia said. "You have made an enemy by insulting me."

Kristina refrained from saying that she had been an enemy for a very long time. She simply gestured toward the door, tendering a silent invitation to leave.

Benecia and Canaan disappeared in a blink.

Kristina, for her part, gave up all hope of getting a good night's sleep. She dressed in dark jeans and a matching cashmere turtleneck, then added a long, buttonless cardigan in the same ebony color. After only a moment's hesitation, she willed herself to Max's house.

Invisibility, being a fairly simple trick compared to some others, was still part of Kristina's repertoire. The dark clothes were a safeguard, in case she had overestimated her talents.

Her reasons for paying this late-night, uninvited visit were altruistic—she meant to watch over little Eliette and Bree until dawn, when the Havermails would be forced into their lairs by the light of the sun—but she still felt like a trespasser, a sort of inverse Peeping Tom.

Perhaps it was not an accident, on an unconscious level at least, that Kristina first projected herself into Max's room. He lay sprawled across the large bed, sound asleep, his naked athletic body only partially covered by a sheet. She admired him for a long time, hoping his dreams were sweet but suspecting otherwise by his restlessness, and then sought and found the room his daughters shared.

It was a spacious chamber, nearly as large as Max's own quarters, furnished with two canopied beds in the pseudo-French Provencal style so popular with little girls, matching dressers, a desk, and a miniature vanity. On Bree's side of the room was a toy chest, overflowing with vinyl dolls in various states of

undress, a scattering of clothes, a coloring book, still open, with crayons in the seam like logs in a flume.

Eliette's territory, on the other hand, was almost painfully neat. The desk and vanity were tidy, and even in sleep the little girl looked as though she were bracing herself, expecting tragedy. Kristina knew that this child had felt the loss of her mother more deeply than anyone suspected, including her very caring father.

Kristina's heart ached; she almost made herself solid again, so strong was her desire to smooth Eliette's little brow with her fingertips, to kiss her and tell her that everything was all right, that she was safe now.

But that promise could not be made, in honesty, to any mortal on earth, no matter how beloved, for inherent in the glorious miracle of life, of course, was the certainty of death.

Kristina moved to stand beside Bree's bed and saw with an inner smile that the younger child was utterly relaxed in sleep, still trusting and vulnerable. She had only deep-seated, almost instinctual memories of her lost mother and did not yet suspect that love could be treacherous.

In those moments a new sort of love was born in the very center of Kristina's being, one she had never known before. The fathomless devotion a mother feels for her children.

It was silly. Even preposterous. But there it was. She cared so much for these little girls that she would have laid down her own life for them.

It was no great leap, from that conclusion, to the realization that she loved Max, as well. Truly and completely, in an adult fashion that bore no resemblance at all to the reckless, superficial and somewhat fatuous fondness she had felt toward Michael.

Kristina settled in to keep her vigil, reflecting upon these revelations while she waited for the dawn.

Perhaps an hour had passed when Bree awakened, groped her sleepy way into the bathroom, and crawled back into bed. She sat up for a few moments, a tousled moppet gilded in silvery moonlight, as though she sensed someone's presence. Then, with an expansive yawn, she collapsed onto the pillows and rumbled back into the sort of consuming slumber Kristina suspected only vampires and small children can attain.

The remainder of the night passed quickly for Kristina. After a last stolen look at Max, who was sleeping peacefully now, she willed herself back to her own house, her own bedroom.

The letter she had intended to read the night before lay on her bed, where she had left it before her shower the night before. Still wearing the dark clothes she'd put on after the encounter with Benecia and Canaan Havermail, she hurried down the hall.

Stepping over the threshold, Kristina scanned the room. The dolls were in their cabinets, staring and silent, and there was no sign that the tiny vampires had ever fouled the place with their presence.

"Behave yourselves," Kristina told the dolls before closing the door and returning to her room to dress for work.

Dathan was waiting inside the shop when she arrived, making himself at home on a Chippendale chair and reading the current issue of *USA Today*. He smiled benevolently, like an indulgent husband whose docile wife has just brought his breakfast on a tray.

"Well?" he said, laying aside the newspaper and rising. He was wearing battered jeans and a tweedy brown sweater, but he bowed as elegantly as if he were clad in a coat and tails.

Kristina was more than irritated at his presumption—he could at least have waited until she'd arrived at the shop herself instead of entering like a common thief—but she put her annoyance aside. Last night's visit from the Havermails had convinced her that she needed someone's help, and at the moment Dathan was the best available candidate.

"We have a bargain," she said, extending one hand to seal the agreement.

Dathan looked mildly surprised. "Acquiescence? So easily and so soon? Great Zeus, Kristina, I confess I'm almost disappointed!"

He deserved a jab, she decided. "You've already had one offer of marriage," she said, "though I doubt you'll find it suitable."

"Was it a vampire?"

"It is certainly the appropriate word and, yes, Benecia Havermail is indeed a vampire."

Dathan all but spat his response. "Why, that's revolting—the creature is a child!"

"She only looks like one," Kristina replied. "Apparently she's decided she made a bad bargain in becoming a vampire and passing up her chance to go through the normal sequence of lifetimes. In addition, she seems to be smitten with you."

Dathan's expression was a study in revulsion. "Needless to say, my dear, that particular monster will not do."

Kristina went to the back of the shop to hang up her coat, set her purse on a shelf, and put a mug of water into the microwave for tea. She had not taken the time for breakfast and felt the beginnings of hunger in the pit of her stomach. "I completely agree that Benecia is not suitable. I hasten to remind you, however, that all vampires are monsters, in one way or another."

"As are all witches and warlocks," Dathan said, though he glossed over the concession pretty quickly. He gave Kristina a pointed look as she took the mug out of the microwave and swirled a teabag around in the hot water before discarding it in the trash bin. "Lesson one, Ms. Holbrook," he said. "Why do you brew tea in the mortal way, like a common scullery maid, when you could simply conjure it up in the first place?"

Kristina considered her long-cherished preference for doing things in human fashion. "I wanted to live as normal a life as I could," she said.

"Normal for you, Kristina? Or normal for the mortal you wish you were? 'This above all,' as the Bard so wisely said, 'to thine own self be true.'"

"Point taken," Kristina replied, deflated. "I've been playing make believe for a long time. The problem is, I'm not sure *what* I am—clearly I'm not human, but I'm no vampire, either."

"You are Kristina Holbrook," Dathan said, touching the tip of her nose with an index finger in the same fond way that her father and Valerian had often done, while reassuring her. "You are utterly unique, and

you should celebrate that, *glory in it*, rather than fretting and trying to pretend you're someone else."

Kristina knew he was right, but just knowing didn't mean she could change right away. After all, she'd been posing as a mortal woman ever since that long-ago day when she'd taken a spill from her horse on an English country road and just as surely fallen for Michael Bradford. A habit of more than a century's standing would take time and effort to break.

"Okay," she said. "What do I do first? How do I start?"

Dathan studied her speculatively. "I assume you know the basics—appearing and disappearing, changing the outward appearance of simple objects and all that?"

Kristina flushed with indignation. "I'm not an idiot," she said.

"Now, now," Dathan scolded, wagging a finger under her nose. "The mark of a good student is humility. To achieve mastery, one must assume the attitude of a beginner."

Indignation gave way to a singular lack of enthusiasm. "Terrific," Kristina muttered.

## CHAPTER 9

For the first time in his life, as he drove the short distance between Kristina's house and his own, Max Kilcarragh questioned his sanity. He cared—more than cared—for a woman who professed to be one hundred and thirty years old, with vampires for parents. He had seen a genuine warlock pop into the room like a character on *Bewitched*.

Seeing was believing, they said. He didn't know which was crazier—that he'd seen, or that he believed. Even more insane was the fact that he wasn't running as fast as he could in the other direction.

He was at risk. More important, so were his children.

Yet there was something inside him, a part of himself he'd never explored, that urged him to stand his ground.

*Stand his ground?* How could one mortal, however athletic, hold his own against creatures with magical powers? Maybe it was already too late to protect his daughters, himself, and Kristina.

Now *there* was a grandiose idea—that he, a high school football coach just five years short of turning forty—would have so much as a prayer against the likes of that warlock, Dathan, or any of the other monsters Kristina had so haltingly described.

He was nearly home, but suddenly there it was—the neighborhood church he had avoided assiduously since the accident. Although he'd sent Bree and Eliette to Sunday School every week, knowing Sandy would have wanted them to stay in touch with their personal heritage, he hadn't set foot in the place himself. Hadn't been inclined to worship a God who would take somebody like Sandy out of the world, though he guessed he still believed. Grudgingly.

Maybe, he thought, pulling over to the curb and staring up at the darkened structure, it wasn't a case of

not having a prayer after all. Maybe, in fact, that *was* all he had.

He gripped the steering wheel in both hands and lowered his head, motivated mostly by discouragement, rather than reverence. His supplication was silent. *Show me how to handle this. I don't care what happens to me, but I'm asking You to look out for Kristina and Eliette and Bree. Please .*

That was the extent of Max's entreaty; he hoped it would be enough. When Sandy was killed, he hadn't had time to ask for help; everything had happened too fast.

He shifted the Blazer back into gear and went home.

Elaine was there to babysit, and her face brightened as Max entered the house. He greeted her with a nod and bounded up the stairs without taking off his coat or asking how the kids were. He had to see his daughters for himself; a report from his sister-in-law wouldn't suffice.

They were safe.

Bree was tangled in her blankets, though the expression on her little face was one of sweet repose. Eliette seemed to be on guard, even in her sleep, but that was normal for her. Max's heart ached because he couldn't take away the pain, make up for the loss that had wounded her so terribly.

She awakened, this elder daughter of his, who remembered the death of her mother all too clearly, and looked at him with large brown eyes. "Hi, Daddy," she whispered, conscious, as always, of Bree. Eliette was too serious, too responsible, but he didn't know how to help her.

"Hi," he said in a gruff, gentle whisper.

"I'm glad you're home."

"Me, too. Everything go okay tonight?"

Eliette nodded soberly. Max wondered if she was thinking what he was—trying to reason out how things could be okay in a world in which your mom could be snatched away forever, without a moment's notice. "You were with Kristina," she said.

It was only a statement, not an accusation. Not a protest.

Max felt a twinge of guilt all the same. What new kind of suffering might he have brought into Eliette's life, and Bree's, by involving himself with Kristina Holbrook?

"Yeah," he said.

"Bree says she's going to be our mommy now. Miss Holbrook, I mean."

Max tucked Eliette in, in an approximation of the way Sandy had done it. "Just a second here," he said softly. "Mommies come one to a customer, and yours is gone to heaven. Miss Holbrook—if I did marry her, and trust me, things haven't gotten that far—would be your stepmother."

Eliette's nose crinkled. "Like in *Cinderella* !"

The word stepmother had been a poor choice, Max thought. While he knew in the center of his soul that



Kristina wasn't wicked, she was no Mary Poppins, either. "No," he said quickly. "Kristina isn't mean."

"Would she get to boss me around?"

Max suppressed a smile, in spite of the fact that the evening's events had left him feeling as though he'd been pushed five miles by a snowplow and then run over. "If you mean could she tell you to do your homework, quit picking on your sister, or clean up your room, yes. Now, go to sleep. We'll talk about this in the morning." He kissed Eliette's forehead and left the room.

Elaine was lingering downstairs, sipping herbal tea. She always lingered, it seemed, but then Max wouldn't have wanted her to walk to her car alone. She was a good friend to him, an attentive and loving aunt to the children, and she had been Sandy's sister. But she got on his nerves sometimes.

She looked at him with big, soulful eyes, and Max was confronted, yet again, with a fact he usually managed to deny. Elaine wanted more from him than he was willing to give. She wanted to step into Sandy's shoes, raise the girls, share his bed every night.

"Bree and Eliette were good, like always," she said.

Max shoved a hand through his hair, much ruffled because it had been a night for that sort of gesture, and manufactured a smile. "I really appreciate your coming over here on such short notice to take care of them," he said. "But it occurs to me that I've been taking advantage of you by asking. I'm sorry, Elaine—I haven't been very thoughtful."

She drew nearer, and Max unconsciously stepped back.

Her smile was tremulous. Her hair was like Sandy's, her face and body were similar. It would be so easy to pretend...

And so unfair. So cruel.

Besides, it was Kristina who occupied his mind and heart these days, for better or worse. He didn't even want to think about the worse part.

"Max," Elaine said quietly as if she were holding out a handful of seeds to a bird on the verge of taking wing, "the girls need a mother."

While Max privately agreed, the remark rankled. In an ideal world, every child would have two loving, nurturing parents, but this one was another kind of place entirely. He'd done his best in spite of that, making sure Eliette and Bree knew that he would be there for them, no matter what.

If there was a single thing he was sure of, in a universe full of surprises, it was that he was a good father.

"I don't think we should pursue this, Elaine," he said with a sigh. "I'm really tired and..." *And tonight I found out that vampires and warlocks, to name just two of a variety of fiends, are real. Not only that —I learned that I'm in love with a woman who is a hundred and thirty years old.*

Elaine did not advance, but neither did she retreat. Max was developing a pounding headache, and he was still wearing his coat. The room felt hot and close, though he knew the temperature was set at sixty-eight degrees, as always.

"I've been patient," she said.

Max felt a chill. Patient? Her sister had died violently, tragically, instantaneously. He said nothing, but started toward the door, hoping to lead Elaine in that direction. Her coat, a simple one of gray tweed, hung on the hall tree. "It's late," he said, offering the garment, holding it out so that she could slip her arms into the sleeves.

She smiled somewhat sadly and got into the coat. Max wished he loved her; it would have made everything so much simpler. Elaine looked like Sandy. She cherished the girls, and they were fond of her. And there were, to his knowledge anyway, no vampires in her family tree, no warlocks amidst her small circle of lackluster friends.

"I've watched you," she said with her back still turned to him, her hands busy with the buttons of her coat. "First you grieved, like all of us, of course. Then you started dating..."

Max closed his eyes for a moment. *Damn. She was going to push it.*

"Elaine—" he began awkwardly, reluctantly.

She turned and placed a finger to his lips. Her eyes were brimming with tears, and her chin trembled. "Just listen," she said. "I've always loved you—even when you and Sandy were first dating. I kept hoping. But then you married her."

He had an image of Elaine as a shy, knock-kneed kid in a bridesmaid's dress. Sandy had tossed her bouquet to her younger sister. Elaine had had too much champagne at the reception, he recalled. She'd sobbed and made something of a scene when he and Sandy left for their honeymoon.

He'd felt sorry for the kid, ascribing her behavior to excitement and the champagne she and some of the cousins had been sneaking all afternoon, but Sandy had touched his arm and shook her head. A signal that she didn't want to discuss the matter.

"Don't," he said now, in the entryway of his home. "Please. Don't."

She ignored his plea. "I can make you happy, Max."

He let out a long, raspy sigh and put a hand to the small of her back, ushering her to the door, turning the knob. "Come on," he said as if she hadn't spoken. "I'll see you to your car."

"Max."

He didn't push her over the threshold, but he did guide her a little, increasing the pressure just slightly. "No, Elaine," he said firmly. Warily. "I won't talk about this with you. Not tonight, not ever."

"Couldn't you just pretend I was Sandy?" They were in the middle of the front yard. Only a few more feet to her car.

"My God," Max answered, opening the car door for her, waiting for her to slip inside. "I'm going to forget you even suggested that. You don't mean what you're saying, Elaine." He felt compelled to offer a reason, an explanation, for her behavior. "It's the grief that's making you say these things. You haven't worked through losing Sandy."

She got behind the wheel, but Max couldn't close the car door because she hadn't swung her legs inside. "You think I didn't love her, don't you? Well, I did. I do. And I miss her as much as you do."

Max shivered, but he didn't think it was the cold November wind that was biting at him, even through his coat. "I know you loved her," he said patiently, carefully. "We all did."

"It's what Sandy wants, you know," she told him. "For us to be together. A family. She told me so."

Max didn't speak. He wouldn't have known what to say.

"In dreams," Elaine explained, all the way inside the car now, at long last. Switching on the ignition. "Sandy comes to me in dreams. Talks to me. Tells me things."

Max still didn't answer. He was a pragmatic man who did not believe the dead spoke to the living, waking or sleeping, but that night he'd learned, in an unforgettable way, that there were indeed other realms, other realities besides the one he knew.

"I'll ask her to visit you. Sandy, I mean. Maybe that will convince you." Having uttered those incredible words, Elaine closed the door, clicked the electric lock button, and backed out of Max's driveway.

He was scared, and not just because of what had been revealed to him at Kristina's house earlier that evening. Nor did he believe that his late wife would show up in his dreams, at Elaine's behest or for any other reason. He knew because he'd tried often enough to summon Sandy, during the early, dark days, when the loneliness had been almost too much to bear. No, what worried Max was the state of his sister-in-law's mind.

He stood in the driveway long after Elaine's car had disappeared around the corner.

"Slow," Dathan said critically, "but a little better than your last try."

Kristina glared at him. She'd willed herself to China and back—the whole process couldn't have taken more than a minute—but she felt as if she'd made the journey on foot. "I'm half mortal, you know," she said.

"No excuse," Dathan replied. They were standing in the center of her living room, where they had materialized moments before; Dathan first, of course, then a disgruntled and somewhat breathless Kristina. There was a subtle change in his expression as he studied her. "You know," he said, "maybe I don't need a vampire for a mate after all. You might do very well."

Kristina felt herself flush with indignation and something not unlike revulsion, although the warlock was a beguiling creature if she'd ever seen one. "Forget it," she said. "My family is weird enough without stirring you into the mix."

Dathan's tender brown eyes flashed with annoyance, and he spread one long-fingered hand over his chest in a gesture of injured pride. "You lack grace," he said. "Verbally, as well as in regard to your magic."

Kristina was exhausted. She wanted to crawl into bed and lie there for a hundred years, like Sleeping Beauty. When she woke up, Max and his sweet, innocent children would have lived out their lives and

gone on to some brighter, safer realm where she would no longer be a danger to them.

"I'm not going to apologize, if that's what you're waiting for," she told Dathan.

"Don't you see that it's your very insistence on pretending to be mortal that has gotten you into this mess?" the warlock demanded. "And yet you persist. You're in love with, of all things, *ahigh school football coach*. A jock, Kristina. That's what humans call men like him, isn't it? Jocks?"

She felt incredibly defensive. "There is nothing wrong with being athletic," she said. "Besides, Max is smart. And sensitive."

Dathan rolled his eyes. "You may already be beyond hope," he said, folding his arms. He looked magnificent, standing there in the center of Kristina's beautifully appointed living room, but she felt nothing except irritation.

"Maybe I am," she said. It was only too true. If anything happened to Max and the girls because of their association with her, she would not be able to bear it. It was the one prospect with the impetus to drive Kristina to destroy herself.

"No," Dathan insisted. "I won't let it happen."

She wondered if he'd been reading her mind, hoped not. There were a great many things she didn't know about warlocks and their singular powers. Or those of vampires, for that matter. "Won't let what happen?" she asked suspiciously. She kept some very private things in her mind and didn't want Dathan or anyone else rifling through them.

"You're not going to give up on your magic, Kristina," Dathan decreed. He tilted his handsome head to one side, considering. His exquisite features were taut with concentration. "Come with me," he went on after a long and, for Kristina, uncomfortable silence. "Be my bride. You will learn to love me in time, and forget your little mortal."

*Little* was hardly the word Kristina would have used to describe Max; he was well over six feet tall and probably weighed better than two hundred pounds. And that didn't take the size of his spirit into account; she had known from their first encounter that Max had the soul of a gentle warrior. Even if he'd been small physically, his character would have made him a giant.

"If I thought going with you would keep Max and his daughters safe, I would probably do it," Kristina said. She hadn't considered her words ahead of time; they simply came tumbling out of her mouth. Straight from her heart.

"But it's too late now. The damage has been done."

"Exactly whom do you fear so much?" Dathan asked. He was standing behind a Queen Anne chair now, his elegant hands grasping the back. "Surely it can't be Valerian. He dotes on you."

"It's the Havermails," Kristina said, and shuddered superstitiously, lest mentioning the little demons' names might summon them from whatever hellish pursuit they'd chosen for the night. As soon as Dathan was gone, in fact, she would go to Max's house and keep watch again.

"Avery? Roxanne?" Dathan raised one eyebrow, and his fine, angelic mouth twisted slightly in a delicate expression of contempt. "Those cowardly creatures? Neither of them would dare cross Valerian, let

alone your mother."

Kristina shook her head. "Benecia and Canaan."

"The devil's children," Dathan said. The contempt in his face changed to revulsion, and there was nothing delicate about it. "Surely they, too, would be afraid—"

Kristina recalled the recklessness of Benecia's taunts the night before when she'd found them in the room where she kept her childhood toys, her collection of dolls. "Something is different. I don't know about Canaan, but Benecia is—well—it's almost as if she wants to be destroyed." Before Dathan could offer to oblige, Kristina held up one hand to stay his words. "Which isn't to say she won't fight to defend herself, Dathan. She is five hundred years old, remember, and her powers are beyond reckoning."

"Maybe for you. Compared to me, she is but a babe."

"But she is powerful."

"She must sleep in the daytime, like most other vampires. Warlocks suffer no such disadvantage. I have only to find her lair and drive a stake through her heart to put an end to her."

"Not good enough," Kristina answered. "Canaan would avenge her, and even if you managed to destroy her as well, other vampires would seek retribution, if for no other reason than that a warlock had given them cause."

"They would defy your mother's command, that there must be peace between vampires and warlocks, lest Nemesis and his angels be sent to destroy us all?"

"Eternity is a long time," Kristina answered. "I believe some vampires—perhaps many of them—are weary like Benecia. Maybe destruction, even damnation, would be a welcome release after century upon century of being just what they are. Humans pass through a variety of lives, you know, shedding each body like a skin when they are through with it. They go on, change, make progress. I've never spoken of it with my mother, Papa, or Valerian, but I suspect that sometimes a blood-drinker hates being trapped in one identity for all of time. Perhaps they've denied themselves the very thing they sought in the first place, in becoming vampires—life."

"They live forever," Dathan reminded her in a quiet voice.

"No," Kristina replied. "They *exist* forever, or until they are destroyed. There is a big difference."

"I will concede that, if for no other cause than courtesy. What does it have to do with the hideous Benecia Havermail and her equally charming sister?"

"They have nothing to lose," Kristina said. The realization weighed so heavily on her spirit that it threatened to crush her. "They may be desperate enough, lonely enough, bored enough, to risk hellfire on the chance that they could encounter oblivion instead. Valerian says the afterlife is what each one of us expects it to be, and he has reason to know."

In a blink Dathan was standing before Kristina, his hands resting lightly on her shoulders. "Let me show you wonders beyond your greatest fantasies, Kristina."

She smiled, though the last thing she felt was amusement. "Let you take me away from all this? No,

Dathan. I don't care for you and, anyway, as I told you before, it's too late."

"Then I shall find Benecia's lair, and that of her sister, and before the first crow of the cock—"

"No," Kristina said quickly. "You mustn't interfere, Dathan. Not in that way. No conscious, reasoning creature kills with impunity."

"More philosophy?"

"Call it a hunch," Kristina replied. "Now, will you please leave? I need some time to myself."

Dathan snapped his fingers; the cloak he'd worn earlier, when he arrived, appeared in his grasp. He donned it with the customary flourish, his soft eyes fiery as he regarded Kristina. "Don't forget our bargain," he warned. "I will train you in magic, and you will find me a suitable mate. In the meantime, I intend to woo you by any means I can devise."

She suppressed an urge to slap her self-appointed mentor across the face. Kristina might have let her powers slip, but she was no fool. "That last part wasn't in the deal," she pointed out. "I don't love you. I don't want you. In fact, I wouldn't have anything to do with you if I didn't need your help. How's that for philosophical?"

Dathan smiled, though both her words and her manner had been poisonous. One warlock's venom was another's ambrosia, she supposed.

"You have your mother's magnificent spirit," he said. "That only makes you more desirable, as far as I'm concerned." He executed a suave little bow, more a motion of his head than his body. "Farewell, lovely Kristina. For now, at least."

With that, he was gone, leaving no trace of smoke or sulphur in his wake.

Kristina hesitated only a few moments before willing herself to the Kilcarragh house. The children were sleeping soundly, but Max was in his living room, sitting in the dark, without even the television screen to provide light.

He sat in a recliner, a drink in one hand, looking ruffled but plainly not intoxicated. Kristina's heart ached as she stood a few feet away, hopefully invisible, watching him. Little wonder that he was upset, she reflected. He'd just been introduced to a world where things that went bump in the night were real, not just imagined. He'd lost that precious mortal innocence because of her.

As if Max sensed her presence, he set the glass aside and peered into the gloom.

Kristina retreated a little way; he knew she had powers, but she didn't want him to think she was going to pop in on him for no reason, like some supernatural stalker. Maybe he could see her; maybe what was developing between them made that possible.

"Kristina?"

She did the mental equivalent of biting her lip and said nothing.

"Damn," Max muttered, rising from the chair with a sudden motion that almost startled Kristina right out of her spell and into full visibility. "You're not that lucky, Kilcarragh."

Had Kristina been solid, she knew tears would have filled her eyes.

He started toward the stairway, moving confidently in the familiar darkness.

Kristina waited until he was asleep before following him up the stairs and slipping into his room. She was tired from her session with Dathan, and her invisibility was shaky at best. At any moment, she might be seen, and explaining would be difficult.

She stood at the foot of Max's bed for a long while, watching him sleep, searching her mind and heart for a way to keep him and his children safe. But no one was really beyond harm except the dead; Kristina knew that and so, surely, did Max.

Reluctantly Kristina finally turned away, forgetting her spell, opening the door, stepping into the hallway.

Bree was standing there, just outside the bathroom door, wide awake and staring in Kristina's direction.

"You really *can* do magic," the child said in a tone of awe rather than fear.

"Or you could be dreaming," Kristina suggested, somewhat lamely, and in a very soft voice. She hadn't planned on being caught, and now that she had been, she didn't know what to say. It would be cruel and foolish to tell an innocent little girl that monsters, whether hiding in the closet or otherwise, were not necessarily imaginary. That sometimes children needed guarding.

"I'm not dreaming," Bree said firmly. She took a few steps toward Kristina, dragging her blanket behind her, holding a worn teddy bear under one arm. "I can sort of see through you. Are you a ghost, like my mommy?"

"No," Kristina answered. "I'm not a ghost, and neither is your mommy."

"How do you know? About Mommy, I mean?"

Kristina shrugged. She didn't know how she knew that Sandy Kilcarragh had gone on to better things, but she was as sure of that as she was of anything else. "I guess by magic," she said. "Now, don't you think you'd better go back to bed?"

Bree wasn't ready to cooperate, though she yawned broadly. "You're getting pretty solid." She reached out, touched Kristina's hand to test the theory. "Yep. How come you're here? Walking around in our house in the middle of the night?"

"I just wanted to make sure you were all right," Kristina said. It was as close to the truth as she dared to venture, at the moment.

Bree pulled, so that Kristina bent down to her level. "I'm okay," she confided in a stage whisper, "but Eliette is really sad. And Daddy needs somebody grown up to talk to and stuff like that."

"I understand," Kristina whispered. "Why is Eliette sad?"

"She thinks about Mommy a lot," Bree explained. "It makes her lonesome."

Kristina shared the sleeping Eliette's sorrow, felt it keenly in that moment. Her own upbringing had been



anything but normal, but Maeve had been a devoted mother, for all her temperament and dramatic flair. Kristina could barely imagine what it would have been like to grow up without her. "It's good to remember people we love," she said gently. "Even if it hurts sometimes."

Bree frowned, her small, pixie-like face solemn. She clutched both blanket and bear just a little closer. "Is it bad that I can't see Mommy's face in my brain, even when I close my eyes?"

Kristina kissed the little girl's cheek. "No, darling, it isn't bad. And deep in your heart, you do remember. I promise."

Bree smiled brilliantly. "I do?"

Kristina nodded, no longer trusting herself to speak. She watched in silence as the little girl toddled back into the room she shared with her sister, there to sleep and, Kristina hoped, to dream sweet dreams.

Not bothering to cloak herself in invisibility again, not even sure she could manage the spell if she tried, Kristina waited a while, then followed, sitting in the wooden rocking chair in the corner of the room, keeping her vigil and waiting.

The night passed without incident, and Kristina went home a few minutes before sunrise, marveling at the weariness she felt. Was she finally beginning to age, after all these years? It seemed too much to hope for.

Only after Kristina had filled the glass carafe with water and started the coffee machine in her kitchen did she turn and see the note resting prominently on the counter. It was written on expensive, handmade parchment, and the elegant, flowing letters could only have been shaped by one hand.

Her mother's.

*Come to London at once, Maeve had written. I must see you .*

Kristina frowned. Sunset was still a few hours away in England, so she didn't have to hurry. It wasn't the summons that troubled her, either, but the fact that Maeve had not simply come to her at Max's house. Why had her mother left a note, instead of seeking Kristina out, or wrenching her home again, by means of her formidable magic?

In the end, it didn't matter why. Maeve had commanded her, as a daughter and as a subject, to make an appearance at "court." There was never any question of disobeying.

Kristina showered, applied careful makeup, and put on a suit of dove-gray silk. Then, after taking a few minutes to psyche herself up for the task, she blinked herself to London and the lovely old house where so many secrets lived.

It was not yet sunset when Kristina arrived. Having materialized in the outer hallway—she was grateful it hadn't been the coal bin, considering the strain she'd been under lately—she made her way to the library, which was situated at the back of the first floor. The room was spacious, overlooking the garden, and a polished suit of armor, empty as far as Kristina knew, guarded the double doors.

She stepped inside the vast chamber and went straight to her mother's collection of volumes on the subjects of alchemy and general magic. The tomes were very old, some still in manuscript form and in danger of turning to dust at a touch, and the language was strange. Kristina was puzzling out a spell to

forestall evil spirits when a voice startled her out of her contemplation.

"You are here," Maeve remarked, sounding at once imperious and relieved. "I daresay I feared you would not obey."

Kristina laid the book gently aside and smiled at her mother. Maeve was a splendid creature, with flowing dark hair, flawless ivory skin, and eyes of a singular indigo shade. She wore a gossamer white gown, as was typical of her, for she loved spectacle and glamour. Which was not to say that she didn't have a somewhat raunchy side, uncontested queen of the vampires though she was.

"Of course I am here," Kristina answered. "When have I disobeyed you?"

"When you married that mortal—what was his name?—Michael Bradford."

"Mother, that was more than a century ago. I was young and foolish."

Maeve came near, bringing the scent of jasmine with her, and kissed her daughter's cheek. Her smile was warm, full of love and humor, but also tinged with worry. "I fear, from what I am told," she said, "that you are *still* foolish."

## CHAPTER 10

Maeve's words trembled in the air.

*I fear, from what I am told, that you are still foolish .*

Kristina was not intimidated by her mother; she knew Maeve would never hurt her. Would indeed perish to protect her daughter, if such a sacrifice were to prove necessary. Still, she was unsettled by the troubled expression she saw in the queen's dark blue eyes, behind the welcome and the joy.

"Foolish?" Kristina echoed, in atone of false innocence, stalling.

Maeve's brilliant eyes flashed with impatience and temper. Creatures of every sort quailed before that look, and not without reason, but Kristina held her ground. She was about to hear a lecture about her involvement with Max, and she fully intended to fight back.

"Yes, foolish," Maeve snapped. "You've been consorting with warlocks! Kristina, how could you?"

Kristina was taken aback. While she had certainly known that there was a polite rancor between her mother and Dathan, she was also aware that the two had once joined forces to destroy a particularly evil vampire called Lisette. "This is about *Dathan* ?"

"Yes," Maeve said with a little less impatience this time. "How can you be so foolhardy as to trust that—that viper?"

Kristina sighed. She had the beginnings of a headache, though she didn't know whether the tension behind it stemmed from her transatlantic blink or the stress she'd suffered of late. Perhaps both. "I expected you to rail against Max," she said, turning, finding a chair and sinking wearily into it.

All her life she'd been able to go days, even weeks, without sleep, but she had never been sick. Still, something was wrong; she wasn't herself.

Maeve was beside her in an instant, seated gracefully on a hassock, holding Kristina's hand in both her own graceful, chilly ones. "He's done something to you," the great vampire fretted. "I swear, if he's poisoned you, I'll find him and make him long for the mercies of hell!"

"Dathan hasn't harmed me, Mother," Kristina said patiently, gently. "He's helping me with my magic, that's all. Frankly the strain is getting to me."

Maeve narrowed her eyes. "Why should a warlock wish to help the child of two vampires?" she demanded suspiciously.

"We have a bargain," Kristina answered. She conjured a cup of tea, hoping that would restore her a little, and while it appeared in her hands, as ordered, it proved slightly bitter and none too warm. She sipped it anyway. "My part is to find him a mate."

Maeve frowned at the teacup, which rattled against its saucer as Kristina set it aside. "Why doesn't he find a partner from his own species?"

"He says witches are too independent," Kristina explained. "He wants a vampire."

"Why?" Merely suspicious before, Maeve was now a study in irritated disbelief. "Does the arrogant bore think *us* weak and pliable?"

"It's something about blending the powers of warlocks and blood-drinkers." Kristina had no intention of mentioning that Dathan had suggested *her* as a romantic possibility. Maeve would have come unwrapped if she did, and that was an event to be dreaded by monsters and mortals alike.

Disbelieving annoyance had finally turned to rage. "That *idiot*!" Maeve hissed, letting go of Kristina's hand, surging to her feet. "How can he think Nemesis would tolerate such an aberration for so much as a moment?"

Nemesis, Kristina knew, was a powerful angel. A warrior feared, and rightfully so, by the very demons of hell. For centuries, Nemesis had been straining at the celestial bit, wanting to destroy the supernatural world once and for all. Maeve, Valerian, and Dathan had barely prevented that from happening before Kristina was born. Clearly the danger was still very real.

Kristina made another attempt at conjuring tea and this time got it right. She supposed caffeine was a mistake, given the situation, but she needed something to raise her energy level. "I ran into Benecia Havermail the other night," she said cautiously. "She implied that you have your hands full with some new crisis. What's going on, Mother?"

As easily as that, the tables were turned. Kristina had become the inquisitor, instead of the one being questioned. Maeve began to pace smoothly and gracefully, as she did everything. But she was clearly agitated.

"There has been an—incident."

"What sort of incident?" Kristina pressed.

"Do you remember Dimity?"

The image of a beautiful vampire came to Kristina's mind. Dimity was fair of hair and flesh, and she'd played a string instrument of some sort, a small harp or dulcimer.

Her most distinguishing characteristic, however, was her friendship with Gideon, an angel under the command of Nemesis himself.

"Yes," Kristina said. "I remember." She'd always thought Dimity looked more like an angel than a fiend, but then that was an attribute of evil—it was so often gentle of countenance, beguiling to the eyes, deceiving the heart.

"They have vanished, the pair of them."

Kristina made no further attempt to drink her tea. The ramifications of her mother's words were earthshaking. If Gideon had been destroyed or wooed to the dark side, there would literally be hell to pay. Dimity, for her part, would be on her own as far as her fellow vampires were concerned, but angels were protected, each one accounted for and cherished by their Maker. As were mortals.

"Surely Nemesis would know where—"

Maeve interrupted her with a shake of the head. "That's the mystery of it. There's no sign, anywhere, of either of them."

Kristina let out a long breath. "What's your theory, Mother? And don't say you haven't one, because I know you too well to believe it."

The vampire queen ceased her pacing and gave her daughter a level look. "I've discussed the matter with your father, of course. And the only possibility we've been able to come up with is that they've gone into some other dimension, some alternate reality."

Kristina was nearly speechless. "A place even Nemesis doesn't know about?" The implications of that were staggering, because the warrior angel was privy to the greatest secrets of heaven itself. How could there possibly be a place, a realm, that was beyond his ken, out of his reach?

"You've been searching for them."

Maeve nodded. "To no avail, obviously. Nemesis has been turning the universe upside-down as well, and he is fit to be tied, as you can imagine. He thinks we're plotting against the Light, we vampires, planning to take over, extinguish the sun—" She flung her hands wide in a gesture of bewilderment, an extremely rare emotion for her.

"Are those things possible?" Kristina asked, awestruck as well as frightened. If they were, she had underestimated her mother's powers and Valerian's by an immeasurable margin.

"No," Maeve said, "but Nemesis can be utterly unreasonable when his temper is roused. The fact that his every effort to locate Gideon has failed only compounds his frustration, of course."

"Dear heaven," Kristina murmured.

"I wish you wouldn't use that word," Maeve replied crisply. She gathered herself, as imperious as ever, and stood before Kristina, willing her daughter to rise. Kristina could no more have resisted than a jonquil bulb could defy the warm, incessant tug of spring sunlight. "We must still discuss the warlock."

Kristina thought of Max and Bree and Eliette, how vulnerable they were. "I have reasons of my own for forging an alliance with Dathan," she said evenly. "Just as you once had. Besides, I doubt that a warlock and a vampire *could* conceive a child in any case."

"Do you?" Maeve asked, arching one ebony eyebrow in an expression that might have been disdain, had it been directed at anyone else except her daughter or her beloved mate. "You forget, then, that you yourself were born of a nightwalker and a mortal. That, too, was thought to be impossible."

Kristina sighed. "I haven't forgotten," she said. "But my conception was a rare occurrence, wasn't it? There has been no other birth like it, before or since—isn't that true?"

"Yes," Maeve admitted, but only after a long and stubborn silence. "It's true."

"Then we can safely assume that any union between Dathan and a vampire would be childless."

"We can safely assume nothing," Maeve said fiercely. "But you are right about one thing—I simply cannot concern myself with this affair, not at the moment. The other situation must take precedence over virtually everything else."

Kristina faced her mother and kissed her cool, alabaster white forehead. "I will be very careful," she promised. "Don't expend your energies worrying about me."

Maeve made a sound that might have been a sigh in a creature with breath. "Warlocks are the most treacherous of monsters," she said. "And they are the natural enemies of vampires."

"Yes," Kristina replied, "but it isn't only politics that makes strange bedfellows. I need Dathan's help, and apparently he needs mine. Never fear, though—I won't make the mistake of trusting him."

"That will have to be good enough, for the moment at least," Maeve conceded. "I *am* glad to hear that you are giving up this silly pretense of being human and finally exploring your powers. It's about time you came to your senses."

Kristina bit her lip and gestured toward the shelves behind her, where the manuscript she had been perusing still lay. "May I borrow some of those volumes? There are some interesting, if ancient, spells recorded there—difficult to decipher but worth the effort, I think."

"Of course," Maeve said. She made a gesture with one hand, and the books Kristina wanted to read vanished into thin air, to land neatly on her desk at home, no doubt. Express mail, vampire style. "I must go now, darling," the queen continued. "First to hunt, then to seek the ever-illusive Dimity. Your father is probably in the laboratory if you'd like to see him."

Kristina smiled and nodded. "Good luck in your search."

Maeve vanished in a draft of cool air and a whiff of jasmine.

Kristina hesitated only a few moments before heading downstairs, to her father's favorite place. Still oddly weary, knowing she would need her energy for the return trip to Seattle, she took the stairs in

good mortal fashion and knocked at the laboratory door.

Simultaneously a lock clicked, and Calder's voice called out, "Come in, Kristina."

She entered to find her father busy at one of his tables. He appeared to be performing an autopsy on something, and Kristina felt bile surge into the back of her throat. "What is that?" she asked, holding back.

Calder grinned at her over one shoulder. He was handsome, and more than one female vampire had dared to flirt with him over the years, but he cared only for Maeve. "Sorry, I should have warned you," he said. "This is—was—a vampire."

Kristina's revulsion was overruled by her natural curiosity, much of which had been inherited, no doubt, from Calder himself. She stepped closer, looking down at the creature on the table, saw a humanoid shape with fangs and sunken, staring eyes. There was none of the gore that would have accompanied such an examination of a mortal, however—the vampire, a female, was dried out and crumbling, like a wasp's nest long abandoned.

"Who-who was she?"

"No one you knew," Calder said, returning his attention to his work.

"How was she killed?"

"An infusion of warlock blood, I would guess. There have been a number of such cases lately, though Dathan and his underlings deny all knowledge of the matter."

Kristina shivered. "Why the autopsy?"

"Part of an experiment," Calder said.

Of course. He was still trying to find the method and the magic that would "cure" blood-drinkers of their ghastly obsession, without robbing them of their singular powers.

She spoke quietly, gently, because she needed for him to look at her, needed his full attention. "Papa, I want to be mortal—I want to have babies, get gray hair, and eventually die. Can you help me?"

Calder's splendid face contorted for a moment with pain and perhaps with understanding. He said nothing just then, but left the autopsy table to cross the room where he shed his lab coat and scrubbed his hands with disinfectant soap and a brush, like a surgeon.

Kristina followed him, stayed close by his side. "Can you?" she repeated.

"I don't know," Calder answered. She saw true suffering in his eyes as he looked at her. To do what she asked would be, in his view, to kill her.

"Don't you ever get weary, Papa?" Kristina pressed. "Don't you long sometimes for peace, for oblivion, for cool, dark nothingness?"

Calder was drying his hands on a starched, spotless towel. He tossed the cloth into a hamper beside the sink before replying. "I am young, as vampires go," he said. "There is still much I want to accomplish."

"But someday—?"

He closed his eyes for a moment, this vampire who had once been a man, a surgeon on the bloody battlefields of the American Civil War. He had seen anguish, of both the flesh and the spirit, and despite his intense focus on his experiments, he was not insensible to the shared sorrows of men and monsters. "Perhaps someday I will grow weary, yes. Kristina, why do you ask these questions? Is it because of that mortal you have become enamored of?"

"Mostly, yes," Kristina admitted. There was no use in lying to Calder, even if she'd felt the inclination. Because of the scientific bent of his mind, he was far more focused than Maeve, and attempts to disassemble were lost on him. "I love Max very much, Papa. You of all people"—they both smiled at the misnomer—"er—vampires—should understand."

"I do," Calder said with a nod. He frowned and narrowed his eyes, studying Kristina more intently than usual. "You do not look well. What is wrong?"

Kristina shrugged. "Love, I suppose," she said. "And I am so very tired."

Calder's frown deepened. "Sit down," he said, indicating a nearby stool. Behind him, the half-dissected vampire was clearly visible, lying still on its gleaming stainless-steel autopsy table. Calder took a syringe from its sterile packaging and skillfully drew blood from the vein in Kristina's right forearm.

"What's the diagnosis, Doctor?" Kristina asked with a wan smile.

He set the vial of blood carefully on a countertop and smiled back, but there was a shadow of consternation in his dark eyes. "Probably nothing," he replied, "but it will take some time to determine the exact nature of the problem."

Kristina felt a little shiver of uneasiness. Was it possible for her to be ill? She'd never had so much as a case of the sniffles, in almost a century and a half of life, though she did occasionally suffer headaches. Even those tended to be more psychic in origin, however, rather than physical. "You'll be in touch as soon as you know?"

He came to her and laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Of course, and in the meantime, I don't want you fretting. I took that blood sample as a precautionary measure, and for no other reason."

Kristina stood. "But there is another reason. You must study the specimen closely, Papa." She paused to draw a resolute breath. "Please. I want to know what I am, if there's a definition."

Calder squeezed Kristina's shoulder lightly before letting go. He did not speak again but simply nodded.

Kristina summoned all her strength and willed herself back to Seattle. Although she had aimed for her house, she materialized in the shop instead. Then, too tired to do anything more, she curled up on a settee in the back of the store and tumbled into a deep, all-encompassing sleep.

The shop remained closed that day. The telephone went unanswered, and so did the postman's knock at the door. Kristina was oblivious, almost comatose.

When she awakened, it was dark, and for a few moments she could not remember where she was. She felt groggy and disoriented, as though she'd been drugged, and the thin light coming in through the



windows cast eerie shadows all around her.

Only then did Kristina recognize her surroundings.

She pushed splayed fingers through her hair. The Victorian settee was hard, stuffed with bristly horsehair that smelled faintly musty, anything but comfortable. She sat up slowly, shaken and filled with a strange sense of urgency, as though there was somewhere she was supposed to go. Something she needed desperately to do.

But she couldn't think, couldn't concentrate. What was wrong?

Kristina made herself stand and flip on a light. She still had enough magic for that, at least, but the effort sapped her strength all the same, made her feel dizzy.

Someone rapped at the shop door; Kristina made her way through the maze of old furniture and umbrella stands and statues to peer through the glass.

Jim Graham, a policeman who patrolled the area on foot, greeted her with a concerned smile after she'd fumbled with the locks and opened the door to the chilly night breeze.

"Everything okay, Ms. Holbrook?"

"I'm just working late," Kristina said. She hadn't really shaped the excuse; it just fell from her tongue, ready-made.

"You look like you could use some rest." The cop was a nice middle-aged man, and Kristina liked him. She wished it was so simple, that all she needed was a day in bed or a short vacation.

"You're right." A smile fluttered near her lips, but she couldn't quite bring it in for a landing. "But you know how it is these days."

Jim nodded sagely. "You want me to walk you to your car? I could wait while you get your coat and lock up."

Kristina's car was parked in her garage at home, her coat still hanging in the hall closet. She didn't explain, of course. "That's really kind of you," she said, and meant it. "But I have a friend picking me up in a little while."

"Well, just make sure you keep the place locked up tight until he gets here," the officer said. "Can't be too careful, you know."

Kristina thought belatedly of the intruder who had broken into the store some months before. She'd turned him into a doorstop, handily enough, but she wondered now how trustworthy her magic had been, even then, and shuddered to think what might have happened if her skills had failed her. "That's for sure," she agreed as the policeman stepped away from the door. He waited, she noticed with appreciation, until all the locks were in place again.

The brass monkey was still on his shelf in the back room, where Kristina had left him. Dredging up all the strength she could summon, she reinforced the original spell, and promptly sank to the floor in a faint.

When Kristina opened her eyes, only moments later, she found herself at home, lying on her own bed.

Dathan bent over her to lay a cool cloth on her forehead.

"What's the matter with me?" she asked in a small voice. She wanted Max, wanted to go to him, to make sure he and the girls were all right, but she couldn't seem to move, except in slow motion.

The warlock sat down beside the bed. He looked incongruous in the delicate, chintz-covered chair, given his size and his almost regal elegance. "It's only a guess," he said, "but I'd say that all these years of pretending have finally caught up with you. You've allowed your magic to be depleted and, thus, the very essence of your being."

"Am I going to die?"

Dathan smiled. "Probably not. You come from sturdy—not to mention stubborn—stock."

Kristina wasn't sure whether to be relieved or disappointed, and the dilemma made her slightly testy. "What are you doing here?"

"You're welcome," the warlock said pointedly.

"Thank you." Kristina gave the words a grudging note. "What happened?"

"You swooned. I dropped by on a lark, and did the—er—gentlemanly thing. Lifted you into my arms, brought you here, all that."

Kristina closed her eyes for a moment, trying to absorb what was happening to her, to make some sense of it. Dathan's theory, that she had expended vital powers in her efforts to live as a mortal, seemed the most likely. "I'm in big trouble," she said.

"That's true," Dathan agreed, but lightly.

"My mother warned me not to trust you."

He smiled as beatifically as an angel. "Maeve is a suspicious vampire."

"She is also *smart* vampire. I need a spell, Dathan. Something to keep the Havermails away from Max and the children, at least until I can get myself together. Will you help me?"

"It is a good thing for you, my dear, that you are virtually irresistible." The warlock sighed in a long-suffering fashion. "Yes, I'll arrange to shield your precious mortals, for tonight at least, though I don't think Benecia and Canaan will trouble them."

"I can't take the chance." But Kristina knew there would have been nothing she could do if Dathan had refused to help. She simply had no strength left.

Max paced. He'd tried to call Kristina intermittently throughout the day. There was no answer at her shop or at her house.

She was a businesswoman, an adult with a life of her own, and he had no claim on her, no right to obsess about where she was or what she was doing. Yet something in his gut, some instinct he had never

felt before, was telling him there was trouble.

He shoved a hand through his hair. It was late, and the girls were already in bed. He couldn't leave them alone and, after the exchange with Elaine the night before, he wasn't about to ask his sister-in-law to come over and babysit. The teenager he hired when Elaine wasn't available was probably sound asleep, and if he called his mother or Gwen in the middle of the night, they would be frightened, not to mention angry.

Max returned to the telephone on the desk in his study and punched the redial button; there was no need to go through the sequence of numbers that would make Kristina's home phone ring, because he'd been calling there since six o'clock.

This time she answered. Her voice sounded small, fragile.

"Hello?"

"It's Max." He closed his eyes, feeling both relieved and foolish.

"I guessed that," she said. There was a smile in her softly spoken words.

"By magic?"

The smile came through again, though Max knew in his heart of hearts that all was not right with Kristina. He was scared.

"No," she answered. "I was just hoping."

He wanted to hold her, to draw her into his arms and shelter her against whatever threatened her. He had never felt so protective before, even with Sandy—but then, he'd been naive in those golden days before his wife's death. He hadn't known how quickly and finally tragedy could strike. Hadn't dreamed.

"Are you all right?"

"Just tired," she said.

Max's gut clenched hard. He was torn between his children and the need to go to this woman who had finally caused him to put away Sandy's wedding band, which he had worn on a chain around his neck ever since his wife's death. He ached to see with his own eyes that she was safe and well.

"Do you need anything?"

He could almost see her shaking her head. He knew she was in bed, though he wasn't sure how, and he felt guilty because the image stirred him in a profoundly sexual way. So much for the altruistic wish to embrace Kristina and lend his manly strength. Max wanted more—a whole lot more—and he wasn't proud of the fact, given that she was so obviously vulnerable.

"No," Kristina replied. "I'm all right, Max, really. What about you? Are you okay? And the girls?"

"Don't worry about us," Max said firmly. "We're fine."

There was a short, pulsing silence, during which their hearts communicated.

*I need you*, Max told Kristina.

*And I need you*, was her reply.

"Can I see you tomorrow?" Max finally asked aloud. He was leaning against the desk now, the receiver clutched in his hand, still wanting to go to her right then. Not in an hour, not the next day, after football practice.

Now.

"I'd like that," she said. "I'll be at home, taking it easy. I've been meaning to read through the rest of those letters anyway."

Just the prospect of seeing Kristina again made Max ridiculously happy, even though he still wished he could go to her immediately. "Couldn't you just—well—blink yourself over here? You could stay in the spare room—"

"Not tonight, Max," she interrupted gently. "I need to sleep now."

A thick knot formed in his throat; he wanted to weep, could not imagine why. "Yeah, okay, me too," he said. "Good night."

Another pause. "Good night, Max." Kristina had not just spoken to him, she had caressed him. He replaced the receiver, crossed the room, and switched out the lights before heading toward the stairway.

If he'd looked out a window, he might have seen the strange, cloaked sentries standing guard in the night, but Max was thinking only of Kristina that night.

"Take this," Dathan said, holding out a spoonful of something.

Kristina, resting against her pillows and still fully dressed, eyed the offering suspiciously. "Like I told you, my mother warned me to be careful of warlocks and their tricks."

"Give me a little credit, will you?" Dathan demanded. "I didn't bring you here and tuck you into bed just to destroy you. I could have done that at any time if that was what I wanted."

"What is this stuff?" The spoon was closer; Kristina saw that it contained a brownish fluid, some herbal concoction, judging by the noxious smell. One she had never come across before and hoped never to encounter again.

"Call it witches' brew if you must," Dathan answered with a touch of impatience. "It will make you sleep, and thus restore some of your strength. Not a cure, but it's a start."

Kristina deliberated a moment longer, then opened her mouth and took the medicine. It tasted bitter, but she swallowed it. "I'm not going to grow horns, am I?" she asked, falling back against her pillows once more.

Dathan's expression said he wasn't about to dignify such a question with a reply.

"You'd better not take advantage of me while I'm sleeping, either."

He bent close and smiled wickedly. "I hadn't thought of that. What a delightful prospect—thank you for suggesting it, Kristina."

Already she was drifting, spinning, sinking. This, she thought, must be how it is for vampires when they lie down in their lairs, far out of the sun's reach.

Kristina did not dream and awakened many hours later, in the same position in which she'd fallen asleep, in the same clothes. There was no sign of Dathan, but Max was standing at the foot of her bed, wearing jeans and a bright blue sweatshirt, his face beard-stubbed and his hair ruffled.

"How long?" she asked. "Since we talked, I mean?"

"About twenty-four hours," Max replied.

She sat up, yawning. The room was brilliant with sunlight. "You're missing work."

"It's Saturday."

"The girls—"

"Forget about Bree and Eliette," Max said gently. "They're with my folks for the weekend. Kristina, what's going on with you? What knocked you out like this?"

She sighed. Dathan's potion, whatever it was, had certainly done its work. She felt strong again, energetic, almost her old self. Almost.

"Maybe it was the supernatural equivalent of the flu," she said. "In any case, I feel fine now."

Max grinned. He looked tired, though, and she wondered how long he'd been watching over her. "If you don't mind, I'd like to borrow your shower," he said. "And a razor, if you have a spare. I forgot mine."

There was a certain intimacy in sharing space with Max, letting him use her shower, her things. She felt a sensual, stretching sensation deep inside, just looking at him. "Okay," she said. "Help yourself to whatever you need."

Another silence ensued, rife with possible interpretations. Then Max turned and went into the bathroom, carrying a gym bag he'd apparently brought from home.

Kristina heard the water go on, imagined Max stripping off his clothes, stepping naked and muscular under the spray. He was so blatantly, unapologetically male.

She wondered what he would say, what he would think, if she joined him.

In the end she didn't quite have the courage. She took a peach silk robe from her closet and went down the hall to the guest bathroom, where she took a long, hot shower of her own. The flow of water did nothing to soothe the ache inside her, the one only Max Kilcarragh could reach and assuage.

Kristina toweled her hair dry, ran a brush through it, and then dried her body. The silk robe clung a little

as she stepped out into the hall.

Max was there, clad in a pair of clean, worn jeans and nothing else. The encounter seemed accidental, but Kristina knew that it wasn't, that they'd both wanted to be together. That had been in the cards from the first moment of history.

Slowly, deliberately, Kristina untied the belt of her robe.

## CHAPTER 11

Max did not move from where he stood, just outside Kristina's bedroom door, until she was near enough to touch, her robe untied, hanging loosely from her shoulders. He put his hands on either side of her face and, with a low sound, part growl and part groan, took her mouth with his.

The kiss was passionate from the first; there was no hesitation this time, only a hunger that had been denied too long. Max entered her with his tongue, conquered her, his silent command presaging all that was to come.

Kristina sagged against him, weakened by her own wanting, by a yearning she had never felt before. When at last he drew back and lifted her into his arms, there were tears of wonder in her eyes.

He kissed her lids, her cheeks, and carried her over the threshold of her bedroom.

"Are you sure you want this?" he asked, still holding her.

Kristina was in a daze. "Oh, yes," she said. "Yes."

Max set her on her feet, ever so gently, and smoothed the robe back off her shoulders, down over her arms. He tossed the garment aside and consumed her naked form with his eyes, arousing her to a fever pitch of desire just by admiring and cherishing her.

"You are so unbelievably, impossibly beautiful," he said.

Kristina leaned forward, brushed his hairy chest with her lips, teasing hard brown nipples with the tip of her tongue. Her fingers strayed to the zipper of his jeans; he halted the motion with both hands, though he did not put her away from him.

"There's a problem," he confessed. "I didn't plan—"

She smiled. Her magic might be rusty, but it was still magic. She held out one hand, in a rather cocky gesture, and a small packet appeared on her palm.

Max chuckled, took the condom, and laid it on the night-stand, within easy reach of the bed. "Impressive," he said.

"Thanks." Kristina slipped her arms around his neck and tilted her head back to look up into his eyes. She knew she was casting a spell, and that it had nothing to do with supernatural powers. In that moment, in that private place, she was not a freak, but a woman, pure and simple.

He unfastened his own jeans and shed them, along with his underwear, and then simply held Kristina against him for a long, heated interval. Just that simple intimacy nurtured her on the deepest level of her being; she could have stood there, cradled in Max's arms, for an indeterminate length of time. Even that small contact was better than anything she had ever felt with Michael.

Finally, however, Max raised his hands to cup Kristina's small, firm breasts. A searing shiver went through her at his touch, for the contact was at once possessive and inexpressibly tender. Hard-edged thumbs stroked her nipples, causing them to stiffen into little peaks.

Kristina emitted a long sigh and closed her eyes. Max bent his head and kissed her again, teasing now, tasting and tempting.

She was still standing, was amazed that her legs would support her. She moved her hands up and down the muscled length of Max's back, in a slow yet conversely frantic motion. She had waited so long, suppressed the yearnings of her body so often, that patience was nearly beyond her.

"Max..." she pleaded against his mouth.

"Shhh," he whispered, and continued to caress her, to adore her with his hands.

Kristina made a soft, whimpering sound; it was all she could manage because he had stolen her breath, stilled her heartbeat, frozen her in one fiery moment of time.

Max laid her down on the bed and stretched out beside her. She wanted him to take her, but he was conducting some primal ritual; she knew he would make her feel every nuance of their lovemaking, that her responses were, to him, a vital part of the encounter.

He kissed her again and again, until she was drunk with the need to have him inside her, but it still wasn't enough. While Kristina entangled desperate fingers in his hair, Max brushed her earlobes with his lips, nibbled at her neck, finally moved down over the quivering rise of her breasts.

She gasped with pleasure and arched her back in an ancient, instinctive gesture of surrender as he took one nipple into his mouth and drew at it greedily.

He went on suckling, meanwhile parting her legs with one hand. She ached to accommodate him; her hips rose and fell as he parted the moist curls at the junction of her thighs and teased her with a soft, plucking motion of his fingers.

Kristina sobbed, with joy, with triumph, with frustration. Her body arched, again and again, seeking, reverberating like the strings of a fine instrument drawn tight.

At last, Max relented. He reached for the condom on the bedside table while kissing Kristina's belly. Once he was ready, he cupped both hands under her buttocks and raised her to receive him.

His eyes searched hers one last time, and then he plunged into her, delving deep, as if to touch the very core of her.

Kristina thrashed beneath him, in a physical plea for him to move faster, to thrust himself even further inside. She wanted all of him, not just his powerful body, but his mind, even his soul. She did not wish to own Max, it wasn't that, but to be a part of him, to meld the very essence of her being with his.



Max set an even pace, driving Kristina insane with long, slow, methodical strokes.

Finally, as she flung herself up to meet yet another thrust, a cataclysmic orgasm exploded within her, thrusting her legs even wider apart, splintering the heavens, altering the path of uncounted planets orbiting innumerable stars. While Kristina flexed beneath Max, seized by spasm after spasm, he stiffened upon her, and cried out in hoarse ecstasy.

Kristina lay still, stunned, spent, but Max got up and disappeared into the bathroom. He was back in a few moments, stretching out beside her again, gathering her close against him. She was trembling, even then, in the aftermath of satisfaction.

Max kissed her temple. "What are we going to do now?" he asked.

She snuggled even closer, loving the feel of him, the substance and power and the scent of him. "After that, anything else would be anticlimactic."

He groaned at the play on words, but there was a smile in the sound.

Kristina laughed and buried her face in his neck.

"What?" Max prompted.

She lifted her head to look into his eyes. "You're the first man I've slept with in a hundred years," she said. "That's got to be some kind of distinction."

Max rolled over so that she was pinned beneath him, his brown eyes bright with mischief and the beginnings of fresh desire. "Was I worth waiting for?"

Kristina put her arms around his neck, kissed his chin and then his mouth. "Oh, yes, Mr. Kilcarragh." She felt him growing hard against her thigh, while her own body prepared itself to receive him again.

"Do you think you could work that little trick again? This time without the package and all the groping around?"

She nodded, and Max was instantly outfitted with a fresh condom.

"Pretty fancy," he said, grinning.

"Stop talking," Kristina replied, putting her arms around his neck. "And let's skip the foreplay."

Max wouldn't hear of it; he worked Kristina into another fit of longing, and by the time she was in the throes of her second climax, a pleasure even keener and more strenuous than the first, she was glistening with perspiration and completely incoherent.

Much later, when Max was dozing, Kristina got out of bed, took another shower, and put on jeans and a T-shirt. Her earlier exhaustion was gone; making love with Max had restored her, it seemed.

She was in the kitchen, humming and filling the teapot at the sink, when Valerian appeared at her elbow, unheralded as usual. Kristina was so startled that she nearly dropped the kettle.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," she snapped.

Valerian folded his arms and glowered at her. "Wish away," he replied.

Kristina sighed. There was no reasoning with him when he was in one of his moods, and she could only guess at what was bugging this most temperamental of vampires. Her controversial arrangement with Dathan or her blossoming affair with Max? Or perhaps Valerian was finding parenthood to be less than wonderful.

"Okay, I give up," she said. "What is it now?" She moved around him to set the teakettle on the stove and switch on the burner.

"If you wanted to polish your magic, you might have come to me. I do know a thing or two about the craft, as it happens!"

Kristina hid a smile. She'd injured Valerian's formidable pride, without meaning to, of course. "You've been busy," she said reasonably. "With Daisy and your magic act in Las Vegas and now Esteban. I didn't want to bother you."

"So you took up with *awarlock* !"

"You sound just like Mother," Kristina answered, no longer smiling. She was an adult by anyone's definition of the word, and she was getting tired of being scolded about the company she kept. "I didn't 'take up' with Dathan. We have a bargain, that's all."

"What sort of bargain?" Valerian's magnificent face was thunderous, and his cloak and tailored tuxedo made him resemble some great, beautiful bird of prey.

Kristina sighed, hoping Max wouldn't awaken and come downstairs. He'd already met a warlock; it was too soon to introduce him to a vampire. "You know damn well what sort of bargain," she retorted. "He's tutoring me in magic, and I'm—I'm going to help him find a bride."

Valerian loomed, in that singular way he had. Kristina drew herself up to her full if unspectacular height, trying not to seem intimidated.

"Great Zeus, is he still harping on that?" the vampire demanded. "I thought I'd cured him of the obsession by setting Roxanne Havermail on his trail."

"Dathan is as stubborn as you are. He won't rest until he has what he wants."

"You realize, of course, how dangerous he is—that he is the leader of all warlocks everywhere? That his mate will share in that power?"

Kristina knew only too well that Valerian could read minds when he tried; she hoped he was too annoyed and distracted to focus on hers and learn that Dathan had proposed an unholy marriage. "He has been an ally in the past," she said to deflect the vampire's attention. "It seems to me that you welcomed his help at one time."

"That was an armed truce," Valerian snapped. "There was never any question that we would be enemies again, once the common threat had been eliminated."

The common threat, of course, had been the vampire Lisette, who had reigned over the nightwalkers before Maeve. "That's silly. If vampires and warlocks made peace once, they can do it again."

Surprisingly Valerian subsided a little, and Kristina had a sudden insight. It wasn't just her relationship with Dathan that was troubling him, but something deeper and much closer to home. *His* home.

"Things aren't going well with Esteban, are they?" she said softly, touching his arm. She had been so occupied with her own concerns that she had not had the time to visit Daisy or Valerian.

The vampire, so imposing, so fearsome, suddenly appeared vulnerable. "He sleeps on the floor like an animal," he said. "He hides food in his room and won't acknowledge anyone except Barabbas."

Kristina considered the environment from which the little boy had been rescued. "Things like this take time," she said.

Valerian was downright crestfallen. "I wanted to give Daisy a child," he whispered, staring off into some realm Kristina couldn't see. "She's so beautiful, so smart and so good. She deserves a normal life."

Kristina felt a wrench far down in her heart. Whatever his faults, and they were many, Valerian adored Daisy. He had sought her out through lifetime after lifetime, only to lose her again and again. Clearly he feared that history would repeat itself. "Daisy loves you," she reminded him gently.

"Yes," he said, his tone dark with misery. "She loves a fiend, a monster, an inhuman ghoul who dares not sire a child for fear of creating something far worse than himself."

Kristina bit her lip. "I was conceived by a vampire and a mortal," she pointed out. "and I didn't turn out so badly, did I?"

Valerian touched her cheek, not as a lover would, but in the way of a devoted uncle or a godfather. His smile was beautiful, and full of sorrow, and Kristina began to fear for him. He had been known, in his long history, to succumb to terrible fits of melancholia, during which he could lie dormant for decades. One of the oldest vampires, Tobias, had gone underground long ago and never resurfaced.

"No," Valerian said. "You are a miracle, Kristina. But your splendid mother and honorable father are far better creatures than I have ever been."

Kristina willed Max not to come downstairs, but she sensed that he was stirring in his sleep, soon to awaken. Although he had seen Valerian at the Halloween party, meeting the legendary vampire up close and personal was something else again. An experience for which any human being would have to be carefully prepared.

She couldn't help thinking of her private theory that some vampires must grow weary of their existence, of watching mortal loved ones live and die. Though they were predators, blood-drinkers were fascinated by human beings and often became enamored of them, appointing themselves as their guardians or wooing them as lovers. Perhaps Valerian, who had been born as a mortal in the fourteenth century, secretly yearned to rest in peace.

"Do you ever wish you'd never become a vampire?" she asked. The kettle was whistling insistently on the stove, but they both ignored the noise.

"Yes," Valerian answered. "Each time I've found Daisy in a new incarnation and loved her, only to lose

her again." For a moment a haunted expression clouded his fathomless sapphire eyes. "It is always with me, Kristina. The knowledge that she will grow old and die, and that I will live on, alone, and wait for her, search for her yet again—"

Kristina thought with sorrow of all the people she'd cared about throughout the years she'd lived—a very short time in comparison to Valerian—her beloved governess, Miss Phillips, for instance. Gilbert Bradford, her husband's brother, and certain mortal friends she'd made along the way. She'd seen all of them age and finally leave her behind. It would happen with Max, too, if they managed to make a life together, and the dread of that pierced her heart like a shard of ice.

"I would gladly surrender my immortality, if indeed that's what I have," she confessed, taking the kettle off the burner at last, pouring hot water over loose tea leaves she'd spooned into a crockery pot earlier. "To me, it's a curse."

Valerian closed his eyes for a moment, as though she'd struck him. "And yet you would suggest that I sire a child by Daisy," he said, meeting her gaze again.

"I would not presume to advise you one way or the other," Kristina answered, "except to say that I think you should forget your Las Vegas show for a while and concentrate on Daisy and Esteban. You yourself said that human life is fleeting—why spend so much time away from them? You certainly don't need the money or the notoriety."

"You're right," he conceded, though somewhat ungraciously. Valerian preferred to play the mentor and guide, not the pupil. In the next moment he assumed a stern expression. "Remember my warning. Warlocks are not to be trusted."

Upstairs, the shower was running. Max was out of bed; he would be downstairs within a matter of minutes.

Valerian arched an eyebrow. "The mortal?"

"Yes," Kristina said with a hint of defiance.

"Is it for him that you are willing to risk so much?"

Kristina knew Valerian was referring to her contract with Dathan. She nodded. "Do you dare to chastise me for that—you who have pursued one woman, one human being, down so many crooked corridors of history?"

"No," Valerian said softly, almost tenderly. "But I sympathize. It would almost be better, I think, if you took a warlock for a mate. At least then you'd be spared the terrible grief, the vulnerability."

"But that would mean giving up the joy as well," Kristina pointed out.

At last he smiled, and when Valerian did that, he was as much a work of art as Michelangelo's *David*. "Wise words," he said. He kissed her forehead and vanished.

There lingered a faint draft in the room, from the vampire's passing, when Max came down the rear stairs and into the kitchen, fully dressed, his hair still damp from the shower. In that moment of simplicity and silence, Kristina knew for certain not only that she loved Max Kilcarragh, but that he had been chosen as her beloved long, long ago, in a time before time, and a place neither of them remembered.

He approached, laying a hand to either side of her waist. He smelled pleasantly of soap, shampoo, and toothpaste as he bent to kiss her lightly on the mouth.

"Hungry?" Kristina asked.

Max drew her against him, gently but firmly enough that she could not doubt his attraction to her. He slid a second, featherlight kiss from the bridge of her nose to the tip. "Yeah," he answered, eyes twinkling, "but I'll settle for food."

Kristina laughed softly and turned in the direction of the refrigerator. Max caught her hand and pulled her back. "Sit down," he said. "I'll cook."

She was amazed again; so much about this man surprised her. In her adult life, especially during her marriage to Michael Bradford, Kristina had never been taken care of by a man. She had essentially looked out for herself, with occasional interference from her mother or Valerian.

Kristina allowed Max to seat her at the breakfast bar. The tea had finished brewing by then, and he brought her a cup before opening the refrigerator door and taking out the ingredients for an omelette—onions, peppers, mushrooms, fat-free cheese, and a carton containing an egg substitute.

"Is it possible for you to develop high cholesterol?" he asked, frowning at the collection of healthy foods.

Kristina flushed a little, embarrassed at this small, harmless reminder of just how different she was from Max himself and virtually everyone else on earth. "I don't know," she said. "I guess it's all part of the act."

Max's expression was thoughtful as he explored the cupboards, finally producing a nonstick skillet. "The act being your need to be—how shall I put it—ordinary?"

She nodded. Her cheeks still felt warm, and she was just a touch defensive. "I've wanted that all my life," she said.

He set the skillet on the stove, turned on the appropriate burner, and began mixing and chopping with a deftness that indicated long practice. There was a twinkly smile in his brown eyes when, at last, he looked at Kristina. "You've been overlooking one very important fact," he told her. "You, Kristina Holbrook, could never be ordinary, in any sense of the word. Even if you were mortal, you would still be utterly unique."

Kristina looked away for a moment, wanting to believe he meant what he said, but skeptical. He was trying to be kind, to spare her feelings. "I know what I am, Max," she said a little impatiently.

But it wasn't true, of course. She wasn't a witch, woman, angel, or vampire. What did that leave? Were there creatures on other planets like her? In alternate universes and parallel dimensions?

He poured the omelette concoction into the pan and added pepper and salt from the shakers on the back of the stove. He didn't reply to her statement, which made her uneasy.

"What do you think I am?" she asked, trying to hide the vulnerability she felt. When Michael, her husband, had learned of her powers, he had said she was unnatural, a bestial freak. Even after more than a century, the memory had the power to wound her.

"Beautiful," Max replied without hesitation, managing the omelette while at the same time meeting her gaze directly. "Intelligent. Generous. Responsive. Shall I go on?"

Tears gathered along her lower lashes; she blinked them back quickly. Her reaction was contradictory—on the one hand, she was relieved, but Max hadn't really had time to absorb and assimilate the various realities of the situation. It was too soon, even for a man as bright as Max, to comprehend what it meant to be involved with her.

Again he nodded, smiling a little now, dashing at her eyes with the back of one hand. "Yes," she said in a raspy whisper. "Tell me more."

"You have the elegance of a goddess and the mind of a philosopher. Making love to you was like being taken apart, cell by cell, and then put back together, but better than before. Stronger."

Kristina sniffled and then gave a soft laugh. Her hand trembled a little as she reached out for her teacup. "You either have a poetic soul or one hell of a line," she said.

Max found plates, divided the omelette, and slid the halves expertly out of the pan. "And you have a trust problem," he answered without rancor. "I guess that's pretty common these days, with both sexes."

She didn't point out that she didn't really qualify for the analogy; there was no sense in harping on the fact that, for all practical intents and purposes, she was some kind of mutant. "How about you, Max? Do you have a trust problem?"

He set the plates on the breakfast bar, found forks, and joined her, taking the stool next to hers, "No," he said after a few moments of thoughtful silence, during which he surveyed his half of the omelette as though he thought it might offer some sort of input. "I was raised in one of the few functional families in America. Nobody drank, gambled, or hit anybody else. We all went to church every Sunday, yet neither Mom nor Dad could be described as fanatical in any way. I was still in college when I fell in love with Sandy, and she happened to be an emotionally healthy individual, too. The toughest thing that ever happened to me—to all of us, really—was her death."

Kristina took up her fork, more because Max had gone to the trouble to cook for her than because she was hungry. It was a terrible injustice that someone talented and beautiful, with a loving husband and two precious children, could be taken in her youth, while jaded vampires yearned for the solace of death and were denied it.

"I'd like to know more about your life with Michael," Max said in that straightforward way he had that so often caught Kristina off guard. "What happened after the duel?"

Kristina started to rise from the stool, her food forgotten.

She wanted, even needed, to share the remaining letters, and the story they contained, with an objective person. If indeed Max could be described as objective, after the way he'd made love to her.

"I'll get the letters," she said.

Max stopped her, taking her wrist in a gentle grasp. "Not now, love," he said. "After breakfast."

Kristina realized that she was hungry, and returned to the omelette. "You're a good cook," she said with some surprise after she'd taken a few bites.

Max grinned. "I'm a nineties kinda guy," he said. "I also do laundry, clean bathrooms, and scrub floors. Once I even mended a tutu fifteen minutes before Eliette was due to perform in a dance recital. Naturally I wouldn't want the guys on my team to find out about that last part."

She smiled at the image of this large, powerfully built man stitching a little girl's ballet costume. The thought stirred a poignant sweetness in the bottom of her heart. "You're a good man, Max Kilcarragh," she said.

He sighed. "Don't give me too much credit. I didn't say *I* liked sewing and cleaning. It was just that somebody had to do it."

Because Sandy was gone, she thought sadly. It was almost as if Max's late wife were there in the room with them, and only then did Kristina fully realize that even if she herself were a normal mortal woman, there would still be an obstacle to overcome. Max had loved Sandy with a rare intensity. Perhaps he did not have the emotional resources to care so deeply again.

"Was—was Sandy that sort of wife?" she asked in a cautious tone. It wasn't really any of her business, she knew, but she still wanted to know what Sandy Kilcarragh had been like. She, who had always had servants, traveled the world, and, in recent decades, concentrated almost completely on building a business that was international in scope. "The domestic type, I mean?"

Max didn't take offense to the inquiry, didn't seem to mind it at all. He took his plate and Kristina's, seeing that she was finished eating, to the sink. "We shared the housework in the beginning," he said, "but once Eliette was born, Sandy decided to take a few years off from her teaching career and stay home. She did more than her share after that, but I helped with the kids as much as I could."

Kristina got off the stool, ready to go upstairs for the other letters. Her throat felt tight, painfully so, for she would probably never be a mother. She and Michael had never conceived a child, and besides, like Valerian, she was afraid of producing a monster of some sort.

"I—I don't think I can have children," she said very softly. She had very good reason to believe as she did.

Max, who had been running water over the breakfast dishes, left the sink to cross the room and take her shoulders tenderly in his big hands. "That hurts you, doesn't it?" he asked. And then, without waiting for her answer, which was probably visible in her eyes, he drew her close and held her tightly for a moment.

Kristina was starved for tenderness; she did not trust her judgment or her perceptions, so great was her need. She was intoxicated by Max's caring, it affected her like opium. She allowed herself to cling to him, just for a few seconds, then pulled away and went upstairs.

She found the letters where she had left them, hesitating only briefly before going back down to the kitchen again. Max was in the family room, sipping from a mug of steaming coffee, probably brewed in the microwave, and gazing out the window, watching a ferry head out of Elliott Bay, lights blazing.

With a smile, Max put down his coffee, went over to the fireplace, and built a crackling fire. It was still dark; dawn was at least an hour away, and there was a certain trenchant intimacy in being together when much of the city was still sleeping. A silent resonance echoed between them, too—a lingering sense-memory of their lovemaking, as though their passion had imprinted itself forever, in the very cells of their flesh.



Kristina stood still, watching Max, allowing herself the fantasy that there could be a thousand other mornings like this one. A lifetime of days and nights.

Max rose to his feet, dusting his hands together, and turned to face Kristina. He ignored the packet of letters in her hand. "Did you ever have one of those moments that you wished could last forever?"

"I think I'm having one right now," Kristina replied.

Neither of them moved.

"It scares me," Max confessed.

"What?"

"Caring so damn much. Kristina, I don't know if I can let myself feel what I'm starting to feel. I don't know if I can risk it."

She understood, or thought she did. "You don't have to be afraid of—of warlocks and vampires. I'll find a way to protect you—"

Max shook his head, and she fell silent. "That isn't what I meant."

Kristina swallowed hard. "Oh."

"I think I'd lose my mind if I loved a woman the way I believe I could love you and then lost her. I've been down that road before, and if I hadn't had Bree and Eliette to live for, I'm not sure I would have made it."

Kristina didn't remind Max that she was already a hundred and thirty years old, that she would probably be the one to grieve, not him. That would have been self-pity, even martyrdom, and those were states of mind she tried hard to avoid, though it wasn't always easy.

She might have said that there were no guarantees, that everyone takes chances, that caring is worth the risks involved, but all those things were too easy, too glib. Max's concerns were valid, and so were her own.

There were so many questions, and so few clear answers.

## CHAPTER 12

*My beloved Phillie*, the next letter began. Max had settled comfortably on the overstuffed leather sofa to read, with Kristina beside him, her eyes following the lines she herself had penned so long before. For her the experience was almost equivalent to reliving those dreadful times, and yet she knew she had to do it, in order to put that most disturbing part of her past to rest...

*I had intended to write sooner, my patient friend, but it is not so easy remembering those dark days, even now, when considerable time has passed.*

*When last I put pen to paper, Michael had killed his own cousin, Justin Winterheath, in a pointless duel, whilst doing terrible damage to his own person as well. My husband's knee was shattered, never to heal properly, always to cause him inexorable pain. His drinking, already a problem even before we were married—I had seen that in him and yet refused to accept it as truth—became much worse. He now had the excuse of his injuries.*

*Phillie, you can imagine the gossip that followed the tragedy at Cheltingham, but I wonder if even you, clever as you are, can anticipate what a web of suffering Michael wove that early morning in the fog.*

*It was said that Michael was a murderer and should be tried and hanged for his crime. Lady Cheltingham, my mother-in-law, was a fragile wisp of a woman in the first place, and after the tragedy she went into swift decline. Her consumption of laudanum increased by increments, it was said, until she wasn't even bothering to get out of bed. Her husband, the once-blustering Lord Cheltingham, had never been an attentive spouse—I believe some of Michael's more pronounced character flaws came from him—but after Justin was buried, the duke gave up his gaming clubs, his hounds and horses, even his mistress. He shut himself away in his library, not to read, a pursuit which might have done much to mend his spirit, but simply to sit, or so the servants whispered, staring morosely out the windows.*

*Only Gilbert and I remained strong—Gilbert, because that was his nature, I because Michael needed me. (I was so foolish, Phillie, thinking I could save him, if only I loved him enough.)*

*Michael became more impossible with every passing day.*

*He tried over and over again to ride—that had ever been his passion, and love for me had never supplanted it—but his stiff knee made the pursuit wholly impossible. He was thrown on each attempt, and then there was more pain, followed by more drinking, and then more railing and cursing.*

*In those days when I might still have been a bride, had I wed myself to a more suitable man, I became instead a reminder of all Michael had lost. By that time, he saw himself as the victim of Winterheath's ungovernable temper, and although he must have known what venomous things were being said about him, he never showed a moment's shame or remorse. He hated me, it seemed, as if I'd brought the whole catastrophe down upon us all, and would often mutter the most vile curses at me, or shout. He even accused me of being faithless, Phillie—of betraying him with his own brother.*

*I don't doubt that you are wondering why I stayed. I am not sure I can answer that question, even now, when I have gained a modicum of perspective. I can only say that I loved Michael completely; my error, no doubt, was in cherishing the man he might have been, instead of the man he was.*

*At night I slept in a room adjoining Michael's—I did not want him to touch me in a drunken and hateful state. But he came often to my bed and claimed me roughly, and I grew to hate that aspect of marriage that I had so enjoyed at first. I didn't need my magic to disassociate myself from what Michael was doing to me—and I had almost forgotten that I possessed any powers at all.*

*One spring morning Lady Cheltingham's serving woman woke the household with a shrill scream. The duchess had died in her sleep and lay shrunken and staring in her lacy nightcap and*

high-necked gown. The ever-present bottle of laudanum stood upon her bedside table within easy reach.

*A pall of gloom seemed to settle over the whole of the estate after that, even though the hillsides of Cheltingham were green with sweet grass and the ewes were lambing. Trout stirred in the streams and ponds, and the sky was that fragile eggshell blue that I have only seen in the English countryside. I wanted to be happy, but I could not.*

*Within a month of Lady Cheltingham's funeral, her husband went into the family chapel in the middle of the afternoon, put the barrel of his favorite hunting rifle into his mouth, and pulled the trigger. The small, ancient church where countless children had been baptized, where eulogies had been said and vows exchanged, was thus fouled by the literal and figurative carnage of Lord Cheltingham's furious despair.*

*Demons seemed to pursue Michael as never before, to stare out of his eyes, to torment him from both sides of his skin. Gilbert tried but could not reason with his brother at all. Michael was beyond both our reaches.*

*He disappeared for days on end, commandeering one of the carriages and leaving Cheltingham Castle, and me, in temporary peace. During those intervals, Phillie, I prayed that he would never come back. God forgive me, I hoped that he would die. But he always returned, angrier, uglier than before, full of terrible accusations.*

*By then Gilbert was the Duke of Cheltingham. Though grief-stricken, and bitterly furious with Michael, he was determined to make the estates prosper, to be a good steward. He had long loved one Susan Christopher, a young woman of excellent social standing, and they had planned, since childhood, to marry.*

*In the wake of the "Cheltingham Scandals," however, Susan's family withdrew their support of the marriage, and Susan herself offered no protest and wed herself to another. She was not steadfast like Gilbert, but I assign her no blame. Although I believe that my own father, as a mortal, was such a man, I have not known another like my brother-in-law.*

*If you are guessing that I at last knew the worst truth of all, that I had joined myself, under the laws of heaven, to the wrong brother, you are right. I came to love Gilbert, and I believe he bore me some tender sentiment, though of course something within him was broken with the loss of Susan.*

*Gilbert and I might have taken some comfort from each other, and perhaps not been blamed too much by a merciful heaven, but we did not. Gilbert was far too honorable, though he often looked at me with the same yearning I felt, but it was no such noble notion as honor that stayed me from sin. I might have seduced my husband's brother, so much did I want him, if the act wouldn't have given weight to Michael's constant and otherwise unfounded reproaches.*

*During this period, Mother, Papa, and Valerian kept their distance. They might have been figures from a mythical tale, for all I knew, and I resented their absence completely, and often summoned them, aloud and in tears. Later, of course, I came to understand that they had stayed away in part because these were battles I had to fight for myself, but there was another reason as well. All of them feared that they would render Michael some unholy punishment, in a moment of uncontrollable fury, and earn my undying hatred in the process.*

*And so I was alone, except for Gilbert....*

The shrill ringing of the telephone jolted both Kristina and Max out of the paper world of the letter; Max leaned his head back on the sofa and closed his eyes, while Kristina went to answer.

"Ms. Holbrook?" an unfamiliar voice asked.

Kristina was watching Max, wondering what he thought of her now, how the information in the letters had affected him. "Yes," she said into the receiver.

The caller gave his name and identified himself as a dispatcher for the alarm company that monitored her shop. "We've had a signal from your place of business, ma'am, and we've sent the police to that address. We're calling to notify you that there may have been a break-in."

Kristina sighed, thanked the man, and hung up. Max was looking at her with raised eyebrows.

"That was somebody from the electronic security firm I deal with," she said. "They've sent the police to my shop. It's probably just a false alarm, but I've got to go down there anyway."

Max laid the unfinished letter carefully on the coffee table and got to his feet. "Let's go," he said.

Kristina luxuriated in the knowledge that Max wanted to go with her, even though she knew it didn't necessarily mean anything. He was a nice guy, raised to be polite and considerate. Silently she blessed his parents—what fine people they must be.

"You don't seem very worried," he commented when, after helping her into her coat and donning his own, he opened the front door. It was tacitly agreed that they would take his Blazer, which was parked in the driveway beside her Mercedes. "About the shop, I mean."

Something was tugging at the edge of her mind, but she couldn't quite identify it. "Like I said, it's probably just a false alarm. And even if somebody did break in, everything is insured."

Max raised the collar of his coat. An icy breeze was blowing in from Puget Sound, and the promise of a rare Seattle snowfall darkened the eastern sky. "Money doesn't matter much to you, does it?" he asked, opening the Blazer's passenger door for her. There was no surprise in the question, and no criticism. Apparently he was just making conversation.

Kristina waited until he was behind the wheel before answering. "I've always had more than enough," she said.

"And what you wanted, you could conjure," he replied, backing carefully into the street.

"But I didn't," Kristina confessed. "Even in the early days, I wanted so much to be—well—normal."

Max shook his head and smiled. "A lot of us would have taken advantage of that kind of power," he said. "Weren't you ever tempted to strike back at Michael when he treated you so badly?"

Kristina considered for several moments, not weighing the answer because she knew that immediately, but deciding whether or not to make such a confession. "I imagined a thousand sorts of vengeance," she

said. "Frankly, I've never been sure it wasn't my anger that finally finished him."

Max glanced at her. A few fat flakes of snow wafted down from the burdened sky. "Are you going to tell me about that?"

She bit her lip. "You'll come to it in the letters," she said.

"Fair enough," Max answered.

They reached Western Avenue and the shop within a few minutes. There were two police cars parked out front, and Max tucked the Blazer neatly between them.

Kristina's uneasiness, barely the fragment of a shadow before, rose a notch or two and would not be denied. She got out of the car without waiting for Max to open the door and approached the front door of the shop, which was broken. Huge, jagged shards of glass littered the steps and the sidewalk.

There went the false alarm theory.

"I'm Kristina Holbrook," Kristina told the uniformed officer guarding the door. "This is my store."

He asked for ID, and she fumbled in her purse, found her driver's license.

The officer nodded, and both Max and Kristina entered the shop. There was almost no glass on the floor, and a quick sweep of the room revealed that very little had been disturbed. The cash register, an antique in its own right, had been slammed through the top of the jewelry counter, probably when the robbers discovered that it was empty.

A plainclothes detective approached, flashing his badge. "Ms. Holbrook? Detective Walters."

Kristina nodded in acknowledgment. Max said nothing, but he stood very close to Kristina, and she was grateful.

"We've got an odd case here, Ms. Holbrook," Detective Graham said. He was a clean-cut sort of guy, nice-looking and neatly dressed. "Looks like it was an inside job. You have any employees? Somebody who might have a key?"

Kristina thought of the glass on the sidewalk. Of course. The door had been broken from the inside. Her uneasiness grew, though she still couldn't pinpoint its cause, and bile burned the back of her throat. "No," she said. "I've always run the shop by myself."

"Any chance somebody could have hidden in here somewhere, when you closed up last night?"

"I wasn't here then," Kristina said, blushing a little. She didn't want to have to explain that she'd been with Max; that was precious and private.

Detective Walters didn't press. After all, one of the advantages of owning a business lies in setting one's own hours. "You having any financial problems, Ms. Holbrook?" he asked instead, in an almost bored tone of voice.

Kristina felt Max stiffen, willed him not to defend her. And at the same time relished the fact that he wanted to protest the implications of the policeman's question.

"No," she said. "I don't need the insurance money."

Walters had the good grace to look mildly embarrassed. "Have to ask, Ms. Holbrook. Fact is, it's an easy thing to check out anyway. Matter of a few strokes to a computer keyboard."

That didn't come as any surprise to Kristina. Her best friend, Valerian's Daisy, was a private detective, and Daisy had long since filled her in on just how easy it was to invade a person's privacy, with or without their knowledge. "I'd like to look around, if you don't mind," she said.

The detective produced a small notebook and a pencil stub from the pocket of his ski jacket. He was wearing jeans, a sweatshirt and sneakers, in lieu of the trench coat Kristina would have expected. "Here," he replied. "Make a list of everything that's missing, if you would."

It finally came to her then, what she had been fretting about ever since the telephone call from the security people had alerted her to the possibility of a robbery.

She headed directly for the back room, where she'd set the doorstep, the ugly brass monkey.

It was gone.

Kristina's knees sagged beneath her; Max caught her elbow in one hand and steered her to the little table nearby, where she took tea breaks in the mornings and afternoons. She sank into one of the cold folding chairs and laid her head on her arms, trembling.

Max touched her shoulder, then crouched beside her chair. "Sweetheart," he said softly. "What is it?"

"The brass monkey," she whispered miserably, turning her head to look into his concerned eyes. "Oh, God, Max—the doorstep is gone!"

"Did this piece have some special sentimental value?" Detective Walters asked, from the doorway. Kristina resented the intrusion, though she did not dislike the man himself.

How could she explain that one night, nearly a year before, a young man had entered the store, bent on tape and robbery, and she'd changed him into a brass doorstep? Obviously she couldn't—not until she and Max were alone, of course.

"Yes," she lied, making herself sit up straight, still dizzy. She knew she was wretchedly pale, and thought she might actually throw up. She hadn't known she was quite human enough to do that. "It wasn't valuable but I—I liked it." She turned imploring eyes to Max, who was still on his haunches beside her chair, watching her closely. "Would you please call my friend and ask her to come down here as soon as she can? Her name is Daisy Chandler." She gave Max the number.

"I'm afraid the perpetrator broke the telephones," Detective Walters said.

Of course. The thief—she'd never troubled herself to learn his name—would have been filled with rage when the spell wore off. It was a wonder he hadn't trashed the whole shop, or even come to Kristina's house to avenge himself. Her home address was printed on the personal cards she kept in her desk, among other places.

"I've got a cell phone in the Blazer," Max answered, and went out to get it.



"What about him?" the detective asked, cocking a thumb in Max's direction. "He have a key to this place?"

"No," Kristina said, unable to keep a note of annoyance out of her voice. "Max is the original solid citizen." She got up, filled a mug with water from the cooler, added a tea bag, and put the whole shebang into the microwave. Nausea roiled in her stomach and seared the back of her throat; maybe chamomile would soothe her nerves.

"Had to ask," Walters said. "Not much more we can do here, today at least. We'll write up a report and ask you to sign it. You probably should get somebody over to either replace that glass or board the place up."

Protecting the rest of her merchandise was the least of Kristina's worries. "Thank you," she said. She didn't exactly mean it, but that was the closest thing to sincerity she could manage at the moment.

Max returned as Walters and the others were leaving. "Daisy's on her way," he said. "While I was on the telephone, I called a friend of mine, a contractor. He'll see what he can do about the door."

Kristina had collected her tea from the microwave. She made her wobbly way back to the table and sat down. She used both hands to raise the cup to her lips, she was still shaking so badly.

"Do you want to tell me what you meant by that remark about the doorstep?" Max asked when they had both been silent for some time. The police were gone, and a cold draft blew in from outside. Both Max and Kristina were still wearing their coats.

She shook her head. "When Daisy gets here," she promised. "I can't stand to tell it twice."

Max drew back the other chair and sat down across from her. "Daisy would be the woman who gave the Halloween party for the neighborhood kids. The one who keeps a white wolf for a pet and considers herself the wife of a vampire."

It might have been funny, so ludicrous was the situation, if it weren't for the fact that an angry robber and rapist had been turned loose. Kristina couldn't find it within herself to smile. "That's her. She's also a private investigator."

"Figures," Max said wryly. "Never let it be said that your friends and relations lead dull lives."

Kristina managed a ghost of a grin. "Before she came to Seattle, Daisy was a homicide detective in Las Vegas. The word *dull* is not in her vocabulary."

Max pushed his metal folding chair back on two legs, his arms folded, regarding Kristina in thoughtful silence for several seconds. "I'm almost afraid to ask this question," he began. "But what can Ms. Chandler do that the police can't? Isn't she mortal, just like them?"

Kristina let out a long breath. She nodded. "Daisy is quite human. She's also very, very good at what she does."

"And she, like you, has some very powerful allies."

"Yes," Kristina replied. She was counting on Valerian and perhaps Dathan for some aid and advice, but



she didn't plan to bother either of her parents with the problem. Calder was doing important work of his own, and Maeve was occupied with the search for Gideon and Dimity.

"How about some more tea?" Max asked, seeing that Kristina's cup was empty.

"Are you always such a nice guy?" Kristina countered, surrendering her mug. "I keep expecting to find out something awful about you."

Max grinned as he dropped a tea bag into water and set the cup back in the microwave. "I leave dirty socks around sometimes," he confessed. "And I'm a sore loser at racquetball."

Kristina spread a hand over her upper chest in mock horror. "Oh, no."

Max leaned down, while the oven whirred behind him, and kissed Kristina lightly on the mouth. "I'm a long way from perfect, okay?"

Suddenly Kristina felt the weight of the ages settle on her slender shoulders. "Maybe," she admitted sorrowfully, "but there's a definition in the dictionary for what you are. I'm something that doesn't even have a name."

The microwave bell chimed; Max took the tea out and set it down in front of Kristina and dropped back into his chair across from her before grasping her hand. "You're a woman," he insisted quietly. "Trust me. I know."

A tear trickled down Kristina's cheek; she dashed it away with the back of her hand. Before she could say anything, however, there was a stir at the front of the shop and the sound of a familiar voice.

"Kris?" Daisy called. "Are you in here?"

"Back here," Kristina replied, rising shakily to her feet.

Max followed her into the shop, where Daisy stood near the broken counter, surveying the damage.

"What happened?" she asked. She was wearing jeans, a turtleneck sweater, hiking boots, and a baseball cap, and her adopted son, Esteban, was perched on her hip. He, too, was bundled against the cold, and his enormous brown eyes were wide as he looked around.

Kristina shoved her hands into the pockets of her coat. Max stood beside her. "You know Max Kilcarragh, don't you?" she asked, stalling.

Daisy nodded. "He came to the Halloween gig," she answered. "Hi, Max. How are the kids?"

"Great," Max replied with another grin. "How's the wolf?"

It was a rhetorical question; no one expected a reply, and Daisy didn't offer one. She was already prowling around the shop, looking at things, assessing the situation. Finally she turned to Kristina again. "Obviously the guy didn't break in, he broke out. What the hell happened here?"

Kristina led the way to the settee and chairs on the other side of the shop, where she and Max had sat talking on another occasion. Daisy took one of the chairs, Esteban settling against her chest and pushing a thumb into his mouth, and Max sat down beside Kristina, on the settee.

Slowly, quietly, Kristina told her friends about the night she'd turned the unwelcome visitor into a doorstep. She admitted that Valerian had warned her that the spell could wear off, and that she had always meant to do something about the thing, but she'd procrastinated.

Now it was only too obvious that the brass monkey had come back to life, torn the shop apart, and left.

"He'd be scared to bother you again, wouldn't he?" Max reasoned. His elbows were braced on his knees; he'd interlaced his fingers and rested his chin on extended thumbs.

Daisy sighed. "As a rule, these guys aren't real smart. That's one of the reasons they commit crimes—because they can't work out the cause-and-effect equation—i.e., 'If I knock off this convenience store, the cops are going to catch me if they can, and then I'll end up in prison.' They don't think beyond what they want at the moment."

Kristina shivered. She hadn't seen the last of her would-be assailant; he'd be back. And now her magic was so weak as to be almost nonexistent. Was she finally going to die, after a hundred and thirty years? And what if Max got in the thief's way, trying to protect her?

She covered her face with both hands and groaned. "Valerian warned me. I should have listened!"

"It's going to be okay," Daisy said. She sounded so certain. Daisy was that kind of person; she never seemed to doubt anything. "First of all, I'm going to bring Barabbas over to keep you company for a while. You could use a pet anyway. And when Valerian—" She glanced briefly at Max, then went on. "When Valerian wakes up, I'll ask him to find this guy."

Max took Kristina's hand and held it tightly between both his own. She felt strength and reassurance surge into her. She saw such love in his eyes that her heart ached with the effort to receive and contain it all.

"My folks could keep Bree and Eliette for a few more days—until this is resolved," he said. "In the meantime, I'll stay at your place. I don't want you alone, even with a wolf to protect you."

Kristina promptly vetoed the idea. "Not a chance, Max," she said. "I won't allow you to endanger yourself that way. Valerian will have some suggestions, and, besides, Barabbas is no ordinary wolf. He'll be a perfectly adequate bodyguard as long as I need one."

Daisy nodded in agreement, but said nothing. There was new respect in her eyes as she looked at Max.

"What are my options here?" Max demanded. "Where this lame-brained plan is concerned, I mean?"

"You don't have any," Kristina said. "If you refuse to let me do this my way, then I'll have no choice but to find this guy and confront him. I have to act, Max. I can't sit around and wait."

A look of horror dawned in Max's handsome face. "*You expect this bastard to come to your house,*" he rasped.

"It won't go that far," Daisy interjected. But she was the only one who felt confident. She stood, easily lifting the now-sleeping child in her arms.

"How do you like motherhood?" Kristina asked, desperate to change the subject. Max's friend, the

contractor, had arrived. Max went to join him at the front of the shop, where the two men conferred about the broken door.

Daisy beamed and kissed the dark, silken hair on top of Esteban's head. "I like it fine," she answered. "Valerian is having fits, though—it upsets him that the little guy sleeps on the floor and hides food and stuff. You'd think in six hundred years he'd have learned some patience."

"Not Valerian," Kristina said, with a wan smile. She was anxious to see the vampire again, although she knew a heated lecture was inevitable. He had warned her, after all, about casting frivolous spells and failing to follow up on them. "What about your work as a PI? Are you going to give that up?"

Daisy shook her head. "I'll be cutting back a little for a while, but I'm a career woman at heart," she said. "We've hired a nanny, through one of those swanky agencies. She came from Brazil, so she speaks perfect Portuguese, as well as English, of course. And Valerian has given up his magic act in Vegas, at least for the time being." She paused and grinned mischievously. "He'll come as quite a shock to the PTA once Esteban starts school, won't he?"

Kristina chuckled, grateful for a few moments of distraction from the new and difficult problem she faced. "I just hope the nanny can deal with your—er—unconventional lifestyle." She thought of the loyal Mrs. Fullywub, who had worked for Kristina's parents for many years, and been fully aware that her employers were vampires.

Daisy shrugged. "Given what we're paying her, I doubt she'll ask all that many questions. Besides, we're not half as weird as some of the people you see on TV talk shows. Listen, I've got to go, but I'll have Barabbas at your place before the sun goes down, I promise. And you can expect a visit from Valerian, too, of course."

Kristina thanked her friend, and Daisy left.

Max introduced Kristina to the contractor, whose name was Jess Baker. Arrangements were made, and Jess prepared to board up the door, until it could be replaced with a new one the following day.

Back at Kristina's house. Max insisted that she sit in the Blazer until he'd gone through the whole place, room by room and closet by closet, to make sure it was safe. Finally he came to the door and signaled that she could come in.

"Are you sure you won't let me move in for a day or two?" he asked, helping her out of her coat.

"Positive," she answered. "Max, we can't keep seeing each other. It's too dangerous—"

He put his arms around her and drew her very close. "Just try to get rid of me," he replied, and kissed her.

Kristina lost herself, lost her troubles, in that sweet, brief contact. "Oh, Max," she said when it was over. "I need you to hold me, to make love to me."

"I think we can arrange that," he answered gruffly.

They went upstairs then, Kristina leading the way, returning to her room. The bed was still rumpled from their last encounter.

Slowly, garment by garment, savoring every moment, every stolen kiss, they undressed each other and lay together on the musk-scented sheets, having flung the covers to the floor. Beyond the windows snow fell, great, fat flakes swaying from side to side, taking their time.

Kristina was filled with a sense of peace, unwarranted as that was, for while Max was touching her, kissing her, holding her, there was no sorrow in the universe, no pain or treachery or vengeance.

"I love you," she said on a breath as Max moved over her.

His body spoke eloquently, but he did not say the vital words, and even in her need, Kristina took note. And she grieved.

## CHAPTER 13

It was still snowing when nightfall came, and Valerian appeared soon after the earth had reached that crucial degree of turning, the white wolf at his heels. Max felt his hackles rise, but he wasn't sure whether it was the animal that provoked this primitive response in him or the vampire. He suspected there wasn't a whole lot of difference between the two of them—both were ferocious, both were cunning, both were wild, and, as hard as it was to admit, beautiful in a lethal sort of way.

There had been nothing particularly dramatic about their arrival, however—the vampire rang the front doorbell, and the wolf crouched at his heels. The animal's silver-white pelt glistened with flakes of snow; Valerian, too, wore a dusting of the stuff, glimmering in his shaggy chestnut hair and on the shoulders of his expensively cut overcoat. Both the wolf and the vampire studied Max with a hungry glint in their eyes, as though ready to pounce.

He stepped back to admit them. "Kristina is in the living room," he said, gesturing. He was sure Valerian knew the way, and that he had never bothered to ring the doorbell before. Popping in unannounced was more his style, according to Kristina.

The vampire stepped over the threshold and shed his coat in a graceful, shrugging motion, then handed the garment to Max, as though he were a footman or a butler. Amused rather than offended, and understandably fascinated, Max offered no protest.

The wolf, in the meantime, shook himself off in the middle of the entryway's Persian rug, then trotted, puppy like, toward the living room. Valerian gave Max a long, assessing look, then followed the beast.

Max hung up the coat, next to his own ratty ski jacket, and went to join the party.

Valerian stood with his back to the living room fire, which Max had built to a comforting roar, warming his hands. Kristina rested on an elegant Victorian chaise, the pages of an ancient manuscript spread across her lap. The wolf had taken his place on the floor beside her, strange blue eyes watchful, muzzle resting on paws as white as the snow drifting past the windows.

Max bent over Kristina and kissed the top of her head. "You're sure you don't want me to stay," he said. It wasn't a question really, but a statement. He hated the thought of leaving her, but she'd already made her wishes more than clear.

She looked up at him, touched his lips and then his chin with one index finger. Hours had passed since they'd made love, showered together, and gotten dressed again, but he still felt the aftershocks of passion deep in his groin.

"I'm sure," she said.

He met the vampire's gaze, which was level and patently unfriendly, then looked down at Kristina again. "You'll call if you need me?"

"I'll call," she promised, trying to smile. She was looking fragile again; Max wondered if their lovemaking had merely added to the strain of her other concerns, rather than lending comfort.

With a nod to Valerian, Max turned and left the room, collecting his coat and the gym bag containing his dirty clothes on the way out of the house. He sat in the Blazer for a long time before turning the key in the ignition, backing out of the driveway, and heading toward home.

"You've really done it this time," Valerian said when the front door closed behind Max. The vampire's nostrils were slightly flared, and Kristina knew he had had trouble containing his temper until they were alone.

Barabbas whimpered.

Kristina closed her eyes. She'd found the volumes she'd asked to borrow from Maeve's personal library waiting on her desk, when she and Max had come downstairs after making love, and searched the pages for a spell that would get her out of this mess. "How do you mean?" she asked with exaggerated innocence, finally making herself meet Valerian's furious glare. "By letting the doorstep come back to life, or by getting involved with Max Kilcarragh?"

"It's obviously too late to do anything about your infatuation with that mortal, and, as you pointed out the last time we talked, it would be hypocritical of me to condemn you for loving a human being." He paused, pacing along the edge of the hearth, striving hard to retain his composure. "Great Zeus, Kristina—I warned you about that damnable, silly spell, didn't I? Have you tried to find this—this doorstep of yours?"

Kristina bit her lower lip and nodded. "No luck," she said. She tapped the manuscript. "But I did come across an incantation that might turn him back into a brass monkey. At least for a little while, until we, or the police, can find him."

Valerian stopped his pacing and arched one eyebrow in plain contempt. "*The police*! What would you say to them, Kristina? That you changed a man into a doorstep in a moment of pique and now it's all come undone and he's on the streets, looking to commit mayhem and maybe murder?"

She shrank against the back of the chaise, properly chagrined. "Can't you find him?" she asked after a long, difficult silence and at a very heavy cost to her pride. "My powers are dwindling, but yours—"

He shook his head. "I have already tried. Something is veiling him from me—probably a warlock. And he may have powers of his own, this brass monkey of yours."

"He was an ordinary mortal!" Kristina protested. It was too horrible to think of that ghoul using magic.

"I have summoned Dathan," Valerian said, taking an exquisite pocket watch from his vest and flipping

open the case. The soft, tinkling notes of a Mozart composition sprinkled the room, light as the evening snowfall. "If there are warlocks involved in this muddle, he'll know about it."

In virtually the next instant Dathan materialized, clad in kidskin breeches, a ruffled shirt, and a waistcoat. The rather dashing outfit was completed by a pair of high, gleaming black boots.

"Did we interrupt a costume party?" Valerian inquired archly.

Dathan was not amused. He dismissed the vampire with a sniff and turned to Kristina. "Have you come to your senses, my beloved?" he asked, taking one of her hands and brushing the knuckles with the lightest pass of his lips. "What a splendid pair we should make."

Valerian made a sound that rather resembled a snort. Another affectation, of course, for his lungs had not drawn breath since the Middle Ages. "How I hate to dash your hopes," he said with a complete lack of conviction, "but you're too late. Alas, our Kristina loves a mortal. I fear it's one of those eternal things, rather like my alliance with Daisy."

Dathan turned at last and leveled a look at his old adversary. Barabbas, who had been watching the warlock intently ever since his appearance, lifted his magnificent head and growled, making it abundantly clear whose side he would take if hostilities escalated.

"I hardly think you invited me here to tell me about Max Kilcarragh," Dathan told Valerian coldly, ignoring the wolf. "I know all about him, as it happens." Here the warlock paused and looked down at Kristina. "He's buried his heart with his dead wife, your Max. He might want very much to love you, but he is incapable of it. Contrary to the stage magician's assessment of the matter, Mr. Kilcarragh's soul mate was—and is—the mother of his children."

Kristina couldn't help remembering that she'd told Max that she loved him that very afternoon, in a most intimate moment, and that he hadn't answered in kind. Max was too honest to offer false vows. "Maybe you're right," she conceded. "In any case, I have other business with you. And it has nothing whatsoever to do with our bargain."

Dathan ran his gaze over her slender form. She was wearing a simple silk caftan of the palest ivory. "Why are you lying there like an invalid? Are you ill?"

Kristina sighed. She'd tried several of the spells she'd found in her mother's books over the course of the afternoon, hoping one of them would work on the escaped doorstop, and the effort had weakened her. The worst part, of course, was not knowing whether or not she'd succeeded.

"No," she said. "I'm just tired, that's all."

A charged silence ensued. Valerian was clearly holding his tongue, though his eyes glittered with malicious amusement, and Dathan actually flushed. No one needed to explain to Kristina that both of them knew what had happened between her and Max.

Kristina gathered the parchment pages of the ancient volume and set them carefully aside. Her relationship with Max was her own damned business, and she resented both the vampire and the warlock for daring to have any opinion at all on the matter. Quietly, evenly, she explained about the intruder to her shop, telling Dathan how she'd transformed the miscreant into an inanimate object, intending to deal with him later. When the tale ended, Valerian spoke.



"Tell the truth," he said to the warlock, "if that's possible for you. Is any of this your doing?"

Dathan flung out his hands in a gesture of supreme exasperation. Again the wolf growled. "What would I have to gain by such a stunt?"

Valerian had a reply at the ready, as usual. "You could 'save' Kristina, thus painting yourself as a hero, perhaps hoping to win her heart. Brave warlock rescues fair damsel, etcetera, etcetera."

"You forget yourself, vampire," Dathan accused, glowering at Valerian. He was not afraid of Barabbas, probably because he could have broken the beast's neck with a simple motion of his hands. "You are the one who delights in high drama, not I."

"Do not provoke me," Valerian warned in a quiet voice that would have spawned abject fear in almost any other creature. "Kristina is in danger. Were it not for the possibility that you can be of assistance, I would just as soon see you bound in barbed wire and thrown into hell as look at you."

Kristina closed her eyes again. The room fairly crackled with animosity, and the tension was smothering.

"This is not helping," she said.

Valerian turned his back to Dathan and leaned against the fireplace mantel. The mirror above it did not show his reflection. The warlock drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, in an obvious bid for patience.

"I'm sorry, Kristina," Dathan said, putting just the mildest emphasis on her name, so that there would be no mistake, no suggestion that he was apologizing to the vampire. "Naturally, I will do whatever I can to help. And let me assure you—I've had nothing to do with any of this."

Kristina believed him; Dathan, though he could be devious when he chose, was also arrogant. He seldom questioned his own intentions and thus felt no need to disguise them. He was used to power; among warlocks, his word was law. "Can you find him?" she asked.

"I shall certainly try," he promised.

Valerian spoke again, in a more moderate tone than before, but with no greater affection. "Look among your own ranks," he said.

"I would offer you the same advice," Dathan replied. "Beginning with Benecia and Canaan Havermail."

Kristina felt a chill and exchanged glances with Valerian. Dathan had struck upon a possibility she had not considered. Perhaps the doorstop had not come back to life at all. Perhaps, instead, the little fiends had found out about the spell somehow and taken the brass monkey to use against Kristina, or simply to spite her. Benecia, after all, had been furious at Kristina's refusal to consider her as a bride for Dathan.

"I must feed," Valerian said. His magnificent face was utterly impassive; he would not allow the warlock the satisfaction of being right. "Then I shall find the demon babies and make them tell me what they know."

He crossed the room, ignoring Dathan as thoroughly as though the warlock had not been there at all, and bent to kiss Kristina's forehead. "Stay here," he commanded, and then he vanished.

Barabbas merely blinked; he was used to his master's comings and goings. But his fierce eyes followed



Dathan closely as the visitor sank into a chair near Kristina's chaise.

"I am calling off our bargain," Dathan announced. "I want only one bride—you, Kristina."

"I don't love you."

The warlock closed his beautiful eyes for a moment, as though she'd struck him a physical blow. "I shall teach you to care for me, and make you queen of all my kind, male and female."

"I do not think witches would take kindly to a queen," Kristina said with a soft smile. "You yourself have told me that they are independent creatures. Besides, I have no wish to reign over anyone."

Dathan leaned forward, sitting now on the edge of his chair, his hands clasped together, his expression so earnest that it caused Kristina pain to look upon his face. "If I swore to keep your Max and his children safe, every moment of every day, until the natural end of their lives, would you agree?"

Kristina started to refuse, but as the implications of Dathan's words sank in, she held her tongue. This was no idle promise; Dathan surely had the power to do exactly that. As matters stood, *she* could offer them nothing but danger.

"It would be a sacrifice," Dathan said very softly. "I know that. But think of it, Kristina. Consider what it means."

She did not need to think, she knew. Just by coming into Max and the girls' lives, she had put them in mortal peril. By leaving them forever, and taking Dathan for a mate, she could undo that.

"I need some time," Kristina said. Her heart was already breaking.

Dathan nodded and rose. "I will make you happy," he vowed.

Kristina didn't respond. Her eyes were brimming with tears, and when she'd blinked them away, telling herself to be strong, Dathan was gone.

Valerian found Benecia and Canaan in a forgotten cemetery, overgrown with weeds, behind the ruins of a church in a Nevada ghost town. They were conducting one of their bizarre moonlight tea parties. They had conjured an elegant table, set with fine china and a gleaming silver service, and arranged four chairs around it.

Each of them occupied one, of course, their tiny feet dangling high off the ground in patent leather Mary Janes. They wore starched dresses, rife with ruffles, and their hair, as always, was done in gleaming ringlets. Their guests were a mummified miner and a teenage hitchhiker, freshly drained of her life's blood and staring mutely into eternity.

The relationship between Benecia and Valerian was not particularly cordial, although Canaan appeared to bear him neither rancor nor affection. Canaan was a self-absorbed creature, concerned, in true vampire fashion, only with her own pleasures. No doubt the hitchhiker had been her evening's kill. Benecia had probably fed elsewhere, since the miner was nothing more than a husk, having been dead for at least seventy years.

Benecia smiled sweetly, all the more horrible for her resemblance to an exquisitely made porcelain doll. "Valerian," she said.

Canaan looked at the newcomer with indifference and returned to her one-sided conversation with the hitchhiker.

Valerian overturned the table without moving, scattering the silver coffeepot, the sugar bowl and creamer, the costly china cups and platters. The miner toppled off his chair, and what was left of his head crumbled to dust. The hitchhiker teetered, but did not fall.

Canaan vanished in an instant, clearly a vampire who believed that discretion was the better part of valor, but Benecia drew back her perfect upper lip and snarled like the vicious aberration she was. "How dare you?" she spat.

"I would dare considerably more, and you know it," Valerian replied, unruffled. Benecia was nearly as old as he, but he did not fear her. Not for himself, at least. "Do not try my patience, little beast—if there is one penance in all the universe that might keep me from the flames of hell, it is driving a stake through your brittle heart."

The demon-child's cornflower blue eyes glinted with hatred, but she did not advance upon him. "What do you want?"

"An explanation," Valerian replied. "What were you doing in Kristina Holbrook's shop last night?"

She stared at him in silence for a long time, her expression unreadable. Finally she laughed. "There was something I wanted."

"The brass doorstep," Valerian said.

Benecia smiled coyly. "Yes."

"Where is it now?"

"I shall never tell you that," she replied cheerfully, "no matter what you do to me."

Valerian knew she was telling the truth; the fact that she longed for the peace of death was at once her strength and her weakness. Driving a stake through her heart would be a favor at this juncture, and he was in no mood to be merciful.

"What do you want?" he asked, speaking as calmly as he could.

Benecia folded small, alabaster white arms. Her shell-like fingernails were tiny and pink, and she wore a frilly white pinafore over her beruffled dress. Valerian recalled an incident far in the past, when she and Canaan had placed all their dolls in little wooden coffins and buried them in a long-abandoned garden, like corpses.

Inwardly he shuddered, he who hunted human prey with the rise of every moon. The difference was that he rarely killed his quarry, but simply left them in a swoonlike state.

"But you know what I want," she taunted. "So why trouble to ask?"

"Answer me, damn you."

"I want to change the past," she said with a touch of defiance and—Valerian could hardly believe it—sorrow. "I want to grow up as a mortal, become a woman, marry, and have children. Give me that, vampire, and you shall have your ugly brass monkey."

Valerian did not speak. What she asked was impossible; vampires could travel no further back in time than the moment of their transformation from human to nightwalker.

"Those are my terms," Benecia said. And then she dissipated like thin fog, as her sister had done, leaving the ruins of her tea party behind her.

Valerian buried the hitchhiker and the miner and returned to Seattle, where he found Daisy seated in a rocking chair in the nursery, Esteban snuggled in her arms. They were both sleeping, and he did not awaken them.

Instead he stood silently in the shadows, understanding only too well what Kristina must be feeling, now that she had fallen so thoroughly in love with her mortal, Max Kilcarragh. Centuries of wandering, in an incessant cycle of finding his beloved and then losing her again, had marked Valerian's soul with loneliness so deep that the scars would probably never heal. Now he had found her, managed to break the curse that had torn them asunder so many times before, and he was truly happy.

With that joy, however, came a vulnerability unlike any he had ever experienced. Loving took so much courage, so much sacrifice. Always the knowledge was with him that one day, being mortal, Daisy would die. He, on the other hand, would look much as he did at that moment; he had not changed significantly in nearly six hundred years.

She opened her eyes, sensing his presence. Esteban stirred but did not awaken. "Hello, handsome," she said. "What accounts for the frown?"

"I was thinking that I love you."

"Odd. Thoughts like that make most people smile."

"Most people grow old at the same pace. Daisy, I don't want to lose you—not now and not fifty years from now."

Esteban whimpered in his sleep, and Daisy began to rock the chair gently, one hand patting the boy's thin little back. "You're torturing yourself," she accused softly. "Eventually I'll die. Then I'll be born again as somebody else, and you'll find me, the way you always do. We're meant to be together."

"Suppose I don't find you?"

"Vampires are so neurotic," she teased. "Of course you will." Daisy's expression turned serious, and she studied her beloved mate closely. "Did you manage to track down Kristina's brass monkey?"

"Yes and no," Valerian replied, pacing, too restless to sit. He would have to go out again, for he had yet to feed, and his powers were at a low ebb. "Benecia Havermail was behind the robbery, and she's holding the thing hostage."

"Out of spite?"

"She wants to be mortal again."

"That's impossible, isn't it?" Daisy asked, frowning.

Valerian spread his hands. "Aidan Tremayne, Maeve's twin brother, was a vampire for well over two hundred years. Today he is flesh and blood again, with a wife, four children, and no memory whatsoever of his former existence."

Daisy nodded. "I remember now." She had heard the story long before; there were no secrets between the two of them. "If Aidan could be transformed, why not Benecia?"

"Aidan was basically good, and he had been made a vampire against his will. Benecia, on the other hand, begged for the privilege and has been unabashedly evil ever since she became a blood-drinker."

"And as a human being, she would still be evil?"

"Unspeakably so," Valerian agreed.

Daisy rose, carrying the little boy out into the entryway. At the base of the stairs Valerian took the child gently from her arms, and together they climbed to the second floor. Esteban's nursery was next to their own room; Valerian laid his adopted son gently in his crib. By morning, they both knew, the baby would have climbed over the rail and curled up on the rug in the center of the floor.

Daisy took her mate's hand and led him out of the nursery. The new nanny would arrive the next day; perhaps she could get through to Esteban, explain to him that he was safe now, that he need not fear being abused and neglected anymore.

"Go and feed," she said in the hallway.

Valerian nodded, resigned, and kissed her tenderly before taking his leave.

The sun had been up no more than five minutes when Dathan made his way down the circular stone steps to the crypts beneath the desecrated chapel on the Havermail's English estate. The parents of the two beautiful demons were nowhere about—Avery and Roxanne had gone then-separate ways long before—but Benecia and Canaan lay side by side upon their beds of stone, immersed in the vampire sleep.

It would be so easy to destroy them, the warlock thought, and he had no compunction about taking their lives. Despite their innocent appearance, these were *not* sweet mortal children, but fiends of the worst order. A stake, an infusion of his own blood, or simply carrying them up the stairs to lie in the sunny courtyard, any one of those methods would suffice.

Only one thing stopped Dathan from killing them both, and that was the brass monkey. As he had suspected, and Valerian had later confirmed, Benecia knew where the thing was hidden, and she had probably confided in her sister.

He drew a steel dagger with a jeweled handle from the scabbard on his belt and for a few moments enjoyed the fantasy of plunging it through those callous little hearts, first one, and then the other. Granted,

the doorstep would still be at large, but at the same time, one of Kristina's greatest fears would be allayed: the Kilcarragh mortals would be safe from this pair of monsters.

No chance of Kristina becoming his mate if that happened.

Dathan wasn't prepared to be quite that noble.

He smiled. He could, however, let both Benecia and Canaan know that they were not invulnerable, despite their highly developed vampire powers.

Using the point of the dagger, Dathan pricked his finger and let a drop of blood fall first upon Benecia's barely parted lips, then upon Canaan's. It was not enough to finish them, more's the pity, but when they awakened at nightfall, they would know they had been visited by a powerful enemy. The message could not have been clearer: *Beware, for I, the warlock, have found you* .

Reluctantly Dathan then resheathed his blade and left the tomb.

Within moments of awakening that night, Calder Holbrook went out to feed. He was back in his laboratory, going over the results of Kristina's blood test for perhaps the hundredth time, before an hour had passed.

Hunting, a delightful sport to many vampires, was a troublesome task to him, to be attended to and forgotten as soon as possible. Maeve relished her powers, her adventures, her singular challenges as queen of the nightwalkers. Calder, on the other hand, got all the excitement he needed just loving Maeve and working on his experiments.

That night, however, he was deeply troubled.

Maeve appeared, looking flushed from a recent feeding, just as the small clock on his desk was chiming half past two.

Calder turned from his microscope to kiss her. As always, the old passion surged between them, undiminished by the passage of many, many years. Before the night was over, he knew, they would make love.

"Any luck finding Dimity?"

Maeve shook her head, her blue eyes probing deeply into his, exploring his heart. "What is it, Calder?" she pressed gently. "I know you're upset—I can sense it."

He looked away for a moment. It was difficult, just knowing what he knew. Telling Maeve, and finally Kristina, would be much worse. "Sit down," he said, indicating a nearby stool.

Maeve obeyed, her gaze fixed on his face. "Tell me."

"It's about Kristina," he began, standing before his mate, resting his hands on her shoulders. "I've—well, I took a blood sample from her, because she said she hadn't been feeling well. Maeve, she is undergoing some kind of genetic transformation."

"What does that mean?" Maeve demanded. She was rigid with anguish; like Calder, she cherished their child.

He hesitated a moment, but there was no gentle way to say it. "Kristina is aging. Her blood cells are virtually indistinguishable from those of a mortal."

Tears glimmered along Maeve's dark lashes. Her indigo eyes were wide with horrible understanding. "She's dying?"

Calder struggled against his own emotions. "Yes," he said finally.

During the night the snow melted away, and Sunday dawned gray and murky in Seattle. Barabbas lay curled at the foot of Kristina's bed, apparently taking his guard-dog duties very seriously.

"What do you eat, anyway?" she asked him. "Besides little girls making their way through the woods to Grandmother's house, I mean."

Barabbas made a sorrowful sound.

"You're right," Kristina admitted. "It wasn't a very good joke. Come on—maybe there's a steak in the freezer."

She put on a robe and slippers, because the house was especially cold, and led the way down the rear stairs into the kitchen. After thawing out a top sirloin for the wolf, Kristina poured herself a bowl of cereal and curled up on the family room couch to eat.

She had just finished when Max pulled into the driveway in his Blazer.

"I should have called first," he said when Kristina opened the front door to him, "but I was afraid you would tell me to stay away."

She pulled him inside, closed the door, and then threw her arms around his neck. "Not a chance," she replied.

Barabbas stood in the doorway leading to the dining room, making a low growling sound.

"Hush," Kristina scolded. "It's only Max."

Apparently satisfied, the wolf turned and padded away.

"Did you sleep last night?" Max asked, holding Kristina in a loose but tantalizing embrace.

"Did you?" Kristina countered, smiling a little.

"You know damn well I didn't," he retorted somewhat ' grumpily. "All I could think about was that creep, the ex-doorstop, out there somewhere, dreaming up ways to get to you." He kissed her forehead. "Let's get out of here for a while. Take a drive or something."

The idea sounded wonderful to Kristina, who was beginning to feel like a prisoner. "What about

Barabbas?"

"He can stay here," Max answered, giving Kristina a little nudge toward the stairs. She needed to get dressed, of course, before they could go anywhere.

At the base of the stairway she paused and looked back at Max with a mischievous smile. "I believe you're jealous of him," she teased.

Max shoved a hand through his hair. "Maybe you're right," he answered in all seriousness. "After all, the wolf got to stay here and watch over you last night. I happen to regard that as my job, not his."

Kristina shook her head. "Males," she muttered, and hurried up the stairs to get ready for the day.

When she came back down half an hour later, clad in black corduroy jeans, a heavy gray sweater, and lightweight hiking boots, Max was sitting in the living room on a hassock. Barabbas faced him, seated on the hearth rug.

They were staring at each other, man and beast, and Kristina wondered who would have looked away first if she hadn't entered the room when she did.

## CHAPTER 14

Bree Kilcarragh took in her surroundings with wonder. Grandmother and Aunt Gweneth said the place was called a flea market, though she had yet to spot even one bug. All she could see was a lot of strange stuff, displayed on shaky tables and in booths.

She tugged at Eliette's hand, while Grandmother and Aunt Gweneth stopped to examine a pair of salt and pepper shakers made to look like little toilets. "Why would anybody want to buy a flea?" she asked in a loud whisper.

Eliette rolled her eyes. She was older and wiser, and she never missed a chance to let Bree know it, either. "That just means there's a lot of junk to buy," she whispered back.

Grandmother turned and smiled at them. It was warm in the large building, so Bree and Eliette didn't have to wear their coats. "Getting tired?" she asked.

Both girls shook their heads vigorously. Although they missed their daddy, they liked staying with their grandparents, and today was extra special because Aunt Gweneth was with them.

"It's almost Christmas," Aunt Gweneth said. "I've got to find something really ugly for Max."

Allison Kilcarragh, also known as Grandmother, smiled. She was so pretty, Bree thought, with her nice clothes and shiny gray hair. "Good heavens, Gwen," she replied, "it isn't even Thanksgiving yet."

Gwen laughed. "I know it seems crazy to you, Mom, but Max and I get a big kick out of our little gift-giving tradition. I think he'd be disappointed if I didn't give him something really awful." She gasped suddenly and strode toward a long wooden table crowded with what looked to Bree like a lot of dirty, twisted metal. "I can't believe it!" Gwen cried, homing in on the weirdest statue Bree had ever seen. "It's



an exact duplicate of the doorstep at Kristina's."

Allison made *atsk-tsk* sound and shook her head. "That is *dreadful*," she said.

Bree agreed, and wondered what Eliette thought. "It's a valuable piece," said the man behind the table. He had hair sprouting from his ears and his nose, and Bree instinctively took a step backward.

"Strange," Gwen murmured. "The thing feels warm to the touch."

Bree looked at the monkey and wished her aunt wouldn't buy it. Gwen was already rummaging in her purse for her wallet, though.

"How much?" she asked.

"Fifty bucks, plus tax," replied the hairy man. He was dirty, too, and smelled bad. He wasn't like the other people who were selling things behind tables; they all looked pretty ordinary to Bree.

"Thirty-five," Gwen countered.

"Oh, Gweneth," Allison groaned.

But the deal had been made. Aunt Gwen paid the man, and he put the monkey in an old Nordstrom bag and handed it over.

Eliette and Bree looked at each other, imagining the doorstep under their tree on Christmas morning. Bree didn't know why, exactly, but she was scared. She wanted her daddy. And she wanted to leave the ugly monkey right there at the flea market.

Some days, though, you just can't make a wish come true, even if you've been very, very good.

"Don't you tell your father about this," Aunt Gweneth warned her nieces, her eyes dancing with happy mischief as she looked down at them. "I want it to be a surprise."

Bree had no doubt that it would be. This thing was even worse than the moosehead—she just hoped she and Eliette wouldn't have to play this stupid game when *they* grew up.

It was dark when Kristina and Max returned from their ride—they'd gone exploring in the nearby Cascade Mountains, and had made reservations at a secluded lodge for the following weekend. At that high altitude, the snow was deep and white, perfect for shaping into powdery balls and flinging at each other. They'd built a snowman and eaten a hot meal in a roadside restaurant before making the inevitable descent back to the real world.

After a stop at a neighborhood supermarket where Kristina bought a huge bag of dog food for Barabbas, Max drove her home. The wolf met them at the door, making that mournful sound in his throat, wanting to go out, Kristina didn't try to stop him.

Max carried the kibbles into the kitchen, then made the rounds of the house, in case of lurking bogeymen, as he had after the robbery. This time Kristina accompanied him.

"I wish I could stay," he said twenty minutes later, when Barabbas was back inside and munching down on the dog food. Max had built a cozy fire in the family room, and now he stood beside the kitchen door, holding Kristina's chin in his hand.

"Eliette and Bree are probably watching for you," she said.

He nodded. "I've missed them."

Kristina envied him for a moment, this man she so deeply—and so hopelessly—loved. What a glorious blessing it must be, to have children, eagerly awaiting your return, ready to fling themselves into your arms out of sheer joy. She stood on tiptoe and kissed him.

"It was a wonderful day, Max. Thank you."

He touched the tip of her nose. "Keep next weekend open for me," he said. "And if you need anything, if you're scared, either call me or come straight to my place. No matter what time it is. Understood?"

Kristina rested her head against his shoulder for a moment. The cloth was chilly and still smelled pleasantly of mountain air, fir trees, and snow. "Understood," she said softly. But she had no intention of involving Max in her problems if she could avoid it. Only sheer selfishness had kept her from breaking off their relationship already.

Soon she would have to do just that.

Max kissed her again, this time with a thoroughness that left her swaying on her feet, said goodnight, and went out. A moment later she heard his voice from the other side of the door.

"Turn the deadbolt and put the chain on, Kristina."

Dutifully Kristina complied, though she knew it was a case of whistling in the dark. With the possible exception of the brass monkey-man, all her enemies were impervious to locks.

So were her friends and relatives, for when Kristina turned around, Maeve was standing a few feet behind her. The white wolf stood at her side, as though she were his mistress.

Kristina was surprised to see her mother, given the Gideon-Dimity crisis. When her father stepped out of the shadows as well, her incredulity gave way to a stomach-fluttering fear. They had come to tell her something, and it wasn't good news.

"What?" she whispered.

Calder took Kristina's arm and guided her into the living room, where there was no fire burning. He seated her in a chair, while Maeve settled herself in its counterpart.

Calder remained standing, too agitated to sit.

"You have often told us that you wished to be human," he said.

Kristina's heartbeat quickened. She sat up a little straighter in the chair and waited, still fearful, but beginning to hope. "Yes," she answered in a shaken whisper.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw that Maeve was weeping, silently and with dignity, but weeping, just the same.

"I have examined your blood sample over and over again," Calder went on. "I have performed numerous tests, including a DNA analysis." He paused, his dark gaze fixed upon his only surviving daughter, and Kristina remembered that he had lost a child years ago, a little girl born of his first wife. "You are aging, Kristina. For all practical intents and purposes, you are mortal."

At this Maeve covered her face with both hands and sobbed softly. She, too, had lost a loved one—her brother, Aidan, had forsaken the world of vampires to become a man again.

Kristina felt several conflicting emotions—sorrow, joy, fear, exhilaration. To be mortal! "I will die someday," she said.

Calder stood beside Maeve's chair, his hand resting on his mate's trembling shoulder. "Yes," he replied. His voice, though steady, was fractured as well.

"When?"

"I don't know," Calder answered, in his forthright way.

"The process has begun—there's no telling how long it will take."

Kristina was still for a while, absorbing that, considering the ramifications. Her mother's sobs subsided as Maeve gathered her composure.

"That's why my magic has been so unreliable," Kristina mused. It was something of a relief, knowing she had no reason to blame herself. She hadn't neglected her natural gifts after all, but simply lost them.

"You could, of course, be transformed into a vampire," Calder said. "But both your mother and I know that would not be your wish."

"You're right," she answered distractedly. That life, with all its privileges and powers, was not for her.

It was a strange feeling, knowing for certain that she would one day die. She would be subject to all sorts of human ailments—head colds, sore feet, weight gain. "Do you—do you think I can bear children?" She had never menstruated, but perhaps she would start. Perhaps she could be fertile after all.

Maeve and Calder exchanged a tender look, and finally, tentatively, Maeve smiled. "If I did," she reasoned, "I see no reason why you couldn't."

Kristina had been in shock ever since the startling announcement had been made; now she realized what it meant to her parents, and she was filled with love and compassion for them.

"I won't separate myself from you, the way Uncle Aidan did, if that's what you're thinking," she said gently. "I love you too much."

Calder's eyes glistened suspiciously. "We would have watched over you in any case," he said. "Ours is a selfish grief, no lighter for the fact that we share it."

"Because I will die one day," Kristina said. She rose from her chair to embrace her father, then her

mother. "Be happy for me," she pleaded softly, looking from one of her parents to the other. "This is what I want, what I've dreamed of as long as I can remember. I have no wish to live forever."

Maeve laid cool hands to either side of her daughter's face. "There is much of Aidan in you," she said. "You are wiser than I, and not so greedy."

"Do you fear death, Mother?" Kristina asked quietly. She had always wondered, but never quite dared to ask.

The queen of vampires considered. "Yes," she said. "I was raised, as a mortal, in an eighteenth-century convent, and the concept of eternal damnation is as real to me as the sky overhead and the earth below."

"And what about you, Papa?" Kristina inquired, turning to Calder.

"I have seen hell," he said. "It is called war, and it exists not in some subterranean realm, but right here on earth."

Kristina went back to her chair and fell into it. She wanted to weep, and at the same time to shout for joy. She might live another fifty years, or awaken with white hair and fragile bones one morning next week.

"What am I going to do?" she whispered.

Maeve stood beside her and laid a gentle hand to her hair. "Live," she said. "Make the most of every moment."

"But I could die tomorrow!"

"Just like any other mortal," Calder put in quietly.

At that, Maeve and Calder joined hands and, without another word, disappeared.

Barabbas laid his large head in Kristina's lap and whined sympathetically. She stroked him, staring into an uncertain future, wondering whether to celebrate her newly discovered status as a woman or to mourn. After an hour or so, still undecided, she went upstairs to get ready for bed.

In the morning she awakened early, with cramps.

At the age of one hundred and thirty, Kristina Holbrook was having her first period. She rolled over onto her side, drew up her knees, and groaned. She'd never expected it to hurt.

After a few minutes wholly dedicated to wretched suffering, she groped for the telephone and punched in Daisy's home number. With any luck at all, her friend would still be there, and not out solving a case.

"Hello," chimed the voice Kristina most wanted to hear.

"Help," Kristina moaned. "I'm human."

"What?" Daisy sounded alarmed, and who could blame her. It had been a strange thing to say.

"I'll explain later," Kristina managed to gasp. "I have the worst cramps—this has never happened to me

before—"

"I'll be right over," Daisy said. "Will the housekeeper from hell let me in?"

"She's off this week. Use the spare key," Kristina murmured. "It's under the ceramic frog by the back porch."

"Great security," Daisy scoffed, but with gentleness. She obviously understood what Kristina was feeling and empathized. "Listen—just give me a few minutes to get Esteban settled with the new nanny, then I'll make a quick stop at the drugstore and come right over."

Kristina choked back a whine. If this was what being mortal was all about, maybe it wasn't so terrific and fulfilling after all. "Hurry," she whispered.

"Sometimes a warm bath helps," Daisy offered, and then hung up.

She arrived within half an hour, but to Kristina it felt more like all sixteen years of the FDR Administration, complete with retrospectives. She was still lying in a fetal position in the middle of the bed, clutching her abdomen and gritting her teeth.

"This stuff usually works," Daisy said, ripping the cellophane off a blue and white package. She had a brown paper bag with her, too, but she went into the bathroom, filled a glass with water, and returned. Two pills rested on her outstretched palm. "Swallow these and try to relax. Tension only makes it worse."

Kristina sat up, took the tablets, and swallowed them.

"What's going on here?" Daisy asked, settling into Kristina's reading chair.

She received a baleful look in reply before Kristina said, "Last night my parents broke some startling news to me. I'm completely mortal. And this morning, I woke up with the proof."

Daisy interlaced her fingers and sighed. She wasn't wearing her baseball cap, but otherwise she was dressed in the usual casual-camp way. "Nobody ever said it was easy being human," she pointed out. "Especially being *afemale* human." She reached for the brown bag with the pharmacy logo printed on its side and tossed it to Kristina. "Here—you'll have to figure these out for yourself."

Kristina looked inside, saw a box of tampons, and groaned again, flinging herself back onto her pillows. Twenty minutes later the pills had worked, and the tampons were in their place on a bathroom shelf. Daisy returned from downstairs where she'd prepared a pot of herbal tea and toasted a couple of English muffins.

"Feeling better?"

Kristina nodded sheepishly. This was an experience most mortal women endured month in and month out, and she'd carried on as though she were having an appendectomy with no anesthetic. She had a new respect for the female of the human species. "Thanks, Daisy."

Daisy grinned. "After you've knocked back some of the tea and wolfed down a muffin, you should get up and move around as much as you can. Get dressed and take Barabbas out for a walk or something."

"I should go down to the shop."

"Why? Isn't there a construction crew there, fixing the door and replacing the glass in the jewelry counter?"

"Yes," Kristina said. "And I want to make sure things are going okay."

"You've heard, of course, that it was Benecia who took the brass monkey?"

Kristina *hadn't* heard exactly, though Dathan had presented the theory, the night of the robbery, when both he and Valerian were squared off in her living room. They'd all but bared their fangs.

She wondered why the warlock had not come to her with the trophy, the ugly doorstop, as soon as he'd retrieved the thing. It wasn't like Dathan to miss an opportunity to score a point, especially when there was something he wanted in return. "I hadn't heard," she said softly. "Who told you?" The question was a formality, escaping her lips before she'd thought.

"Valerian, of course. Dathan couldn't resist letting him know that a warlock had succeeded where a vampire could not."

Kristina's heart, now all too mortal, was hammering against the base of her throat. "Where is it—he—the monkey, I mean?"

Daisy's gaze was solemn. "Benecia refused to tell. She means to use it against you if she can."

Kristina set her tea tray on the bedside table and leaned back against her pillows. "How did Dathan respond to that?"

"He was enraged, of course, but he dared not destroy the little demon because the knowledge of the doorstop's whereabouts would go with her. I suspect he found their lairs, Benecia and Canaan's, I mean, and gave them a sample of warlock blood. According to Valerian, everyone in the vampire world heard their wails of fury when they awakened, deathly ill. They had probably been fed just enough to serve as a warning of Dathan's vengeance. Let's hope they are wise enough to heed it."

Although she still felt a little dizzy, Kristina's pain was mostly gone. She got out of bed, somewhat shakily. She would take a shower, get dressed, and concentrate as hard as she could on summoning the warlock. Max and his children were in more danger than ever before, now that Kristina, too, was mortal and had no magical means to protect them.

Daisy touched her arm. "I'll check on you later. Right now I've got to see how Esteban is making out, then make a run downtown to the agency."

"Thanks for everything," Kristina said, mildly embarrassed that, at her age, she'd had to have the basics of menstruation explained to her.

When she'd showered and dressed, again in jeans, with sneakers and a blue cable-knit sweater to complete the outfit, Kristina hurried downstairs. The bottle of pills Daisy had brought were clasped in her right hand; if the pain came back, she wanted to be ready.

She had barely sat down at the family room table and set herself to concentrating on Dathan's arrival when he appeared. Kristina realized, with a touch of sadness, that it was his magic that had alerted him to

her need, and not her own. Hers was gone, and she was going to miss it, even though she'd wished it away for as long as she could remember.

He was dressed like a gentleman who has just attended the opera, most likely one in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. He sported a short cape, a gleaming black top hat, and very elaborate shoes, with ornate buckles and square heels. Like vampires, warlocks were facile at time travel.

Dathan approached Kristina, hardly sparing a glance for Barabbas, who gave a low, throaty growl but did not rise from his resting place on the hearth rug. Taking her hand and sweeping off his top hat in the same grand gesture, Dathan placed a warlock's kiss on her knuckles. She withdrew rather abruptly.

"Why didn't you tell me, instead of Valerian, what you had found out about Benecia Havermail?"

"Because I could not present you with a *fait accompli*, my dear," Dathan said, looking and sounding surprised that anyone would question his judgment. "A situation is not resolved until it is—well—*resolved*."

Kristina lowered her head, thinking of Max, of the way he laughed, the way his eyes told her so much of what was in his mind, the way he made love to her. As though she were a goddess, powerful and worthy of worship, and yet fragile, too. She must give him up and make her way alone, as she had always done.

Dathan curved a finger under her chin and raised her face to look deep into her eyes. "You are so troubled, beloved," he said with inexpressible tenderness. "Why? I will protect your Max, as I promised to do, even though it breaks my heart to know how you love him."

She was surprised again; Dathan, for all his intuitive powers, hadn't discerned that she'd changed and become as mortal as her lost Uncle Aidan. When she told him the truth, he would no longer want her for his bride and queen—a fact that came as something of a relief.

"Yes," Kristina said. "I do love Max, very much."

"But someday—"

"No," she interrupted, shaking her head. "Dathan, I have no powers. I am mortal."

"Nonsense."

"It's true. It's part of the reason I've bungled so many spells lately. My magic is gone. I am a woman, and nothing more."

The warlock's face was not crestfallen at this news, as Kristina had expected, but translucent with some inner joy. "Even better! The mating of a warlock and a mortal—"

"Cannot be that unusual," Kristina said, losing patience. While she didn't relish the prospect of spending the rest of her life, whatever was left of it, alone, she wasn't about to settle for a mate she didn't love, just to have someone to call her own.

Not that any woman could ever call a warlock her own. Like vampires, they were fickle creatures—Valerian and her parents were the only nightwalkers of her acquaintance who remained faithful to their romantic companions. Though when Daisy was between lifetimes, Valerian had certainly been known to engage in a variety of affairs of the heart.



"I think," Dathan said, "that I should take my leave now, and return when you are in a better mood."

"That," Kristina responded, "would be wise. Only don't bother to come back if you're going to hound me about marrying you, because I won't."

Dathan sighed forlornly, spread his elegant cape like black wings, and was gone.

Kristina walked Barabbas around the block—there was a scent of snow in the air again—and then took him back to the house and shut him up inside. A few minutes later she was in her Mercedes, driving downtown to her shop.

The door had been replaced, and Max's friend and two of his helpers were just finishing the repairs to the jewelry counter. The floor had been swept, and as Kristina moved among the familiar antiques, she told herself she could open for business that afternoon, or in the morning at the latest.

She wondered how long it would be, though, before Benecia and her sister returned to wreak more havoc. And where was the brass doorstep? Would he turn up one night, standing over Kristina's bed, a knife in his hand?

She shivered. Barabbas was there to protect her, of course, but she couldn't depend on a wolf forever. Besides, the animal belonged to Daisy and Valerian; it's rightful home was with them.

Maybe, Kristina thought sorrowfully, it was time to close down her shop and go traveling again. She could simply wander from place to place, the way she'd done after Michael's death. The world had changed a great deal since the days of steamer trunks and great ocean liners; countries had new borders and new names.

There were other differences, too. She was deeply in love, and on this journey she would not have unlimited time. Every moment, every heartbeat and breath, was now infinitely precious.

Max telephoned that night, and he didn't suggest getting together. That was fine with Kristina, because she wasn't ready to tell him about her mortality. He might see the change in Kristina as a reason to rejoice, but she knew it was a very mixed blessing.

"You're okay, right?" he asked. She heard cupboard doors opening and closing, pans clanking. The man was decent to the core, a wonderful lover, and he could cook in the bargain. Amazing. "No creepy stuff has been happening?"

Kristina bit her tongue. It was all in how you defined "creepy stuff," and she didn't want to enlighten him. She needed more of those anti-cramp pills, a warm bath, and a good night's sleep. "Barabbas makes a pretty good bodyguard," she said after a few moments.

"You'll call if you need me?"

"Yes," Kristina promised. She was beginning to wonder, though, if Max had decided she was too much trouble, with all her weird relatives and White Fang for a pet. It would be easier all around if he dumped her, right then, but she found herself braced against his rejection all the same. "I'll call."

He destroyed her theory in the next sentence. "Thursday is Thanksgiving," he said. "My mother is putting on her usual feast, and she's asked me to invite you. Not that I didn't want to, of course." More pan clattering, a brief aside to one of the children, something about fishing somebody named Barbie out of the aquarium. "Will you come with us, Kristina?"

"I'd be happy to," she said, then closed her eyes against a rush of tears. Why, *why* had she agreed, when she knew it was a terrible, even dangerous, mistake to draw the situation out any further? She had already let things go too far.

"It's a long weekend," Max continued, making matters worse. "The kids usually stay with my folks, and you and I do have that reservation at the lodge up in the mountains."

Kristina had completely forgotten that, with all that had happened since. "Maybe you shouldn't be away from Bree and Eliette, over the holidays, at least. I know it sounds silly, but I didn't realize Thanksgiving was coming up so soon."

No pot clanging, no muttered instructions to the kids.

"Don't say no, Kristina," he said. "My daughters aren't being neglected—they *always* spend that weekend with my parents."

Heaven help her, she didn't want to refuse. She yearned to be alone with Max, making love, talking in front of a fire, playing in the snow. The way things stood, that might be the last true joy she ever experienced.

"All right, I'll go," she promised very softly. She would give herself, and Max, that one glorious interlude together, and then she'd do what she should have done long before and put an end to the relationship. She'd tell Max she was selling the store, leaving Seattle and never coming back, and she fully intended to keep her word.

"Pick you up at noon on Thursday?" There was a smile in Max's voice; it warmed Kristina and eased the ache in her heart just a little.

"I'll be ready," she said, silently calling herself every sort of fool.

Then, after taking two more of Daisy's pills, she ate an early dinner, took a brief bath, and crawled into bed with the stack of letters she and Max had been working their way through together. She supposed she should have waited, but that night, it seemed, nothing had the power to distract Kristina from the gloomy future but the past. The days of yesteryear, while grim in their own right, had one advantage on the years to come—they were over.

*... Michael was inconsolable after his father's death; he blamed himself for both his parents' passing, I think, though he never admitted as much to me. He would have said even less to Gilbert, who represented everything Michael himself was not and could never be—he was good, strong, steady. Even handsome, though in a less fragile way than Michael.*

*Late that summer Gilbert brought me a strange and magnificent gift, a little baby swaddled in rough blankets. He explained that the poor little mite was a foundling, that his mother had given birth to him beside one of the roads passing through the estate, and had perished there.*

*I was filled with yearning, for while I had put my own powers firmly out of mind, I was certain*

*that I could not bear an infant of my own. Yes, of course, my mother, a vampire, had brought me forth in quite a normal fashion, but I was an oddity and I knew it. Here was a helpless, needy child that I could love, dote upon, educate.*

*I felt as though I had been drowning and someone had flung out a rope, that I might catch hold and be saved.*

*I recall that Gilbert looked at me, and at the child, with the most moving tenderness glowing in his eyes. "I wish things had been different, Kristina," he said, and that was all.*

*But I knew what he meant. That we might have been together, as husband and wife, and produced babes of our own. He did not know the truth about me, though Michael did, by then, and had reviled me for it often.*

*I might have known how my husband would react to the introduction of a foundling into the household, although it was rightfully Gilbert's estate, and not his own. He called the infant a bastard—true no doubt, but surely not the fault of the child and very probably not even the fault of its mother—and ordered me to send him away.*

*I refused, and Michael tormented me day and night. Then one morning, when Gilbert was away in London, my husband confronted me yet again, in a drunken rage. We were standing at the top of the main stairway leading down into the great hall of Cheltingham Castle—great Zeus, Phillie, why did I challenge him then? And why there?*

*I had named the baby Joseph and engaged a nurse for him, and I already loved him as much as if I'd given birth to him myself. And so, in a moment of temper, I told my husband I would sooner give him up than the child.*

*He backhanded me then, did Michael, and I went sailing down the stairs, end over end. Had I not been what I was, I would surely have perished, and even so I suffered incapacitating injury. When I awakened, Joseph had been taken from the house, and my searching, however frantic, was fruitless.*

*I can write no more just now. I know you understand.*

## CHAPTER 15

The next of the many letters Kristina had written to Miss Eudocia Phillips, her former governess, was dated nearly six months after the one in which Michael had engineered the disappearance of Kristina's adopted child. Even after all this time, remembering made Kristina's heart ache, for no amount of searching had turned up even a trace of the baby boy, Joseph. Not then, at least.

*... Your letters have brought me so much comfort, Phillie. You would tell me, wouldn't you, if you found the story too burdensome, too full of sorrow, and could not bear the telling?*

*When last I wrote, I told you how Michael had taken my son from me, and struck me when I confronted him for what must have been the thousandth time. The wounds I suffered when I fell down the stairs were insignificant compared to what that final treachery did to my spirit. I was*

*destroyed and could no longer endure living under the same roof with Michael Bradford.*

*Still, I had cracked several ribs in my fall and could not travel, so I had no choice but to remain at Cheltingham, at least until I'd recovered. Michael, in the way I have since learned is typical of such men, was immediately contrite, as solicitous as any husband might have been in the circumstances—rushing down the stairs, shouting that a doctor must be sent for, soothing me and stroking my hand as we waited. I lay there at the base of the stairs, beyond anguish, with servants hovering about, for Michael had decreed that I must not be moved until the village physician had examined me.*

*How ludicrous it seems that Michael should be my caretaker, my constant companion, when he had been the one to do me hurt in the first place. I despised him and wanted him to go from my sight, not just then but forever, but he would not leave me; even after I was carried to a downstairs bedchamber, where my ribs were bound and I was given laudanum to ease my pain. In some ways, Phillie, that was the greater torture, his continued and doting presence. The drug numbed my flesh but could not reach the anguish in my soul.*

*Michael held my hand. He stroked my hair. He said he was sorry and swore he had never meant to do me any harm. I believe he meant what he said, as he was saying it, but I hated him as I have never hated anything or anyone before.*

*"Tell me where Joseph is," I said. I thought one good thing might come out of Michael's remorse, at least—that I might learn the whereabouts of my foster child. When I had sufficiently recovered, I meant to fetch the boy from wherever he was being kept, and then put Cheltingham behind me forever. I would miss no one there, except for Gilbert.*

*I hoped that my parents and Valerian would come to me at last, once I had truly separated myself from Michael. I felt an almost inexpressible yearning to see them again, but I confess I was embittered, too—quietly furious that they had refused to step in when I needed them so much. Knowing that they had good reasons, and that the decision was a difficult one for them, was of no consolation then.*

*Michael hesitated a long time before answering my question about Joseph's whereabouts. Then, the very picture of compassion, he said, "You must cease your fretting over the brat, Kristina darling. We shall make our own babies."*

*I turned my head upon the pillows; I could not bear to look at him. And I was wiser now; I knew better than to let him see how I despised him. "I want Joseph," I whispered.*

*Michael brushed my hair back from my forehead. "He is gone," he said. Such a tender motion from the very hand that had bruised me, and sent me reeling and tumbling down a long flight of stairs.*

*I felt a terrible chill at the words—surely even Michael, with all his sins, would not destroy an innocent child! I was not to know Joseph's fate for a long time, and when I did, it only made me hate Michael more.*

*It was very late that same night, when my husband had ceased his feverish ministrings at last and left me in peace, and I was half insensible from the drugs the doctor had prescribed, that Valerian appeared at the foot of my bed.*

*I thought at first that he was an illusion, or part of a dream, so long had it been since I had laid eyes upon this beloved creature who called himself my guardian vampire. He has always had an irreverent sense of humor, but then you knew that.*

*What I remember most about that visit from Valerian was the sorrow I saw in his face and in his magnificent countenance. "Have you learned your lesson, sweet Kristina?" he asked.*

*I moved to sit up, but I could not.*

*I wanted to plead with him to find Joseph, to bring my baby back to me, but something stayed my tongue. "What lesson was that?" I asked, a bit testily, I fear, for he had tarried long in coming to me, and I had suffered so much in the interim.*

*He feigned one of his melodramatic sighs. "Kristina," he scolded in a quiet voice.*

*"All right, yes—I chose the wrong man, for the wrong reasons."*

*"Anyone might have made that error. The worst part, my darling, is that you stayed with that monster. Why didn't you simply leave him?"*

*"I kept hoping he would change."*

*Valerian flexed his elegant white fingers. "Do you know what it is costing me, little one, not to rouse the wretch from his drunken stupor and kill him in a manner that would cause Genghis Khan himself to cringe?"*

*"Yes," I said. "I can imagine."*

*"I have come to take you away."*

*I closed my eyes, but tears seeped through my lashes and sneaked down my cheeks. "I hurt so much," I said with a nod.*

*"I know," Valerian said softly.*

*"As much as I long to leave Michael, it is difficult for me to go without saying good-bye to Gilbert."*

*Valerian's lips curved into the thinnest of smiles. "Don't worry, beloved. One day you will undoubtedly see him again, under other circumstances." He rounded the bed, bent over me, and touched my forehead, and instantly I was unconscious.*

*When I woke, it was morning, and I was back in the house in London where I had been so happy as a child. My parents were asleep in their lair, and Valerian, of course, was in his, wherever it was, but I was surrounded by familiar servants, and they fussed and fetched and tried their utmost to bring me cheer.*

*My heart was broken, however, and I could not be happy.*

*That same afternoon there was a tremendous scuffle downstairs, and I was dreadfully afraid that Michael had come for me, perhaps bringing ruffians to assist him. Our servants were all elderly,*

*and the vampires of the household could not help, being in their usual daylight trances, far below ground..*

*I remember that I grasped the candlestick from the table alongside my bed and summoned up what I could of my neglected magic, prepared to defend myself as best I could. On pain of death I would not return to Cheltingham.*

*There was more shouting, but then I heard my personal maid, Minerva, who had often attended me at Refuge, our country home near Cheltingham, speak in calming tones to the protesting mob.*

*Moments later, she entered my room with a little bob and said, "It's all right, miss. You may put aside the candlestick, for it's Lord Gilbert who's come to call, not his brother. Will you see him?"*

*Before I could reply—my smile would have given away my feelings on the matter already—Gilbert filled the doorway, tall and handsome, his face contorted with a peculiar combination of rage and sympathy. Minerva perched upon one of the cushioned window seats overlooking the back garden; rules of propriety were observed in our household, by the servants if not the primary inhabitants, and I must not be left alone with a man who was not my husband.*

*Gilbert was dressed for business—he had come to London to attend to matters related to assuming his late father's title and the estates—but he was clearly a country gentleman in his tweeds and scuffed boots. His brown hair was rumpled where he had repeatedly thrust his fingers through it.*

*"Oh, God, Kristina," he murmured. "It's true, then. He did injure you."*

*"I asked again about the baby," I said. "About Joseph. "*

*Gilbert drew a chair close to the bed and took my hand in his. Tears rose in my eyes and in his as well. "I have had the whole of England search for that child, he said raggedly. "You know that."*

*"He's killed him. Michael has killed my baby."*

*Minerva, who had been stroking one of the house cats, a tabby called Trinket, and pretending not to listen, gasped at this.*

*Gilbert and I were silent for a long time, then Gilbert spoke.*

*"I cannot believe, even after all Michael has done, that he would stoop to murder. Especially a child."*

*"Then you are a fool," I replied, unkind in my grief.*

*Gilbert, as usual, was understanding. "You needn't worry about Michael after this," he said. "I'll make a remittance man of him, provided I don't succumb to the urge to do murder myself. In the meantime, Kristina, you must stop tormenting yourself over little Joseph." He paused. "God in heaven. I curse myself every day for ever bringing the infant to you in the first place. I thought—"*

*I squeezed his hand. "I know what you thought," I said gently. "That you might give me joy."*

*He nodded, then bent and kissed my forehead. "I will deal with Michael," he said. "And if there is*



*a way to get the truth out of him regarding the babe, I will do it. In the meantime, you must rest and recover."*

*I knew, somehow, that I would not see Gilbert again, and clung to him for a long moment when he would have turned to leave the room.*

*"Good-bye," I whispered.*

*He kissed my mouth that time. It was light, brief, but in no way brotherly. "Farewell, sweet Kristina," he said. And then he strode out of the room without once looking back.*

*Minerva, poor dear, was sniffing and dashing away tears with the hem of her apron when I glanced in her direction. "Such a dear man," she said.*

*"Yes," I replied, staring at the empty chasm of the open doorway, through which Gilbert had just passed.*

*"I can't see the likes of him raising a hand to a woman," Minerva observed in a righteous tone, rising from the window seat with the cat squirming in her arms.*

*"No," I agreed, but I feared Gilbert would do violence when he returned to Cheltingham, and I was right. Word came to London, several weeks later, by way of an intricate network of grooms and footmen and others who handled horses and carriages, that Gilbert had gone home to find Michael preparing to come to the city and fetch me.*

*They had argued heatedly, as the story went, and Michael had taken up a fireplace poker, in a fit of temper, and swung it at Gilbert's head. Gilbert had deflected the blow, fracturing a bone in his forearm in the process, but had managed, all the same, to administer a memorable thrashing. Our stable hands had it on good authority, and passed the word to the household servants, that Michael Bradford had been dumped, bruised, chastened, and humbled onto a ship bound for Australia. As long as he kept himself within those far shores, he would receive an adequate allowance. Should he return to England, for any reason, however, he would be utterly penniless.*

*I received one letter after that, from Gilbert. He wrote that he was to be wed at last, to one Ethel Grovestead of Devonshire, and that there had still been no word of Joseph...*

Kristina laid the letter aside. Joseph.

She seldom allowed herself to think of the little boy, but he was very much on her mind that evening. She had found him, some seven years after his disappearance, with Valerian's reluctant assistance, working with a gang of pickpockets. Once a cherubic baby, the child was now feral and ratlike, hardly even human. Michael had put him into a foundling home after taking him away from Cheltingham in secret, a terrible, cold place where he'd been beaten and half starved. At five he'd fled the institution and taken up with a gang of cutthroats, orphans, and other lost boys like himself, and Kristina had realized at last, looking into his fevered and hateful eyes, that there was no saving him.

Valerian had understood that all along, and perhaps Gilbert had, as well. They had been shielding her, the pair of them, and she did not appreciate their efforts.



She'd given the boy, once called Joseph, all the money in her bag. He'd snatched the coins into his grubby hands, spat at her, and fled. After that, she'd done her best to provide for him, again with Valerian's aid, but after only a few months the child had perished in an alleyway, a small bundle of dirty rags and brittle bones, racked with consumption.

If Kristina had hated Michael before that, it was nothing compared to what she felt afterward. Life might have been so very different for Joseph, for all of them...

She pulled her thoughts forcibly away from that dreadful time. She had dwelt on the past long enough, for one night. Now she must look forward, make plans for a new life.

Kristina switched on the computer at the small desk in the family room, got out her address book, and began composing letters to other antiques dealers all over the world. Her wares were envied far and wide, and selling them would be an easy matter, once her colleagues knew she was going out of business.

She worked into the small hours of the morning, then went upstairs to shower and crawl into bed. Barabbas slept at her feet, heavy and warm, and hers was a peaceful, dreamless sleep.

The next day she went to the shop and sent off the letters she had written the night before, via her fax machine. By lunchtime she was already receiving offers. Several dealers, in fact, were flying in from other parts of the world, while others asked for a complete inventory list. Kristina kept her stock catalogued on the shop computer and updated the information once a week. It was an easy matter to print out a copy and begin responding to the requests.

All the while she waited for the brass monkey-man to show up, human again and bent on revenge. Benecia Havermail could hold a doorstep hostage as long as she wanted to, but even she wouldn't be able to reverse the spell Kristina had cast. She would, however, have a better chance of defending herself.

At home Kristina let herself in, half expecting her assailant to pounce on her. Instead she was greeted by a whimpering Barabbas, eager for a walk and supper.

Kristina let him out, trusting him to return when he was ready, although she knew he wanted to go home to Valerian, who was his true master. Because the wolf had been commanded to keep watch over Kristina, however, he would do so, no matter how lonely he was.

While Kristina was making supper—a light pasta dish—the telephone rang. She didn't need her lost magic to know the caller was Max.

"Hi," she said.

He let out a long breath, as though he'd feared she wouldn't answer. "How was your day?"

She smiled as she chopped red, yellow, and green peppers to roast and put on top of her pasta, to give it some color and pizzazz. "It was pretty good, really. Nothing jumped out at me, or anything like that. How about you?"

Max laughed. "Wish I could say the same," he said. "My players are all keyed up for the four-day weekend, and most of them were on hormone overload in the first place. I spent the day letting the smaller guys out of lockers."

"I don't know how you stand the little devils," Kristina said, cooking as she spoke. A little salad would go nicely with the pasta, she decided.

Max, too, was making dinner; she could hear the homey, accompanying sounds over the wire. "Coming from you, that's an ironic remark," he teased. "Given the sort of company you keep, I mean."

His words reminded Kristina of all she would have to tell him, in the very near future, and dampened her spirits a little. Thinking of Michael, she said, "Considering the cruelty of some human beings I've known, I marvel that Valerian or even Dathan could be called 'monsters.' "

"Did I hurt your feelings?"

That was Max for you. No beating around the proverbial bush; just get right to the point. The concern in his voice made Kristina want to weep.

"Maybe a little, but I know you didn't intend to."

"Sorry," Max said. She hadn't known anyone even remotely like him since Gilbert Bradford, Duke of Cheltingham.

"It's all right," she insisted. Her appetite was gone, though. She turned off the burner under the pasta and took the chopped peppers out of the electric grilling machine she'd ordered off an infomercial one night, a few years before, when she hadn't been able to sleep. "Vampires and warlocks aren't subject to the rules of political correctness."

"Just give them time," Max said ruefully with a grin in his voice.

There was so much she wanted to tell him—that she was human, that she was fertile, that she was closing her shop and leaving Seattle, but none of it could be said over the telephone. She had had to give up Gilbert, and now she would lose Max, but this time she would have some very sweet memories to take away with her, along with a freshly broken heart.

"How are Bree and Eliette?" she asked, holding her breath while she awaited his answer. She was still very afraid of Benecia and Canaan; they could so easily turn their envy on Max's little girls, who had everything they wanted. Innocence. Mortality. Not just one future, but many.

"Only slightly less rowdy than my football players," Max replied. "They're getting excited about Thanksgiving—not that they're all that thankful. It's just that, thanks to TV, they know it's a greased track from Turkey Day to Christmas."

Kristina smiled again, but wistfully. Although she had had plenty of beautiful toys as a child, and a great fuss was made over her birthday, even the boldest vampires did not dare to observe the holy days of any of the great religions. Nemesis and his Superiors were very touchy about such matters, and no sane fiend would invoke their ire.

"That must be fun—filling stockings, keeping secrets..."

"To tell you the truth," Max confessed when Kristina's voice fell away, "it's something of a hassle. And it bothers me a lot that the central idea is Getting Stuff. Whatever happened to peace on earth and goodwill toward men?"

"I think both are where they always were—in the hearts of men *and* women. It's just a matter of what you focus on."

"You're right," Max said. "First my mom and dad made Christmas happen, then Sandy took care of it. The last couple of years I've been—well—going through the motions."

Again Kristina's heart was touched with sadness. She wondered if being in love was always like riding a roller coaster, or if her mood swings were connected to her new humanity. "I bet you're not giving yourself enough credit," she said.

"Maybe," he allowed.

It was then that Barabbas scratched at the kitchen door. Kristina stretched but couldn't quite reach the knob. "Hold on a second, will you, Max?" she asked.

His voice was warm and low, sexy as a caress. "Maybe I'd better let you go. The spaghetti is about to boil over. Call you tomorrow?"

"I'll be looking forward to it," Kristina said.

She hung up the telephone and opened the door. Standing behind Barabbas, in the early darkness of late November, were Benecia and Canaan. They were dressed as ludicrous little pilgrims, complete with buckles on their shoes, Puritan bonnets, gowns, and aprons.

"Barabbas," Kristina commanded in an even voice, "bring Valerian."

The wolf darted away into the night, and while Canaan looked unsettled by this development, Benecia smiled. Her uncanny beauty made her all the more hideous, all the more vile.

"Aren't you going to ask us in?" she asked in her small, bell-like voice.

Kristina had no choice, and she knew it as well as they did. She just hoped Valerian wasn't too far away to help.

The fact that Benecia didn't seem particularly worried about the other vampire was not encouraging. Stepping back, Kristina admitted them.

"Where is the doorstep?" she demanded.

"I haven't the faintest idea," Benecia replied. "I gave it to a junk dealer. It'll be interesting to see where the thing turns up, don't you think?"

Kristina might have gone for the little beast's throat if she hadn't known it would mean instant—or worse yet, *not* instant—death. She said nothing. *What* could be keeping Valerian?

"I believe he's busy elsewhere," Benecia said with acid sweetness, as if Kristina had asked the question aloud.

Kristina drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. She must stay calm, at all costs. Vampires of this ilk were like wild, vicious animals, unreasoning, provoked by the scent of fear. "What do you want from me?" she asked in what she hoped was a reasonable and even tone of voice.

"A plan has occurred to us," Benecia said.

Canaan was still keeping an uneasy eye out for Valerian.

"What sort of plan?" Kristina went for a tone of contempt, in what was probably a futile effort to distract Benecia from the terror she felt.

"One that would allow us to be human, to live out normal lives." She paused and smiled, showing her white teeth, as perfect and pearly as a doll's. "We might even be your daughters. Wouldn't that be fun?"

Kristina swayed inwardly as the full weight of Benecia's words struck her. Great Zeus, the little beasts were talking about *possession*, planning to abandon their own vampire bodies and take over those of Eliette and Bree!

"I will do anything to stop you," she whispered. "*Anything.*"

"But can you?" Benecia retorted, almost simpering.

"You have no magic now. You are nothing but a mortal woman."

"Nothing but what you have always wanted to be," Kristina replied.

"Let's go," Canaan said, breaking her silence at last. "I don't like it here."

"A wise child," commented a third voice, but it wasn't Valerian who spoke. Even before Kristina whirled to look, she knew it was Dathan who had materialized in her kitchen, not the fearsome vampire.

Canaan retreated a step, but Benecia advanced, snarling, her china-blue eyes demonically bright. She held a particular grudge toward Dathan, Kristina recalled; something on the order of a woman scorned.

"You," the vampire accused. "It was *you*, warlock, who gave us your vile blood while we slept!"

Dathan was, once again, dressed for either the theater or the opera. Kristina deduced, stupidly, that he must be quite an aficionado of the arts. He dusted the impeccable sleeves of his greatcoat with white-gloved hands before replying. "Hold your tongue, you demon's whelp, or I'll give you a dose that will make arsenic seem like ambrosia."

Benecia made a primal sound, like the hiss of a jungle cat about to spring, and Dathan raised one hand and snapped his fingers.

A circle of flame danced around Benecia's feet.

Canaan shrieked and fled immediately; sensible vampires fear fire as they do sunlight and the point of a wooden stake. Benecia, though visibly frightened, glared at the warlock as the blaze grew.

Kristina clasped both hands over her mouth, horrified. "Stop," she whispered. "Please, Dathan—stop."

He sighed, and the flames died down to a black circle on Kristina's floor.

"Get out," he said.

Benecia scowled at him a moment longer, then vanished.

Kristina turned and flung herself against Dathan's chest, utterly terrified. "You must help me—they're planning to take over Max's children—can they do that?"

Dathan gave her a gentle shake, then held her close again. "We shall not allow it, you and I," he said tenderly, kissing the top of Kristina's head. "Leave the 'littlest vampire' and her more judicious sister to me."

"What will you do?"

He touched a finger to her lips. "Shhh," he said. "Do not worry yourself with such matters, Kristina. After all, you will soon be my queen. Think on that instead. Imagine what it will mean."

She could not bear to consider the full scope of her vow, not then. She had told Benecia and Canaan she would do anything to save Eliette and Bree from them, and she'd meant it. The price was high indeed, but Kristina would not stint.

"You must give me just a few more days to end things with Max."

"I cannot pretend I am not jealous," Dathan said. "But I will grant you that request or virtually any other. But you must give me your word, Kristina. You will become my bride."

She swallowed hard, blinked back tears, and then nodded. "I promise," she whispered.

With that, Dathan bent his head and kissed her gently on the mouth. She was not unmoved—he was a creature capable of great passion—but there was no spiritual connection as there was with Max. No sense of lightness, of something ordained in a time when stars, now long dead, were tumultuous and new, bursting with fire.

Then suddenly he vanished.

Valerian arrived an instant afterward, popping in in his usual spectacular fashion, bringing Barabbas with him. Or did Barabbas possess that talent in his own right? It didn't matter, for Kristina had just sold her soul, and she was as good as damned.

"Where have you been?" she demanded, and then gave a deep, wrenching sob.

Valerian put his arms around Kristina in the way her father might have done, ignoring her outburst. He was not at her beck and call, and he had the good grace not to point that out—though he could be depended upon to raise the subject later. "I have been doing what I could to assist your mother," he said simply.

Kristina looked up into his face, full of sorrow, glad that she was human, that she would die. "I will be wed to Dathan within a fortnight," she said.

Valerian looked truly startled, an emotion she had not seen in him in all the length of her memory. "What?" he demanded.

She explained Benecia's threat, brokenly, trembling all the while, and the somber expression on the

vampire's face told her that such a thing was indeed possible.

"They have made some unholy bargain," Valerian reflected. "They must be destroyed before they can carry out their plans, or other vampires will do the same. I do not believe I need to tell you how Nemesis would react to that."

"What can I do?" Kristina asked, desperate.

Valerian cupped her chin in his hand, wiped away some of her tears with a thumb as smooth and cool as marble. "Only wait," the vampire said. "You were very foolish to promise yourself to Dathan, however. He will not release you from the pact."

"It is worth it to me," she replied.

The vampire kissed her forehead. "I hope so," he answered. And then he, too, was gone.

Kristina took Barabbas, drove to Max's, and knocked on the front door. Maybe she couldn't protect Bree and Eliette, with her lapsed magic, but there was a chance that the wolf could. And besides, she wanted to be able to summon Dathan if Benecia and Canaan decided to put in an appearance.

Max didn't ask questions, bless him. He just led Kristina to the guest room, kissed her lightly, and left her alone.

Sometime in the middle of the night, Bree and Eliette joined Kristina in the double bed, cuddling up close, but she knew it wasn't because they were afraid. They had sensed her sorrow, somehow, and wanted to console her.

Kristina was sipping coffee the next morning in the kitchen when Max found a moment to talk to her alone. The girls were on their way to their separate schools, via the neighborhood carpool.

"Okay," he said. "What's the deal? How come you showed up in the middle of the night?"

"I got lonesome," Kristina hedged. "Besides, you invited me, didn't you? You said I could come over any time I wanted."

"And I meant it." He glanced at the clock over the kitchen sink, and his jaw tightened. "I have to get to work. We'll talk about this later."

Kristina nodded, though she had no intention of explaining, *ever*, that two vampires wanted to possess his daughters. She had all day to think up some story that would bear a resemblance to the truth.

"I'll stop by the shop after practice. Around five o'clock?"

He would find out that she was liquidating her stock and getting ready to close down the business, but that was the least of her problems. In fact, she needed to hurry home to shower and put on makeup and a power suit, because two of her European colleagues were arriving that day to take their choice of her merchandise.

"Make it six, and I'll take you out to dinner. Bring the girls."

If Bree and Eliette were along, they could avoid a lot of subjects Kristina didn't want to talk about just

yet. Like why she'd showed up at their house after midnight with a wolf in tow.

Max didn't fall for it. "I think I can get Cindy from down the street to babysit," he said. "I'll see you at six."

Forget the battle, the whole war was already a lost cause. Kristina was putting herself through hell just so she could have that one special weekend in the mountains with Max before she told him it was over, and it was selfish and unfair of her to do it.

But then, she had never claimed to be perfect.

## CHAPTER 16

Two of Kristina's European colleagues were still at the shop when Max arrived that evening, at five after six. Between them, Adrian and Enrique had purchased nearly everything in the place, and the few items they hadn't claimed had been sold via telephone and fax to still other dealers. Both men had hired shipping companies, and Kristina's treasures were being bound up in bubble wrap, taped into boxes, and put into huge wooden crates with shredded paper for padding.

Adrian and Enrique oversaw the whole process, each one jealously guarding his spoil, and many things had already been taken away in trucks. Adrian's purchases would go to a small shop in Avignon, and Enrique owned an exclusive place in Toronto.

Max, who had had no idea what to expect, in that charming way of mortals, was flabbergasted to find the shop in the process of being emptied.

Adrian and Enrique paused in their noisy supervisory duties just long enough to assess the newcomer, then ignored him. He was definitely not their type.

Max was still standing just inside the door, looking stunned, when Kristina went to him, took his hand, and gently pulled him into the back room, where they could have a modicum—though not much more—of privacy.

"What in hell is going on here?" Max demanded in a loud whisper. Kristina knew he was worried, not angry.

"There are some things I need to tell you," she said. "We established that this morning. Now, are you ready to go out for pizza and some intense conversation, or shall we stay here and make sure Adrian and Enrique don't kill each other?"

Max's large, football player's shoulders rolled under his sports jacket; he might have flung out his arms if the back room hadn't been so small and so jammed with Kristina's personal belongings—the microwave, the stash of herbal teas, the mugs, the table and chairs. There was also a small desk, which held a laptop computer, a miniature printer, and her fax machine.

"There are *definitely* some things you need to tell me. How about starting right now?"

She moved close to him, slipped her arms around his waist, laid her cheek against his chest. He smelled



of a recent shower and crisp, fresh air, and she wished she could hold Max like that forever.

It was then, of all times, that she realized who he was—or more properly, who he had been, once upon a time. The knowledge nearly buckled her knees, but she wouldn't let herself fold up now. There were too many things to be done.

"I don't want to talk here," she said, blinking back tears, her forehead pressed against Max's breastbone. "Please—there's a quiet place down the street, with candlelight and soft music and tables tucked away in the shadows. Let's go there."

Max held her tightly for a moment, then took her shoulders in his hands and looked down into her eyes. "Fine," he said. "But what about those hairdresser types out there? Do you trust them?"

Kristina couldn't help smiling at Max's description of her colleagues. "They're art and antiques dealers, Max, not cat burglars. Besides, I've already put through their Gold Card numbers. Thanks to the wonders of electronics, the money for what they've bought is being transferred into my business account even as we speak."

He smiled at that, and kissed her forehead, but she knew he was still troubled. "Let's get out of here," he said. "Unlike most people, I get hungry when I'm stressed."

In the main part of the shop the circus of labeling, packing, and arguing in four languages continued. Kristina explained that she and Max were leaving, and would be back later to lock up. She didn't bother with introductions.

It was a short walk to Luigi's Ristorante, only a block or so, and the night was cold. The stars were out, but seemed somehow more distant than before, as though they had taken a step back from a doubtful Earth. Max held Kristina's hand, but neither of them spoke until they had checked Kristina's coat and taken a seat at one of the most private tables.

They chose a red wine and ordered the house specialty: a wonderful, thick-crust pizza with an astronomical calorie count, preceded by *insalata mista*— a simple mixed salad.

Max held his peace until the greens arrived. Then he stabbed a forkful of lettuce leaves and said, "All right, Kristina. What's the deal?"

"Are you asking why I showed up at your house in the middle of the night or why I'm shutting down my business?"

Max laid his fork down again, the food untouched. "Both," he said. He looked like a man who didn't want to hear the answer he himself had demanded.

"Unfortunately it wouldn't be quite accurate to start with either of those events," Kristina said, resigned. Amazingly, she found she had an appetite and began to nibble at her salad. She hoped she wasn't going to turn out to be one of those mortals who ate when they were stressed, like Max—with her circle of friends and relations, she'd double her weight in a month. "I've discovered something very interesting about myself, Max. I'm human. I mean, fully, completely, flesh-and-blood *human*."

She had expected him to be pleased, but as Kristina watched Max's reaction, she saw something peculiar in his face. Not fear, exactly. She couldn't be sure what it was she'd glimpsed, and it wasn't the right time to ask. He began to eat.

"Maybe you were always mortal and just didn't know it."

Kristina shook her head. "I had magical powers, and they're gone now. My father has performed tests—he was—*is*—a doctor, you know. There's no doubt that I've changed."

Max let out a long sigh, polished off his salad, and started on the breadsticks. "Why didn't you tell me last night?"

"It was late, and I felt bad enough about disrupting your household that way as it was. Besides, the timing wasn't right."

"Okay. Let's move on to that. What brought you to my door in the wee small hours, with Barabbas at your heels, looking as though you'd just barely outrun the devil?"

"Maybe I had," Kristina said, reaching for her wine, a rich Chianti, and taking a thoughtful sip. She set the glass aside. "I wanted to protect you and the children, and I knew I couldn't manage without my magic. So I brought Barabbas to serve as a sort of watchdog."

Max leaned forward, his second breadstick forgotten in his hand. "Protect us from what?" he pressed quietly.

Kristina was still a little wounded that he wasn't happier about her being mortal, which didn't make sense, of course, because she was going to have to tell him, very soon, that they couldn't see each other anymore. What she would *never* tell him was that Benecia and Canaan had plans to possess his children; he could do nothing to save them and would only be tormented by the knowledge that they were in danger.

And he'd hate her for bringing that peril into their lives.

"Just—things in general," she answered after a long, painful silence, during which she indulged in several more sips of wine. "I've already explained about my unfortunate connections with the supernatural underworld, Max. Please don't force me to say more, because it would serve absolutely no purpose."

Max was quiet, indulging in his own wine, though in gulps rather than sips. Finally, pale under his year-around suntan, he said, "Let's get back to the subject of your mortality for a moment. I don't give a damn about your lost magic, and it isn't your job to protect me or my family anyway, though I appreciate the effort. Does this mean that you can die, like everybody else?"

The food arrived, with exquisitely bad timing. They both sat in silence while the waiter gave them plates and forks and red-and-white-checked napkins, then cut the succulent pizza into wide sections dripping cheese.

Kristina watched Max the whole time, feeling as though she'd been struck. Maybe Max had never truly cared for her at all. Maybe he'd only wanted her because he thought she couldn't get sick or be killed in an accident. The way Sandy had been.

"Yes," she said when the solicitous waiter had finally left them alone. "I'm as vulnerable as anyone else." She tried to smile but didn't quite achieve it. "Guess I take after my father's side of the family—he was still a mere man when I was conceived."

Max waited until Kristina had taken a serving of the steaming, fragrant pizza for herself, then slid a double helping onto his own plate. He ate with his fingers, while Kristina used a fork.

"Why are you closing the shop?" he asked, after refilling both their wineglasses. She knew, though, that he was still mulling over what she'd just told him, that she wasn't going to live forever.

Kristina bit her lower lip. Lying had never come easily to her, and it was almost impossible with Max. She was already straining the limits of her abilities. "I guess I'm tired of working for a living," she said. "I don't have to, you know—I have more than enough money."

"I'd guessed that," Max replied. "That you weren't poor, I mean. But you've got to admit the decision might seem sudden to the casual onlooker."

"I'm impulsive," Kristina said with a little shrug. She hadn't meant to sound flippant, but there was so much she couldn't say. Not yet.

"Am I about to be dumped?" Another Max-ism. If you want to know something, ask. A simple concept, in theory at least, but damn hard to emulate in practice. Or so it seemed to Kristina, who felt mired in lies and omissions.

She didn't want to give up Thanksgiving dinner with a real family, or the long, delicious weekend in the snowy mountains. It was pure selfishness, and she knew it, but there it was. The rest of her life looked too long and too lonely to survive, without the comfort of these last few precious memories.

"I was wondering the same thing," Kristina said. "Whether or not you'd decided to break things off."

"I don't know," he finally replied, meeting her gaze straight on. She loved him for that, for so many things. "I love you, Kristina—I'd like nothing better than to marry you and make babies—but it scares the hell out of me, and I'm not talking about warlocks and vampires here. It's the idea that you could—that what happened with Sandy could happen all over again—"

Kristina reached out and touched his hand. "It's okay, Max," she said softly. "I understand."

He interlaced his fingers with hers and squeezed. "I'm not going to ask you what your plans are," he said hoarsely, "because I don't think I could deal with the answer right now. So let's just take things one day, *one moment* at a time, at least until after this weekend. Agreed?"

Kristina swallowed a throatful of tears. "Agreed," she said.

They ate a good deal of the pizza, and then Max walked Kristina back to the shop, where Enrique and Adrian were still packing and giving orders and arguing. Kristina gave Adrian a spare key—she had several, because of the new door—and asked him to lock up when they were finished.

Adrian kissed her on both cheeks, which made Enrique feel compelled to do the same, though he seemed a bit put out that his competitor had been the one chosen to close the shop. Max waited patiently by the door, then drove Kristina to her car, which was parked in a lot several blocks away.

"Feel like spending the night?" he asked, getting out of the Blazer to open her door for her and see her inside and properly seatbelted.

Kristina considered, then shook her head. She'd imposed enough as it was by showing up unannounced

the night before. Another appearance would probably worry Bree and Eliette, or at least confuse them. "I could send Barabbas over, though."

Max rolled his eyes. "Thanks," he said, "but no, thanks." He bent and kissed her through the open window of the driver's door. "Try not to worry so much," he said, when it was over. He'd left her dizzy, but he didn't seem to have a clue how his kisses made her feel. "There are fiends and ghouls in the world, mortal and otherwise. I wouldn't have believed the 'otherwise', if it hadn't been for you, but you reminded me of something else, Kristina. Something I'd almost completely forgotten, because I was so furious that a woman as sweet and smart and innocent as Sandy could die like that."

There were tears on Kristina's face, and she didn't try to hide them. Nor did she speak.

Max dried her cheeks, first one and then the other, with the edge of his thumb. "You made me remember how much good there is in the world. For every demon, there's an angel."

An old memory brushed Kristina's heart, like the soft, feathered wing of a passing cherubim. Once, when she was very young, Benecia Havermail had told Kristina that she was doomed, being the child of two vampires, and would surely burn in hell forever. Kristina had been terrified and had run to her governess, the unflappable Phillie, with the news that she was damned.

"Heaven bears you no ill will, child," Phillie had said, smoothing Kristina's hair with a tender motion of her hand. "While the bodies of innocents sometimes suffer, their spirits are inviolate. Do you understand what that means?"

Kristina, being seven or eight at the time, and uncommonly bright, had gotten the gist. Flesh was temporary, spirit was eternal.

She brought herself back to the here and now, heartened, but still wishing for Phillie. How reassuring it would have been to tell her troubles to her old friend, the way she had as a little girl, as a young bride, as a lonely wanderer.

"You'll be okay?" Max asked, caressing her cheek.

Kristina nodded, and as she pulled away she said a little prayer that Eliette and Bree would be guarded, with special care.

There was no word from Dathan, or from Valerian, her parents, or any of the other vampires of her acquaintance, that night. Only Barabbas greeted her, trotting over and plopping down beside the chair in her bedroom, when she sat down to read another of the ancient volumes she had borrowed from her mother.

She couldn't have said why she bothered, for even if she found a spell to protect Bree and Eliette and Max, it would be of no real use, now that her magic was gone.

She learned nothing at all in fact, and her sleep that night was crowded with dreams, all of which stayed just out of conscious reach when she awakened in the morning.

After showering, dressing, and feeding Barabbas, Kristina drove back down to the shop. Adrian had locked the place, as promised, and he and Enrique and all their little hired elves were gone.

The place was practically empty, except for those things that had still to be boxed for shipment to other dealers. Kristina could have hired the work done, of course, but she wanted to be busy, to keep her mind off Benecia Havermail's aspirations to be human and well away from the absolute necessity of breaking things off with Max. She most certainly didn't want to consider the implications of her inevitable union with the warlock, so she kept her brain as blank as she could and worked furiously until the sun had gone down and she was exhausted.

Again there were no visitations from supernatural creatures, and Kristina was boundlessly grateful. She made a simple supper, attended to Barabbas's canine needs—i.e., a walk and a bowl of kibbles—and finally settled herself in front of the family room TV. Unable to face the old letters to Phillie that still remained to be read, or the volumes that were yielding no solutions to her problems, she tuned in to the shopping channel and sat sipping herbal tea. By the end of the evening, she owned two gold bracelets and a combination grill and waffle maker.

She would figure out what to do with this largess some other time.

Morning brought some good news, however minor. Her period was over.

Kristina went through the showering, dressing, and eating ritual and, clad in jeans and a sweatshirt, returned to the shop to finish packing the last of her stock. Only a few items had not been sold; she would take those home and, like the loot from the shopping channel, dispense with them later.

By noon a delivery van had arrived, and the driver was wheeling boxes out to his truck in relays. Kristina signed the necessary papers, supplied her account number, and then stood in the near-empty shop, wanting to cry but not quite able to manage it. She'd loved building the business, but she knew it was the process of doing that that she'd truly cared about, not the establishment itself.

She wondered, with wry depression, what her duties would be as queen of the warlocks. How could there even *be* a queen of the warlocks, for pity's sake, if witches, the female of the species, were an entirely separate group? Come to that, how could there be warlocks *or* witches if the two genders hated each other too much to mate?

Kristina had decided to donate the microwave, table and chair, fax machine, etc., to a charitable group. They arrived with a truck of their own and took away the contents of the back room, the place that had been her refuge during hectic work days. She threw in the unsold antiques for good measure so she wouldn't have to carry them to her car. and then went home.

She'd been in the house approximately five minutes when Daisy called. From the electronic chopiness of the transmission, Kristina guessed that her friend was using the cell phone she carried in her fanny pack.

"You might tell a person you're closing up shop," snapped Valerian's bride, "instead of just folding your tent like some sheik and stealing silently off into the night."

Kristina smiled, even though she felt more like crying. Daisy usually had a cheering effect on her, and she hoped her upcoming, lifetime alliance with Dathan wouldn't interfere with their friendship. "Sorry," she said. "It was a sudden decision."

"Like agreeing to become Dathan's bride?" Daisy demanded between crackles. "Damn, I always forget to charge this thing. Stay where you are—I'm coming right over."

Kristina sighed, put on water for tea, and waited.

Daisy arrived within twenty minutes. Barabbas greeted her with pitiful delight, squirming at her feet like a puppy.

"You've got to take him back to your place," Kristina said. "I can't bear the guilt—I feel like the villainess in a *Lassie* movie."

Daisy shrugged out of her jacket. "Okay," she said, opening the kitchen door and cocking one thumb. "Barabbas, go home."

The wolf shot through the slim gap as though he had springs in his haunches.

Daisy closed the door. "Valerian is pretty crazy over this marriage of yours," she said. There was no judgment in the remark; it was just an observation.

"It's none of his business," Kristina replied in the same tone. The tea was ready, and she carried the pot to the family room table on a tray, along with sugar cubes, a small pitcher of milk, and two cups and saucers. The irony of the phrase "family room" struck her, and she laughed, though the sound came out sounding more like a sob.

"You're right," Daisy agreed, letting the sob pass with-commenting or commiserating. "But since when has that stopped Valerian from meddling?" She sat down across from Kristina. "I guess you gave up the shop because you'll be leaving here."

Kristina nodded, stirring sugar into her tea. "There is that. And I've been in the business of collecting and selling antiques for about seventy-five years."

"Because you loved it," Daisy pointed out. She could be implacably blunt, like Max. It was one of her most endearing, and most annoying, qualities.

"It's gone," Kristina said. "That's the bottom line."

"You own the building, don't you? Maybe you could start up again sometime. If you get bored with being queen of the warlocks." There was a twinkle in Daisy's eyes, along with a great deal of empathy. "What exactly will you do, anyway?"

Kristina shook her head. "I don't have a clue—beyond the obvious, of course."

Daisy, who had been a homicide cop in Las Vegas and consorted with all sorts of sleazeballs in her more recent career as a private investigator, actually blushed and averted her eyes. Although neither of them took the subject any further, Kristina was pretty sure they were both wondering what it would be like to have sex with a warlock.

She felt a new yearning for Max, deeper and more desperate than ever.

"Where will you live?" Daisy asked.

Kristina didn't know that, either. And since she no longer possessed magical powers, she wouldn't be able to transport herself from one place to another at will as she had done in the past. "Probably in



Transylvania," she said, trying to make the best of a bad situation by turning it into a joke. It didn't work.

"Don't," Daisy said.

At last Kristina broke down and cried. "I'm going to have one weekend with Max," she sobbed, "just one weekend. And the memories of that will have to last for the rest of my life."

Daisy lowered her head for a moment, obviously feeling Kristina's pain, bowed by it, probably imagining what it would be like to be separated from Valerian, once and for all. She tried to offer consolation. "You're mortal now. Maybe in another lifetime..."

Kristina's sobs had subsided to inelegant sniffles, but her sorrow was as great as ever. "No," she said. "I knew Max once before—he was someone else then, of course—and it just wasn't meant to be."

"Don't tell me he was that Michael character who threw you down the stairs and left your foster son in a workhouse!"

Kristina didn't need to ask how Daisy had known those things, details she had confided to no one else besides Phillie and her "guardian vampire." Valerian had told her, of course. "No," she said. "Max wasn't Michael." But she didn't offer any more information than that.

"Have some more tea," Daisy said. "Have you got any brandy? If you ask me, you could use a shot of firewater."

"No, thanks," Kristina replied. She would have liked to escape the pain, but she didn't care for the idea of dulling her senses, especially now that Barabbas was no longer there to guard her. "How's the new nanny working out? Not to mention motherhood in general?"

Changing the subject proved a good tactic. Daisy's face brightened, and the uncomfortable subjects of Dathan and Max were forgotten, at least temporarily. "She's a wonder worker—now that she's told Esteban he's safe with us, that we're not going to starve or beat him, he's doing better. He still sleeps on the floor once in a while, but he's not hiding food, and he's trying to learn English. He adores Valerian."

Kristina remembered how tenderly the legendary vampire had held the little ragged boy that night in Rio, and was touched. Ah, but it was not a simple thing, this matter of good and evil. Was Valerian, who preyed upon mortals and sustained himself on their very life's blood, a monster? What of Esteban's birth mother, who would sell her own child into an unthinkable fate? Was *she* not the true fiend, though a human heart beat within her breast and her soul might still be salvaged through grace, should she repent, however unlikely that seemed?

"To know Valerian," Kristina answered at last with a slight smile, "is to love him."

Daisy laughed. "I certainly do," she said, "but you've got to admit—it's a matter of perspective."

It was a comfort just having Daisy's company for a little while, and by the time her friend left, Kristina felt better, if a bit lonely. She built a fire, took a nap on the family room sofa, and lapsed into a dream. She couldn't remember it after she woke up, and that troubled her, for she'd been left with a sense of urgency, part terror, and part hope.

The next day was Thanksgiving.



Kristina packed a small bag for the weekend in the mountains with Max and dressed carefully in a tan cashmere skirt, high brown leather boots, and a long, ivory-colored silk sweater. When Max and the girls arrived to pick her up, she saw by the warmth in Max's eyes that she'd chosen well, and that was something of a relief, for with all her sophistication, Kristina did not know exactly what one wore to a family feast. She'd never attended one before.

Max took her bag and put it in the back of the Blazer while Bree bounced around him, babbling questions. Was Kristina taking a trip? Where was she going? Was he going along, too? Could she and Eliette go?

Eliette walked more sedately, keeping close to Kristina's side. She was usually reserved, but she'd been the one to cuddle closest the other night, when Kristina had slept over in Max's guest room and his children had joined her in bed. "Bree is just a kid," she confided to Kristina. "She doesn't know about these things."

Kristina tried not to smile. She also felt bruised inside, for she guessed that Eliette had begun to let down her guard a little, to see her as a friend. Which meant the child would be hurt again, to some degree, when Kristina and Max went their distinctly separate ways.

"What things?" she asked, casually offering her hand.

Eliette took it, after a brief hesitation. "Oh, kissing and stuff. Like you do with Daddy."

"Oh." Not a very original or profound reply, but Kristina was stumped.

Mercifully they had reached the Blazer, and Eliette pulled free and scrambled into the back beside Bree, who was already buckled in. Max helped Kristina into the passenger seat and then went around to get behind the wheel.

He was whistling softly under his breath.

"Aunt Elaine moved to Arizona," Bree chimed from her booster seat. "She broke her heart. I think she fell down."

"She didn't fall down, ninny," Eliette said. "She wanted to marry Daddy, and he said no."

Out of the corner of her eye, Kristina saw Max tense slightly, but she had to hand it to him. When he spoke, his voice was matter-of-fact. "Aunt Elaine missed your grandparents," he said. "Besides, they're getting older and they need her."

Max hadn't exactly lied; he hadn't denied that Sandy's sister, Elaine, was in love him. It was probably true that she missed her parents, and they might even need her help, if their health was poor or something like that. But he had certainly steered the conversation away from the subject of his sister-in-law.

Kristina gave him a teasing, sidelong look, to let him know she wasn't fooled.

He chuckled and shook his head.

The day was wonderful, straight out of the fantasies Kristina had cherished all her life.

Max's parents lived in a large colonial-style house, built of brick, in one of Seattle's better, though

certainly not exclusive, neighborhoods. There was a small duck pond out back, and the spacious property was fringed with fir and maple trees. A few gloriously yellow, brown, and crimson leaves still clung to the wintry branches of the maples.

The people in the living room, some gathered around a piano singing, and others in front of the fire arguing politics, looked like figures from some painting celebrating Americana. The air was filled with lovely aromas—roasting turkey, spices, scented candles, and a variety of perfumes.

Mrs. Kilcarragh came immediately to greet Max with a kiss—the girls had already shed their coats and gone running to sit on either side of the piano player, whom Kristina deduced, by the resemblance, to be Max's father.

"Kristina," Mrs. Kilcarragh said warmly, taking both Kristina's hands in hers. "It is a joy to meet you at long last. I'm Allison, and that handsome devil at the piano is the girls' grandfather. Do come in and meet our other guests."

There were an overwhelming number of people in the Kilcarragh house, but that only made it better. Kristina loved the laughter, the music, the talk, and the food, and she could not remember a happier day in all of her life.

After the meal, which was unbelievable, the men retired to watch the football game, Max included, and the women cleaned up. Kristina was thrilled to help—she had not known this particular kind of female camaraderie ever, and being part of it was an experience so sweet that it swelled her heart. Oh, to be a part of this family, to share in other celebrations, to belong.

But it wasn't to be, and all the pretending in the world wouldn't change that. Nor would she squander such a precious gift by looking ahead to a bleak future, however. Kristina kept herself firmly in the present, listening to the women's chatter.

Gweneth, Max's sister, whom she remembered from her one visit to the shop when she'd wanted to buy the brass monkey, was in charge of drying water glasses as they were washed and rinsed. Since Kristina was doing sink duty, they were in close proximity.

"I've found the world's ugliest gift for Max," Gweneth announced to the room at large, with glee and an obvious sense of accomplishment. "He'll never be able to top this."

"What?" asked one of the aunts, grinning.

"Yes, what?" echoed somebody's cousin's sister-in-law.

Gweneth's eyes twinkled as she shook her head. "I want it to be a complete surprise. Trust me, though—he will *hate* this. And the best part is, I've hidden it right under his nose."

Allison shook her head, looking less than amused. "You and Max are getting too old to play such silly games," she said. She looked around the room in general, as if seeking confirmation for her statement. "Why can't they give each other regular presents like everybody else?"

"That wouldn't be any fun," Gweneth answered.

Soon the china and silver were clean and put away, and the football game was over, and practically everybody over the age of thirty was stretched out somewhere in the big, cozy house, taking a nap.

Max found Kristina standing at a window in the dining room, watching the light change on the waters of the pond behind the house. He slipped his arms around her waist, kissed her nape, and drew her back against him gently.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

Kristina turned in his arms, looked up into his face, and smiled, even though her heart was breaking.

"Ready," she said.

## CHAPTER 17

"You have a wonderful family," Kristina said softly as she and Max drove out of the city and onto the freeway leading to Snoqualmie Pass. She had watched him say good-bye to Eliette and Bree, and had thought that Eliette clung a little at the parting, as though unwilling, even afraid, to let him go. Perhaps the child had been remembering another day, when she'd lost her mother, and very nearly her father as well.

"Thank you," Max replied, flinging her a sidelong grin. "Since I've never met your parents, I can't return the compliment, but if they made you, they have to be special."

"Special," she said, with a smile and a nod. "You missed your calling, Max Kilcarragh—you should have been a diplomat."

He laughed at that. "I wonder if my players would agree," he replied. "You might not believe it to look at me, but I'm one of those guys who paces the sidelines and shouts when things aren't going well in a game."

Kristina studied him soberly. "Do you care that much about winning?"

"I don't give a damn about it," he answered, eyes mirthful. "I just think a little yelling and an occasional dose of pressure make the kids better prepared to live in the real world. And, no, I don't use the same techniques with Bree and Eliette, if that's what you're wondering."

"I was," Kristina confessed. "It's a bit hypocritical of you, though, wouldn't you say, to shout at other people's children?"

Max smiled, flipped on his signal light, glanced into both the side and rearview mirrors, and changed lanes. "No," he replied with certainty. "The guys on my team are all at least sixteen years old. There's a big difference."

By tacit agreement, they avoided the subject of Kristina's closed shop and all it might mean. It was as if nothing existed beyond the darkest edges of the upcoming Sunday night; everything difficult, if it had a bearing on the present, would be discussed then.

"I guess you're right," Kristina conceded. "So someday when your daughters are that age, and they complain that a teacher is pressuring them—"

"I'll try to stay out of it, unless I think there's a deeper problem." The freeway was crowded with holiday travelers, and dusk had descended before they left Max's parents' house. He concentrated on his driving and did not look away from the road when he spoke again. "What about the letters? What happened after both your in-laws died so quickly?"

Leaning back against the seat and closing her eyes, Kristina sighed. Although she had been rereading the letters, she didn't need to do that to remember. It was just that the process made her feel close to Phillie, who had been her dearest and truest mortal friend except, perhaps, for Gilbert Bradford.

In a quiet voice she brought Max up-to-date from the place where he'd left off—explaining, though it was difficult, about Joseph, and the injuries she'd suffered at Michael's hand when she finally confronted him one too many times. She made very little mention of Gilbert, however, except to say that he'd sent Michael away to Australia, never to return.

"And did he?"

Kristina shook her head. "No," she said. But there was much more to the tale, and, as they drove, she began to tell it, unconsciously lapsing into the accent of her English upbringing and the formal phraseology of the time...

"After Michael had gone away, I believed I should have peace at last, but I did not. I was frantic over Joseph's passing—ironic, isn't it, that one's life can be even more horrible than so wretched a death as he suffered? But such children were common in nineteenth-century London.

"For five years I worked among the poor—I could not remarry since I was still legally Michael's wife—but in the end the hopelessness of it was simply more than I could bear. I needed a respite, but did not know what to do.

"Finally, I decided to go traveling, simply to get away. I rode elephants in Burma and climbed mountains in Peru and Africa. I was in China, perhaps eight years after I had left England, when I began having the dreams.

"They were extraordinarily vivid and always terrifying. In them I was visiting Australia—a place I would never go, as large and fascinating as it was, because I feared encountering Michael. I could not be sure I wouldn't kill him with my bare hands if I saw him again. I blamed him completely for what had happened to Joseph.

"In the nightmares I saw a debauched Michael, aged by drink and whoring and the use of opium. He was in a small courtyard, beating a woman, slapping her again and again, first with the front of his hand, then with the back. She flinched, of course, for she was smaller, but she did not cry out, nor did she attempt to defend herself. She simply glared at him with such hatred that her dark eyes glinted in the moonlight.

"At last he hurled her down into the dirt of a flower bed. She put out her hand, only to balance herself, but her fingers closed round the handle of a small gardening trowel. In that moment I became her, entered her body, took over her thoughts.

"Now I was the one clasping the trowel. And I had no compunction about striking back. I raised my hand and, with a strength born of years of hatred, drove the point of the tool straight into Michael's throat, and deep. He had not expected the attack—indeed, it had all happened very fast, in that way of dreams.

"Blood spurted from his open jugular vein, staining his shirt, his coat, the very stones of the courtyard. He put his hands to his throat, eyes bulging with horrified rage, as if to stem the flow. Of course, he could not.

"With a gurgling sound I shall remember as long as I have the capacity to recall anything at all, he slumped to the ground and perished there at my feet, and even then I felt no remorse. My hands and dress—indeed, *her* hands and dress, whoever that ill-fated woman had been—were sticky with the crimson evidence of my guilt, but I would have celebrated, rather than mourned.

"It was always the same dream, and it went on for months on end, in exactly the same manner. Each time it ended as other people rushed into the courtyard, grasping at the woman, crouching over Michael, squashing the delicate flowers under the soles of their shoes.

"About eight months had passed, I suppose, and I was in Paris, because my mother had bid me to come to that city on other business, when I happened to pick up an English newspaper left behind at a table in front of a sidewalk cafe. In it was a discreet report of Michael Bradford's murder, somewhere in New South Wales. He'd been stabbed with a garden trowel, by an unnamed woman who had subsequently been taken into custody. Before the alleged killer could be tried, however, she hanged herself in her cell.

"I was so stricken that I took to my flat for three days and would not come out for any reason. It wasn't that I spared any grief for Michael, but every time I thought of that poor woman, I was bludgeoned with guilt. Had she been blamed for a crime I had actually committed, while thinking I was merely dreaming? How else could I have known so much about Michael's death if I hadn't been there?

"Eventually I had to stop asking myself those questions, for it was pure torture, and there was no way to learn the answers. But sometimes it haunts me still, even now, when so much time has passed.

"I could not seem to stop moving about the world after that. I was always on board a steamer bound for somewhere, or a train, or rattling along in a coach. I still insisted on doing things the human way, you see, but if I'd really *been* human, I'm sure the pace I kept would have done me in. Even my parents, who can go anywhere they wish, provided the sun is not shining in that place, of course, simply by thinking of their destination, were hard put to keep up with me.

"I began to collect things on my journeys—a jade figure here, a painting or a sculpture there, but the idea of going into business did not occur to me until 1925, when I finally opened a shop in San Francisco. I had garnered some friends in that city, and the need to wander lessened, though it certainly hadn't abated.

"By the time air travel was prevalent, I was off again, though I kept the San Francisco shop for many years.

"My friends grew old and died, and that was nearly unbearable for me, being left behind over and over again. I became almost reclusive and then left California, because there were too many memories.

"Finally I settled in Seattle—I'm not sure why, beyond the fact that it's beautiful, with the water and the trees and the mountains all round. I know I had a sense of belonging that I had never really known before, in any other place on Earth, as if I had come home at last.

"I was dreadfully lonely, but careful not to make many friends. I confined my social life, such as it was, to the company of my parents, Valerian, and a few other diverting vampires.

"For want of something to do, I opened my store on Western Avenue under the name of Kristina Tremayne. When some years had passed, I went away for a while and came back as my "daughter," Kristina Bennington. Then, when enough time had gone by, I reinvented myself again, this time as Kristina Holbrook. As my uncle Aidan had done before me, I willed my assets to myself, as though I were my own descendent. Otherwise, obviously, a lot of difficult questions might have been asked.

"I grew set in my ways, over the years, as mortals and monsters alike will do. I ran my shop, made occasional buying trips, attended estate sales, and the like. I read extensively and I was excruciatingly bored. Sometimes, when the dreams of Michael's murder in the Australian courtyard threatened, I didn't sleep for weeks at a time.

"Finally I met you, and everything changed..."

She had almost said "I met you *again*," but caught herself just in time. Max had enough to deal with without adding an account of one of his past lives to the tale. There were reasons, after all, why most people did not recall earlier incarnations—good ones. The past, for mortals at least, was gone, and looking back, except to learn, was a waste of the precious present.

"It sounds like a lonely life," Max said gently. They had reached the mountain lodge where they had booked reservations the week before, and there were snowflakes dancing in front of the headlights.

"It was," Kristina replied.

"Wait here," Max said, reaching out to touch her arm. "I'll register us and get the key to our cabin."

She nodded. After so many years of doing everything by herself, for herself, it was lovely to be so thoughtfully attended. She looked forward to being alone with Max, to the privacy of the cabin, and the freedom to make love as much and as long as they wanted.

True to his word. Max returned within five minutes, climbing into the warm Blazer, tossing the huge old-fashioned key into Kristina's lap with a grin, shifting the engine into reverse. A fire had been laid in their one-room cottage, but not lit, and the air was so cold that they could see their breath.

Max crouched beside the hearth, struck a match, and got a good blaze going. Then, with a light in his eyes, he turned to Kristina, who was shivering inside her cloth coat.

"I think you need a little warming up," he said, rising.

Kristina felt a thrill go through her as he came toward her, drew her into his arms, and kissed her. It was tentative at first, that kiss, but as Max put his hands inside Kristina's coat and boldly cupped her breasts, it grew deeper and more demanding.

She had made love with this man before, of course, and known true rapture, but that first contact was a portent of something still more powerful, something rooted in eternity itself.

He stripped her of the coat, then her boots. He took off her sweater and her bra, and then, after kissing each of her taut nipples, he began unhooking her skirt. She was covered in goose bumps and at the same time approaching meltdown, so great was the heat within her.

Finally Max removed her skirt and slip and pantyhose, and she stood before him utterly naked, trembling with anticipation. The fire on the hearth was just beginning to warm the room, but a thin film of perspiration glistened on Kristina's bare flesh.

"I've been wanting to do this ever since I first laid eyes on you," he said. He was still fully dressed, except for his jacket, which he had tossed aside at some point, and now he knelt in front of Kristina like a worshiper before a goddess.

"W-What?" she whispered. Though she knew, somehow.

The cabin was dark, except for the flickering light of the fireplace, but Kristina was in a fever. She didn't know whether she had turned out the single lamp or if Max had.

"To taste you," Max answered. He caressed her belly with his fingertips, then held her hips for a moment, as though aligning her for possession. Then he began to massage her most private place, making it ready, causing it to harden in the same sweetly painful way her nipples had done earlier, at the touch of his tongue.

Kristina had nothing to hold on to, but it didn't matter, because Max was supporting her. He widened her stance a little, moved his hands to clasp her buttocks, and delved through musky silk to take her full in his mouth.

She cried out throatily, letting her head fall back, not at all certain that she could bear such pleasure.

But bear it she must, for Max would show her no quarter.

He teased her mercilessly, now suckling hard, now nibbling, now laving her with his tongue. She groaned aloud, grinding her hips without shame, desperate to be vulnerable and more vulnerable still.

Finally Max eased her back into a chair, draped her trembling legs over its arms, and consumed her in earnest. Kristina bucked under his lips and tongue, hairline and body drenched in sweat, begging him in senseless, disjointed phrases for release.

In his own sweet time he granted her appeal, but it was a brief victory. As soon as her body had ceased its violent spasms of pleasure, he proceeded to make her want him all over again. By the time Max carried Kristina to the bed, which was covered with a bright, heavy quilt, she was all but delirious and could not honestly have said whether the room was cold or warm.

She herself was burning, but the fever was an ancient one.

Max undressed at his own maddening pace, the way he did everything, but when he lay beside Kristina on the bed, and she reached out to touch him, to clasp his staff in her hand, she knew how much he wanted her. He had paid a great price to make certain that Kristina's needs were accommodated.

"I love you," she said, rolling on top of him.

"I—love—you—" The words came hoarse and splintered from his throat, for she was still holding him, her knees astraddle of his hips.

"By all rights," Kristina teased, leaning forward to nibble at his lower lip, "I ought to put you through the same exhaustive paces you put me through, but I won't. Not yet, anyway."



Max groaned. He was at her mercy now, and she was enjoying the power this benign dominance gave her. To his credit, so was he.

"There are all sorts of things I could do to you, you know," Kristina said, passing a thumb back and forth over the moist tip of his erection, guiding it slowly toward its natural sheath inside her own body. She proceeded to name a few.

Max was half out of his head with need by then. Exactly what he deserved. "Kristina—"

She took him into her, but lingered infinitely at every fraction of an inch, feeling herself tighten instinctively around him, feeling him swell and grow harder still in response. Finally, with a warrior's cry, Max grasped her hips and thrust his own upward, possessing her completely.

There was a power shift in that instant, but not to one or the other. They were true equals, Max and Kristina, as they rode the tempest into a storm of spinning lights and shattering ecstasy.

Finally Max arched high off the bed, his powerful body flexing as he emptied himself into Kristina, once, twice, three times. For her, the climax lasted even longer—she was still descending, and occasionally catching on still another orgasm, each one sweet but less intense than the last, when Max kissed her temple.

"Ummm—I think we forgot something," he said.

Kristina closed her eyes, crooned low in her throat, and then snuggled against him again. "What?" she asked.

"A condom."

"I haven't slept with anyone in a hundred years, Max," Kristina reminded him. "You?"

"Just Sandy, though it hasn't been quite that long, so you're safe with me. But what if you got pregnant?"

Kristina's eyes flew open. On the one hand, the prospect of bearing Max's child delighted her. On the other, it was terrible, because she could never marry him. She had promised herself to Dathan, and it was a vow she must keep, no matter what her own feelings in the matter might be.

"You don't suppose—?"

"Could happen," Max said. "After all, this is the standard method."

Kristina held on to him very tightly and buried her face in his chest. "Would you be angry?" she asked in a small voice.

"Angry?" The word ruffled the soft hair at her temple, which was still moist from their earlier passion. "God, no. I love kids, Kristina. And I love you."

Kristina fought hard not to cry. She was afraid Max was going to ask her to marry him, and equally afraid that he wasn't. She made a circle on his bare back with the palm of her right hand, greedy for the feel of his flesh. "I thought it made a difference—my turning out to be mortal, I mean."

"What kind of difference?"

"In how you felt about me. You admitted that part of my charm might have been the fact that I couldn't die."

"Yeah," Max said with a long, deep sigh, his arms tight around her. "I've thought a lot about that. What it all comes down to, though, is that love is a risk, plain and simple. And everybody has to die someday. I mean, everybody's human."

"Even vampires can die," Kristina said, thinking of a story her mother had once told her, about the original vampires. They'd called themselves the Brotherhood and had become blood-drinkers on the island continent of Atlantis, while participating in a scientific experiment. They had grown weary, after many thousands of years, and willed their own deaths.

Max raised himself on one elbow and looked down at her. "Really? How? Do they have to be shot with a silver bullet?"

Kristina didn't laugh, though the thought was ludicrous enough to provoke a certain grim amusement. "That's werewolves, and I don't even know if it's true, because I've never encountered one. Vampires must have blood, of course, and they can be killed by fire, by sunlight, and by having a stake driven through their hearts, just like in the movies. They have one other known vulnerability as well—the blood of warlocks is poisonous to them. Given a sufficient dose, they will slip into something resembling a coma and gradually die of starvation." She stroked his cheek, where a five o'clock shadow had sprouted. "Can't we talk about something else?"

"I'm sorry," Max said. "I should have left the subject alone." He touched the tip of her nose. "Are you hungry? Believe it or not, they have room service in this place. No doubt everything comes by dogsled."

Kristina laughed. "Hungry? After that dinner your mother served today? I may never need to eat again!"

"Well," Max said, resting on his elbows. "I'm starved."

Kristina fell back with a groan and pulled the covers over her head, and Max reached for the phone on the bedside table and called the restaurant in the lodge. She was hiding in the bathroom—up to her chin in bubbles in an old claw-foot tub actually—when his late-night snack was delivered.

He joined her, after dispensing with the food, a devilish glint shimmering in his eyes. With a growl, he flung off his robe, which came with the room, and stepped into the bath, nearly causing the water to overflow.

They made love again, there in the tub, and got the floor so wet in the process that Kristina figured the bathroom would be a skating rink by morning, if they let the fire go out.

Eliette liked staying at her grandparents' house. She enjoyed sleeping in the room that had been her daddy's once, and still had some of his things in it. She liked floating boats on the duck pond, though she and Bree weren't allowed to go near it unless an adult was with them. She especially liked all the sounds—people talking quietly in a nearby room, soft music playing somewhere, the creaks and squeaks as the old house settled itself for a winter's night. In the morning there would still be a crowd, but just like always. Grandmother and Gramps would belong only to her and Bree, for that special Friday.

They would start by going out to breakfast, just the four of them. Even Daddy wasn't invited on those outings, or Aunt Gweneth. Bree and Eliette could order anything they wanted to eat—even a chocolate sundae or a corn dog, if they chose—but they always picked scrambled eggs and orange juice and waffles.

Then, once they were all full, they would get back into Grandmother's Volvo—Gramps didn't drive anymore because he had a disease in his eyes, and every year it was harder for him to see—and drive to a big mall called South Center. There they went into practically every store, choosing presents for their daddy, for Aunt Gweneth and Aunt Elaine and their Arizona grandparents, Molly and Jim. They even bought stuff for each other, one going off to shop with Grandmother while the other went with Gramps.

They'd have lunch then—they usually went to a Mexican place close to the mall—and in the afternoon they saw a movie.

By the time they got back to the big brick house, they always had lots of packages, and Gramps always took a long nap before dinner. Grandmother ordered out, then sat down in her favorite chair and put her feet up, sipping tea and dozing a little. Bree and Eliette were usually pretty tired, too, but they were too excited to sleep. After supper, though, and their baths, they would barely get into their pajamas before they crashed.

Eliette smiled, just to think about it. It was so much fun.

She closed her eyes, willing herself to drift off. In the twin bed across from hers, Bree was sound asleep. But she was smiling, too.

Eliette snuggled down deeper in the covers. It was a cold night, and the weather man had said it might snow. That was relatively rare in Seattle, and Eliette hoped there would be such a deluge that they wouldn't have school again until after Christmas.

Fat chance.

Thinking about Christmas made her think about the awful brass monkey Aunt Gweneth had bought for Daddy at the flea market. It was already wrapped, first in bright red paper and then in that heavy brown stuff, and tucked away on a shelf in one of the cabinets in their garage. On Christmas Eve, Aunt Gweneth said, Santa Claus would bring it inside and put it under the tree.

Eliette made a face. She didn't like the monkey any more than Bree did; it was ugly, and besides, it gave her a creepy feeling. She didn't regard herself as a sneaky sort of kid, but if that doorstop thingy had been handy just then, she might have carried it out and dumped it in the duck pond.

"Kristina can't do magic anymore," Bree said from the other bed, startling Eliette. She'd been convinced her sister was asleep.

"That's okay," Eliette answered, feeling the need to put in a good word for the ordinary. "Most people can't anyway."

"Do you like her?"

Eliette considered. "Yeah. Do you?"

Bree nodded; it was a good thing Eliette was looking. Half the time the kid just assumed you could hear her shaking her head. "She's going to go away, though, so I guess I'd better not like her too much."

Eliette felt alarmed. Ever since her mom had died, she'd been trying to make herself stop needing people, but it hadn't worked very well. "What makes you say a silly thing like that?"

"An angel told me."

Eliette made a contemptuous sound. "Angels don't go around delivering messages, like Federal Express or somebody."

"Yes, they do," Bree insisted. "Grandmother told me that's what the word *angel* means—a messenger. And I saw one."

"Okay," Eliette scoffed. "When did you see this angel? And what did it look like?"

"Not *it*—she. She was pretty, like one of those dolls nobody wants you to touch. She had yellow hair and blue eyes and a ruffly dress with lots of lace trimming. I saw her the night Kristina came to stay in our guest room, when I got up to go to the bathroom."

Eliette felt a chill. Angels were scary, as far as she was concerned. "You ate too much pumpkin pie," she said. "Either that, or you've been dreaming. Or both."

"No," Bree insisted. "She was real. She told me she had a sister, too."

Eliette sighed, but she pulled the covers up to her chin at the same time. "This angel really had a lot to say, it seems to me. On top of all this, she told you Kristina was going away?"

"To marry a king," Bree said with awe and not a little sorrow.

Eliette felt sad, too. She hadn't wanted Kristina around at first, but lately she'd been counting on her staying and marrying Daddy and being their stepmother. "I don't want her to go," she said.

"Me, neither," Bree answered. "But grown-ups do what they want to."

Eliette nodded. That was certainly true enough. Some adults didn't even seem to *see* little kids; it was as though they were invisible or something. But Kristina wasn't like that—she noticed people, whether they were big or small—and if she went away, Eliette would miss her more than she cared to admit.

She was getting really tired, because it had been a long day. Thanksgiving always was, she thought. When a person got to be seven, they started to see a pattern in things like that.

"Go to sleep," she said to Bree. "We've got to get up early."

Bree yawned loudly. "I'm going to buy Kristina something really beautiful. Then, even if she marries that king, she'll remember us."

Eliette's throat felt tight. She gulped and let her eyes drift half closed. After a few moments she thought she saw a blond angel through her thick lashes, standing at the foot of the bed and smiling. She was just as Bree had described her, but in a blink she was gone.

Eliette told herself she was dreaming and soon enough, she truly was.

In the morning Max and Kristina ate a room-service breakfast in bed, made love, then got dressed and went outside into a fresh fall of snow. They made snow angels and flung balls of the stuff at each other and laughed like kids. They didn't go inside until they were breathless and so cold that their feet and hands were numb.

They made love again and then slept, warm and sated.

That evening, after having dinner in the lodge restaurant, they joined half a dozen other guests for a sleigh ride over perfect, moon-washed snow. It was a magical experience, and Kristina thought she would remember the singular music of the horses' harness bells for the rest of her life.

It was an idyllic weekend, but it went by very fast, as such interludes always do. On Sunday night they sat together on the rug in front of the fireplace in their cabin, the room still resonating faintly with the power of their love-making, like a concert hall after a great symphony has been played.

Max took Kristina's hand, and she knew the moment had arrived, that the enchantment was over, the spell broken.

He said her name, running his thumb lightly over her knuckles. Then he whispered, "Marry me."

She looked away in a useless attempt to hide the tears that burned in her eyes. She wanted nothing more than to marry Max Kilcarragh, but she dare not accept his proposal. She had already pledged her life, perhaps her very soul, to another.

Max caught her chin in his hand and made her look at him, though gently. With the pad of his thumb, he smoothed away the tears, then touched her lower lip, leaving behind the taste of salt. "Was that a 'no'?"

"I can't," Kristina whispered. It was agony to say the words, to turn down her greatest desire, her shining dream.

He let his forehead rest against hers for a moment, and his broad shoulders moved in a great sigh that broke Kristina's already fractured heart.

"Because?" Max prompted.

"Because I'm going to be Dathan's mate."

He stared at her. "*Thewarlock*?"

Kristina only nodded. There was no point in explaining.

Max pushed to his feet, abandoning her, ripping himself away. "You came here and slept with me, knowing that? That you were going straight from my bed to his?"

Kristina could not speak. She merely nodded again.

Max began gathering their things, his motions wild, furious, full of hurt, and Kristina offered no protest,

no words of consolation. There was nothing to be said.

## CHAPTER 18

Kristina and Max had left their cozy cabin at the mountain lodge far behind before either of them spoke. The atmosphere in the Blazer was thick with tension, and a fresh snowfall enclosed them in white gloom.

"Why didn't you just leave me alone in the first place?" Max ground out. He didn't look at her; understandably, he was keeping his eyes on the slippery, treacherous road.

Kristina bit her lower lip for a moment before answering. She wanted to cry—no, to sob and wail—but somehow she held onto her composure. "You make it sound as though I sought you out and deliberately led you on. I was in love with you, Max—and I always will be."

The sound he made was low and contemptuous. "And all along you intended to mate with that—*thing*."

A shiver moved down Kristina's spine, and it had nothing to do with the cold that had somehow settled in the marrow of her bones, despite the Blazer's more than adequate heating system. It was dangerous to speak of creatures like Dathan in such a desultory way, especially for Max. The warlock was already jealous of him.

"It wasn't like that at all," she said evenly. There was no way to assuage Max's pain, or her own, but she owed him some kind of explanation. Even though anything she might say would probably only serve to deepen his sense of betrayal.

The snow was blinding now, and traffic slowed to a crawl, then a full stop before Max replied. "What *was* it like, then?"

A state trooper approached the driver's side, and Max rolled down the window. Kristina held her tongue.

"Sorry, folks," the policeman told them, shivering but genial. "The pass is closed. You'll have to turn back and find a place to wait out the storm." Through the weather-fogged windshield, Kristina saw other cars making U-turns and heading in the opposite direction. Soon enough, Max and Kristina were going that way, too.

"Great," Max murmured. "Couldn't you just zap us back to Seattle or something?"

Kristina folded her arms and blinked back tears. "You know I can't," she said, shrinking into the seat.

Max reached for his cell phone and punched a single button. A moment later he was talking. "Hi, Mom—it's Max. Listen, the pass is closed, so we aren't going to make it back tonight. Will you explain to the girls? And be sure they understand that everything is okay?" There was a brief pause, then Max smiled, and the expression bruised Kristina's heart somehow because it wasn't, might never be, directed at her. "Thanks, Mom. See you."

The cordiality was gone from Max's voice and manner when he glanced at Kristina, after replacing the cell phone in its little plastic bracket on the dashboard. "I guess we're stuck with each other, for tonight at

least."

Kristina pretended to be looking out the passenger window and quickly dashed at her tears with the back of one hand. "We'll be lucky if we don't have to spend the night in the Blazer, with so many people turning back," she said, hoping he wouldn't hear the slight snuffle she hadn't been able to disguise.

They were lucky, as it turned out. Their room at the mountain lodge had not yet been rented, though the whole place was full.

Kristina sensed the fine hand of Valerian, or perhaps her mother, at work, but mental efforts to summon either of them met with resounding failure. With their help she and Max could have been, as he'd put it, "zapped" back to Seattle.

Max carried the bags back in and rebuilt the fire. The bed had not been made up, since they'd left the lodge well past check-out time.

"I meant it when I said I loved you," Kristina said, huddling inside her coat and staying very near the door, as if to bolt. It was a silly urge, she soon realized—after all, where could she go? Besides, this wasn't Michael she was dealing with, it was Max, her beloved, sensible, mentally healthy Max. No matter how angry he might be, or how hurt, she had nothing to fear from him.

He turned from the hearth and rose, shedding his ski jacket and tossing it aside. "Call it off, Kristina," he said, his dark gaze holding hers. "If you mean what you say, then tell the warlock there won't be a wedding."

Kristina flushed. "I can't," she said, wishing with everything inside her, everything she was and would ever be, that she could. "I promised."

*"Break your promise."*

She shook her head. She could not tell him, even now, why she had made her heinous bargain with Dathan—to save Eliette and Bree from possession. That was worth whatever she might have to suffer in consequence of the pact and, as much as she longed to be free to marry Max instead, she hoped with all her soul that the warlock would succeed.

"At least tell me why," Max said. He went to the service bar and rummaged for a beer and a diet cola.

At last Kristina removed her coat and crossed the room to accept the can of soda, which Max knew she preferred over every beverage except water and herbal tea.

"You were right," Kristina conceded miserably, "when you said I should never have let things get started between us in the first place. I can't begin to explain the kind of danger I've put you in, not to mention your children. I'm doing this to protect you, Max, all of you—and that's all I can or will say about it."

He sighed and shoved his free hand through his hair. "Doesn't it matter that we love each other?"

She sat down in one of the chairs near the hearth, still feeling chilled, and Max perched on the arm. "Of course it matters. It's the whole reason we have to say good-bye." Kristina raised her eyes to his face. There was one thing she had to tell him, even though he probably wouldn't believe her. "We were in love once before," she said very softly. "A long time ago. It was a star-crossed match, just like now."



Max's brow furrowed into a frown. The hurt was still plainly visible in his eyes, but he was calmer than before. "I think I'd remember that," he said, sounding bewildered.

Kristina smiled, though her heart was breaking, falling apart bit by fragile, splintered bit. "Not necessarily. Your name wasn't Max Kilcarragh then—it was Gilbert Bradford. You were the Duke of Cheltingham, Michael's elder brother."

Max's eyes narrowed. "Reincarnation?"

"Sort of. It's really more complicated than that. Time is not linear, so human beings actually exist in all their various incarnations at once. They're usually not aware of it, of course."

Max set the beer aside. "I was—am—Gilbert? The good guy?"

Kristina laughed. "Yes. And probably a lot of other people, too."

He frowned. "Is this what Albert Einstein was talking about with his theory of relativity?"

"In a way," she agreed.

Max was silent, absorbing it all.

Kristina took a sip of her diet cola, wishing it were something stronger, a potion capable of quelling the terrible heartbreak she felt. "It would seem," she said carefully, "that we simply aren't destined to be together." The next part was one of the most difficult things she had ever had to say. "Very likely, Sandy is your true mate, for all of time."

Max rose suddenly from his seat on the arm of the chair and went to stand on the hearth, his broad back to Kristina, his hands braced, wide apart, against the mantelpiece. "I loved her very much," he said at great length, in a voice so low and hoarse that Kristina could barely hear him. Then he turned and looked deep into her eyes. "But I love you, too. And even though I don't remember being Gilbert Bradford, I know from the letters you showed me that he felt something similar to what I'm feeling now." He paused to draw a long, ragged breath and once again pushed his fingers through his hair. "I don't understand about eternity—I'm an ordinary man, Kristina. All I know is what I want this moment, *in this* lifetime. And that's to marry you."

Kristina looked down at her hands, which were knotted painfully in her lap. She tried to relax her clenched fingers. "That's what I want, too," she admitted. "But we can't be together, Max. It's impossible, and the sooner we accept that, the better off we'll be."

Even as she spoke the words, she knew she would never be able to accept losing Max, never get over this particular farewell. She dared not think beyond the moment when they would part, once and for all.

He came to her then, drew her up out of the chair and into his embrace. He held her close, and they wept together in silence, while outside the little cabin the snow continued to fall.

In a cabinet inside Max's garage, the package stirred. Brown paper fell away, followed by the festive Christmas wrap beneath. The thing quivered, grew hot enough to singe the paper, and toppled out onto the concrete floor with a metallic crash.

It rolled a little way, and then, in a mere flicker of time, Kristina's spell was broken. Billy Lasser, boy criminal, came back to life.

He was only eighteen years old, but in the course of his brief existence, he'd pulled off more than his share of convenience-store heists, muggings, and rapes. Once he'd even done murder, if that was what you wanted to call it, killing a whore down on the Sea-Tac strip and dumping her off out by the Green River.

Billy smiled, remembering his cleverness. No doubt about it, the cops would have chalked that one up to a certain serial killer they'd been tracking for as long as he could remember.

But his pleasure quickly faded, replaced by rage. He had another score to settle, with that weird chick who'd turned him into a goddamn monkey. Billy wasn't overly bright, and it didn't occur to him that messing with somebody who could do stuff like that might not be a good idea. He knew two things: that he was hungry and that he was pissed off.

He looked around, his eyes adjusting to the darkness, and realized more from the smells than anything that he was in somebody's garage. Maybe if he broke into the house he'd find that bitch who'd locked him up inside a hunk of metal and make her wish she'd never been born.

After he'd had a sandwich and maybe some beer, if there was any.

Billy tried the inside door and found it locked, but that hardly slowed him down. The light switch was right there handy, and he turned it on. There was a toolbox on a workbench nearby; he took a screwdriver, and in no time he was inside.

He paused, waiting, listening. The place was empty; he'd have bet on that. There was no dog and probably no alarm system.

Billy flicked on the kitchen lights and went straight to the refrigerator. There was plenty to eat—he stuffed two packages of lunch meat down his throat without bothering to find the bread, then guzzled two beers in a row before taking a third one to sip as he went through the house.

He figured out right away that the bitch didn't live here, but he found some cash in a cookie jar on top of the fridge and stuffed that into the pocket of his jeans.

Billy checked out the upstairs, reckless with relief that he was finally free, and high on the beers he'd downed so fast. Two little girls shared one room, and one was obviously reserved for company. The third belonged to a man, judging by the clothes in the closets and bureaus. No mommy in this family.

What a pity, Billy thought.

He went downstairs, feeling a little less reckless now that the food was getting into his system, and tried to figure out what to do next. It was cold outside, and all he had was his fake leather jacket, bought at a swap meet a couple of years before.

He helped himself to a beat-up down-filled coat he found in a closet by the front door and pulled it on. It didn't fit, hung clear to his knees in fact, but Billy didn't care. It would keep the chill off.

It was snowing, and Billy walked a long way before he finally managed to catch a bus headed

downtown. The weather in Seattle was usually mild, and when they got a little white stuff, the whole place freaked out.

The bus driver gave him a look, and Billy barely suppressed an urge to strangle the bastard then and there. Instead, he brought out some of the money he'd lifted from the big man's cookie jar and paid the fare.

The shop on Western Avenue was closed, of course, since it was late. Billy let himself in through the back door, a little disappointed to find that it wasn't even locked. A few seconds later he knew why—the place was empty to the walls—and now he was even more pissed than before.

He paced the darkened shop restlessly, barely able to contain his agitation. Nobody—*nobody*—was going to get away with treating him the way that woman had. What was her name?

He'd been able to hear things, once in a while, since he'd sat, helpless, for weeks, maybe even months, in this prissy-assed store, though most of that time he'd just sort of drifted, as if he'd been high on top-grade stuff.

He thought hard.

Kristina, he recalled at long last. Kristina Holbrook.

Billy went out the same way he'd come in, hurried through the bone-chilling cold to the nearest phone booth, and shut himself in. Sure as hell, the stupid slut was right there in the book, big as life, along with her fancy address.

It was almost too fucking easy, Billy thought, but he was grinning as he left the booth. Feeling triumphant, he hailed a cab.

The driver bitched about the snow all the way, and that was good, as far as Billy was concerned. Kept the guy from wondering what business a hood like him would have in such a ritzy area of the city. Not that it mattered, Billy reflected smugly, what some dumb-ass cabbie thought about anything.

Her house was big and expensive-looking.

It was also dark.

Billy blessed his continued good luck as he paid the cabbie with cookie-jar money, crossed the sidewalk, opened the front gate, and walked up to the door. He was running on attitude now, and adrenaline.

The cab pulled away, its taillights glowing red through the heavy white flakes.

Billy sprinted around the side of the house to the back, where he broke in through a basement window. The lots were big in this part of town, and the neighbors wouldn't have heard the glass breaking anyway, he figured, because the snow was still coming down thick and fast. Billy was no weatherman, but he knew from TV that snow muffled sound.

He crawled through the space and found himself in a pretty standard basement.

It was dark as hell, but he couldn't risk turning on any lights, not yet, so he just stood there, waiting and

breathing hard, until his vision had adjusted again.

Then he made his way to the cellar stairs.

No big surprise: They opened onto a kitchen.

Billy found a flashlight in one of the drawers—he'd burgled a lot of houses in his time, and they'd all had a little cubbyhole where things like that were stashed, along with a lot of assorted junk.

After pausing once more to listen, Billy switched on the flashlight and, keeping the beam pointed low so there was less chance of it showing at one of the windows, he began to explore the home of the woman he meant to punish.

He went upstairs first, found her bedroom, touched the perfume bottles on her vanity table, and fingered the jewelry lying in a pricey, Chinese-looking box on one of the dressers. These rich bitches, they didn't even care enough about nice things to take care of them right. Just left them laying around, waiting to be stolen.

Billy dangled a strand of pink pearls from one index finger. They were real all right, and old. They glowed, even in the darkness, as though there was moonlight inside them. His ma would have given anything, including him, probably, to own a necklace like that.

Not that his old man woulda let her keep it very long. Thing like that you could pawn for serious change.

Billy dropped the pearls into his pocket. He'd check out the other jewelry later, after he'd made himself at home for a while, after he'd had revenge on *Ms* . Holbrook. When she got home from wherever she was, she'd find a big surprise waiting for her.

He grinned at the thought and opened drawers until he found her nightgowns and underwear. Silk, all of it. A single pair of her panties probably cost more than everything he had on, even when it was new.

His grin faded, though his fingers worked the smooth silk back and forth. It wasn't fair that some people had so much, while guys like him got squat.

He'd make her pay, he thought, and felt better. Lots better.

Billy put the panties back and scooped an armload of nightgowns out of the drawer. Then, carefully, still with only the fading beam of the flashlight to guide him, he began laying the costly garments out on the bed, one by one, tracing the lace edgings with his fingertips, running his hands over the cloth. It felt as fine as a butterfly's wing.

God, he thought, he was getting to be a regular poet.

It took a long time to pick out which gown he wanted the bitch to wear when he took her, but he finally chose a little thigh-length number the same pink color as cotton candy, with ivory trim. Hedraped it over the back of a chair for later.

Then, very neatly, taking his time, he refolded all the other garments and put them back in place. After that, he went back downstairs, found a roll of duct tape, scissors, and fresh batteries for the flashlight, all in the same junk drawer he'd raided before.

Finally Billy Lasser stretched out on Kristina Bitch Holbrook's satin bedspread, hands cupped behind his head, booted feet crossed at the ankles, and waited for her to come home. He drifted off to sleep with a smile on his face, dreaming of sweet, sweet revenge.

Max and Kristina spent the whole night making love. Their couplings were poignant, frantic, even greedy, for both of them believed that this would, indeed, be their last night together.

In the morning they awakened to find that the snow had stopped. According to the weatherman on TV, the pass was clear again, and traffic was moving at a steady rate in both directions.

Resigned, Kristina and Max showered, had breakfast in the lodge's restaurant, and set out for Seattle. Max was already running late, and although he'd called the school office from the cell phone that morning to explain his absence, he was anxious to get to work.

Or did he just want to get away from Kristina?

They stopped at her house first, of course, and Max walked her to the door, waiting while she let herself in. The pain in his eyes was so intense, such a clear reflection of what she herself felt, that Kristina could barely look at him.

"Do you want me to come inside and have a look around?" he asked.

Kristina's heart might have been in agony, but her brain was numb. She shook her head. "It's okay," she murmured.

Max touched her cheek with the backs of curled fingers. "Shall I call later?"

"It would be better if you didn't," she answered.

He nodded, leaned forward to kiss her forehead briefly, then turned and walked away. Kristina watched him until he'd gotten into the Blazer and driven off, longing to run after him, convince him that somehow everything could be all right. But that was a lie, and they both knew it.

Thoroughly weary, Kristina went into the kitchen and put on a pot of coffee. It was a paradoxical thing to do, considering how badly she needed sleep, but nothing about Kristina's life made much sense at that moment. She was too soul-weary to sort things out in any reasonable fashion.

If she slept, she would dream. If she stayed awake, she would think of nothing but Max, and how she'd lost him forever.

She couldn't win.

She dialed Daisy's number at home and got the new Brazilian nanny. Ms. Chandler, the woman told her pleasantly, was on a case at the moment, but Kristina's message would be relayed.

Kristina sighed and hung up, feeling utterly alone.

It was only when she'd poured her coffee and climbed the stairs that she realized she was not alone. There was a faint, strange scent in the air, something dangerous. And things seemed disturbed, out of

place, though this last was strictly a subjective matter, a fact discerned in her gut rather than her head.

She paused, almost on the threshold of her room, the hairs on her nape standing upright. Some of the coffee splashed over her hand, burning her, but she barely noticed the resultant sting.

Her visitor could not be Benecia or Canaan—they were vampires and thus asleep in their lairs. Dathan, though fully capable of being abroad in the daylight, liked to make flamboyant entrances, a la Valerian.

Who, then... ?

Kristina closed her eyes for a moment and swallowed hard.

Of course. It was only her housekeeper, Mrs. Prine, back at last from her vacation.

Kristina stepped into her room and stood frozen in place, staring into the grinning face of the young man she had turned into a doorstep months before. He was lying on her bed, cleaning his fingernails with the point of her antique letter opener.

He gestured toward the chair, and she saw one of her silk nightgowns there, laid out for her. A shiver went down her spine.

"Put that on, baby," he said. "Billy-boy wants to see you in it."

Kristina's response was two words long and most unladylike.

"That's kinda what I had in mind," Billy answered, sitting up. She'd have to burn her white satin bedspread after he'd lain on it, with his filthy clothes and greasy hair. "Only it ain't gonna be good for you, honey. Just me."

"No," Kristina said flatly. If her life was to end in this room, at the hands of this awful man, that was that. But she wasn't about to cooperate in any way, and she would die fighting.

"Come here," he said.

She did, but only to fling the scalding hot coffee into his face.

Billy was screaming in fury and pain when she turned, an instant after the deed, and bolted for the rear stairway.

She was halfway across the family room, headed for the side door that led out onto the deck, when he caught up to her, grasping a handful of her hair and wrenching her back against him. Bile rushed into her mouth, and the pain in her scalp was blinding.

Billy intensified it by giving her a little shake. She caught her breath; nearly fainted.

"Let me go," Kristina said, forcing herself to speak calmly, "or I'll turn you into a toad."

Billy laughed. "I figure you would have done something like that already, if you could. What's the matter, little witchy-bitch? Have you lost your magic somewhere?"

Tears of fury and frustration filled Kristina's eyes. She didn't want to become the warlock's bride, but

neither did she want to die.

*Dathan*, she thought desperately. *Help me* .

Billy tightened his hold on her hair, nearly pulling it out by the roots. "Answer me," he said.

Kristina spat another ungracious invective and tried to stomp on his instep.

He hurled her back toward the stairway, and she landed on the steps, bumping one shoulder hard. "I've got plans for you," Billy said with a leer that made her stomach roll again. She hated being so defenseless, and yet she was glad she'd turned down Max's offer to check the house for her before he left. Max was much bigger and stronger than Billy, not to mention brighter, but the little creep might have gotten the jump on him somehow. There was no question in Kristina's mind that Billy was armed.

She gave him a look of contempt and got to her feet slowly, using the wall for support. She was breathless with fear, on the verge of vomiting, but she wasn't going to let this little weasel know it.

"I'm afraid you're just going to have to cancel your plans," she said.

He produced a .38-caliber pistol from the waistband at the back of his jeans. Kristina recognized the weapon from the night he'd tried to rob her shop and wished she'd made him eat it. The idea had occurred to her at the time, but she'd dismissed it as gauche.

"No, ma'am," Billy answered, brandishing the .38. "We've got business to attend to. It's going to hurt, it's going to take a long time, and face it, baby doll, it's going to happen." He was standing by then, with his back to the window over the kitchen sink, leaning indolently against the counter. "First, you're going to take off all your clothes, then I'm going to look at you for a while. Have a little fun, maybe. Then you're going to put on that silky thing—"

Kristina's gaze was caught by something at the window—a flash of white—and then suddenly the glass splintered in a thousand directions, and Barabbas came through the chasm, all sleek, glorious, snarling wolf. Billy shrieked as the animal landed on him from behind, catching him by the nape and shaking him as though he were no heavier than a rat.

Wide-eyed, both paralyzed and speechless with shock, Kristina simply stood there, unable to believe what she was seeing.

There was blood and glass everywhere, and after an indeterminate length of time, Billy stopped screaming. Barabbas flung him aside and trotted over to Kristina, as docile as a lapdog, nuzzling her thigh with a bloody muzzle.

Sobbing, she dropped to her knees and flung both arms around Barabbas, burying her face in his lush fur. Billy lay still a little distance away, and Kristina knew without touching him that he was dead. She clung to the wolf, who sat patiently, and waited.

Kristina knew she should call the police, but she couldn't move, and her mind was doing peculiar things. One moment she would be cognizant, then she'd drift off into a dream. The hands of the clock over the stove had advanced significantly every time she looked at them, and finally the quality of the light began to change and soften. Gold became lavender, and then charcoal, then black. A cold wind blew in through the broken window over the sink, bringing flakes of snow with it.



That was how Valerian found them when he arrived only moments after sunset, woman, wolf, and dead man.

Muttering an expletive, Valerian rushed to Kristina and drew her into his arms. "What happened?" he demanded, and Kristina felt him trembling.

"The—the brass monkey—" she managed to grind out. "He was here—Barabbas broke the window—I think he's dead."

Valerian carried Kristina into the family room as tenderly as if she were a fragile child and laid her on the sofa. After covering her with his cloak, he rummaged through the liquor cabinet until he found a bottle of Grand Marnier. After pouring her a double dose and ordering her to drink it immediately, the vampire returned to the kitchen.

She heard him speak softly to the wolf, but Valerian spared no word for the man whose blood covered the floor and cabinets.

"He's dead all right," he said flatly upon returning to the family room.

Barabbas followed, and Kristina noticed that the blood that had stained his coat and muzzle was gone. No doubt the kitchen had been Valerianized as well; the body had probably vanished already, along with all traces of the killing. This was not a matter any of them would want to explain to the police.

"Please don't say 'I told you so,' " Kristina whispered, recalling how many times Valerian had warned her to use her magic with caution.

He smiled and drew up a chair. "I won't. Not until you're over the worst of it, anyway."

"Did you—is he—?"

"Yes, darling," Valerian said gently. "He's gone. And this time it will be forever."

Kristina was almost sick with relief. She held out a hand to Barabbas, and he came to her, licking her fingers affectionately. "Thank you, my friend," she told the animal. "I don't know how you knew I needed you, but your timing couldn't have been better."

Barabbas made a whimpering sound and sank to his haunches.

"And thank you," she added, turning her gaze to Valerian.

He blew her a kiss. "Don't mention it. By the way, the Dimity-Gideon crisis has been resolved somewhat."

Sipping her Grand Marnier, Kristina was beginning to feel calmer. "Really? How?"

"I'll leave that tale for your mother to tell, since it was mostly her doing. She'll be along shortly, I should guess. By now she's probably sensed that you've had a near miss and are something the worse for wear." He glanced at his watch, another affectation, or perhaps just a habit since, like all vampires, he always knew the time. "I must feed," he said. "Unless you need me to hold your hand until Maeve arrives, I'll send Barabbas home and take my leave."

"I'll be all right," Kristina said, and she knew it was true, despite all her problems.

Valerian vanished, after planting a light kiss on the top of her head, without reclaiming his cloak. He hadn't been gone more than a moment when the telephone rang.

Kristina reached for the receiver of the cordless phone, which was lying on the lamp table at the end of the couch. "Hello?"

"Kristina?" The voice on the other end of the line was Max's, and even though he'd only spoken a single word, her name, she knew he was in a terrible state. "Oh, God, Kristina—I need your help. Bree and Eliette are missing!"

## CHAPTER 19

Max's children were gone.

Kristina's personal ordeal was forgotten in the face of all that might mean. "What happened?" she whispered into the receiver, one hand raised to her throat. She held her breath, waiting for the answer, and could see Max shove a hand through his hair as clearly as if she'd been standing in the same room with him.

"I picked them up from my parents' house after work," he said evenly. Kristina knew what a supreme effort it was for him to remain calm. "They were playing in their room. I phoned for a pizza, and when it was delivered, I called to the kids to come down to supper. They didn't, so I went up to look for them. They were gone—nowhere in the house."

Kristina closed her eyes, agonized. "Have you called the police?"

"Of course," Max answered. He couldn't be faulted for snapping a bit; he must have been frantic with fear. Kristina certainly was, and Bree and Eliette weren't even her children. "They're sending somebody over," he finished, less abruptly.

"What did they say on the phone—the police, I mean?"

Max let out a long sigh, and in it Kristina heard frustration as well as terror. "That the girls are probably at a neighbor's house or hiding somewhere. They asked if I was divorced—I guess the non-custodial parent is usually the culprit."

Kristina bit her lower lip. She felt a fluttering motion at her side and was relieved to see Dathan standing there, his brow furrowed as he eavesdropped.

"I'll do whatever I can to help, Max. This is my fault."

"We can argue about whose fault it is later," he replied. "Just get over here, *please*—if I don't find my kids, I don't know what I'll do."

"I'm going to find Bree and Eliette," Kristina answered, meeting the warlock's steady gaze.

"But your magic—"

"I have somebody to help me," she said gently. "We'll resolve this as soon as we can, Max—I promise. Just try not to panic."

Without speaking a word, Dathan took Kristina's free hand while she hung up the receiver with the other.

"Benecia and Canaan, I think," Kristina said, answering Dathan's unasked question. "God, I hope it's not already too late!"

Dathan tightened his hold on Kristina, and together they vanished.

Kristina was breathless when, only moments later, they reassembled.

She had expected a cavern far beneath the earth, like the one in the stories Valerian and Maeve had told her about the Brotherhood, the lost forefathers of all vampires. Or the inside of some elaborate tomb. Instead they were in a sunlit garden next to a cottage with a thatched roof and painted wooden shutters.

Kristina glanced nervously at her future mate, confused. "Benecia and Canaan are here? But the light—"

"An illusion, all of it," the warlock said. "And quite probably a trap."

Benecia appeared in the open doorway of the charming cottage, a beatific smile on her face. "So," she chimed, "you've come at last." She was looking at Dathan, not Kristina, who might have been invisible for all the notice the vampire gave her.

"Yes," he replied, his tone absolutely expressionless. "Where are the Kilcarragh children?"

Benecia gestured. "They're inside. We're having a tea party. Do come in and join us."

Kristina started toward the door, desperate to reach Bree and Eliette, gather them in her arms, protect and reassure them. Dathan stopped her by extending an arm, and though he said nothing, the sidelong glance he gave her was a stern one.

He bowed at the waist—this grand gesture was, of course, directed at Benecia—and then walked toward the fairy-tale house and his hideous little hostess.

"You've certainly taken your time to come courting," Benecia said, pouting prettily. "Canaan said nothing would entice you, but I knew she was wrong."

"You must allow me to serve the tea in order to make up for being remiss," Dathan said smoothly. His smile and manner were charming now; he would have made a fine actor.

Benecia's cornflower gaze found and acknowledged Kristina at last and lingered maliciously. "Why *is she* here?"

"She wants the Kilcarragh children," Dathan answered, standing close to the small vampire now, casting back a warning glance at Kristina. "That is the bargain, isn't it, my sweet? I take you to wife, and you give us the little girls, unharmed."

"How do I know you'll keep your word?"

"You don't. That is one of the perils of entering into an affair of the heart." He took her doll-like hand, bent, and kissed the knuckles. "No more arguments, my darling. We shall drink a toast to our future together." With an elegant motion of one wrist, he conjured a golden goblet, probably medieval, studded with emeralds and rubies, diamonds and amethysts. It glittered in the false sunlight.

Kristina did not want to obey Dathan's unspoken edict that she stay where she was; every instinct compelled her to storm the bastions, to collect Bree and Eliette, to see for herself that they were all right.

Max's children, the children of her own heart. But she dared not move or speak.

Benecia stepped daintily into the cottage, and Dathan followed.

Kristina waited in anguish for something, anything, to happen.

All that came from inside the cottage was an eerie silence.

Then Bree and Eliette stepped out, holding hands and seemingly unharmed, although they appeared to be sleepwalking. They looked blindly in Kristina's direction, plainly not seeing her.

All the same Kristina held her arms out, and they came to her, slowly, and with bewilderment, still entranced. She sank to her knees in the sweet, imaginary grass and gathered them close, terrified that it was too late, that Benecia and Canaan had already done irreparable damage, had begun the process of possession.

Kristina clutched the speechless children more tightly, weeping now. She would never, never forgive herself if they did not recover. If their souls had been stolen, the blame was hers to bear, for all of time and eternity.

The scene around them was chillingly idyllic, almost cartoonlike, with twittering birds, a fresh breeze, apple trees blossoming pink and white in a nearby orchard. A butterfly with kaleidoscope wings fluttered past, and the sky was china blue and cloudless.

A perfect spring day in a place that did not exist.

"Bree? Eliette?" Kristina spoke softly to the little girls, holding one in the curve of each arm. They were wearing jeans, T-shirts, and sneakers—their after-school clothes, no doubt. Their eyes were absolutely blank, and although they did not resist Kristina's embrace, they didn't cling to her, either.

Suddenly a terrible shriek pierced the air, coming from inside the cottage. It was immediately followed by another. Then, silence again, more frightening in some peculiar way than the screams had been.

Kristina stiffened, but if either Bree or Eliette had heard, they gave no sign of it, but simply stood unmoving against her sides, staring at nothing.

Dathan came outside again, pausing to close the door tidily behind him. His smile bordered on cocky as he met Kristina's gaze; he dusted his hands together, in the time-honored gesture of a job not only completed, but well done. And despite the profound relief she felt, there was also remorse.

He had destroyed Benecia and Canaan, as promised, and that had been a service to mortals and

monsters alike. All the same, they had once been *children*, those horrid little beasts; it was a matter for sorrow, their perishing, though in all truth they'd died long ago.

The warlock came to stand over Kristina, gesturing with one graceful hand toward the cottage. There was no sign of the jeweled chalice he had produced at the doorstep, before stepping inside to work his cruel mercies.

"Go and see for yourself. Kristina. The vow I made to you is now kept."

Kristina did not want to see, did not want to leave Bree and Eliette for even a moment, but she knew she must go and look upon her dead enemies with her own eyes. If she did not, she would wonder, through all that might remain of her life, if they were truly gone.

Kristina nodded and got to her feet.

"Bree and Eliette—?"

Dathan looked fondly upon Max's children. "They believe they are dreaming."

"They won't remember?"

He sighed. "Subconsciously they will know that something weird happened to them. With proper love and care, however, they'll overcome any remaining trauma. The loss of their mother was far worse."

Kristina's eyes filled as she looked down at these two precious, innocent children. They'd been through so much in their short lives, and she was sick with the knowledge that they would never have encountered Benecia and Canaan, if not for her.

Once again, Dathan read Kristina's thoughts. "You saved them," he said gently. His hand rested lightly on the small of her back, urging her toward the cottage, which was even then shifting, blurring at the edges. "Bree and Eliette will be safe with me. Go inside, Kristina. Let it be over at long last."

She walked reluctantly forward, through the swinging gate, up the walk, onto the step. After drawing a deep breath and releasing it very slowly, Kristina pushed open the door and stepped inside.

The cottage was furnished like a playhouse, with everything to scale. A table had been set with miniature china dishes and a silver tea service. Benecia and Canaan, ludicrous shapes of pulp and powdery ash, slumped in two of the four tiny chairs.

Dathan's chalice stood between them, with one drop of shimmering warlock's blood still glistening on the brim. It seemed unlikely, given their great age, that they had been tricked into drinking what was, for a vampire, the most potent hemlock. No, Kristina thought sadly, they'd known what they were doing.

Benecia had wanted, even yearned for, oblivion and peace.

Canaan had no doubt followed her sister into the darkness voluntarily, preferring death to eternal solitude.

Kristina turned and left the cottage.

Dathan, Bree, and Eliette waited in the dooryard. The great warlock held one child in each arm, their

heads resting upon his shoulders, sound asleep. For a moment Kristina was reminded of Valerian and the vast tenderness he showed for his adopted son, Esteban.

"Stand very close," Dathan said, his eyes soft and somehow sad as he surveyed Kristina.

She nodded and stood with her chest pressed to his, her arms around his neck.

In an instant they were all in Max's house, in the room Bree and Eliette shared.

Dathan stood behind Kristina, holding her in a loose embrace, and she knew he had somehow rendered them both invisible.

Bree and Eliette, meanwhile, were suddenly animated again, sitting on the floor between their two beds, as if nothing had happened, putting two Barbie dolls through a spirited argument.

"Hey!" Max yelled from downstairs. "The pizza's here. And don't forget to wash your hands!"

With shrieks of pure joy, Bree and Eliette abandoned the dolls and bounded out of the room. A tear slipped down Kristina's cheek as she listened to their footsteps on the rear stairway.

"You turned the clock back an hour or so," Kristina said, turning to look up into the splendid face of the warlock. How she wished she could love him, but it was Max she cared for, and Max alone.

Dathan shrugged. "I thought it would be better this way."

She nodded. "Thank you, Dathan," she whispered.

He laid his hands to her shoulders and kissed her, ever so lightly, on the lips. Then, in the next breath, she found herself standing in the middle of her own family room in Seattle. There was no sign of the warlock.

The telephone rang again, suddenly, shrilly, startling Kristina out of her daze. Her hand trembled as she reached for the receiver.

"Hi," Max said.

Kristina held her breath, and her heart swelled like an overfilled balloon, ready to burst. "Hi," she replied.

"Look, I know you and I didn't exactly part on the best of terms this morning—"

Kristina closed her eyes, even more grateful than before for Dathan's magic. The kidnapping hadn't happened, as far as Max and the girls were concerned, and he need never know about her encounter with Billy Lasser. "It's okay," she said. They'd made love over and over the night before, at the mountain cabin, and that would sustain her. "Saying good-bye is never easy."

"No." His voice was gruff. Kristina loved him so much that she very nearly couldn't bear it. "We've got a lot of pizza over here," he said. "How about joining us for supper?"

Kristina was an emotional wreck, after all she'd been through, and as much as she loved Max and the children, she needed to eat something, take a hot bath, crawl into bed, and sleep. She simply could not

spend an evening with the three people she considered to be her family, knowing she was fated to spend the rest of her life as Dathan's mate.

"I can't, Max," she said softly. "Please understand."

"I do," he replied, just as softly. There was no sarcasm in his voice.

She sighed and pushed a hand through her hair, the way she'd seen Max do a hundred times. "There are a couple of things I need to say," she told him. "I love you. And you don't have to worry anymore, because you and the girls are safe."

"Kristina—"

"That's the end of it, Max," she broke in, her eyes burning again. "Good-bye." With that, she hung up.

The phone rang again immediately, but she ignored the sound until it stopped.

It was the middle of the night when Kristina awakened, sensing that someone was standing at the foot of her bed. She opened her eyes, mildly alarmed, to find her mother there, looking like a vision in her flowing gown and cascading ebony hair.

Maeve smiled. "Hello, darling," she said.

Kristina sat up. "Is everything all right?"

"I came to ask you the same question. Valerian told me about the incident with that brass monkey of yours."

Kristina shivered at the memory. "Fortunately that's over. Thanks to Barabbas." She remembered something else Valerian had said. "I hear Dimity and Gideon have been found."

Maeve took a seat on the edge of Kristina's bed, smoothed her hair back from her forehead with a gentle motion of one cool hand, the way she'd done when Kristina was small. "After a fashion, yes," she said. "Dimity found her way into a parallel dimension, where she can live as a woman instead of a vampire."

Kristina thought, with some unhappiness, of Benecia, who had wanted to do that, too. "And Gideon?"

"An angel is, and must always be, an angel. He tried to follow her, but he could not, and he is inconsolable."

"He loved Dimity very much," said Kristina, who had heard the stories as a child. Too, she knew what it was to care so deeply for someone forbidden.

"It is denied to angels, that sort of love," Maeve said firmly. "Don't worry. Gideon will be fine in time, and Dimity is happy where she is."

"And Nemesis? What is his state of mind?"



Maeve looked grim for a moment. "He is furious, but since all the blame cannot be laid at Dimity's feet, and thus put upon all vampires, he has withdrawn his armies."

"He had *assembled armies*?" Kristina whispered. "Are you saying that we—that all of us—were on the brink of Armageddon?"

"Yes," Maeve answered without hesitation. "But that danger—though it will inevitably come again—is past. You will become Dathan's mate, now that he has lived up to his part of the agreement?"

Kristina nodded. "I have no choice. And *I am* grateful for what he did."

"Gratitude is a poor basis for such a union," Maeve said.

"Yes," Kristina agreed. "But I don't have any alternatives."

Maeve took Kristina's hand. "No," she answered. "Neither do I, under the circumstances. Still, I have learned some things that I feel you need to know—from Nemesis, as a matter of fact. It was he who told me I would bear a mortal child, before I knew you were growing in my womb."

"What did he say?" Kristina asked, hardly able to breathe.

"You are carrying Max's babe," Maeve said.

Kristina fell back against the pillows, stunned. Full of sorrow and of exultation, in equal measure. She could not speak, though tears slipped down her cheeks.

"There is more," Maeve went on very gently, her hand tightening on Kristina's. "On some level, you were waiting for Max to come back into your life. You've probably already guessed that he was Gilbert Bradford. In any case, that is the reason you didn't begin aging until recently. You wanted to be in step, so to speak, with Mr. Kilcarragh."

Kristina let out a long, broken sigh. She'd come so close to complete happiness, so close to living all her dreams. "Perhaps Dathan will change his mind, once he knows I'll bear another man's child."

Maeve's expression was gently skeptical. "I know this warlock. While he has certain redeeming qualities, he is not above claiming Max's babe as his own. Dathan wants you very badly. Kristina."

"Can't you help me?"

The queen's beautiful, ink-colored eyes glittered with vampire tears. "A pact was made and kept. I cannot interfere."

Kristina nodded and leaned forward to kiss her mother's cheek. "You won't abandon me, will you? Like when I married Michael?"

"I have often regretted that," Maeve confessed. "No, darling. I shall be available to help you in any way I can. Mayhap you will come to love the warlock one day—it could be, you know, that he is your destiny, after all, rather than Max."

Although Kristina did not want that to be so, she had already considered the possibility. No doubt Max would find Sandy again, in another lifetime, and anyone he married now could only be an interim love.

"Yes," she said. "It could be that Dathan and I were meant to be together, at least for a while. But I shall never love him."

Maeve embraced her tenderly. "No," she said, understanding. "But there are other joys. And you will surely cherish the child."

"Do you know about this babe—whether it's a boy or a girl? Mortal or immortal?"

Maeve smoothed Kristina's tears away with palms as smooth as polished marble. "Nemesis offered no other information than the fact that you and Max had conceived. And I did not ask him to tell me more." The great queen kissed her daughter's forehead. "And now I must hunt. Dream sweet dreams, my darling."

As surely as if Maeve had cast a spell, Kristina fell immediately back into a deep sleep. When she awakened the next morning to another light snowfall, she wondered if she truly *had* been dreaming.

Until she descended into the kitchen and found Dathan standing there, dressed for a wedding, that is. Kristina felt nothing but despair, but some quirk caused her to look down at her long flannel nightie and then at her future groom, her expression rueful.

"I'm afraid my wedding gown leaves something to be desired," she said.

Dathan raised his right hand high, palm up, and as he lowered it, a wondrous dress formed itself to Kristina's body. It was made of the finest ivory silk, the skirts embroidered with hundreds of appliquéd doves, outlined in tiny pearls. The bodice was lacy and sprinkled liberally with diamonds.

"There has never been a more beautiful bride in all of time," Dathan said.

Kristina swallowed hard. Dathan conjured a small hand mirror, and she saw that her veil, a trail of gossamer white netting, tumbled from a circlet of small white orchids on the crown of her head.

"Okay," she said, resigned. "So where's the preacher?"

Dathan arched an eyebrow. "It isn't done in exactly that way," he said.

"Then how *is* it done?"

"We will simply clasp hands and make a promise to each other."

"Here?", Kristina asked. "In the kitchen?"

Dathan sighed. "Wherever you wish, my darling. Just name the place, and we'll be there in a moment."

"Beside the point," observed a third voice.

Both Dathan and Kristina turned in surprise to see Valerian standing just a few feet away. Given the fact that it was broad daylight, that was amazing.

"How—?" Kristina croaked.

"Call it astral projection," Valerian said with an impatient wave of one hand. "I'm a magician,

remember?" His gaze was fixed on Dathan, and the vampire looked as solid as he ever had. "There is a point in human wedding ceremonies that I rather like," he told the warlock. "The clergy member always says, 'Is there anyone here who can give just cause why these two should not be joined in holy matrimony?'"

Dathan flushed. "I am not human," he pointed out in a dangerously even voice.

"But Kristina is," Valerian offered reasonably. "Furthermore, I can show just cause. She loves one Max Kilcarragh—has waited a hundred years to be his wife. Even now, his child is curled beneath her heart—a heart in which Max, not you, will always live."

Dathan looked down at Kristina. "Is this true? The part about the child, I mean?"

Kristina nodded. She guessed she hadn't dreamed her mother's late-night visit after all.

"Can you never learn to love me?" the warlock asked.

A great sadness welled up within Kristina. "No," she said.

"If you care for Kristina," Valerian put in, very gently and very carefully, "you will set her free."

"We had a bargain!"

"And only you have the power to break it," Valerian reasoned quietly.

"Damn you," Dathan spat, glaring at the vampire. "How dare you speak of bargains? You once promised me a bride, and instead you set Roxanne Havermail on me like a mad dog!"

Valerian tried his very best to look contrite, but there was, Kristina thought, a certain merry twinkle in his eyes. "A nasty trick, I confess. Allow me to rectify the matter."

Dathan narrowed his gaze upon the fiend, while Kristina just stood there, resplendent in her conjured wedding dress, apparently forgotten. She did not want to remind the warlock of her presence before Valerian had made his point.

"Why should I trust you?" Dathan demanded.

"Kristina's happiness is at stake," Valerian replied. "She is like my own child, and only Daisy and Esteban matter more. I would not play you false in such a case as this."

Dathan turned and looked down into Kristina's upraised face. "So beautiful," he whispered, almost regretfully.

"But so mortal," Valerian said. "There is a female vampire—I have trained her myself—by the name of Shaleen. Meet me this night on the north entrance to All Soul's Cathedral in London, and I will prove myself truthful."

"If you lie—" Dathan murmured.

Kristina held her breath. She wasn't even sure her heart was beating.

"If I lie, you have only to come and take Kristina back."

Dathan considered, while Kristina flashed her "guardian vampire" a scathing look. She hadn't wanted that last option to be part of the deal.

"Well?" Valerian finally prompted.

Dathan gave a great sigh. "All right," he said. He kissed Kristina, first on the forehead, then on each eyelid. When she looked again, he was gone, and so was Valerian. The magical wedding dress had turned back into a chenille bathrobe.

"Cinderella, eat your heart out," Kristina muttered.

She waited three full days before she called Max, just in case Dathan's blind date with the vampire, Shaleen, had gone wrong. During that time, Kristina busied herself by sorting through old papers and other things she no longer needed or wanted. She read the last of her letters to Phillie and burned all of them.

The past was truly gone.

"Hello?" Max answered when Kristina finally called him. It was 6:05 and she could tell by the background sounds that he was cooking dinner.

"Hi," Kristina said with a smile in her voice. "This is a mysterious woman from your recent past."

He laughed. "The meter maid who gave me a parking ticket this morning?"

"No," Kristina replied in a naughty undertone. "The one you spent the weekend in bed with."

"Oh, that one." There was hope in Max's voice now, as well as humor.

"I was wondering if you could come over. There are some things we need to talk about."

"Just give me half an hour to round up a babysitter," he replied.

He arrived in twenty minutes flat.

Kristina pulled him inside, wrapped both arms around his neck, and kissed him soundly. It was a greeting, that kiss, but it was an invitation, too. If she had her way, they would be upstairs, in her bed, very soon.

"Did you mean it when you said you wanted to marry me?" she asked when it was over, and Max was standing there, still in his coat, with snow in his hair. His mien was one of pure, dazed confusion.

"I did indeed," he said. "But you had other plans, if I remember correctly."

"They've changed."

"You're not going to marry the warlock?"

"I'm going to marry you, if you'll have me. But there's something you have to know first—something that

might make you feel trapped. And I only want a willing husband, Max Kilcarragh."

"What?" he asked in a voice so tender that it brought a lump to Kristina's throat and tears to her eyes.

"I'm pregnant. With your baby."

For a moment Max looked as though she'd struck him with a blunt object. She was just beginning to worry when a grin flicked up one corner of his mouth and then slowly spread until it seemed to cover his whole face.

"That's the second best news I've heard all day," he said, and despite his smile, there were tears shining in his eyes.

"What's the first best?" Kristina asked, unzipping his jacket, slipping her arms inside to embrace and warm him.

"That you're going to marry me. Oh, God, Kristina—I love you."

She took his hand. "Upstairs," she said, pulling him in that direction. "If we don't start now, we may end up making love right here in the entry hall, or on the stairs—"

They made it as far as Kristina's bed, but just barely.

In the attempt to undress each other, they became entangled in each other's clothes and finally landed on the mattress in a laughing, twisted knot of flesh and fabric.

Soon enough they'd sorted that out, and Kristina lay on her back with Max poised over her, gazing down into her eyes.

"Hurry, Max," she whispered.

He smiled. "No way," he answered, and bent his head to her breast, teasing the nipple unmercifully with the tip of his tongue.

Kristina began to writhe and moan. "Max," she said with a gasp, "we don't*need* foreplay—I've been thinking of nothing but this for three days!"

He moved to the other breast, subjected a second nipple to slow, sweet torment. "Good," he said. "That ought to make it all the better."

With that, he suckled in earnest. There were long interludes where he teased her with his fingers and with his tongue. He whispered shameless, wicked things in her ear and nibbled at her lobes.

Kristina was out of her mind with need, her body drenched in perspiration, when Max finally parted her legs and gave her just the tip of his shaft. When she begged—and he made her do it prettily—he finally entered her in a slow, deep thrust.

She pleaded some more, and the thrust quickened, deepened, but only slightly.

Finally she shouted out what she wanted, not caring who might hear, and with a sound that was part chuckle and part animal need, Max took her in earnest. Placing his strong hands under her buttocks, he

raised her high to receive him, and she undulated against him, her hands moving restlessly, feverishly, up and down his muscle-knotted back.

They reached a simultaneous climax, their bodies arched high off the bed and slick with sweat, and hung there, suspended, flexing spasmodically, for what seemed like forever. Finally, replete, exhausted, they tumbled to the mattress and lay entwined in each other's arms and legs, struggling to breathe, transported.

"Tell me what changed your mind," Max said sometime later, when shadows filled the room. "About marrying me, I mean."

She explained about Valerian's intercession, but left out the near-miss with Benecia and Canaan. There was no need for Max to suffer over that—the incident of Bree and Eliette's disappearance had been erased from his mind, and that was for the best.

"Did you know I've been waiting for you? That that's why I finally became completely mortal?"

He kissed the tip of her nose. "Was I worth it?"

She smiled. "So far, so good," she replied, and pulled his head down so that his mouth found hers.

## EPILOGUE

### SEATTLE

#### 10 MONTHS LATER...

The question of whether or not Jaime Maxwell Kilcarragh had been blessed—or cursed—with magical powers was as yet unresolved. He was a healthy, strapping boy, however, greatly loved by his parents, two elder sisters, and a weird but devoted extended family.

Downstairs in the large family room of the house Max and Kristina had bought together shortly before their marriage, Valerian heard happy laughter. Daisy, Esteban, Maeve, and Calder were all there, along with Max and Kristina, of course, and their daughters, Eliette and Bree.

The great vampire closed his eyes for a moment, listening, nearly rapt, for the sound was like music. It courted the ear, then went deeper to swamp the soul, causing a sweet ache there.

As he watched, the babe awakened. The room was dark, except for a small night-light near the crib itself, and the flow of autumn moonlight through the window. Valerian knew this child was safe, and yet he felt compelled to look out for him, just as he had for Kristina and, once, a long time ago, for Aidan Tremayne.

He closed his eyes briefly, for the thought of Aidan was still poignant, if not actually hurtful.

When Valerian looked again, he was no longer alone in the room. Esteban stood beside him, a sturdy, solemn-eyed lad, ready for school.

"Papa?" he asked softly, taking Valerian's hand. He'd come so far, this beautiful little one, in a short time. He spoke clearly, worked his lessons, no longer slept on the floor or hid stashes of food all around the house.

Valerian lifted Esteban into his arms, sensing his uncertainty. "Shhh," he said against the boy's small temple, where dark, gossamer hair grew, fine as fairy-floss, and a warm heartbeat pulsed. "We mustn't wake the baby."

"We are going to have cake," Esteban confided in an accommodating whisper, his brown eyes very wide. Daisy seldom allowed such treats; she was into health food.

There were times when Valerian was more than grateful that he wasn't required to eat the way mortals did.

"Don't you want some?" the child prodded, glancing back once, at the babe.

"What's the real question?" Valerian prompted. They understood each other more than passing well, this father and son.

Esteban sighed. "Do you like him better than me?"

Valerian shook his head. "No."

Reassured, Esteban began to squirm. He was probably thinking of the cake, perhaps fearing that the others would consume it all before he had his share.

With a chuckle, Valerian set the boy on his feet, and Esteban ran off again.

Valerian went to the crib side and looked down at the handsome babe, who returned his gaze directly. Then, with the slightest smile, Jaime Kilcarragh shifted his gaze to the teddy bear at the foot of his small bed, and raised one tiny hand, wriggling his fingers. The toy had been summoned, and it came obediently to lie beside Jaime, who snuggled close and went back to sleep.

Smiling slightly, Valerian turned and walked out of the nursery.

The adventure wasn't over, he thought. No, indeed—it had only begun.

LINDA LAEL MILLER

is the award-winning author of many bestselling novels. A favorite of romance readers, Ms. Miller has expanded the scope of the traditional love story with her unique vampire romances, *Forever and the Night* and *For All Eternity*, and has contributed a time-travel story for the romance anthology *Timeless*. She is currently writing the next novel in her bestselling vampire series.



