

Chapter One

A siren wailed through the clear night air.

Gillian eased off the accelerator, downshifted and steered her vintage Corvette onto the freeway shoulder.

About time! Where are the cops when you need them? She had started to think she would have to drive halfway to Los Angeles to run into a speed trap.

She braked, then turned off the ignition just as a California Highway Patrol car pulled up behind her. *Dinnertime!* Gillian got out of the driver's seat and stood by the open door, assuming a "lost waif" expression. Or as waiflike as a woman almost six feet tall could look. Her elfin-thin face and boyish figure helped.

The officer emerged from the patrol car and strode toward her. He was blond, broad-chested, and tall, at least two inches taller than Gillian. Good, she preferred males she didn't have to bend over uncomfortably far to nibble on.

"What's wrong, officer?" she said in a breathy whisper, to force him to approach closer to hear her. His clean scent sharpened her appetite. This hunting method snared much more satisfying prey than she would catch by cruising bars. "I didn't think I was speeding."

Brandishing his notepad, he said, "Miss, you were doing at least eighty-five."

"Oh—I'm sorry. I must have been daydreaming." She stretched out a hand to brush his collar with one fingernail, while her eyes held his gaze. She knew he saw pinpoints of crimson glowing in their depths. She made no attempt to hide this inhuman trait, for his vision was already glazing over. Even though still young for one of her kind, she had no trouble casting a glamour over any human subject who wasn't prepared to resist.

"Daydreaming. Not a good idea on the freeway."

"I know. I'll never do it again. You don't want to give me a ticket, do you?" she murmured. Her touch intensified the effect of her hypnotic stare.

"Not really—" His hands dangled, barely keeping a grip on the ticket book.

She pressed her fingertips to the warm flesh on the side of his neck, relishing the throb of the pulse beneath the skin. "Let's go back to your car."

After guiding the man into the driver's seat of the police car, she slipped into the passenger side. She gently turned his head so that his eyes focused on hers again. The car's radio crackled, unheeded by either of them. "Now I'm going to kiss you. You want that, don't you?"

He slowly nodded.

She scattered feathery kisses over his cheeks and temples, avoiding his lips; somehow that contact

seemed too intimate, despite what she was about to do. His breathing quickened. His skin temperature rose, sharpening her appetite. Strong emotion added spice to the blood, and sexual desire flavored it most intensely. Her empathic sense drank in his rising passion. The background noise of distant traffic blurred to an oceanic roar in her ears. Gripping the back of his neck, she unbuttoned his collar and fastened her mouth on his throat. Her tongue flicked rapidly, teasing both him and herself while the enzymes in her saliva augmented the painkilling effect of her hypnotic spell.

He gripped the edges of the seat. When her razor-edged incisors pierced his skin, his hips arched. The salt-sweet gush of blood sent heat surging from her mouth to every cell of her body. The thrill rippled through her taut nipples and the hypersensitive flesh between her thighs.

For a second she almost stopped drinking. *I shouldn't feel that way.* Normally, her pleasure was diffused throughout her body, radiating from the spot where she luxuriated in the taste of her prey. She didn't expect such intensely localized sensations.

Never mind. Think about it later. She yielded to the ecstasy.

Her victim groaned aloud as she sucked and licked the tiny wound. She dropped her free hand to the zipper and ran her open palm along the hard ridge that angled across his lap. He thrust into her strokes. She drew one last, long swallow of hot blood and pulled away. She pressed against the wound to stop the bleeding, meanwhile lightening the pressure of her hand.

His moan of frustration reminded her of the final step she needed to take, according to the rule she'd learned when her need for human blood had first awakened: "You have to pay them back for your meals, even if it's with pleasure they'll have to forget the source of. That's only fair." Her memory recited the words in the voice of her mother, Juliette. Smiling, Gillian wondered how it would feel to be—intimate—with her prey.

What am I thinking about? Just take care of him and get away from here!

Massaging the back of his neck, she murmured, "Shh, it's all right. In a minute you're going to take a little nap. When you wake up, you'll forget you ever saw me. You pulled over to rest for a minute and fell asleep. All you'll remember is a dream, a very nice dream."

Inch by inch, she pulled down his zipper, while the fingernails of her other hand skimmed the nape of his neck. His erection sprang free. She circled his shaft, meanwhile nuzzling his throat without quite reopening the wound. He arched his back, rising out of the seat, as he thrust into her palm. Engorged with blood, his organ felt on fire to her. "Yes," she hissed against his flushed skin. "You're in the arms of your ideal woman, plunging into her. She's wet and hot. You've never been so stiff before, you've never come so hard."

His hips pumped. With the frantic acceleration of his movements, his heartbeat thundered in her ears. His heat and musk filled the car like a cloud of incense. At his moment of release, she nipped the skin of his throat and tasted one more drop of blood. Her own body echoed the climax as he erupted.

She licked her fingers before wiping them with his handkerchief, then pressing the square of cloth into his lap. Semen had a flavor tantalizingly similar to blood.

"Now," she whispered, "close your eyes." Leaving him to the fantasy she had planted in his mind, doubtless a thrill more intense than he'd ever shared with a human female, she returned to the Corvette and drove away.

Now if that were Paul, she thought, I might not mind getting a little--closer. She squelched the image, annoyed at herself for letting it arise in the first place. Her association with her collaborator Paul Shelby had to remain businesslike; anything else could be dangerous. She mustn't even let herself wonder how he would taste. In fact, she'd made a point of feeding well tonight because she had a meeting with Paul the next day and she didn't want to be hungry when she saw him.

Lately she'd caught herself thinking of Paul more and more, outside the boundaries of their writer-photographer partnership. She'd felt oddly restless in the past few weeks, even dreaming about him several days in a row. Her nonhuman neural patterns required only a few hours of REM time per week, vague, fleeting images that evaporated upon waking. The vivid scenarios that haunted her weren't normal. Those tantalizing visions wrecked what should be peacefully dreamless day-sleep.

Rolling her window all the way down, she let the desert wind blow through her short, curly red hair. The feeding had infused her with energy; she wanted to banish pointless worries and enjoy the sensation. She took the next exit and reentered the freeway southbound, headed for her home in El Cajon, a suburb east of San Diego.

Chapter Two

Half an hour later, she breezed into her townhouse still high on her victim's blood and passion. Just inside the foyer, she stopped short, her exhilaration flattened by an all-too-familiar metallic scent in the air. Extending a telepathic tendril, she brushed the surface of the intruder's thoughts. Only the surface; hard, smooth, and cold. Despite the blood-bond they shared as mentor and pupil, he never allowed her into the depths of his mind. *Lord Volnar.*

She drew the front door shut and fastened the deadbolt. She didn't need to ask how he'd got in, since he had a key. But she couldn't imagine why he was visiting, with no prior notice. Now that she was too old to need constant supervision, she saw her adviser only a few times a year, a schedule of which she heartily approved. And their last meeting had occurred only nine days earlier.

She marched into the living room, folded her arms, and glared down at the man seated on the low, sea-green sofa. In the dark room, his eyes gleamed red. "What are you doing here? I'm not a kid anymore. You can't just barge in anytime."

With a tight smile, Volnar gestured at the other end of the couch. "Sit down, Gillian."

As she did so, perching stiffly on the edge of the cushion with her hands clutching each other in her lap, his nostrils flared, and his thick eyebrows arched. Not for the first time, she observed how much he looked like Stoker's description of Dracula in the original novel—aquiline profile, high forehead, iron-gray hair, thick moustache, eyebrows meeting over the nose. She knew there must be a story behind that resemblance, one he'd never told her.

"At least you could've called first."

"Pointless," he said. "You would have wasted time trying to persuade me to stay away."

"You bet I would. I don't need you hovering over me anymore. So what's wrong? I haven't done

anything I can think of."

His smile widened to bare his teeth. "Why do you assume I'm here to chastise you? I have good news."

Suspicious of Volnar's idea of "good news," Gillian didn't quite relax, but she did sit back and unclasp her tightly entangled fingers. "What's going on?"

"Last time I visited, I noticed a change in your body chemistry, your—fragrance. Now it's more obvious. I'm sure of it—you're about to go into estrus."

"What?" Her heart accelerated. She drew a deep breath and willed her pulse to a slow, even rhythm. "Happy, happy, joy, joy," *was not* her first reaction. "That's impossible. I'm only twenty-six. I shouldn't start for another four years."

"That's the typical pattern for our species. You are not typical. You're one-fourth *Homo sapiens*, completely unpredictable."

"I did start needing to feed on—human prey—younger than normal. But this—I'm not ready. Can't you do something to stop it?" She realized the silliness of that plea almost before the words emerged from her mouth.

"Stop it? Child, this is an unprecedented opportunity. With your human genes, anything is possible. You might even be fertile at your first heat. If so, we mustn't waste it."

Her throat tightened with anxiety. *Maybe he's right. The way I reacted to that policeman—*

"If I really am going to be fertile a week or two from now, the last thing I want is to get pregnant. You know how I feel about that stupid breeding program of yours."

"Young lady, without that 'stupid program', you wouldn't exist. I've lavished enormous amounts of time and energy on you. I expect cooperation. You know how our birthrate has dropped over the past few centuries."

"Of course I know. You never let me forget it. Human DNA is going to revive our gene pool, I have a duty to the race, yada, yada." Momentarily she wondered where she got the nerve to be rude to her adviser, the most ancient of their kind.

He showed no anger. With his power, he didn't have to squander emotion. "I never let you forget it because it's important. You can certainly spare a little of your time for the good of your people."

"A little time!" She jumped to her feet and paced around the room, fists clenched at her sides. "Eleven months of pregnancy, three or four years of breast-feeding—"

"Out of a lifetime that will last for millennia. Calm yourself and think rationally. You have to mate with someone. The compulsion is irresistible. So you may as well accept my choice."

"Your what?" That couldn't mean what it sounded like.

"Unless you already have someone in mind? No? I assumed not."

Her nails dug into her palms. She flexed her fingers to ease the muscle spasms. "You're not saying you've picked a mate for me?"

"Of course. If you're capable of conceiving, we can't leave the father to chance. Since you have little or no background to base a choice on, it's logical for me to make that decision."

"Now wait just a minute!" She choked down the rage boiling up in her throat. She knew her aura must be sparking like a thundercloud. His remained as serene as ever. "I pick my own mate! Females of our species always do. You can't take that right away from me."

"You are not an ordinary female. While it's unlikely that you'll ovulate the first time, in view of your heritage—"

"Damn my heritage!" Lightheaded with anger, she breathed deeply until the red mist cleared from her vision. "Those human genes you keep lecturing about come from my father and he hates the whole idea of this selective breeding crap as much as I do. He wouldn't put up with this for one minute."

Volnar's eyes hardened. "He has nothing to say about it. In view of his human mind-set, I've allowed him an unusual involvement in your upbringing. But not something this important." He stood up, though he didn't approach her. "Don't you want to know whom I've chosen?"

"Doesn't matter, because I won't do it."

"Luciano Rossi. A good bloodline, proven fertile, but he hasn't yet sired enough offspring to cause problems with future inbreeding, if he should succeed in impregnating you."

"You've got to be kidding." A futile outburst, since her adviser never joked. She visualized Luciano, slightly over five centuries old, born in Italy, with dark, wavy hair in dramatic contrast to his vampire-pale skin. Attractive, no doubt about it, probably a ravishing success with human females.

"I know what he thinks about 'half-breeds' and 'lap dogs who pretend to be wolves' and contaminating the gene pool with lower life forms. I overheard him ranting about it once, not that he tried very hard to keep me from listening. I can't stand him."

"That's irrelevant," said Volnar with a dismissive wave of his hand. "It's not as if you're expected to marry each other, like ephemerals. One night and you never have to see him again."

"Yeah, well, one night is about twelve hours too long." She flung herself down on the sofa. "Why are we arguing about it? Luciano would never want me, anyway."

"On the contrary, he has already agreed."

Her pulse stuttered in renewed shock. "You asked him without even talking to me first? You—" When she'd forced her emotions back under control, she said, "Oh, I understand. He wants to get on your good side. The Prime Elder favors interbreeding with ephemerals, so Luciano decides to have a change of heart. That's the only reason he could possibly have to mate with a half-breed."

"His reasons shouldn't concern you. The point is that he's a superb physical specimen, with enough experience to give you a pleasant initiation."

"Right, about as pleasant as being staked out in the desert at high noon." A possible escape occurred

to her. "Why don't you mate with me yourself? Like you said, I have to do it with somebody. You're bound to have more—experience—than Luciano."

"Out of the question," Volnar said. "I've already sired more than enough offspring. The purpose of this project is to increase our genetic variety, not subtract from it."

"Then let somebody else do the increasing. I won't let that man near me."

Volnar's lips quirked in amusement. "What will you do about your needs, then?"

"Maybe I won't have to do anything. You said yourself; all bets are off because I'm one-fourth human. Maybe my estrus will be weak enough that I can ignore it, ride it out by myself."

"You don't know what you're saying, young lady." Sitting beside her, he took her hand. "That's extremely unlikely. And if you find yourself overcome by the full force of the compulsion, with no mate available—I would not want you to suffer that agony."

His cool touch sent an unexpected shiver up her arm. She snatched her hand away. Her skin felt too tight, and her head began to pound with tension. "I'll worry about that when it happens. Now that you've ruined my night, get out of here!"

He started for the door. Pausing on the threshold, he turned toward her and said, "I can feel it approaching already. You must certainly be aware that your physical response to me isn't normal. Soon, Gillian—probably within the week. Be prepared to accept Luciano."

Only after the door shut behind Volnar did she work up the nerve to snarl, "The hell with that! I'd rather mate with an ephemeral."

Abruptly Paul's image flashed into her mind. A flood of heat rushed over her.

I have to get out of here. At this rate I'll never be able to sleep tomorrow.

Hurrying out the back door of her condo, she threaded her way through the townhouse complex to the open desert behind it. Ice plants crunched under her sandals. Jogging up a steep hillside to the top of a ridge, she inhaled the deliciously cool breeze that blew toward her. After stripping off her clothes, she spread her arms wide and yielded to the electricity that danced over her skin. Silken fur sprouted on her arms, back, and face. Her teeth sharpened. Wings erupted from her shoulders. She shuddered with the thrill of the change.

Launching herself into the air, she glided over the open land. Her flight wasn't true flying, but levitation, with the wings to steer and provide balance. Regardless of the technicalities, the sense of delirious freedom swept away her anxiety and rage. She knew she shouldn't fly this near a populated area, but tonight she didn't care.

An hour later she returned home and retreated to her darkroom, immersing herself in work. By dawn, she had tired herself enough to sink into the deathlike daylight sleep.

Chapter Three

The clock radio woke her at four p. m. She dragged herself out of bed groggy and crabby, knowing the sun would shine for hours yet. *Maybe I should spend the summers in Patagonia.* Only the prospect of a meeting with Paul made facing the summer afternoon bearable.

She had dreamed of him again, of flying through the desert night sky with him in her arms, like a scene from a "Superman" comic. His image refused to fade from her mind—copper-gold hair a few shades lighter than her own, blue eyes, the ruddy aura of a man in prime health, a masculine aroma clean of any trace of disease or tobacco smoke.

Her teeth tingled, and the cilia in her palms itched with the yearning to caress warm human flesh. She cursed aloud. Her feeding the night before should have appeased that need. In the shower she ran her hands over her breasts. The friction made the tiny hairs bristle and her nipples harden. For a vampire, whose erogenous zones weren't localized like an ephemeral's, both sensations were equally tantalizing.

Ripples of pleasure spread over her bare skin, sensitized by the torrent of hot water from the shower. Though she knew she couldn't satisfy her own craving—she needed the blood and passion of a human donor for that—she couldn't resist nestling a hand between her thighs. The hidden bud swelled and throbbed. Normally she felt sensations there only when she fed, and only as a small part of the whole-body rush. Now she felt compelled to stroke that spot.

The frisson that arced along her nerves surprised her. Again she had to face the fear that Volnar might be right about her—premature development. She rubbed harder and faster, but no relief came. Gritting her teeth, she teased herself until her veins felt on fire, her stomach cramping and jaws aching. Finally, her throat dry with frustration, she turned the shower to full cold and stood under it until the hunger faded, banishing Paul's image whenever it floated to the surface of her mind.

I've been mooning over him like a lovesick heroine in one of Juliette's romances! Her mother, Professor Julia Frost in the English department at the College of William and Mary, also wrote historical romances under the name "Juliette Fontaine." Reviewers praise the authenticity of the author's mid-Victorian settings, never guessing, of course, that she'd lived through that era. Gillian had always read her mother's novels as a source of humor. Strictly for ephemerals, who made an endless fuss over their mating rituals. Now she'd started acting like one of them.

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Wearing a light summer dress and a wide-brimmed straw hat with polarized sunglasses, her arms and face coated with factor 30 sunscreen, Gillian headed west on the freeway to Paul's ranch-style faux adobe house in La Jolla.

Beside her in the front seat lay a portfolio of recent photographs, sample illustrations for their latest book proposal. Paul augmented his income as a zoology professor at the University of California, San Diego, by writing wildlife picture books for children. Gillian supplied the photos.

As a team, she and Paul specialized in California's nocturnal fauna. They'd worked up a plan for a new series, stories instead of straight nature reportage. The first book, if the publisher they'd approached offered a contract, would be *Chico the Coyote* .

By the time Gillian reached Paul's home, driving straight into the setting sun most of the way, she had a pounding headache. The anticipation of seeing him made it worthwhile, though. He opened the door almost as soon as her finger touched the buzzer. She heard his heartbeat stutter when their eyes met. With that mutual attraction, seducing him would be fatally easy.

She pushed the thought into a corner of her mind, but not without pausing to savor his fragrance, soap and shampoo spiced with the warmth of his flesh. She noticed that his golden-red hair still curled damply from the shower.

"Gillian, hi! Got the pictures?—great, come right in." With a light grip on her wrist, Paul led her into the combination living room-dining alcove. Aware of her sensitivity to the sun, he'd left the curtains almost completely shut. When she removed her sunglasses, the pastel blues and greens of the decor soothed her eyes.

She immediately caught sight of a bottle and two glasses on the coffee table, which was carved from a tree stump and varnished to a deep chestnut gloss. "What's this, something I should know?" she said as she plopped her portfolio, hat, and purse on the couch.

Paul's smile widened. He handed her an e-mail printout. "I was planning to make a big production of it, but why wait? Here—message from Jan this afternoon."

Their agent. Gillian scanned the sheet of paper. The publisher had offered a contract for the picture book series. She had to read the amount of the advance twice. Though she could have all the money she ever needed from Volnar for the asking, she preferred the independence of earning her own.

"Yes! Of course I had a feeling they wouldn't turn us down, but—Paul, this is great!"

"Caldecott Medal, here we come!" He threw his arms around her in a bear hug. His heart pounded against her breast, his rapid breath ruffling her hair. Almost involuntarily she returned the hug. For a second her cheek rested against his. By tilting her head at a slightly different angle, she could press her lips to the side of his neck—

She eased out of his arms. Paul avoided her eyes like a flustered teenager. He bent over the champagne bottle, clumsily picking at the foil cap. Grateful for the distraction, Gillian sat down on the couch and picked up one of the empty glasses. While he opened the bottle, her eyes wandered to the terrarium in the corner where his pet boa constrictor coiled in its usual torpid condition.

A tempting fantasy flitted through her mind. Could a man who liked snakes accept the truth about a human-shaped predator who fed on blood? She smiled to herself at the idea. Surely she wouldn't seriously think of revealing her true nature to Paul? Ephemerals receptive to the companionship of vampires were far more than vampires themselves.

The pop of the cork interrupted her reverie. After filling their glasses, Paul toasted their future success. Sipping, she gazed into his eyes and fantasized about the flavor of his essence instead of the tart fizz of champagne. *I have to stop thinking this way!*

He lounged beside her on the sofa, refilling both goblets. "Come on, I want to see your latest

masterpieces."

Grateful for the diversion into a professional mood, she took the photos out of the portfolio. Paul fanned them on the coffee table. Scanning Gillian's candid shots of coyotes, raccoons, chipmunks, jackrabbits, and pocket mice ignited an appreciative glow in his aura that warmed her almost as much as his leashed desire for her. "Your night photography never ceases to amaze me. These belong in *National Geographic*."

"Someday," she said, not altogether kidding.

"How do you get so close without spooking them? Raccoons, okay, you practically have to fire a shotgun to scare them away, but these others—"

Gillian shrugged. She couldn't very well explain how she used vampiric influence to lull the creatures into submission or, alternatively, cast a psychic veil to make herself "invisible" to them. "Just a knack, I guess."

"These raccoons look like you posed them that way."

She said nothing, since she couldn't admit she had done just that.

"Maybe we should use them for the next book. They're familiar animals, so kids should enjoy reading about them, plus we could use the story to educate them not to try petting or feeding weed species."

Gillian laughed. "I hope you don't plan to call them that in the book! Kind of undermines the cuteness factor."

They finished off the bottle while discussing possible raccoon-centered plots. Though their agent had persuaded the publisher to sign a multibook contract, the exact number of books remained to be decided. Paul suggested they should have several proposals ready to demonstrate their ability to follow through on a long-range series.

"How about bats?" After a moment's thought, he said with a self-deprecating laugh, "Don't know if I'd want you crawling through caves full of guano, not to mention taking chances with rabies."

"Bats wouldn't bite me," she said absentmindedly, provoking a quizzical glance from Paul.

"How about staying for dinner to celebrate?" He held up a hand when she started to protest. "Yeah, I haven't forgotten your allergies. I got a couple of things you can eat, and the rest of the time you can just talk to me."

Gillian had refused every previous invitation, partly because the "allergy" excuse would stretch only so far, but partly to keep a cautious distance from Paul. If she accepted this invitation, she'd set a hazardous precedent. Yet she couldn't bring herself to refuse this time.

He took her silence for acceptance. "Great, I'll just put my steak under the broiler."

After she'd watched him start dinner, he said, "Time to feed Naga. Want to help?"

"Sure."

While he fetched a white rat in a small cage from his home office, she lifted the glass top off the terrarium. The snake languidly raised its head to stare at her. "You know," said Paul, dangling the rat by its tail, "you're the only woman I've ever had over here who'd watch this, much less do it, without screaming or gagging."

How many women has he invited over? she thought. The pang of—could it be jealousy?—astonished her. "That's silly. It's part of nature."

"Red in tooth and claw," he misquoted. "Most people don't like to confront that fact too closely." He dropped the rat. The snake's coils whipped around the rodent and squeezed. A minute later, the fanged jaws unhinged and engulfed the victim. Paul and Gillian watched while the rat disappeared into the snake's mouth in spasmodic jerks, tail last, and became a lump in its gullet.

While Gillian replaced the lid, Paul returned the cage to the other room. The sight of the reptile devouring its prey roused her own appetite. *Ridiculous, I shouldn't be hungry at all tonight.* Maybe the anomaly had something to do with her approaching estrus. She pushed that thought aside; she wanted to forget the problem for a few hours.

Paul dined on steak, baked potato, and salad—with garlic-free dressing, in consideration for her "allergies." He shared a first course of beef broth with her, and she drank milk in addition to a glass of the burgundy he opened. She knew he tactfully restricted her wine intake because she had to drive home. She couldn't explain that her inhuman tolerance made the precaution unnecessary. With the scent of his rare steak tantalizing her, she wished the alcohol could dull her senses.

"There's something I want to ask you," he said as they moved from table to couch with after-dinner shot glasses of sherry. The rose-pink of his aura dimmed and flickered, reflecting his nervousness. She noticed how he sat closer to her than usual. When he put down his glass and touched her hand, not quite clasping it, his heartbeat accelerated. "You must know I'm interested in you, as more than a collaborator."

She nodded. The near-formality of the statement intrigued her. Most of the human males who'd tried to seduce her in the past, allured by her innate vampire magnetism, had used much more blunt language. Or else they'd bypassed words altogether. Paul, in comparison, acted like a knight from King Arthur's court.

"I don't want to push you into something you're not ready for, but I don't want to wait forever, either. So—" He shook his head with a rueful smile. "Good Lord, listen to me babble. The hell with the prepared speech. Would you like to spend this weekend with me in my cabin at Big Bear?"

She stared at him. This wasn't quite the approach she'd expected.

Apparently taking her stunned expression for reluctance, he said, "It can be just companionship, if that's all you want. Just take it a step at a time. How about it?"

Gillian shook her head. Even if it weren't dangerous to get too close to an ephemeral she actually liked—the risk of addiction was too high—spending a whole weekend with him, day and night, held the potential for disaster. Not to mention that he would see her failing to eat enough to keep an anorexic twelve-year-old alive, he might catch a glimpse of her asleep. Her daytime dormancy looked enough like death to scare him witless and destroy any illusion that she was a normal woman.

He emitted disappointment like radio static. "Can you tell me why? Is it that you could never feel that way about me, or is this just not the right time?"

"I can't explain it, Paul. I do like you, but—intimacy—wouldn't work." His unwavering look told her that he wouldn't accept this non-explanation. She gazed back at him and snared his eyes with her hypnotic power. "Don't worry about it. We can stay friends, just as we've always been. You don't need to know my reasons. You trust me."

He stared unblinkingly into her eyes. "Right. I trust you. I don't need to hear your reasons."

She felt a needle-prick of guilt. How silly most of her kind would think she was being. Ephemerals existed as prey, tools, or at most pets. Superior beings had no obligation to them. *But I'm part human, and Paul is my friend.* Her half-human father, at least, would say she was right to feel guilty.

Well, it couldn't be helped. She had to squelch Paul's curiosity if she wanted to keep working with him.

While ruminating over the problem, she unconsciously kept her eyes fixed on his. He leaned toward her, as helpless as the rat swallowed by the snake. His aura glowed a deeper red as excitement replaced his disappointment. His hand, still holding hers, squeezed tighter, and he traced circles in her palm with his thumb.

Her pulse speeded up to match his. *I'll let him go soon; just let me enjoy this for a minute or two.* Even while her brain made that sensible resolution, her body inched closer, and her lips drifted toward his neck.

His mouth intercepted hers. Though entranced by her psychic power, he hadn't lost his erotic skills. He teased her lips apart. Her tongue flickered to meet his. The moist heat of his mouth made the roots of her teeth burn. Strangely, a similar heat welled between her thighs.

She ran her fingernails down the nape of his neck. When he shivered in response, her own body echoed the reaction. She had never kissed a man before—lip contact was irrelevant to feeding—and the effect on her appetite astonished her.

Just once. What can it hurt? He won't remember a thing. She licked and nibbled her way down the side of his jaw. His breathing roughened, while one of his hands massaged her back in languid circles, and the other fondled her breasts.

When she pierced his skin, he let out a sharp gasp that mirrored the spike of arousal her bite evoked. One caress from her fingers, she knew, would trigger his release. But that didn't seem right, not in a hypnotically-induced daze.

She sipped from the tiny wound until the hot, tangy taste had fully appeased her hunger. Intoxicated with the half-awake sensuality he projected, she almost wished she could let him remember, maybe wake him and let him enjoy the climax he craved.

No, the very idea was insane. Stroking his hair and forehead until he sank into light sleep, she whispered, "I have to leave now, Paul. You won't remember any of this." A reckless impulse seized her. "Except the kiss. Remember the kiss. After that, we said goodbye, and I left. Understand?"

He slowly nodded, his eyes closed.

"After I left, you crashed on the couch. In a little while you'll wake up and remember just what I told you. Okay?"

"Yeah," he murmured.

"Tonight when you go to sleep, you'll dream about me, and it'll be totally—fulfilling." If caution wouldn't allow her to have a real-life relationship with him, they could at least share it in fantasy.

Chapter Four

When Paul woke up, he found himself lying on the couch, alone. Where the heck was Gillian? Oh, yeah, they'd kissed, and then she'd gone home. What was the matter with him, letting her escape so easily? Though she'd turned down his invitation, that kiss had been too hot to let him believe her "just friends" line.

At least, what little he remembered of it was hot. His groin tightened at the mere thought of her mouth on his. Why was the memory such a blur? He stood up and his head spun.

What's going on? I didn't drink that much!

He stumbled down the hall, leaning on walls for balance. He couldn't believe he'd passed out on the couch without even walking her to the door. Real smooth. He'd finally had Gillian in a position to do something more intimate than discussing their books, and he'd blown it.

Lots of men might not be turned on by a tall woman with a greyhound-slender body. Their loss. He loved to watch her perky little breasts under clinging T-shirts, and for months he'd fantasized about having her long legs wrapped around him.

Cold water on his face didn't clear the mist from his head. He staggered from bathroom to bedroom. Groaning, he shucked his clothes and crashed on the bed. *Maybe I'm coming down with something?* The fog thickened in his brain and he drifted off.

Fire and ice spread over him, painlessly searing every inch of skin. He opened his eyes to meet Gillian's, gleaming silver with radiance like a cat's. Her lips teased his. When he opened his mouth, her tongue flickered like a flame. Hugging her naked body to his, he felt her peaked nipples against his chest. Her mouth moved downward to brand his neck like a red-hot coal. Pressed against her satiny flesh, his erection grew painfully hard. She arched her back and drew him in. Her moist head squeezed him in a n accelerating rhythm that drover the pressure to unbearable intensity. His rod felt a foot long. He plunged into her and shot off with a roar of mingled ecstasy and anguish.

He woke alone, drained. *Oh, man, what a dream!* Only a wet patch on the sheet gave evidence that one aspect of the dream had really happened. He felt spent but not satisfied. He craved Gillian in real life, not only in dreams. And he realized he wanted her for much more than a night or even a weekend.

Maybe forever.

Chapter Five

Gillian arrived home with her head spinning. She'd done everything she had continually promised herself not to do. Encouraging Paul to expect anything beyond friendship was the worse kind of folly.

Over and over, Volnar and every other adult vampire she knew had cautioned against preying on people she worked with. Constant association with a donor would make it too easy to slip up and let the ephemeral suspect her nonhuman nature. The more often she had to mesmerize a human companion into forgetting little anomalies in her behavior, the greater the hazard that the mental control would come unstuck.

At least, she thought, I still had the sense to turn down that weekend invitation. On top of Volnar's revelation the previous night, this evening's indulgence with Paul left her dizzy with confusion. Mate with Luciano? Not until California slid into the ocean, and maybe not even then. Now, if Luciano were anything like Paul—

Have you lost your mind, girl? He's an ephemeral. A food source—or at most a pet.

She needed advice, and not from her official adviser. Volnar had already made his position clear. Her half-human father, Roger Darvell, a psychiatrist in Maryland, would understand her predicament. Ordinarily a male vampire had no role in his offspring's life beyond the genetic one, but as hybrids, Roger and Gillian didn't conform to the standard rules. While growing up, she had spent several weeks each year with him.

After checking the time on the East Coast, she punched in her father's phone number. Since it was well after 6 p.m. there, he ought to be awake. Curled up on her bed, she drummed her fingers on the nightstand through four rings, until he answered. She felt illogically comforted by the sound of his cultured New England accent. In a rush of words, she poured out her distress at Volnar's ultimatum.

"I'm surprised you didn't call Claude," Roger said. "He's so much closer to you geographically. Or Juliette." Roger's brother Claude had a home in Los Angeles and spent most of his time there.

"Neither of them would really understand. Sure, they'd try to sympathize, but they don't have the human viewpoint on sex. They'd wonder what I'm making such a fuss about. Even my mother—Lord Volnar picked you as her mate, and she went along with it."

"He didn't try to override Juliette's veto power, though," Roger said. "She wanted a child and accepted me of her own free will. Besides, it wasn't quite the same thing. We never actually had intercourse; it was done with artificial insemination."

"How?" Gillian asked. "I mean, if you couldn't become fertile without being stimulated by a female—"

"I was." Embarrassment tinged his voice. "In the room with her, under the influence of her scent, I ejaculated repeatedly until Volnar decided we had enough of a specimen for conception. After he performed the insemination procedure and I left, I understand Juliette inserted a cervical cap to prevent contamination, so to speak, and then mated with him to satisfy her—needs."

"Okay, probably more than I wanted to know," Gillian muttered.

A pause, while Roger spoke to someone in the background. The extension at his end clicked on, and Gillian heard the voice of Britt Loren, Roger's office partner, bond-mate, and donor. "Did I hear right?" the woman said. "Volnar *ordered* you to mate with a male you can't stand? I'd think any vampire would be shocked at that. Doesn't the female have an absolute right to choose her own—uh—stud?"

"Usually," said Gillian. "But in this case, according to him, the fact that I'm a hybrid outweighs the established custom. It's my duty to breed for the good of the species." She knew her voice sounded bitter but didn't try to soften it.

"I got exactly the same argument," Roger said. "Not that I regret having fathered you, but at the time I resented the pressure."

"Don't let them push you around, girl," said Britt.

Roger dryly commented, "That's easier said than done. We're talking about Gillian's adviser, who also happens to be head of the Council of Elders."

"Then don't you have any suggestions at all?" Depression settled like fog around Gillian.

"One possible counterattack," said Roger. "If you had an alternate choice to offer... isn't there anyone you'd want, if you were left to your own preference?"

"Not anybody who's available. I'd trust Claude, but he's totally committed to his human lover, just like you and Britt. Besides, he's too closely related to me. There are a couple of other males nearer my age that I wouldn't mind mating with, but they have the same drawback—attached to human bond-mates."

Soft laughter from Britt. "Why are all the good ones taken? I thought that was strictly a problem for *human* females."

Gillian sighed. "I'd even accept Volnar as my initiator. I suggested that to him. He turned me down, of course—didn't want to 'waste' my fertility. Not that I expect to be fertile the first time anyway. I think he's making a big deal out of nothing."

"If you don't want to become pregnant," Roger said, "that's entirely in your own hands, isn't it?"

"Sure, I could mentally block an embryo from implanting. But I'd rather not be faced with the situation at all. Why can't I just skip the whole thing?" She pulled a pillow into her lap and hunched over it.

"From what I hear," said Britt, "it doesn't work that way. When you go into estrus, you have to—relieve the pressure, so to speak. Right, Roger?"

"How would I know?" he said with a tinge of impatience. "As far as I've been told, yes. You're one-fourth human, though. Your experience might not be typical."

Gillian's depression lightened a degree. "I've thought about that, but I was afraid it might be just wishful thinking. If I could keep from going into heat at all—

Maybe if I don't let any male vampires near me, it won't happen. Or it'll be weaker, not completely unbearable. Once I've ridden it out and it's over with, I won't have to worry about it for another couple of years at least."

Britt said, "And you can't...well...handle the discomfort yourself, can you?"

"I don't think so. I tried, sort of, earlier tonight. It didn't help." She caught herself squirming at the memory.

"I could have told you that," said Roger, "and I'm more human than you are. All it does is make you hungry."

"That's what I found out." Gillian caught herself sighing aloud again, as her thoughts drifted back to her evening with Paul. "What if I wanted to mate with a human male?"

"Aha," Britt said. "I have a feeling that question isn't hypothetical."

Gillian froze in embarrassed silence.

"Well?" Roger said. "Should we assume you're thinking of getting involved with an ephemeral?"

"I don't know about 'involved.' I do have a friend—" She wasn't sure, herself, whether she would seriously consider intimacy with Paul.

"You're very young and inexperienced for that," Roger said. "The pitfalls of getting entangled with a human partner who'll have to be told what you really are—"

"Oh, Roger, don't give her a hard time. Gillian, do you think this man is attracted to you?"

Roger didn't give Gillian time to answer. "How could she be sure? Colleague, you know as well as I do that our kind are irresistibly seductive whether we're trying to be or not. You've commented on the phenomenon often enough."

"True," Britt said. "Unless you're consciously suppressing it, you project that magnetism all the time, especially when you're hungry."

Gillian recalled how she had been reacting to Paul lately. "Every time I get near him, I'm hungry."

"Uh-oh," Britt said.

Roger echoed her tone. "Have you fed on him yet?"

"Once, earlier tonight." She half-consciously kneaded the pillow with her free hand.

"You're in serious danger of getting fixated on this man. I can hear it in your voice. That will cloud

your perception even more."

If she'd been human, Gillian would have started crying. "Do you mean I'll never be sure whether he likes me or he's just... hypnotized by me?"

"The point is," Roger said, "you have to be very careful. That's where your lack of experience comes in."

"You're bonded with Britt. So is Claude with his human mate. You made it work, and you're not the only ones." Noticing that one of her nails had torn the pillowcase, she relaxed her grip.

"All of whom are significantly older than you," Roger said. "And I know of some vampires equally experienced who've failed disastrously at such relationships."

"Don't be such a wet blanket," Britt said. "Not that he doesn't have a point, Gillian. You have to consider not only how this man will react to the truth about you, but also how he'll adjust in the long run. You're immune to sickness and almost impossible to kill, and you'll never age. How will he feel about that when he's turning into a decrepit old man?"

"You're doing okay so far," Gillian said, knowing she must sound like a sulky child.

"Not without some adjustment problems over the years," said Britt.

"And don't overlook the restraint you'd have to exercise," Roger said. "To keep him healthy, you'd have to content yourself with small sips and make up the difference with animal blood or warmed-over blood bank products. True, the quality more than makes up for the limited quantity. But don't underestimate the problem."

"Then are you telling me it's impossible?"

"Of course not. I only want you to make the decision with your eyes wide open," Roger said.

Britt added, "Back to the short-term problem, if you take a human male for a mate, you have to expect certain... deficiencies, compared to a vampire. With one of your own kind, your pheromones keep him up to the challenge, so to speak. An ordinary man can't ejaculate eight or ten times per hour. If he's young and healthy, and he's been celibate for a while, he might perform three times in the twelve hours you'll be in active estrus. With, uh, encouragement from your hypnotic powers, he might go as high as five or six times. That's a physiological limit you can't get around."

"Roger, your mother mated with a human lover," said Gillian, "or neither of us would be here. Too bad I can't asked her about it." Gillian's grandmother had been lynched, along with her human husband, in 1940.

"Yes, and she's the only one I know of. There's a good reason why most long-term interspecies liaisons involve a human female and a male vampire."

"For a human female, that special... technique... is absolutely unforgettable."

"Britt, please!" Roger said.

She laughed softly. "You're so uptight sometimes, colleague."

"I'm human enough to have a residual distaste for discussing my sex life with my daughter, even indirectly."

Gillian had the feeling that the conversation was racing out of her control. She'd received all the useful advice she could reasonably expect. "Thanks—I'll think about what you said. I'll be careful."

If it's not already too late for that, she thought as she hung up the phone.

Chapter Six

To distract herself, Gillian spent the next hour sorting piles of photographic prints into file folders, each labeled for a different prospective book. If she couldn't indulge her desire for Paul, at least she could immerse herself in the work they shared. Still left with too much time to fill before dawn, she turned on the computer to check her e-mail.

As she scrolled through her in-box, the doorbell rang. Walking toward the living room, she extended her empathic sense to check on the visitor. She touched the mind of a vampire, but not a familiar one. The intrusion puzzled her. Solitary predators didn't make social calls for the fun of it, and why hadn't the visitor phoned ahead? The presence on the other side of the barrier radiated no hostility, but she switched off the alarm and unlocked the bolt with wary deliberation, opening the door only as far as the chain allowed. She scented the metallic aroma of a male vampire's flesh.

"May I come in, Gillian?" Luciano's voice, smooth as melted chocolate, made the hairs on her arms prickle. Through the gap she scanned his face, strikingly pale against the mane of black hair. Traces of red glinted in his silver-gray eyes.

"What for? I don't have anything to say to you."

"Surely you don't want me to shout through the door." His voice had a foreign lilt, too vague to be called an accent.

Removing the chain, she stepped out of his way. "Okay, but make it quick."

"You won't be asking for that in a few more nights," he said, gliding past her to take a seat, uninvited, on the couch. He flashed a smile that verged on a leer, a gesture she'd never seen from a male of her own species before. "Lord Volnar informed you of our arrangement, didn't he?"

She remained standing, to keep whatever advantage she could. "Why, Luciano? You don't like me any better than I like you."

His grin broadened. "As a favor to the Prime Elder. And what makes you think I don't like you? Human females, from what I've seen, are ready and willing all the time. With your first estrus on top of that—"

"Oh, so that's the attraction?" She didn't care to waste breath explaining that she didn't share this human trait. "You want to copulate with a prey animal? A taste of bestiality?"

"And perhaps a taste of your part-human blood. Call it what you wish. I'm sure we'll enjoy each other."

A pain in her jaw made her aware that she was grinding her teeth. Struggling for a courteous tone, she said, "No, because it isn't going to happen. Go back to Volnar and tell him the `arrangement' is off."

The feral smile vanished. "As I understand it, you don't have any say in the matter. And you should consider yourself lucky that I offered to initiate you. Not many eligible males would consent to mate with a half-breed."

Her heart sped up, and she tasted acid. Swallowing the vileness, she reined her anger until her pulse slowed. "That's my problem. You'd better leave now."

"Not until we've discussed the logistics. Where do you want to consummate the union? Here, or on neutral ground? Perhaps a luxury hotel. Unless you're worried about the staff hearing you scream?"

Her fingers involuntarily curled, clawlike. "Aren't you listening? I won't spend ten minutes with you, much less a night. You *aren't* my choice."

Luciano darted across the room and grasped her right arm, too quickly for her to dodge. A gasp caught in her throat. His eyes locked on hers. He placed a fingertip on her lips, while the thumb of his other hand caressed her wrist. "Why are you fighting me, young one? I can give you what you need, and it's only for one night, after all."

"Are you trying to seduce me like a human female? You know that won't work. I'm immune."

"You won't be, two or three nights from now." He leaned over to sniff her hair, his breath tickling her ear. An unpleasant shiver ran down her back like a trickle of water, yet she couldn't force herself to pull away. "Yes, you smell like sweet musk. It won't be much longer."

Unwillingly she recalled what Volnar had said about Luciano's "experience." Thanks to their empathic perception, vampires normally couldn't lie to each other, and Luciano made no attempt to shield his emotions. He was telling the truth about the state of near-ripeness he sensed in her, and his eagerness was sincere. Her stomach knotted, and something deeper inside quivered. She shook her head.

"I know how to satisfy you." His tongue flicked her earlobe. "You feel the craving already, don't you? Do you think you can relieve it by yourself? Don't bother trying. Artificial aids won't help, either. You'll need a live male inside you."

The image generated a rush of heat in her lower abdomen. She involuntarily swayed into Luciano's embrace, going rigid when she realize what she was doing. *No! I don't want him!* She wouldn't allow her body to trick her into surrendering to a creature who felt nothing for her but contempt. She stepped back, trying to tug her hand free.

He squeezed tighter and closed the gap between them. His other arm wrapped around her. Too astonished to evade him, she felt his open mouth cover hers. She had never seen any vampire kiss another. Maybe some of them toyed with that human custom, but none she had ever met.

When Luciano's tongue probed between her lips, she whipped her free hand up to scratch his face. He sprang back with a snarl. Blood beaded on his cheek. Rather than attack her again, he shut his eyes in a moment's concentration. The thin slashes closed.

He glared at her, the red sparks in his eyes more prominent than before. "I won't waste time fighting you now. You'll beg for my touch soon enough. I'll see you then." He stalked out and slammed the door.

Chapter Seven

Shaking, Gillian fastened the deadbolt and chain, then reset the alarm. *That does it, I have to get away!* The sensations that still stirred in the pit of her stomach told her that she didn't dare let Luciano within reach when she entered estrus. Her instincts would give in to him no matter how much she loathed the idea. She had to hole up somewhere until the hormonal storm passed.

Where? Roger or his brother Claude would give her sanctuary at a moment's notice. Her mother would probably do the same, though with more of an argument. And those were the first places Volnar would look. Gillian knew that hiding in plain sight would only delay the inevitable by a few hours.

Leave town and check into a motel hundreds of miles away? Using her credit card for airfare and lodging would leave a trail Volnar could follow. If she withdrew cash, she would still have to buy a plane ticket, and her adviser need only cover the concourse at LAX and interview one reservation clerk after another, using his hypnotic influence, until he discovered Gillian's destination.

Could she evade him by car? But where to go?

She collapsed onto the couch, her hands still trembling. Paul had invited her to his cabin. She could take him up on that offer. She'd never visited there before. Volnar and Luciano had no way of knowing about the place's existence, much less its location. All she had to do was get to Paul without alerting the two older vampires. *As if either one of them would stake out my house, anyway.* But just in case, she would behave as if they did.

After tossing a few clothes into her overnight bag, she stuffed the inside zipper compartment of her purse with hundreds of dollars in various denominations, thankful for Volnar's training on this point, at least. He'd always insisted that she keep plenty of emergency cash tucked away. Ready to leave, she turned off all the lights except for the porch lamp, then peered between the curtains to survey the street out front. No sign of Luciano, no wisp of a vampire's aura lingering in the dark. If he lurked out there, he'd veiled himself from her sight. Most likely, though, he wouldn't have bothered to hang around.

Still, she exited through the back door and didn't head for her car. On the threshold she paused to wrap an illusion of invisibility around herself, a psychic shield to deflect any eyes that glanced her way. Only a member of her own species powerful enough to penetrate that shield—such as Volnar, who was nowhere near—would see her. To ephemerals and lower animals, she flitted through the night like a wisp of fog.

She walked four blocks to the nearest Seven-Eleven, where she called a cab on the pay phone. When the taxi pulled up, she remembered at the last minute to make herself visible before stepping to the curb. She gave the driver Paul's address. Only when she was walking up to his door did she stop to think about the lateness of the hour. Paul would think she had gone crazy. No matter, he wouldn't shut her out.

Seconds after she rang the buzzer, she heard his footsteps on the carpeted floor. Why wasn't he asleep at this hour? Lying awake fantasizing about her, maybe? The thought gave her a frisson of guilty delight. He cracked the door a cautious inch, then unhooked the chain and flung it wide when he saw her.

"Gillian? What in the world are you doing here?"

He wore only a pair of running shorts. The fragrance of his clean flesh with a residue of sexual musk and a trace of aftershave swept over her.

After a quick glance toward the street, she said in a strained whisper, "Let me in. Please."

Without waiting for an answer, she shoved past him into the living room. He closed and locked the door, turning toward her with a puzzled frown.

Her courage dissolved. She dropped the overnight bag and purse, flung herself upon him, threw her arms around his neck, and shuddered with tearless sobs. After a second of astonishment, he wrapped her in a hug. Her fear melted in the warmth of his aura. His body heat and the smoothness of his back against her palms woke her hunger all over again. His heartbeat revved up, and his unguarded human emotions bombarded her with worry, affection, and lust. With the close fit between their heights, she felt his response physically, too. For a second she yielded to the impulse to press against the hard bulge.

Shocked at her own behavior, she pulled back, panting like some ordinary human female with her pulse and respiration not even under conscious control. Paul's flush of embarrassment quickened her appetite. *What's wrong with me? I fed on him just a few hours ago.* To her relief, he pretended to ignore her lapse and his own excitement.

"Gillian. . .shh, it's all right. You're safe." He led her to the couch and made her sit down. He sat beside her with an arm around her shoulders, a safe enough position as long as she remembered not to let her mouth stray too near his chest or neck. "Now tell me what's going on."

Ashamed of her panic, she managed a calm tone. "Earlier, you invited me to your cabin."

"Yeah? Does this mean you've changed your mind? I'm glad, but you could've told me tomorrow. It's not like the invitation was going to expire." The tenderness in his voice softened the teasing.

Noticing her fists clenched in her lap, she uncurled them and drew a deep breath. "I have to go right now. Please." Though she could have short-circuited all argument by hypnotically overriding his will, her human part couldn't accept treating a friend that way. Using her power to feed on a man who desired her anyway was one thing, but she couldn't bring herself to force him something he might not want to do.

The trace of humor vanished from his tone. "What's wrong, Gillian? Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"Sort of. I need to hide." She realized she should have concocted a reason to give him.

"From who?"

"A man." She sensed a spark of anger in Paul's aura. "I'm not hurt, but I need to get away for a while. It's a—a guy who's interested in me and won't take no for an answer."

"He's stalking you?" Paul squeezed her hand tightly enough to cause pain to a human female.

"You could say that. I want to go someplace he doesn't know about. Your cabin sounds perfect."

"Say no more—*mi casa es su casa*. But shouldn't you report this creep to the police?"

"No! No police!" At his bewildered look, she said, "I can handle this myself. All I need is a temporary hideout."

"Won't he just start harassing you again when you go home?"

"There's a good reason why he won't." She stood up, sizzling with impatience. "I can't explain the rest of it. Please trust me." Her eagerness to get moving almost overcame her scruples about mesmerizing him.

He got to his feet, took her hand, and lightly kissed it. "Of course I do. Maybe you can bring yourself to tell me later, but if not, that's your choice."

The brush of his lips on the cilia in her palm made her teeth tingle. She forced herself to retrieve her hand. "Thanks...I'll never forget this."

"Good thing I'm done with classes until September," he said over his shoulder as he headed for the bedroom. She heard him opening drawers and rummaging through clothes. A minute later, he reappeared with a small suitcase. "We can work on the books while we're up there."

She followed him into his home office, where he grabbed his laptop computer and piled manuscripts and diskettes into a briefcase. "Oh...you're planning to stay there with me?"

He turned to her with a look of faint surprise. "Did you think I was just going to abandon you in a strange place, with some jerk trying to hunt you down?" Snapping the briefcase shut, he walked over to her and cupped the back of her head, his thumb tracing absentminded circles behind one ear. "Don't worry, I won't try to take advantage of the situation. Separate rooms."

She acknowledged the pledge with a nod and glided out of his reach. Whether she wanted him to keep that promise, she still wasn't sure.

Minutes later, she sat in the passenger seat of his car, speeding northeast on Interstate 15 toward Big Bear Lake. He didn't try to talk much on the long drive, for which she was grateful. The farther they got from the city, the more her mood lightened. Surely neither Volnar nor Luciano had any way of finding her at Paul's vacation cabin. All she had to do was ride out a few nights of estrus and keep him from noticing anything abnormal about her.

Yeah, all! a sardonic voice in her head taunted her. She told it to shut up.

They drove straight through except for a short break at a convenience store, where Paul filled a bag with miscellaneous groceries. By the time the car pulled into the driveway of the cabin, the sky was

turning gray with a hint of dawn. The small house with a fake log facade stood in a clearing at the end of a narrow gravel road, surrounded by trees. Gillian stepped out and stretched her cramped legs, inhaling the clean scent of pine and the cool breeze from the lake. *Good hunting here, I'll bet.*

Carrying the grocery bag, Paul led the way inside. The front of the cabin consisted of a living room and an eat-in kitchen. Down a short corridor to the rear of the building, he showed her to the guest room, with a bathroom sandwiched between its door and the one that led to his own bedroom.

"I guess you'll want to get some sleep. I sure do." He paused in the hallway, his eyes not quite meeting hers.

Not wanting to linger long enough for awkwardness to melt into temptation, she said, "Thanks for taking me in. It won't be for long."

"Long as you need. I just hope you'll be safe here."

"I will. Don't worry." Brushing aside her scruples, which became more insistent and inconvenient by the hour, she locked onto his gaze and said, "Don't worry about me. A few days from now, it will all be over, and I won't have to hide. Believe that."

His eyelids drooped, and he leaned against the nearest wall. "I believe you."

A problem she'd temporarily forgotten came to mind. "Listen carefully. I like to sleep most of the day. Don't let it bother you, and don't try to wake me. Don't disturb me at all. Okay?"

"Okay," he mumbled. His drowsiness added to the effect of her hypnosis.

"And don't worry about what I eat or don't eat, either. I'm fine. Understand?"

He nodded.

"Okay. Goodnight, Paul."

After his answering "goodnight," she slipped into the guest room and closed and locked the door. She hardly trusted herself not to take advantage of his delicious pliability.

Chapter Eight

Gillian awoke disoriented. Weak rays from the setting sun filtered through Venetian blinds. Paul's scent permeated the air around her. It triggered the memory of driving up from San Diego the previous night. Extending her senses, she heard Paul rummaging in the kitchen. She stretched, shrugging the sheet and patchwork quilt away from her naked body. A bird chirped outside the window. Wind rustled pine needles against the glass.

I'm safe here, really safe. Well, safe from everything but her own desire for her host. And surely she could control herself for a few days. *Oh, yeah? Your record hasn't been great so far.*

She reminded the voice that she had satisfied her hunger, and therefore her curiosity. Now that the mystery was gone, self-restraint should become easier. Would her hypnotic commands of the night before hold firm? She would find out in a few minutes, when she faced Paul.

At the last second she remembered to throw on a terrycloth beach wrap before opening the bedroom door. She was so used to living alone that she had almost stepped into the hall naked. For another vampire, a glimpse of her in the nude wouldn't have much effect without the heat and aroma of her own arousal, but human males reacted strongly to that visual stimulus. She tended to forget how bare female flesh excited them.

In the shower she scrutinized her body, wondering whether she needed to worry about a glance at it driving Paul mad with lust. She didn't conform to contemporary human standards of beauty, with her height and small breasts. For a bleak moment, she speculated that without her vampiric allure, he might not find her attractive at all.

The aroma of broiling meat greeted her when she emerged from the bathroom and scrambled into jeans and a T-shirt. She didn't bother with a bra; with her breast size, she seldom did. In the kitchen she found Paul, dressed in a T-shirt and Bermuda shorts, scooping a couple of hamburgers out of the oven onto paper towels to drain. His aura brightened when he saw her. "Good, you're up. I hope I brought enough stuff you can eat. There's broth and vanilla ice cream and milk—"

"Milk is plenty for now," she said, opening the refrigerator to pour herself a glass.

"Okay," he said cheerfully. So far, her "don't worry" command was working.

She sat at the table and watched him load up his hamburger buns with ketchup and mustard. "I'll just watch you eat," she said, sipping the milk.

Conversation about the book project kept them going through dinner, after which Paul inserted a disk into his laptop and showed her outlines for future installments in the series. "I know we have to anthropomorphize the animals somewhat, to keep the kids interested," he said. "But I don't want to go too far and mislead them. It's too easy for people to fall into the trap of thinking animals' minds—if any—work the same as ours."

"Such as?" She hovered over him, too restless to sit.

"For instance, when a cat plays with a mouse, some people think she's being cruel. In fact, the releasing and recapturing behavior is just an instinctive response to the stimulus of the prey's movements."

"Okay, maybe we should write a story about feral cats."

"We've already made a good start on demonstrating that predators are a vital part of nature, with the coyote book."

"I like a man who appreciates predators," she said, wishing she were free to explain why she felt that way. "How about bears next?"

"Whoa, I don't even want to think about you trying to sneak up on a bear. I'd have too hard a time

finding a new partner. Now, here's my raccoon plot—"

His nearness, the rhythm of his heartbeat and breathing, the radiant heat of his flesh all conspired to distract her. She would have to hunt for animal prey soon, just to take the edge off her appetite. She was thankful that Paul, being only human, couldn't sense her craving.

"I think we've done enough for one day," he finally said. After switching off the computer, he opened the curtain to reveal the fading light of a summer sunset. "How about a drink outside?" A thread of nervous anticipation underlay the simple words.

He opened a bottle of white zinfandel, and they took their glasses onto the wide deck at the back of the cabin, facing toward the mountains. They sat in a pair of deck chairs with the bottle on the floor between them. At least, Gillian thought, they weren't sharing a bench, where physical contact would add to the temptation she had to resist.

She quickly realized, though, that Paul had no intention of resisting. After a few minutes of silent companionship in the fading daylight, he carefully set his glass down on the other side of his chair, leaned toward her, and took her hand.

She could already hear his heartbeat clearly, of course, yet the sensation of his pulse racing under her fingers sent electric shocks through her nerves. When she didn't retreat, he lightly brushed her hair away from her forehead and stroked down her cheek and jawline. Her teeth tingled. He had no way of guessing how provocative that gesture was.

With her chin cupped in his palm, his fingers caressing her neck, he bent over to nibble the corners of her mouth. She could stop him anytime. She knew she ought to do that, should hypnotize him to forget any desire he felt for her. The command would work, if she really wanted it to, if she exerted her will firmly enough.

Instead, her lips parted to welcome the probe of his tongue. Her gasp of surprised pleasure encouraged him. His arm slipped around her shoulders. He tasted like beef blood and vanilla ice cream. She wanted him for dessert...

When his hand left her neck to explore the front of her shirt, a flimsy shield for the bare flesh underneath, Gillian recovered her senses. She pulled back. Taking the hint, Paul let go of her.

"You must know how I feel about you," he said. His rapid breathing and pulse gratified her, despite her better judgment. "I want us to be a lot more than collaborators or even friends. Tell me honestly, what are my chances?"

She gazed into his eyes. She wanted to answer rationally, but the hammering of his heart deafened her thoughts, and the pulsating glow of his aura fogged her vision. *Here's the perfect time to mesmerize him, make him to stop wanting me.* She couldn't bring herself to speak those orders. Instead, she stood up so abruptly she almost knocked the chair over.

When he got up, too, she backed away from him. "I'm sorry, Paul. I can't talk about that now. I need to get some fresh air." Silly excuse, when they were already outside. She sensed his surprise and hurt but hardened herself against the silent appeal. "Exercise, I mean. I need to go for a walk, alone. Please." She hurried down the back steps and into the dark woods.

* * * * *

From the deck, Paul watched Gillian rush into the shadows under the trees. What scared her so much about his question? She should know she didn't have to run away from him. All she had to do was say no, and he would respect her decision.

No matter how much he ached for her. Hell, how was he supposed to understand the workings of a woman's mind? He was a zoologist, not a psychologist.

Taking another sip of his wine, he grimaced. Suddenly it tasted sour. Dinner felt like a heavy lump in his midsection. Might as well admit to himself that he'd ridden along on this trip not just to protect her, but in hopes of seducing her.

So does that make me a sleazeball? I don't think so. After that kiss, he knew she wanted him, too. For some reason she fled in panic from her own desire. Should he chase her or wait for her to return on her own? She was running around by herself in the woods—

His frustration evaporated in a surge of fear for her. *What if that guy who's stalking her somehow followed us? I can't let her wander out there alone.* He dashed inside, grabbed a flashlight, and plunged into the forest in the direction Gillian had taken.

He didn't have any trouble tracking her. She'd left a trail of broken branches and trampled undergrowth. After a few minutes, he noticed a crumpled ball of cloth on the ground. When he picked it up, he recognized Gillian's shirt.

What the hell--?

Paul increased his pace. Seconds later, he slammed to a halt at the edge of a clearing. The flashlight reflected off a pair of red eyes.

The world tilted under his feet. *I don't believe this!*

Chapter Nine

Muscles twitched under her skin. Frustration made a knot in her stomach. She stormed through the undergrowth, heedless of the noise she made. Her peripheral vision caught glimpses of the auras of small animals that skittered out of her path. She growled aloud. Her nerves crawled like a swarm of ants. *How many nights of this can I take?*

Panting like a panicked animal herself, she leaned against a tree and skimmed her hands down the front of her body. The friction made her nipples peak. The burning in her throat and the pit of her stomach sparked a similar fire between her legs. One hand, almost without conscious direction, plunged into the V and began rubbing. An unfamiliar wetness welled up. Wrapping the other arm across her chest

to press on her taut nipples, she vigorously massaged the source of the moist heat. After several minutes, though, she still felt no relief. Snarling, she shoved herself away from the tree.

There was one thing she could do to work off these unwelcome urges. The need to change boiled up from deep within her. Fur sprouted on her arms, neck, and face even before she stripped off her shirt and tossed it aside. The wings burst from her back. Her teeth elongated into fangs, her nails into talons.

Though she had no room to fly under the trees, she could run. Her feet skimmed the ground, hitting the mat of pine needles every couple of yards. Again, she made no attempt to glide silently or avoid the weeds and fallen branches in her path. When she blundered into a clearing and sighted the halo of a deer's life-essence, she was nearly as surprised as the animal.

The doe, nibbling on the leaves of a sapling, whipped her head around to fix on Gillian. Gillian sprang too fast for the victim to flee. No subtlety; she just crashed into the doe and knocked her down, with a blow to the head to stun her. Straddling the unconscious prey, Gillian sank her fangs into the softness of the abdomen. The gush of blood granted momentary relief for the fire in her stomach.

After a few swallows, she became aware of her surroundings again. That was when she heard human footsteps approaching. She raised her head and confronted the glare of a flashlight.

Behind it, she saw Paul staring at her, as stunned as the deer had been a minute earlier.

Gillian's body melted back into human shape. She was still young enough to have trouble holding the winged form, and stress always made it unstable. She rose from her crouch, automatically wiping her mouth with her forearm.

The light beam shook from the tremor of Paul's hand. "You changed. . . you were biting—oh, my God!"

She tried to pitch her voice to a calming tone. "Don't be afraid, Paul."

"Afraid?" He sounded hoarse. "Good Lord, your eyes shine red. No way—I amnot seeing this."

She knew she had to erase his memory. But not here—back at the cabin, where he'd feel safer and she would have time to work on him. "I won't hurt you," she tried again. "Let's go back and. . . talk." The excuse for delay, she realized, meant she didn't want to make him forget. She enjoyed the idea of his knowing the truth.

"Talk," he said. "You bet we will." The fear he radiated ebbed as she stepped closer to him. He swept the flashlight over the ground while they strolled toward the cabin. "You bit that deer."

"I was hungry."

She sensed a renewed shock jolt through him, but he didn't show any signs of panic. "Either I'm crazy, or you aren't human. And I don't believe I'm crazy."

So far, he was taking the revelation better than she'd feared. "You're not."

"Let me get this straight. Wings—fangs—drinking blood—you're a vampire, right?"

Gillian suppressed the impulse to laugh. "This is one time I can be thankful for all those dumb movies.

They save a lot of explanation."

"That explains the night-owl habits and the picky eating. If you sleep in a coffin, you forgot to bring it along."

She gave her head an impatient shake. "I didn't say the movies were accurate. I'm not supernatural. I don't sleep in a coffin, and I reflect in mirrors. We're another species, not undead."

"I saw you transform from a monster with fangs and wings to a human-looking female. That's not supernatural?"

"It's a kind of psychic power. We can shift into an ancestral form stored in our DNA. We don't think of it as supernatural. It's part of our biological inheritance."

"Oh, man, what zoologist wouldn't kill for a chance like this!" He added with a sidelong glance, "Not that I'd publish anything. Who'd believe me? And a headline in the *National Enquirer* would wreck my chances at tenure."

"Then you don't want me to leave?" she said as they reached the cabin and climbed the stairs to the deck.

"Hell, no! I want answers."

"How did you find me, anyway? And why?"

He shrugged. "I was worried, after you ran off that way. You weren't exactly hiding your tracks. Broken underbrush, not to mention this." She realized he was carrying her discarded T-shirt. "Uh...you might want to put it on."

"Why? You've already seen me."

He blushed and averted his eyes. "Humor me."

So she pulled on the shirt and followed him into the living room.

"Don't know about you, but I need a drink." His heartbeat spiked, and he threw her another dubious look. "Guess you already had yours." Detouring to the kitchen, he returned without the flashlight and with a gin and tonic on the rocks. "First question, just to get things clear. You don't do to people what you did to that doe, I hope?"

"I feed on human prey. I have to, two or three times a week, to stay healthy. But it's a small amount, and I don't kill them. They never know it, in fact."

They sat down at opposite ends of the couch. He gulped a swallow of his drink, obviously gathering courage. "Never know? Okay, next question. Have you done it to me?"

She nodded, igniting a spark of anger in his aura. "Once. Last night."

"I don't remember a thing. Well, except for a kiss. And a dream—a pretty hot dream." He scowled at her over the rim of his glass. "You caused it, right? You hypnotized me."

"That's what we do." Would he change his mind and throw her out now?

"Just routine, huh? So I'm just a snack?"

"No, Paul! We're friends."

She edged toward him, and he recoiled. "That's what I thought...until now. Friends don't do what amounts to rape."

"You're angry."

"Damn straight!"

"But you did enjoy the—dream. And you still desire me."

His face flushed a deeper red. "Now what, you're reading my mind?"

"Just your emotions."

Putting the glass down, he bowed his head in his hands. "Good God, this is worse than I thought."

"I don't understand what's so horrible. Now that you know the truth, I won't mesmerize you again without your permission."

"So you expect me to just let bygones be bygones? Oh, and have you pick up every feeling that pops into my head." The sarcastic edge in his voice stung her like a razor cut.

"What did you expect me to do?" she snapped. "Explain what I am and what I wanted? As if you would've believed me."

"You could have trusted me!" he yelled.

"Oh, you wouldn't have called the police or the men in white coats when I asked for a little sip of blood? Or thrown me out into the street, at the very least?"

He sighed. "You have a point. Truth is, I don't know what I would have done. And it's too late to find out now." The crackle of static in his aura quieted. "Trust me now. Why did you really ask me to bring you here? What are you hiding from?"

"A man actually is stalking me. But it's a little more complicated than I implied."

"I'd have thought you could protect yourself against any ordinary man."

"This isn't an ordinary man. It's one of us. As I said, it's a complicated story."

"We've got plenty of time, right? Tell."

"First off, I'm part human. You see, there aren't many of us, fewer than ten thousand worldwide, and our fertility rate has declined over the past couple of centuries."

"Are you immortal, like in the movies?"

"Movies again! Not exactly like that, but we do live a very long time and never die of old age."

"Interesting." He no longer emitted either fear or anger. "Then it would make sense for your species to produce very few offspring."

"Yes, that's how it works. Our females go into estrus only once every few years, and they don't ovulate every time. Males aren't fertile at all, except when stimulated by a female in estrus."

"That fits. Typical K-selected species."

"Say what?"

"Extended lifespan, only one or two infants per conception, long gestation, heavy energy investment in the young." The technical discussion seemed to calm him down.

"Uh—right. The trouble is, more often than not, heat periods are barren. The elders say it's been getting worse recently."

"So your population's declining—even if you don't die naturally, some of you must get killed."

Gillian reflected that Paul's doctorate in zoology saved a lot of time in explanations. "Right. Our Prime Elder got the idea for a breeding project, revitalizing our gene pool with human DNA. That's where I come in, being one-fourth human. He thinks I probably have hybrid vigor and might even be fertile at my first heat, which normally never happens. So he picked a mate for me."

"One that you didn't want."

She caught herself baring her teeth at the memory of Luciano's arrogance. "Not only is it our traditional right to choose our own mates, I can't stand this person. He doesn't like me, either. He's just trying to score points with the Prime Elder. I needed a refuge he wouldn't know about. Someplace to hide until I get through estrus."

"After that it won't matter, because you won't be producing the pheromones anymore. Is that how it works?"

Relieved at not having to spell out the details, she nodded.

"Okay, I admit I'd have thought you were putting me on or out of your mind, if you'd tried to tell me all this before. But now that I know, of course I want to help." Once again the blood suffused his skin, and his aura dimmed with embarrassment. "One thing, though...female animals in heat usually, uh...suffer."

"I had a theory that since I'm part human, it wouldn't be as severe. I thought if I stayed away from male vampires, I might be able to get through it on my own."

"You thought?"

"Well, it hasn't worked out quite the way I hoped. And would you please stop blushing like that?"

He picked up his half-empty glass and took a long swig. "It's not like I can control it. Anyway, why

do you care?" His tone roughened with a blend of defiance and desire.

"The dilated capillaries and the rise in your skin temperature. . . watching that makes me thirsty, if you must know."

"Oh. Should I worry?"

"My self-control isn't totally shot!"

"Glad to hear it. Anyway, if you didn't rip out my throat before, when I was totally off guard, you sure won't do it now that I know about you." His eyes shifted away from hers and back again.

"Then what's wrong?" she said.

"I want to ask you something, and I'm not sure if it violates some vampire etiquette rule. I'd like to watch you change. I didn't get a good look out there in the woods."

Having expected something worse, she said, "Sure, I can do that, if you promise not to freak out."

"Freak out? Perish the thought. Cool, analytical man of science, that's me."

She stood up and peeled off her shirt.

Paul's eyes widened. "Do you have to do that?"

"I'm too young to include clothes in the change. What difference does it make, now that you've already seen me half-naked?"

"Nudity has emotional significance for human males. You must have figured that out by now."

She nudged her sandals off but didn't remove her jeans, in consideration for his obvious uneasiness. "You're not just any man, though. And what's the big deal about showing my breasts? I've seen those pictures in *Playboy*, and I don't come close to the American erotic ideal."

"Not all men have mammary obsessions, not even American men." He scanned her body, then hastily looked away. "And I like your breasts." The dilation of his pupils and the flare of red in his aura confirmed that claim.

With a sigh of pleasure, she unleashed the change. Again the silken fur, fox-red like her hair, spread over her body like flame over dry grass. Cream-colored, mothlike wings unfurled. She felt the tingling eruption of fangs and claws. The sensations eased a little of her tension.

Stunned, Paul gaped at her. After a brief silence, he stood up. "You can't fly, can you?" His hand reached for hers but dropped halfway. "You're too heavy for those wings to lift."

"We levitate. The wings provide balance and steering."

"Levitate." He shook his head. "Another psychic power, like hypnosis and shapeshifting? Sure looks supernatural to me."

Gillian reined her irritation. With so much to take in at once, he had an excuse for thickheadedness.

"Our powers evolved like any other animal's special abilities."

Gathering his nerve with obvious effort, he circled around her. "May I touch?"

"Go ahead." Exactly what she wanted but knew she ought to discourage. "Take it easy, though. We're sensitive in this unstable condition."

When his fingers skimmed her wings, the membrane quivered, and she drew in a hissing breath.

"Sorry...does that hurt?"

"Not hurt," she breathed.

His hands swept over the curves of the wings. He stroked down her spine between them. The heat of his palm made her back arch. "Like velvet," he murmured. He repeated the caress. She responded with an involuntary growl-purr.

"Kitten." He clasped one of her hands and fingered the claws. "Tiger kitten." His other hand reached toward her cheek.

She grabbed his forearm.

He winced, though not in fear. "Good Lord, you're strong."

"I didn't mean to hurt you." She unclenched her grip. "You shouldn't touch my—teeth." Her jaws already ached. She couldn't rely on her self-control if he teased her there. His tangy scent and the pounding of his heart made her dizzy. The waistband of her jeans constricted her breath. She normally transformed completely nude.

"I thought I could handle this. Maybe not." She slithered away from him and melted into fully human shape. Her clothes still felt tight enough to make her stomach cramp. She fumbled at the snap and zipper, wiggled out of the jeans, and kicked them away.

Paul's breathing quickened when she stood before him in nothing but bikini pants. "What do you think you're doing?" Though his voice held an edge of anger, the emotion he radiated felt more like desire.

"I couldn't stand it anymore—my skin's crawling..."

"Look, you can't just strip naked in front of a man. Not even a close friend." She felt him tremble with the effort of staying motionless. "It's not fair."

"Then I'll get out of here." She didn't turn to leave the room, though.

"Don't do that. I mean..." He raked his fingers through his hair. "You're driving me crazy. Do I have to say straight out how much I want you? How beautiful you are?"

Would he lust for her, though, if she were only human? Gillian knew perfectly well that her figure didn't match the Barbie doll ideal. "That's an illusion," she said. "It's the vampire allure you're responding to, not the way I look."

"Hold it—you aren't hypnotizing me right now, are you?"

She emphatically shook her head. "I won't hypnotize you or drink from you again without your permission. Word of honor." Luckily, it didn't seem to occur to Paul that she might influence him to accept her word, and he would never realize it. She didn't want to complicate the discussion by reminding him of that possibility. "It's a kind of magnetism we have. Involuntary, unless we suppress it deliberately, and it gets stronger the more excited we are."

"You're saying I can't help being attracted to you. Any man would."

She nodded. "Sexual polarity makes it more intense, but it can work on same-sex targets if we want it to."

"I don't believe it's just that." Now he did allow himself to inch closer to her, as if he expected her to bolt like a deer. "I like you for yourself, your mind, your personality."

"I'm glad," she whispered. If she let herself think too much about his claim, she would doubt it all over again. In her overwrought condition, she couldn't be sure, herself, how much she was lulling him with her innate power.

"Because I need a favor from you."

The musky aroma of his arousal made a fire smolder in the pit of her stomach. The antlike prickle under her skin was back, stronger than before.

Chapter Ten

"What kind of favor?" The tremor in his voice underscored the queasy excitement he radiated. A touch of anxiety made his pulse race, yet her heat vision showed blood pooling in his loins.

She snaked her arms around his waist and undulated against him. "I'm in estrus. I recognize the symptoms, from the descriptions I've heard. And I won't be able to ride it out alone, after all. I tried, and it didn't work. Something about needing a live male body in direct contact with mine, I guess.

He hugged her close and massaged her shoulder blades. "You mean you want me to—Good grief, do you know what position you're putting me in?"

"What's wrong?" She sensed waves of lust emanating from him. Why did he hesitate? "You said you wanted me."

"If you can read emotions, you know I do. Hell, you should be able to tell without that." His arms tightened around her, and he nuzzled her neck. "That's just the point. This is the stereotype of every man's ultimate fantasy, a woman in heat who can't get enough of him. I'd be taking advantage of your...predicament."

Ephemerals! Their logic completely eluded her. "Taking advantage of *me* ? Don't be ridiculous, it's

the opposite. I'm taking advantage of *you*. I need a male, and you're the only one around." She drew a deep breath. "And the only one I want."

He gazed at her, their eyes meeting almost level. "Really?"

"Yes. I certainly don't want any of the eligible males of my own species. If I have to choose anyone, it's you."

"All right." His voice shook. To her ears, the thunder of his heartbeat almost drowned out the words. "If you're sure, I'm not about to pass up the opportunity."

"Wonderful!" She decided not to mention the literal truth of the "can't get enough" clause. With luck, her human heritage meant that her needs wouldn't rage beyond the limits he could handle. She slipped out of his arms and stripped off her panties. "Take off your clothes."

"Whoa—" He backed up a pace. "We don't usually rush into things so abruptly."

"Oh. I guess you have plenty of experience with sexual relations." Her eagerness shaded into trepidation as she speculated that her ignorance of mating etiquette might offend or bore him.

He shrugged, his aura wavering with a hint of discomfort. "I'm no Don Juan. I've been celibate since my last relationship ended six years ago. So you don't have to worry about catching anything."

That point hadn't even occurred to her. "I'm immune to infectious diseases. And since I've never had intercourse, I can't be a carrier."

"Never? Not even with the men you've fed on?" His aura dimmed, then flared a lurid red.

What did that momentary flash of darker emotion mean? Jealousy? "It's not necessary. I get my satisfaction from them without allowing that intimacy. This is different."

At the word "different," she sensed a tinge of doubt in him, but he didn't pursue the point. "I almost forgot, what about pregnancy?"

"I don't expect to ovulate. That's just a far-fetched idea of my mentor's. If I do, I have enough control over my body to prevent a fertilized egg from implanting."

"That's all right, then. If you aren't worried about—"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He exhaled a deep breath. "No problem."

"So what are you waiting for? Get undressed." She reached for the snap on his shorts.

Paul grabbed her wrist. "Hold it. I'm used to a little more in the way of preliminaries." To her dismay, the level of his arousal dropped slightly, tainted by confused hesitance.

"Why? You've acknowledged that you desire me, and I need a male. The seduction process is unnecessary."

"Another male fantasy, a woman who's as ready as a man. You make it sound so, well, mundane."

Gillian shrugged. "It's a biological process, after all." Though she enjoyed his ardor, at the same time it made her prickle with uneasiness. Personal involvement with a human donor meant a risk she'd always been taught to avoid.

"At least let's go into the bedroom. More comfortable."

"Very well." She laced her fingers through his. "Yours or the guest room?"

"Uh...mine, I guess." His thumb traced a circle on her palm. The cilia bristled, making her shiver with pleasure. "Hey, little hairs. Interesting."

"And sensitive. *Come on* ." She led him into the bedroom and lay down on his unmade bed, still holding his hand.

Sitting on the edge of the mattress, he stroked down the front of her chest, between her breasts. "Interesting hair growth pattern."

"Speaking as a zoologist?" she whispered.

He grinned. "Right. Got to make careful observations." He traced the outline of the inverted triangle of fine hair that covered her torso from the underside of her breasts down, with its apex at her navel. "Like silk." The painless burning of his hand on her bare flesh made her squirm. Every nerve sizzled, and her nipples hardened.

Paul freed his hand from hers and skimmed over both peaks. Ordinarily, that caress would have made her salivate and the roots of her teeth ache. It did, but instead of the whole-body arousal that normally accompanied blood-thirst, she felt fiery darts shooting straight from her nipples to her loins. Crossing her legs and squeezing them didn't help. "Take off your shirt," she whispered.

After he pulled the shirt off, she raked her nails lightly over his chest, careful not to scratch him. When she played with the tight curls of hair and flicked one of his nipples, as taut as her own, he gasped.

"You're sexually aroused," she said.

"How'd you figure that out?" he said with a wry smile. "Oh, yeah, you sense emotions."

"Not only that. I see into the infrared, so I know your skin temperature is rising. And your scent has changed, too."

He flushed a deeper red and bent to take off his shoes and socks. "Good grief, I can't have any secrets around you, can I?" But embarrassment didn't stop him from bending to kiss her, while one hand returned to fondling her breasts. Even though she avidly drank in his taste and aroma, she writhed with impatience.

He paused to catch his breath and ran his hand down the front of her body, this time not stopping at the navel. She arched her hips to meet the hand cupping the soft triangle of pubic hair. "Do you have an erection?" she said.

"Are you kidding?"

"No, I'm asking. My knowledge of human male sexual physiology is only theoretical. I can see a concentration of heat at your groin, but that just tells me blood is rising to the surface there."

"It sure is." His breathing came heavy and ragged.

"Show me."

With shaking hands, he unfastened his shorts and dropped them to the floor, along with the briefs underneath. His erection jutted out at a ninety-degree angle.

Bracing himself with both hands on either side of her, he licked first one nipple, then another. Heat pooled between her legs. She dug her nails into his shoulders, only the scent of blood reminding her to exercise restraint. "What are you waiting for? You're obviously ready to copulate."

Paul gazed into her eyes. "I don't want to start before you're ready, maybe hurt you."

"You can't hurt me. I'm not human, remember? No hymen. Besides, I can suppress pain."

"Still, most women like to take it slowly, get warmed up, so to speak." His fingers toyed with the silken hair at the apex of her thighs.

"I don't need warming up. I'm hot." She meant the term literally; her normally cool skin felt scorched. "And my vagina is lubricated. I'm ready for intromission."

One of his fingers dipped into her wet heat, then stroked slowly up and down between the folds. "Unbelievable, you've got me incredibly turned on by talking like a textbook." He circled the firm bud at the top of her labia.

She couldn't suppress a moan. "That tickles."

"How's this?" His fingertip flicked back and forth over the sensitive spot. "Or this?" He swept down the insides of both thighs, then back up to her burning center.

"Tickles," she whimpered.

"Then I'd better stop." She heard the humor in his tone.

Her hips involuntarily rocked against his hand. "No! Stopping makes it worse." She wiggled, her attention torn between the slowly building pressure in that location and the hot flood deeper inside.

She gripped his shaft, fascinated by the texture, hard, yet satin-smooth on the surface. He groaned and thrust into her clasp.

"You're ready to penetrate, aren't you?"

"You bet," he said through gritted teeth.

"Then do it. Now!"

He knelt between her spread legs and probed at the welcoming portal. She arched up to draw him

in. For a second she felt tightness, almost pain, but as she'd expected, it disappeared when he began to move. She caught her breath in astonishment. The sensation was so focused, so unlike the whole-body climax of feeding on aroused prey. Fire consumed her. She undulated with the rhythm of the contractions that convulsed her inner flesh.

The convulsion happened twice more before Paul plunged in to the full depth and groaned aloud while his whole body shook. She felt the hot eruption of his release inside her.

Breathing hard, he eased down on top of her. After a couple of minutes he said, "Oh, Lord, that was incredible. Too bad it was over so fast."

"We can take a slower pace next time, if that's what you want."

He raised his head to stare at her. She felt his surprise. "You're expecting a next time?"

"I'm in estrus, remember? Normally this continues for a full night."

"Yeah, that would be the usual pattern for animals like cats and such. You, too?"

"So I've been told." Did he think of her as an exotic specimen to study? Why did that idea disturb her? She wanted an uncomplicated mating, didn't she?

"Well, as long as I've waited to have you like this, one time couldn't wear me out." He planted a light kiss on her parted lips. "Just give me a little while to recover."

She already felt the insistent need coiling in the pit of her abdomen. Trailing her fingers down the front of his body, she curled over him to circle each of his nipples with her tongue. The salty flavor reminded her of blood, but the urgency that drove her felt different from bloodlust. Her fingertips brushed his genitals, and she felt a twitch of response. He caught his breath.

"I'm getting wet again," she murmured, nibbling her way down his chest, grazing the skin without scratching it.

"I don't think I'm ready—" He gasped as her nails found a sensitive ridge in the perineal area. "Or I could be wrong about that."

Alert to the changing nuances of his emotions and sensations, she followed the shifting pattern of his arousal until he hardened, and she sensed his passion building toward explosion. By now she was writhing with impatience. "Come on," she growled, rolling onto her back.

This time she enjoyed six orgasms before he reached his.

Struggling for breath, his head on her breast, Paul said, "Oh, God, how do you do that? Know exactly how to touch?"

"Empathic perception, remember? That includes physical sensations as well as emotions."

"I can see where it has advantages."

She felt the rhythm of his heartbeat and respiration decelerate as his emotional high faded toward sleep. She dozed awhile, too, although she couldn't really sleep after dark. Within less than half an hour,

the craving seized her anew, as fierce as thirst.

She pushed Paul onto his back and lay on top of him. "Wake up."

"What—?" His eyelids barely opened.

"I need you again." She licked and nuzzled him, meanwhile rubbing her insistent heat against his dormant penis.

"Gillian, I'm not sure I can."

"You have to." She raised up to straddle his hips, stroking down his body in ever-lengthening spirals. As she'd expected, his nerves and blood vessels responded to the power of her touch. Finding the trigger points, she worked on them until he sprang erect under her.

"I don't believe this—how—" He was already thrusting even before she impaled herself on him. "You promised you wouldn't hypnotize me."

"This isn't hypnotism, just encouragement. I influenced your body, not your mind."

"Well, it's...definitely—encouraging!"

This time she lost count of her climaxes. Since even vampiric seduction couldn't completely overrule human male physiology, Paul lasted over fifteen minutes before he spent.

The aftershocks of their shared ecstasy left him trembling. "That's absolutely incredible!" he said when he could speak again. She purred with delight at his reaction.

Several minutes later, he stumbled to the bathroom and back, then collapsed into sleep. She watched him for a few minutes, smoothing his damp hair, before she, too, dozed off.

Again, though, she didn't stay zoned out for long. Her body demanded relief. When she woke Paul this time, he sighed. "You know I want to, but there are limits. I'm only human."

"Don't worry, I'll...encourage—you." Her nails raked over his chest. He shuddered. Blood beaded along one scratch where she'd miscalculated and broken the skin. Her tongue flicked at the tantalizing drops. Further aroused by the taste, she intensified her caresses. Inevitably his body responded to her urgency. She climbed on top while he lay with his eyes shut, his body slick with sweat. The prolonged coupling that followed gifted her with a continuous stream of orgasms, each peak almost overlapping the one before it.

After nearly half an hour, he pulled out and demanded in a passion-roughened growl, "Roll over."

"What?" Her head reeled, a crimson fog clouding her vision.

"My turn." He prodded her until she lay face down. Grasping her inner thighs, he shoved her legs apart.

"Paul, what are you doing?" She flexed her fingers and dug her claws into the sheet, fighting the panic incited by this moment of helplessness.

Silently except for the rasp of his breath, he hammered into her. With her legs splayed, she arched her hips like a cat in heat to match his pounding rhythm. He rammmed more deeply, stretched her more fully, than she had ever imagined possible.

Wide open to him, body and mind, she found herself swept into the whirlwind of his passion, as if they were bonded. She drowned in his emotions.

He shuddered with the thrill of her wet heat rippling around his rigid shaft. The climax building in his loins felt like a flood of molten lava ready to erupt. He panted in time with his thrusts, and on every exhaled breath he groaned aloud. Gillian moaned in chorus with him. Her cries made his heart race even faster, and he pounded harder to match the speed of their synchronized pulsebeat. He exulted in the frantic pumping of her hips. He'd unleashed this wildness in her—she wanted him and only him.

"Mine," he breathed. "You're mine. Come with me," he urged, clamping her wrists to the mattress. "That's it, let go, come now—" Seized by a savage impulse, he sank his teeth into the nape of her neck. With a keening moan, she convulsed beneath him. He roared in primal satisfaction.

After a few more strokes he spasmed in release. She howled like a she-wolf as his explosion ignited yet another one in her. Spent, she sank back into her own body.

When they parted and she stretched out beside him, he summoned the strength to put an arm around her. "Gillian, honey, that's the most mind-blowing thing I've ever experienced, but it's not exactly *fun* anymore. I may never move again."

"Rest, then," she whispered. "Sleep." A few seconds of stroking his forehead eased him into oblivion.

After that encounter, she hoped her need had exhausted itself. She got up to take a shower and drink three glasses of water. Though she didn't feel hungry now that the sexual drive had slacked off, the exercise had made her dehydrated. For a few minutes she stood on the deck, without bothering to dress, and watched the shimmering heat traces of insects and small animals in the dark woods. The cool air whispered over her bare skin and made the hair on her arms and torso vibrate along with the cilia in her palms.

She wandered back into the bedroom and looked down at Paul. His musky aroma stirred an echo of blood-thirst in the pit of her stomach. She knelt on the mattress and licked perspiration from his chest, savoring the salty tang. He shifted position but didn't wake. Gillian nuzzled his groin and lapped at the tip of his organ. The droplets that clung there tasted intriguingly similar to blood. Some other time, she looked forward to drinking from that fountain.

She felt her arousal reawakening. Sitting astride his legs, hoping the friction would provide some relief, she continued licking and kissing him until he struggled up to consciousness.

"Gillian, I can't," he groaned. "I'm sorry, but it's just impossible."

"But I need..." She hated to hear herself whimpering in frustration, but she couldn't help it, any more than she could help rocking against his legs to ease the burning that tormented her. Maybe it was true, after all, that a human mate could never satisfy her. If she'd been human herself, the thought would have made her cry.

"Gillian, come up here and let me try... please" Gathering her into his arms, he kissed her open

mouth, then each of breasts in turn, while stroking her in long, languid caresses. She shuddered under his petting. Though his body heat felt wonderful on her hypersensitized skin, the fire between her thighs negated the pleasure.

To her surprise, he plunged two fingers inside her. She arched to meet his probe. Within seconds, she fell into a vigorous copulatory rhythm. It didn't seem to matter that his hand, not his erection, provided the stimulus. She had his warm flesh pressed against her and thrusting inside her, she had the comfort of his scent and taste, his thumb meanwhile teased the swollen bud that contributed more to her delight than she would have expected, and she was spiraling higher, higher...

"I know," he murmured, "like cats." She felt his fingernails scrape the inner wall of her canal. She screamed aloud in release.

He kept up the steady rhythm until her convulsions played themselves out. Finally she relaxed with her head on his shoulder.

"It worked," he said, his breath ruffling her hair. "We've found a solution."

"What did you mean about cats?"

"The tomcat has barbs on his penis. The stimulation seems to be vital to the copulation process. So I tried to imitate that, thinking it might be similar with your species."

"Interesting." She stretched and snuggled more comfortably against him. "Logical." She decided she was lucky, after all, to have picked a zoologist for a mate.

* * * * *

Over and over they fell into light sleep, then woke to repeat the operation as the peaks and valleys of her arousal demanded. The ability to please her seemed to satisfy him even though he could no longer share her climaxes. Waves of warmth emanated from him, enfolding her in a rosy cloud of sensual delight. Toward morning, the intervals lengthened. About five a.m., Paul had slept for almost two hours, and with the approach of dawn, Gillian felt the day-sleep beginning to overshadow her.

She was surprised to feel another surge of need. She caressed Paul awake. When he started to pet her, she whispered, "Wait. This should be the last time—I think you can..."

He lay back and let her vampire seduction work on him. For all her efforts and his willingness, though, his erection rose only to half-mast, while she moaned with impatience. "Let me try something," she said. "Trust me."

Often enough, she'd heard her elders refer to blood-sharing as the ultimate thrill. She'd seen evidence of it in the auras of her father and his lover in the aftermath of encounters she was expected to pretend not to notice. Now she slashed her wrist with her teeth and pressed the trickle of blood to Paul's mouth. For an instant he resisted, but the caress of her free hand lulled him, and he clamped his lips to the wound.

The flick of his tongue sent an electric shock through her. On top of it, she felt his emotions more keenly than ever, heard the chaotic riot of his thoughts—*what's she doing, that feels incredible, tastes*

like champagne—and felt him stunned by the echo of her arousal in his own loins. Almost instantly his erection sprang upright. As she engulfed him and rocked through her climax, she felt her teeth tingling with thirst. She'd promised him, but—

"Paul, please!" she moaned.

His thoughts answered her, since his mouth was still occupied with sucking her blood. *What's wrong?*

"Please... I need to bite."

Then do it!

When her teeth nipped his throat, and his blood gushed into her mouth, she climaxed again, and he came with her.

For an unmeasured time afterward, they lay motionless, their thoughts so intertwined that Gillian couldn't tell his from her own. She hadn't realized how intimate the union would be. It frightened her, opening her thoughts to an ephemeral, and yet the joy of the sharing was worth it.

After a while Paul disengaged his body from hers and sat up. "Hey, what was that?"

"Bonding," she said, gazing at him from under half-open eyelids. "Two-way blood-sharing makes us telepathically linked."

"You didn't mention that." She sensed a wariness in him.

"I wasn't thinking. I just needed to be close to you and let you feel what I felt."

"And now you're in my head." He shakily stood up. "I'm not sure how I feel about that."

His withdrawal puzzled her. He had enjoyed what they shared as much as she had. Why didn't she feel the simple, pleasantly exhausted satisfaction she felt? "My cycle is finished now. We don't have to be inside each other's thoughts any more than we want to."

"Finished, huh?" A whipcrack of anger accompanied the words. "Just like that. You've gotten what you want, so you don't need me anymore."

"I don't understand... haven't you had more than enough of my demands? I thought you wanted it to be over—"

His irritation faded as quickly as it had sparked. He picked up his shorts from the floor. "Look, I'm worn out, and you probably need to sleep."

"Yes. Oh—when I'm asleep during the day, I look sort of, well, dead. Don't let it worry you."

"Yeah, right." His lips twisted in a wry smile. "After last night, I won't give a second thought to a little thing like that." He walked gingerly toward the bedroom door. Her own muscles reflected the soreness in his, and she wished he would let her massage the pain out. Instead of responding to that tentative thought, he said, "I'll crash in the guest room so you won't be disturbed when I get up."

Though she felt an emptiness when he'd left the room, her fatigue didn't let her brood for long. The daylight coma instantly overwhelmed her.

Chapter Eleven

The moment she woke, well into the evening, Gillian extended her mental antennae in search of Paul. When she brushed the fringe of his thoughts, he rebuffed her in a tone like a slap.

Stay out of my skull.

She curled up and hugged herself for a few minutes, until the sting of that command faded. She'd witnessed the profound union between Roger and Britt, seen the love flowing between them. Why did Paul react to the bond so differently?

Gillian showered and dressed, resisting the impulse to send Paul another telepathic greeting, but constantly aware of his presence in the house, moving from room to room.

She went into the kitchen, where he silently poured her a glass of milk. The aroma of bacon and eggs pervaded the air. Sitting at the table, she watched him serve himself a plate from the stove. Only when he sat opposite her with his food and a glass of orange juice did he finally speak.

"How often is this going to happen? Every seven years, like a Vulcan?"

She didn't pretend not to understand the question. "No more than twice a decade, normally."

"That's a relief," he said without a trace of a smile. "Any more would probably kill me. That's assuming we ever do it again."

She almost choked on a swallow of milk. "Why wouldn't we?"

"Next time you'll have plenty of warning to find a mate of your own species. I figure now that I've serviced you, we go back to being just collaborators, right?"

"Serviced? Is that how you see it?" His cold manner baffled her. "Why would you think that? We share a blood bond now. Our relationship can't be casual."

"A bond you created without asking me. That's a heck of a lot more serious than hypnotizing me a couple of times." She felt him bristle with outrage like a porcupine spreading its quills.

"You enjoyed it as much as I did."

"Damn it, that's not the point!" He shoveled in a few bites of fried egg. "You invaded my mind. Can't you understand why that bothers me?"

"I'm trying to. Paul, I didn't plot to take control of your brain and turn you into a zombie. I wanted to let you share what I was feeling. What's wrong with that?"

"You could've asked."

"I didn't think it out. I acted in the heat of passion. Plus, I really didn't know how intense it would be. After all, I don't make a habit of this."

"Yeah?" Chomping on a slice of bacon, he stared at her for a minute. "You never did this blood bond thing before?"

"Only with my mentor, and that's not the same at all."

"So maybe you have some excuse. But I'm still not sure how I feel. I need to think about it. This is a hell of an information load to process." He pushed his half-empty plate aside and stood up.

"You haven't finished eating. You need nourishment after last night."

"I can feed myself without you giving me orders." He headed for the back door. "I'm going for a walk."

"Okay, we can talk about—"

"Alone. I said I have to think, and that means without your...influence. My brain doesn't work right when you're around."

After he'd left, she drank the rest of her milk and fought the urge to follow him telepathically. Already his absence made her feel half-empty. How would she endure it if he continued to reject her? She wandered into the office and settled down to read some of his rough drafts. The thought of collaborating with Paul in this strained mode chilled her. Which would be worse, never seeing or touching him again, or working with him while this barrier separated them?

Oh, no, I think I'm addicted! She'd been warned about the risk of feeding too often from one victim or feeding at all from a donor she was emotionally entangled with. Yet the warnings hadn't given her any inkling of how fast and hard the condition could strike.

Giving up on work, she poured herself a glass of wine and sat on the deck in the deepening twilight. How long would Paul stay away? He couldn't hike around in the woods all night, could he?

She'd nearly finished the wine when a mental scream ripped through her brain. *Paul!* She leaped to her feet and extended her thoughts toward him.

Stay away from me, Gillian, it's a trap.

Ignoring his plea, she insinuated herself into his senses. For a few seconds she saw through Paul's eyes. A man led him to a car parked on an otherwise deserted dirt road. *Luciano.* Paul's mind still functioned, but his body obeyed the vampire's commands.

Relaxing the link for the moment, Gillian hurried into the cabin, scrambled into her shoes, and rummaged through the junk on Paul's bedroom dresser. She thanked the Dark Powers that he wasn't one of those men who automatically loaded their pockets whenever they dressed. She found his car keys

almost immediately. Alone, she could have shapechanged and flown to intercept the pair, but she would need the car for Paul.

Of course he was right about the trap, but that fact was irrelevant. She couldn't leave him in Luciano's hands.

In the car she opened her mind to Paul's without making him aware of the contact. He drew her like one magnetic pole attracting its opposite. The only way she could lose the trail would be if her target drove out of telepathic range.

Despite her frustration at having to follow the windings of back roads through the trees instead of making a crow's-flight straight shot to the location, it took her less than an hour to catch up with Luciano. She found his vehicle, a rented four-door sedan, parked in the driveway of a cabin slightly similar to Paul's. She screeched to a stop on the side of the road, jammed the keys in her pocket, and raced toward the house.

Luciano stepped onto the front porch, leaving the door open behind him. Sensing Paul's presence inside—awake, unharmed—she itched to shove the other vampire out of the way and barge in. She knew, though, that Luciano's greater strength would make that difficult.

He greeted her with a gloating smile. "I expected to have to telephone you. I planned to let you suffer awhile, then tell you where I'd taken your pet. How did you get here?"

Her lips curled in an involuntary snarl. She had to inhale and exhale several times to bring her voice under control. "Never mind that. Let me see him."

"Only one way I can think of, but surely not—" He scowled, his aura darkening. "Don't tell me you bonded with this ephemeral!"

"None of your business." She would *not* allow Luciano to make her ashamed of sharing herself with Paul, yet his scorn showed clearly how most of her kind would regard the act.

"Well, no matter. However it happened, I believe you're actually addicted to him. If he's that important to you, all the better. You'll give me what I want, or he'll suffer."

She stalked toward him, pausing only when he emitted a warning growl. "How did you find me, anyway?"

"Naive child." He sighed in mock sympathy. "It was no trouble at all. I asked around until I discovered that you had only one regular associate, your professional collaborator. By questioning his neighbors, I learned that he'd vanished overnight and not come back. By further interrogation among his friends, I found out about his vacation property. Of course, all the people I talked to have forgotten they ever met me."

"Very clever. Now, what do you want?" As if she couldn't guess.

"You, of course, my promised mate. You'll be on the verge of desperation soon. After our night together, I'll return your pet to you."

"Forget about it, Luciano. It's too late for that."

"What the devil are you talking about?" He took a couple of paces away from the door.

"You've missed your chance. I'm not in estrus anymore."

Gliding closer to her, he sniffed the air like a dog. "Damn. You aren't. Who—"

In a dash almost too fast for her eyes to track, he sprinted to her side and grabbed her arm. He bent to inhale the scent of her hair. She flinched, and he squeezed her forearm.

"That ephemeral! I can smell him on you." He released her with a contemptuous shove. "You actually mated with that creature."

"Don't you dare hurt him!"

Luciano radiated disgust. "Begging, now? Incredible—you have tender feelings for him, don't you? The bond is more than lust? I knew all along this business of grafting human genes into our bloodline was a mistake."

Gillian's fists involuntarily clenched, and a crimson fog thickened before her eyes. The only thing that kept her from striking out was the fear that Luciano would inflict his wrath on Paul.

"If you had to get infected by this human disease called love," Luciano continued, "you didn't have to make it worse by going mad over a lower animal."

Gillian drew a long, shuddering breath to dispel the mist of rage that shrouded her brain. "Enough. Just give him to me."

Luciano's lips curled in a snarl. "I ought to tear him to shreds, just for the time I've wasted on you half-breed."

"If you kill him, I swear I'll—"

"Murder me? Break the most fundamental law of our kind?" He taunted her with a feral smile. "Oh, Dark Powers, girl, at least stop acting like a hysterical child. Why would I bother killing your pet? Come and get him."

He stepped aside with an ironic gesture of welcome. Gillian ran up the driveway to the open door. Why hadn't Paul come out already? What had Luciano done to him?

Chapter Twelve

The interior smelled dusty, shut up and unused. Luciano must have "borrowed" a cabin whose owners hadn't visited in some time. Tracking Paul's thoughts, she found him in a bedroom. He lay atop the rumpled covers of a fully made bed, his arms stretched to the sides and handcuffed to the headboard.

His legs were hobbled by ropes tied around his ankles and the posts of the footboard. His eyes widened in alarm when he saw her.

The air rippled with the speed of Luciano's entry. He slipped past Gillian and appeared beside the bed. "Should I give him back to you right away or play with him a little? You arrived so fast I didn't have time for any recreation."

"If you hurt him, I'll rip your head off, law or no law."

"Don't worry, I don't consider him worth the trouble. I won't damage your pet."

"Stop calling him that!"

Luciano turned to Paul. "Think she protests too much? That's all you are to her, you know, a pet. We're superior beings, and your kind are our prey."

"It's not true, Paul!" she cried. "You know I don't feel that way about you."

Paul gave her a bleak stare.

Luciano bared his teeth at Gillian. "And you—do you really believe he's in love with you? Would he look twice at you if not for your vampire magnetism? That's the allure, you know. Without that, no human male would give you a second glance, much less get a cockstand for you. You don't have the kind of body they lust for."

"Stop it," she whispered. She knew he registered the impact of every barb he shot. Her agitation wouldn't allow her to guard her emotions from him.

Pulling down the collar of Paul's shirt, Luciano forced his head to one side and bent to lick his throat. "How does that feel? Not too different from the way she made you feel, I daresay?" He scraped a fingernail across Paul's neck. Blood oozed from the scratch. The vampire lapped at the drops, while his hand skimmed down his victim's chest and abdomen to the groin. Paul's body jerked, and a moan escaped from him.

Gillian felt his terror and revulsion at his own physical response. She stood panting, her hands curling and uncurling like claws. The scarlet fog in her brain almost obliterated thought, but not quite. She retained enough control to realize that charging the vampire would endanger her bond-mate.

"You like this, don't you?" Luciano breathed in Paul's ear, while his fingers danced like spiders over all the most vulnerable spots. "Doesn't matter which vampire is feasting on you, the sensations are just as keen." His tongue flicked the scrape again. "Ah, I notice you've recovered from Gillian's use of your cock. It's nicely stiffened. I could make you spend right now."

Paul closed his eyes and groaned, struggling to writhe away from Luciano's touch.

"But I won't." The vampire stepped back from the bed. "Take him, girl, and good riddance to both of you."

She pounced to the bedside and snapped first one ankle rope, then the other. Paul cast an agonized gaze on her when she approached the headboard.

"Here," Luciano said from the doorway. He reached into his pocket and tossed a key to Gillian. "Do you really want to release him? Now he knows what our kind are really like. Do you think he won't loathe the sight of you?"

He vanished, and as she began to unlock the handcuffs, she heard a car start and accelerate into the distance.

With his hands free, Paul hunched over, rubbing his wrists. Gillian watched, afraid to speak or touch him. His mind, boiling with turmoil and outrage, lay open to her. Finally he looked up.

"I have your car," she said. "Let's get out of here."

"Right." The word dropped from him like a stone.

When they got to the car, he walked to the driver's side and reached for the keys. She dropped them into his hand, catching a stray thought that letting her drive him home would be one thing too much to endure. The concept bewildered her, but she sensed that taking the wheel held a symbolic value for him.

Once they got on the road, she had to ask. "What's bothering you? Luciano's gone. It's all over."

"Can't you understand how I feel, being rescued by you? By a woman?" The anguish in his voice ripped into her.

"I don't believe you said that. I've never thought of you as a reactionary male chauvinist."

"Me neither, but it must have been hiding in me somewhere."

She swallowed her rising anger, recognizing it as mostly a reflection of his. "No, I don't understand."

"Then I sure can't explain it." Tight-lipped, he glared out the windshield.

They'd almost reached the cabin before he spoke again. "What that creep said. I'm a pet to you. How about it?"

"Paul, you know that isn't true. You never thought that way when we worked together or last night while we made love."

"Mated, you mean. You can't love a lower animal. Any man would have served the purpose."

His tone pierced her like an icicle to the heart. "You've known me for over two years. And now I've turned into a monster overnight?"

"I got a glimpse of your family background, so to speak."

Her jaws ached with clenching them in frustration. "How can I convince you I'm not like that?"

"I don't know," he said, "when you can hypnotize me into believing any claim you make."

"I promised not to do that again."

"Sure, but how can I believe your promises? Look what your vampire friend did to me. Controlled me like a robot."

"He's not my friend." She breathed deeply, striving to keep her voice level. "Yes, any vampire could do that, but I won't. Never."

He pulled the car into his driveway and turned to look at her. "But I'll never know, will I? I could be under your control without realizing it. And how do I know what I really feel for you? The way I reacted when that monster touched me..." She felt him swallow a surge of nausea.

She heaved an exasperated sigh. Put that way, the situation constituted an impossible Catch-22.

"And another thing," said Paul, opening the car door, "what did he mean by `addicted'?"

Too late to deny or evade; Paul would distrust her worse if she did. "It's a fixation, a physiochemical thing, that results from feeding on the same donor too many times, or feeding on a donor with emotional involvement."

"Wonderful." He stood upright and stared at her across the roof of the car as she got out. "So you can't be sure, either. For all you know, when you think you care about me, it might just be addiction talking."

Gillian shook her head. "It's not that way. I cared about you first—that's why I got hooked so fast when I tasted you."

He stalked into the house, and she followed. When he headed for his own room, though, she didn't pursue. Instead, she sat brooding in the unlighted living room.

* * * * *

Paul stood under the shower letting hot water flood over him. He leaned against the tile wall with his eyes closed, leaking tears. How could he ever face Gillian again, much less make love to her? She'd watched him get an erection for that monster. He felt as foul as if he'd had sex with a reptile. Even if she, with her nonhuman mindset, could put that incident behind her, Paul didn't believe he could. The humiliation of seeing her face while he lay there helpless would haunt him. He probably wouldn't be able to perform with her anymore, remembering that.

The worst of it was, Gillian didn't have a clue why he felt this way. Sure, she could read his emotions, but they obviously baffled her. Just silly human scruples, for all she understood. He must have been crazy to believe he could share love, or anything besides animal passion, with a woman of another species. Maybe, deep down, she really did regard him as a pet, a simple creature to be soothed into docility until the next time she needed its services.

When the hot water cooled to lukewarm, he turned it off, rubbed dry with skin-reddening roughness, and ducked into his room for fresh clothes. He had to get away from her as soon as possible. He could hardly abandon her here, though. Okay, so he'd drive her home. But after that he wouldn't see her again. This disaster didn't have to ruin their professional partnership. They could collaborate on their books by e-mail and fax. It would be a relief to escape the complications of emotional entanglement.

Dressed, he headed for the living room with a firm stride. Now that he'd made up his mind to treat everything that had happened this weekend like a surreal dream, he ought to feel at peace.

So why did he feel as if he'd been shot through the heart?

* * * * *

After a long time he emerged, having showered and changed. His clean scent, punctuated with traces of soap and shampoo, made Gillian's heart stutter. "That Luciano guy isn't a threat anymore, so you don't need to hide out." Paul said. "I guess I'd better drive you back to San Diego."

She stood up to face him, knowing that in the dark room he could see the red gleam in her eyes. "Please don't, not yet."

"Why the hell shouldn't I?" His folded arms mirrored the locked and barred gates of his mind.

She swallowed, groping for the words to explain her plan. It would work, if only he would agree to try. "I have an idea. I can prove my sincerity, if you'll let me."

"I can't imagine how, but go ahead and explain." He switched on a lamp and flung himself into the armchair.

"If you still don't believe I care for you—love you..." Her own words astonished her, but she realized she meant them. "After this, I won't bother you again. We can collaborate at a distance. You'll never have to see me."

His eyes followed her while she perched on the arm of the couch. "Okay, what's the plan?"

"You can enter my mind." She felt his instant recoil. "At your own speed, as deep or shallow as you want. We can drop our barriers, but I'll stay passive and let you do all the exploring." If he saw her as invading and overpowering him before, maybe this contact would make up for the indignity.

He gripped the arms of his chair. "Sounds reasonable. Go ahead."

She opened her mind and stretched an inviting tendril toward his. The gesture met a blank wall. "That won't work," she said. "You have to relax. Can't you trust me a little?"

He sighed, closed his eyes, and unclenched his hands. She closed her own eyes to concentrate, visualizing her inner self as an ivy-festooned mansion with the door ajar. *Come in*, she silently whispered.

She felt Paul's mind open with the creak of an unused gate. Then his thoughts brushed hers. He stepped into the entry hall of her mental house. She held very still, afraid of scaring him away.

Little by little, he inched his way to the inner rooms. She imagined his footsteps on the carpet of parlor and stairs. Quivering with her own kind of anxiety, she didn't make a move or a sound while he roamed through the bedrooms to gaze out the gable windows, up to the attic to survey her childhood memories. He caught glimpses of her confusion as a part-human girl, struggling with her vampiric urges, powers, and limits.

Step by step she guided him to a niche in the farthest corner of the attic. He opened a door upon a spiral staircase. With confident strides, he ascended. The stairs wound up, higher than Gillian herself had imagined, until they opened into a tower room lined with bookshelves. Paul roamed from shelf to shelf, taking down slim volumes and ponderous tomes to skim through them.

Leading him up a ladder, Gillian placed his hand on a brightly colored picture book. When he opened it, he saw a painting of tigers on a hillside behind a fence, one half-asleep, one pacing an endless circuit of the enclosure.

The picture cast Gillian back into the moment it portrayed. Volnar's fingers clutched her shirt and dragged her to the edge of the tiger pen. Midsummer sun beat down on her, only partly relieved by her baseball cap and polarized sunglasses. In contrast, Volnar's icy touch made her skin prickle. "You were careless," he said, his voice emotionless as ever. "You disobeyed me. You let yourself be seen."

"He was only a kid—"

"A child your own age. But human children prattle, and their parents sometimes listen. You let him see your strangeness."

She squelched a cry when his nails gouged her shoulder.

"Do you want to end up like them?" He pointed to the tigers. "A curiosity in a cage?"

The child Gillian shook her head.

"Then never let an ephemeral know what you are."

She snapped back to the present. Paul bent over the open book with moisture gleaming on his cheeks. *I see*, his thoughts murmured.

You're the only human being who's seen my true self, she silently replied. *I've put my life in your hands.*

She felt his dawning comprehension of her need for him and her longing to share the kind of love she'd witnessed between other bonded couples, as well as her fear of repelling him with her desperate craving.

His thoughts drifted through her brain like mist, no longer chill: *Then I'll put my life into yours. It's only fair.*

He clasped her hand and led her into his own mind-fortress, now with the gate open and the drawbridge down. She saw the depth of his affection for her and his hurt when he thought she'd been using him. Sweet warmth flooded over her.

Chapter Thirteen

She disentangled her thoughts from his, maintaining only a light sensory link, and opened her eyes to find him beside her on the couch. His aura pulsed with desire, tinged with a mixture of wonder and bewilderment. "I feel through your skin," he said, "the way I did this morning." A hot blush suffused his face. "I can even see myself through your eyes, if I concentrate. Weird."

"Yes, that's how it's supposed to work." She gently took his hand, ready to withdraw if he resisted. Instead of retreating, he drew her into an embrace.

"That feels great," he said, nuzzling her hair. "I'm already not sure why I fought it."

"I understand why," she said, "and I mean it when I promise I won't override your will ever again. Uh—I hope you don't mind some sensory 'encouragement' now and then, though?"

"You mean in bed?" His blush stirred her thirst despite her physical and emotional fatigue. "Or does no estrus for the next few years mean no sex?"

"Not at all." Her tongue lightly flicked his earlobe, then the side of his neck. "I get my satisfaction from your excitement. I'm looking forward to having you make love to me when I'm not in heat."

He stared intently at her. "Will you really enjoy it as much that way?"

"Sure. It's a different kind of pleasure, but just as intense, maybe more so because it involves my whole body, not localized."

"More intense? Are you sure I'll survive?" But this time he smiled, clearly teasing.

She answered the underlying doubt that remained, though. "You can go at your own pace, not mine. In fact, as soon as you've...recovered...we can try it. I won't make a move without your permission. You can guide me through the *Kama Sutra* page by page." She paused for a long breath, afraid he would hear the invitation as pressure. "Only if you want it, of course."

"You mean I could do this all night long?" He fondled her breasts. "Or this?" He kissed her throat, then nipped her earlobe. "How about this?" His fingers tickled between her legs.

"Yes." She drew a tremulous breath. "As long as I get my turn to choreograph...when I'm thirsty."

"Oh, yeah, I want." She heard his pulse quicken. By extending her senses only a little, she could feel the blood pooling in the dilated capillaries of his erogenous zones. He lightly brushed the tiny hairs in her palm. "Hey, that makes you thirsty, doesn't it? I can feel it in my own body. Incredible."

"Yes, so you'd better slow down."

"Why slow down? Why not give it a try?" Now he sounded only half teasing.

She stared at him in astonishment. "Now? Are you sure you're up to it?" When he laughed, she realized her unintentional pun.

"Oh, I think I might be up to it." His hands crept under her shirt. Warmth radiated from his open palms to spread over her breasts and make her nipples tauten before he even touched them. She

stretched her arms above her head, and he slipped the T-shirt off her. With a purr vibrating in her throat, she lay back on the couch and luxuriated in the play of his fingers on her body. His tongue circled each nipple in turn. Each one caught fire, a flame that spiraled out to envelope every inch of her skin.

Opening her thoughts to him, she felt his mind leap to merge with hers. This time, rather than drowning in his passion, she swam in it as in a blood-warm river. She felt the glowing brand of his caresses. Yet she also felt her own curves under his hands, along with the satin coolness of her flesh. When she eased off his shirt and stroked his chest, the curly hair made the cilia on her palms tingle with delight. Through his senses, she thrilled to the way her nails skimmed down his torso and under the waistband of his jeans. The scratches burned him like impossibly painless razor cuts. There she stopped, waiting for his cue.

"Yes," he whispered. Pressure built in his stiffening organ. His pants felt tight. He guided her fingers to the zipper and lifted his hips to help her remove the rest of his clothes.

She withdrew slightly from the current of his sensations to savor his slow progress in peeling off her shorts and bikini briefs, inch by inch, nibbling his way down her flat stomach on the way. Waves of pleasure washed over her. Her clit throbbed, but the same electricity vibrated in her nipples, the erect cilia in her palms, and her lips and tongue that yearned to taste him. The ache between her legs and in the pit of her stomach, as well as the dryness of her mouth, felt like pleasurable anticipation rather than desperate need.

"Cover me," she murmured. He spread his body over hers, his blood-warmed skin like a silken blanket against the chill of her own. "Kiss me," she sighed.

His tongue parted her lips and fenced with hers. *You taste like spiced wine and something metallic*, came his bemused thought.

And you taste like salt and ripe fruit. The flavor thrilled her taste buds without slaking her thirst. Every nerve quivered with eagerness to melt into him and draw him into her.

She slid from her half-reclining position to lie flat on the couch. Without words he heard and accepted her invitation. He nudged at her portal, not quite entering. The moist petals opened to him.

A new thirst tantalized her. "Paul—I want to drink you." With his lips nuzzling her neck, he projected a silent question. "Not your blood." She sent him an image of what she wanted.

He gasped. His erection twitched as if zapped by electricity. While Gillian lay on her side to make room, he stretched out beside her, head to foot. The curves and hollows of their bodies fitted together, his heat branding her flesh, her chill sending delicious shivers through him. His pulse reverberated in her deepest core like the bass notes of an orchestra, and she transmitted the echo back to him, making his excitement soar higher and carry her to the heights with him. His lips nestled into the damp curls at the apex of her thighs. She closed her mouth on the head of his penis. His hips trembled with the effort of holding still while her tongue swirled around the swollen shaft. She ached with gratitude for the gift he gave her, allowing her razor-sharp teeth in such a vital spot without an instant of fear.

His tongue flickered like a flame over her throbbing bud. This time, instead of concentrating in that one place, her pleasure expanded in ever-widening circles until it was no longer inside her, but she was inside it. Her whole being melted into a scarlet fog of sensuality. With Paul, she tasted her metallic-tinged love-juice and felt the explosion ready to burst from his straining cock. With her, he plunged into the ecstatic whole-body rush of tingling heat that his embrace gave her.

Screaming out loud, he shot into her mouth. Her own body echoed the tremors that rocked him. She swallowed his salt-sweet essence. *Yes, it's like your blood! Oh, God, Paul, I do love you!*

With their senses still merged, the taste lingered on his tongue, too, blended with her intimate flavor. For both, the combination held the richness of vintage wine. *I love you, Gillian. Don't ever think of leaving me.*

Finally, he raised his head and wiggled around until she nestled against his chest. Long minutes later, their breathing calmed, and he could speak again. "Gillian, after all this, I really hate the idea of you drinking anything, even blood, from anybody else."

"Didn't I make that clear? No, I guess not. Part of what 'addiction' means is that I can't stand any other human blood. I need yours. Animals provide the bulk nourishment, but for real satisfaction, I depend on you."

"Will that work? I mean, how much do you need?" The question carried no overtones of fear, only concerned curiosity.

"A few sips at a time," she said. "Your passion flavors it. Quality makes up for quantity."

"I just thought of something else. Pregnancy...did you ovulate?"

She turned inward to study the ebb and flow of the tides in her womb. "No. There's no pregnancy."

Paul hugged her closer. "Strange, I'm almost sorry. But with all the other adjustments we have to make, we're better off without that complication."

"True." She snuggled almost into his lap. "You know, most of my kin would say it'll never work. You'll get tired of serving as my ambulatory blood bank. Our circadian rhythms will clash. You'll want me to join you in daylight activities and lavish restaurant meals."

"So? You'll have to watch me turn into an old man, while you stay young and hotblooded forever. Right, it'll never work."

She heaved an exaggerated sigh. "Well, nobody ever accused me of obeying rules or acting sensible. Do you want to stay with me anyway?"

"Just try to stop me." Their lips met, and their hearts and minds echoed the union.



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