

Chapter One

The air hummed with rapt attention from dozens of human minds, most of them female. "Oh, lady bright! Can it be right—This window open to the night?" Claude paused in his recitation to savor the shallow breaths and rapid heartbeats of his audience, inaudible to human ears but plain to his. He had performed this reading of Poe's "The Sleeper" so often that it required only a fraction of his attention. He knew just what phrases to linger over to coax the most intense emotions from the listeners.

Their fascination perfumed the air like a cloud of incense. He could almost taste it, a delicious appetizer for the more substantial feast he anticipated enjoying later that night. For the black-clad young women he half-affectionately thought of as "vampire groupies," he knew his hypnotic delivery transformed the drab hotel function room into a boudoir "beneath the mystic moon" with an "opiate vapour, dewy, dim". While he didn't believe Poe had written "The Sleeper" with a vampire's nocturnal visit in mind, doubtless the "window open to the night" conjured up just that image for most of the audience, a reaction that suited Claude very well.

His eyes swept over the group while he intoned, "Oh, lady, dear, hast thou no fear? Why and what art thou dreaming here?" Locking glances briefly with each female in the first couple of rows, he savored the way a blush blossomed on each one's face at the fantasy that he addressed the lines to her alone. About midway to the back of the room though, he captured the eyes of one person who watched him with peculiar intensity, a woman of about thirty, with mahogany hair pulled back in a braid. From her he sensed a hunger that answered his own with a more complicated need than the yearning for a fantasy vampire's bite.

Pleasantly rounded, from what he could see of her, though not enough to violate the current standards for female beauty, she had what people used to call a "peaches and cream" complexion. Claude approved of her apparent refusal to either diet herself into emaciation or bake her skin under cancer-inducing rays. She would make an excellent dessert. The image made his jaws ache.

He mentally shook himself. He already had plans for tonight. Still, it wouldn't hurt to make contact with her and keep her in reserve, so to speak. Winding up the poem, he smiled at the memory of a lapel pin he'd seen on one of the fans earlier that day: "Cthulhu Saves—He Might Get Hungry Later."

He stood up with a flourish of his cape to signal the end of the session. Instantly, the audience mobbed the front of the room, convention programs and pens in hand. Teeth clenched in the closest thing to a smile he could manage, he scribbled his name as requested, watching the back of the delectable woman's head vanish into the corridor. With all the people blocking his view, he hadn't even managed a glimpse of her name tag.

Finally, dry-mouthed with thirst from exposure to his fans' body heat, pulse sounds, and keyed-up emotions, he broke away and headed for his room. Though he

lived only a few blocks away, his need for a refuge in the middle of the convention made renting a hotel room worthwhile. He craved a few hours of sleep before that evening's awards banquet.

When he unlocked the door, he noticed an unfamiliar scent. His nostrils flared. Not human, but acrid and quasi-metallic, like one of his own kind. Something rustled under his feet as the door closed behind him. A large manila envelope.

Tossing the cape onto the bed, he took the envelope to the desk and opened it. Two newspaper clippings fell out. Both, he saw, came from a San Francisco paper. The first headline read, "Human Remains Discovered Under Church Parking Lot."

About a month earlier, archeologists had begun excavating that parking lot in downtown San Francisco in preparation for expansion of St. Anthony's parish hall. Inside the buried ruins of the original church building, destroyed in the 1906 earthquake, searchers had found two bodies. Oddly, one, a woman's, had been reduced to a skeleton, yet the other was remarkably preserved, as lifelike as the famous Inca maiden sacrifices. That mummified corpse was a man's.

Claude's heart raced. He had to concentrate to force it under control. He was annoyed to discover his hand shaking as he picked up the second clipping. "Earthquake Mummy Vanishes." The bodies had been turned over to the anthropology department at the University of California, Berkeley. Two days after being transported there—more like two nights, Claude suspected—the man's corpse had vanished. Claude knew the "corpse" had never been truly lifeless though, and he wasn't surprised to read of the security guard found dead in the hallway outside the storage vault.

So Philip was alive. Not only alive, but here in Los Angeles at this very hotel. He had obviously shoved the envelope under the door of Claude's room within the past couple of hours. He's after me. Wonder what the devil he wants? Revenge, no doubt, but what kind?

He flashed on a memory of the ground shaking and the church roof caving in, while Philip howled in anguish over the maimed body of his woman.

Picking up the phone, Claude dialed the Prime Elder's number. If the Council didn't already know about Philip's resurrection, they needed to. Claude heaved an exasperated sigh at the vanished prospect for a decent afternoon's sleep.

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Panting from her run to the elevator, Eloise Kern dashed into her hotel room and flung herself onto the bed. She'd meant to introduce herself to Claude Darvell after the poetry reading, but her reaction to his resonant voice and penetrating gaze had embarrassed her so much she couldn't face him. Especially after that moment when she'd imagined his eyes had lingered on her a bit longer than on anyone else. Oh, stop thinking like a ditzzy fan! she scolded herself. Every female in that room had doubtless imagined the same thing. She hadn't come here to indulge in fantasies about

her favorite horror movie star. She'd wheedled her friend on the con committee into seating Claude next to her at the awards banquet so she could conduct business, not drool over his ebony hair and violet-gray eyes. Keeping her mind on screenplay contracts would have been a lot easier if he'd looked less ravishing in person than on film, instead of more so.

For weeks since receiving his latest letter, she'd had to read it over and over to confirm she hadn't imagined it. She'd even packed it in her overnight bag for reassurance. By now she knew the relevant passages by heart, from "Dear Ms. Kern" to "I look forward to discussing your proposed adaptation of Varney the Vampyre in person at ConCatastrophe." She peeled off her clothes and stepped under a hot shower, lost in visions of Claude—"tall, dark, and deadly," as a tabloid reporter had labeled him—emoting the lines from her own script.

She visualized him in the opening scene taken directly from the novel, climbing through a window on a moonlit night, like the one in the poem, to plunge his fangs into the heroine's delicate throat. Eloise's nipples puckered at the image. Throwing her head back, with her eyes closed, she let the warm water flow over her own neck, imagining his lips fastened there. There you go again, like a teenybopper with a crush, she mocked herself.

Better to wallow in that daydream than to brood over the other letter, the one she'd stuffed in her purse right before leaving home. The home she might not have much longer. The management of her townhouse complex had spent the past few months planning a conversion from rentals to a condominium regime. Eloise had started saving toward the down payment and closing costs, a slow process between her mother's nursing home fees and the uncertainty of a writer's income, but she hadn't expected the shift from rental to condo for another couple of years. Suddenly the schedule had accelerated. She had six months to dredge up the money or get out. Guild minimum for a screenplay would make the difference between home ownership and homelessness.

Wrenching the shower to the "off" position, she towed dry with impatient roughness, threw on a robe, and sat at the dresser to brush her hair and redo the French braid. Why was she imagining herself as a bag lady? Multi-published authors with doctorates in English Lit didn't end up on the street. She gave her hair a last, firm twist and looped a scrunchy around the end. Enough negative vibes! She had to project confidence when she met Claude at the banquet. What actor would want to produce or star in a movie scripted by a writer with the stalwart firmness of a bowl of Jell-O?

Chapter Two

He wasn't coming. The place next to Eloise at the award recipients' table, with "Claude Darvell" on the name card, sat empty. He must have been stricken with a sudden illness or called away on some emergency. Blinking in the atmospheric candlelight, she considered eating his chocolate mousse. Anxiety always made her feel like nibbling, and all the rolls were gone. Sure, she didn't have to meet him in person to negotiate the projected movie deal. But she felt she'd have a much better chance if they

could discuss the script face to face.

Lost in worry, she clapped automatically after each presentation and almost missed her own name. Recovering, she scurried up to the podium to receive her award for the con committee's pick as author of the year's best paranormal romance. She read her brief acceptance speech off an index card, her own voice echoing hollowly in her ears as if it were somebody else's. Glad to make it back to the table without tripping over her high heels, she didn't register at first that the seat beside her was no longer vacant.

In a black, crimson-lined cape that seemed to add inches to his already imposing height, Claude Darvell stood up to give her a half-bow of greeting. "Eloise? I'm Claude."

"Yes, I know." She cringed internally at the inane remark.

"Congratulations on your award." He clasped her hand briefly. His skin, she noticed, felt cool. A delightful shiver ran up her arm. "Forgive my lateness. I'm afraid I overslept."

She stomped firmly on a fantasy of his dark, wavy hair tousled from the pillow. In person he looked even more like an updated Lord Byron than he did onscreen. "You missed dinner."

Gathering the cape over one arm, he sat down. "I didn't come here for the food." His violet-gray eyes prowled over her before turning toward the speaker on the podium. "I'd like a glass of wine, though." He waved at the half-finished bottle of burgundy, which she passed to him.

"There go my illusions," she whispered. "What happened to the 'I never drink wine' bit?"

"After a day at a convention, I'll drink anything," he whispered back, leaning close so that his breath ruffled her hair.

A sensation like the caress of invisible fingers tickled down her back. She sipped her own wine and forced her attention to the next presentation. Minutes later, Claude got up to accept his award for best male lead in a horror film. Eloise watched his panther-like stride with growing appreciation. As far as she could tell with the cape and tux, he had the build of a greyhound, sleek and thin. Far from an illusion of makeup and camera angles, his demon lover persona proved even more captivating face to face.

She still had trouble believing her luck, that he had taken the time to write an appreciative letter about her article analyzing his "Count Orloff" vampire movies in the

Journal of Popular Culture. Still more incredibly, her note of thanks in reply had elicited another message from him, and they'd become regular correspondents. When she had mentioned her half-finished script based on that sprawling Victorian penny-dreadful novel, Varney the Vampyre, Claude had expressed his own long-standing desire to film the novel. So here they were, sharing a bottle of burgundy and the hopes of making a movie together.

When the master of ceremonies finished his concluding remarks, Claude turned to her. "Did you bring any of your Varney material with you?"

Of course she had, though she wouldn't have committed the faux pas of pressing it on him without an invitation. "Yes, I've got a proposal and a partial script." Thanks to her past dealings with producers who had optioned a few of her books, she had enough familiarity with the workings of Hollywood to prepare such things in the proper format.

"I'd love to take a look at them." Pulling out her chair, he lightly clasped her wrist, as if taking her pulse.

Bracing herself against the prickle of sensation that danced along the inside of her arm, she told herself he wasn't doing that at all. Or if he was, the gesture was only part of the vampire pose he assumed for the entertainment of his fans. "Great, let's go up to my room," she said, hoping the invitation didn't sound like a come-on. Not that she would have minded if he'd taken the words as an opening for seduction, but if she wanted to deal with him on a business level, she'd better not mix her signals. On the way to the elevator, Claude's hand rested on her back at her waistline. When they'd touched before, she'd thought his skin felt cool. How could it burn her through the satin of her evening gown? By the time the elevator started ascending to her floor, she already felt lightheaded. I'm just nervous about the script, she thought. That was the only reason for her rapid pulse. Sure.

"I noticed you at the reading earlier," he said as they walked down the sixth-floor corridor.

"I didn't want to try to introduce myself in the middle of that crowd," she fibbed. To her annoyance, her hand shook when she tried to insert the key. Inside, she switched on the foyer light and one of the reading lamps.

"That's plenty," he said before she could turn on any others. He stepped over to the window and gazed at the sparkling skyline, with the famous illuminated "Hollywood" sign on a distant hillside. "It's a beautiful night. As beautiful as downtown Los Angeles ever gets, anyhow." He punctuated the remark with a wry smile.

"Yeah, I haven't seen a night this smog-free in ages." Eloise took the treatment and script out of her briefcase and handed them to Claude.

"Oh, yes, you live nearby."

"Pasadena. But I'd rather pay for a room than drive home after midnight two nights in a row." "I share your sentiments," he said, leafing through the printout she'd given him. "I have a penthouse just a few blocks away on Wilshire." He set the pages on the desk and drew her to the window with a casual touch at her waist. "I'll read all this later. Right now, I'd rather hear the highlights straight from you."

"Sure." She froze, half wishing he wouldn't touch her, so that she could keep her mind on Victorian vampires, and half wishing he'd make that touch more than casual. Her nipples peaked, creating friction with the lining of her bra, and her stomach fluttered. "I'm sorry I don't have anything to drink I can offer you."

"Don't worry about that. I'm not thirsty—right now." His hand drifted from her waist to her neck, skimming the bare skin above the low-cut dress on the way. His fingers insinuated under the braid and gently rubbed the roots of her hair. "Are you planning to have me commit suicide in Mount Vesuvius, the way the book ends?"

"Sure. Think of the cool special effects." She tried to focus on a vampire diving into a volcano, instead of the heat that swirled around her scalp and down her spine.

He chuckled. "More hot than cool, n'est-ce pas?"

"Ha, ha. Don't most vampires attack with fangs, not puns?"

"I suppose we can't do without fangs. Audiences expect them. Speaking of attacks, we'll start the film with Varney invading Flora's bedroom?"

"Of course. The first scene of the book is too good to waste. Hail, thunder, wind, lightning, and a demon of the night feasting on a half-naked girl. Starting and ending will be the easy part. The hard part is deciding what to do with the other 800 pages in between." She tilted her head, the better to enjoy his gentle rubbing. She felt like a cat having its ears scratched.

"I'm sure you'll work it out. I do look forward to playing jolly old blood-and-thunder Varney, as long as we don't make him one of those undead twits who constantly whines about the terrible curse he's under."

"Perish the thought." She caught herself leaning back against the hard length of Claude's torso. His massage, moving from her hairline to her shoulder blades, made her want to purr. I really should make him stop that.

"Handled properly," he said, "Varney could be a new twist on the tragic vampire. New to the box office public, anyway, since nobody reads the book except specialists like you. I have a couple of financial backers in mind. Once I've got a general idea of the plot outline, I'll contact them and set up the deal."

The conversation was progressing faster than Eloise had dared hope. She knew Claude, even though his official biography said he was independently wealthy, wouldn't put up the funding himself. No sensible actor/producer would violate Hollywood's "OPM" rule—use Other People's Money. The fact that he'd already considered the financing issue showed he was serious. She murmured a wordless sound of agreement. Why did she feel so fuzzy around the edges? She hadn't consumed that much wine at dinner. Why did Claude's touch seem to scorch right through her clothes? She'd never responded to a man so intensely, not even one who embodied her

deepest fantasies.

"Very well, I break into Flora's chamber in the middle of a storm. What's my motivation? Other than my appetite for her nubile flesh and sweet blood, of course?"

His breath ruffled Eloise's hair. Her pulse pounded in her temples, and she felt her face flush. "The house," she said, trying to catch her breath. "He left England in the seventeenth century, when he turned into a vampire after Cromwell's men killed him. Now he's back, and the Bannerworths are living in his mansion. He's tired of wandering and thinks he can find peace in his ancestral home. He wants to scare them into selling it."

"Is Flora frightened of him?" Claude's hands moved to her upper arms and stroked up and down, making the bare skin prickle with heat. He seemed to savor the sensual motion as much as she did.

"At first. Who wouldn't be, with a man crashing in through her window? Not to mention a man with fangs and claws and glittering, silver eyes."

"Hold on, the book says his eyes look like polished tin."

"Never mind that," Eloise said, her breath coming shallow and fast. "It's my script, and I don't think polished tin sounds very romantic."

"Oh, so you want a romantic vampire?" A hint of soft laughter underlay the remark.

She blushed still hotter. "You've read my stuff. You know what kind of vampire I like." She'd sent him autographed copies of a couple of her novels, and his reply had made it plain that he'd done more with the books than glance at the title pages.

"Will this film have an R rating? Where will Varney pierce Flora's tender skin? Here?" To Eloise's surprise, he bent to kiss the side of her neck with a butterfly-wing flicker of his tongue. "Or here?" One fingertip traced a line from the hollow of her throat to the swell of her right breast above the V of her gown.

Her heart raced. A melting sensation flowed from the spot where his touch lingered to the hollow between her legs. She forced a deep breath and said, "I think you'd better leave."

He flung off the cloak and draped it over a chair, then removed his bow tie and tossed it on the desk. "I'll leave when I'm good and ready," he said in a tone of genial firmness. "And I'm nowhere near ready."

Chapter Three

Eloise knew she ought to lash out indignantly at that arrogant pronouncement. Instead, when he put an arm around her waist and steered her towards the bed, she found herself following him without a moment's hesitation. Somehow she was sitting

beside him on the edge of the mattress rather than shoving him into the hall. Weird, she thought. Not only her own behavior, but his. I've heard of the casting couch for actresses, but never for writers!

"I'm thirsty now," he said. "For your lips." He nibbled the edge of her mouth, darted his tongue in and out, then withdrew to gaze into her eyes.

What a hokey B-movie line, she thought. Yet "thirsty" seemed a perfectly apt word for her own dry-mouthed, head-whirling excitement. Or possibly "fever". "We shouldn't—" she began.

"You desire this as much as I do. I wouldn't touch you, otherwise." His hand rested between her breasts. "I feel it in the beating of your heart."

She opened her mouth, whether to confess or deny, she wasn't sure. He cut off her answer with a deeper kiss. A taste and scent like hot metal flooded her senses. His tongue and lips seared hers, while his hand on the curve of her breast sent electric currents through her, switching every erogenous zone to "on". The flutter in the pit of her stomach migrated lower and became a full-fledged throb of need.

Good thing he couldn't read her mind. He couldn't know how her nipples strained against her bra, begging for a caress, or how her clit tickled maddeningly and wetness pooled between her thighs. She crossed her legs and squeezed. With his fingers creeping under the V of her dress, the pressure didn't bring any relief.

As if he did read her mind, he abandoned that tactic and instead cupped her right breast through the satin. Rubbing in slow circles, he coaxed the nipple to a hard peak. The other one ached for the same attention. Instantly, Claude draped his free arm around her shoulder to reach her left breast and fondle both in the same rhythm. Meanwhile, his tongue continued to probe her mouth. She fought to keep from squirming. Without her conscious will, she unfastened the top buttons of his shirt and ran her fingers over his chest. No undershirt, just cool skin and velvety hair. With the fog of lust clouding her brain, she gave no more than a fleeting thought to the difference from the usual texture of male body hair.

"You'll be more comfortable lying down," he murmured, nuzzling her neck. She felt him grope behind her to unzip her dress.

This would be the proper moment to cut the encounter short. Never in her life had she fallen into bed with a man on first meeting. Claude's erotic expertise and her crush on him shouldn't matter. Contaminating business with sex, losing her self-respect, and, for all she knew, risking some ghastly disease would be far worse than a few minutes of frustration. Besides, she could remedy that frustration by herself as soon as he left.

Before she realized she had moved, though, she lay on her back, with Claude reclining on one elbow next to her. He captured her mouth for another long kiss while he slid the dress off her shoulders. His practiced skill at undoing the front clasp of her bra stung her with a pang of jealousy. How many women did he seduce per year? Probably one at every convention.

She forgot that question the moment his tongue traced a path to one breast and spiraled inward to the peak. After slipping off her bra, he licked that nipple while teasing the other with thumb and forefinger. Somehow he knew just the pressure and speed to send ripples of pleasure through every nerve.

Involuntarily, she clutched his shoulders and eased her thighs apart. One of his legs covered hers with tantalizing pressure against her slit through her skirt. Already she trembled on the edge of orgasm. He abandoned the nipple for a brief, hard kiss on her mouth. "You taste as delicious as I expected." Passion roughened his voice, lending the words a tone of sincerity she hadn't anticipated.

He probably uses that line on all his victims. By now it didn't matter, though. Her clit and her vagina ached for relief. And hearing the same need in his voice, she couldn't deny him.

She arched her hips, trying to press her swollen clit against his leg. He moved aside, drawing a hiss of protest from her. Removing her shoes and reaching under her skirt, he swept his palm up the inside of her calf and thigh. On this summer evening, she hadn't worn pantyhose. Her bare skin tingled, making her tremble with impatience for him to reach her hot, wet center. He cupped her mound through the bikini panties, silencing her moan of pleasure with a kiss.

Fumbling inside his shirt, she dug her nails into his chest. He growled and nibbled a path from her mouth to her neck. At the same time, he stretched the elastic of the panties to part her petals and caress the throbbing bud. Her clit started to twitch the instant he touched it. The frenzied licking of his tongue at her throat matched the rapid strokes of his fingers. When the throbbing began deep inside, he plunged two fingers into her slit, while his thumb kept rubbing the spot that ached most desperately.

She erupted like that volcano they had mentioned earlier, pumping her hips in time with his finger-thrusts. When she hit the peak and began to spiral down, he nipped her neck and flicked her clit in some magical way that sent her even higher.

At last, soaring to a height so rarefied it sucked the breath from her lungs, she fell off the precipice into oblivion.

Chapter Four

When she opened her eyes, a rosy mist clouded her vision, and her throat felt dry. After dragging herself to a sitting position, she rubbed her face and looked around. Oh, Lord, I can't believe I acted that way! How can I ever face Claude again?

Come to think of it, where was he? His cape still hung over the chair, but he was nowhere to be seen, and she didn't hear any sounds from the bathroom. No way could she look him in the eye, at least not until she'd put some distance between herself and her humiliating cat-in-heat behavior. Maybe he'd be gentleman enough, next time they met, to pretend the encounter had never happened. Meanwhile, she had to get out before he reappeared. When he saw her gone, with luck he would return to his own room and leave her alone.

Standing up, she had to grab the bedpost until a surge of dizziness faded. Noticing how loosely the bodice of her dress hung, she reached behind and pulled up the zipper. Muzzy-headed, she staggered out the door and along the hall to the elevator, one hand on the wall for balance. By the time she'd ridden to the ground floor, the danger of toppling over at every step had passed. Her brain still felt like oatmeal, though. She drifted through the lobby to the main doors, with a vague idea of letting the night air clear her head.

She shoved through the double glass doors and meandered to the corner of Wilshire Boulevard.

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Claude came back from his foray to the vending machines with a full ice bucket and a can of Coke. After her involuntary donation, Eloise would feel dehydrated. Even before unlocking the room door, he sensed her absence. What the devil had got into the woman? He hadn't expected her to wake so quickly, but what had possessed her to run off the moment she did?

And without her shoes, he noticed. Or her key, which he'd taken with him. While these thoughts ran through his mind, he was already heading for the stairs. He could dash to street level on his own power faster than the elevator could arrive and carry him down. If Eloise hadn't gone all the way to the first floor, he could search the hotel at leisure. The first priority was intercepting her if she was indeed wandering around the lobby barefoot and half-conscious. Damn, this was the last thing he wanted to be doing after the mutually satisfying "dessert" they'd sampled.

Hurrying from the stairwell into the lobby, he scanned the area. Just in time, he caught a glimpse of Eloise disappearing out the main entrance. He strode after her as fast as possible without breaking into a trot. She paused at the corner. As he walked toward her, he noticed the dreamy vagueness of her gaze. She stepped off the curb with no sign of noticing the red stoplight. Claude darted into the stream of traffic, wrapped his arms around her, and flashed back to the sidewalk too fast for human eyes to follow.

Clinging to him, she shook her head in obvious bewilderment. "Claude—?"

He sensed the fog lifting from her brain. In a second she would start complaining about the way he'd chased and grabbed her. He also sensed eyes boring into him. Not just the curious glances of people who wondered how a man in a tuxedo and a barefoot woman in a formal gown had suddenly appeared on the sidewalk. Hostile eyes that felt not quite human.

He wasted no time processing this impression. Choosing action over analysis, he draped himself in a psychic veil that repelled vision. He projected a "you don't see me" aura that amounted to invisibility. With Eloise held close to him, she fell under the same curtain. Casual passers-by would blink at their "disappearance," then instantly forget about them. As for the watcher who troubled Claude the most, if he, she, or it existed at all, the illusion might provide enough time for an unseen retreat to the shelter of

Eloise's room.

Claude carried her, murmuring confused protests, up the stairs to that refuge.

"What the blazes is wrong with you?" he said as he plopped her on the bed. "Where did you think you were going?" And why did his own heart hammer with alarm at her narrow escape? He tabled that question for the moment.

"Out, if it's any of your business." Her flushed cheeks stirred his appetite, even though he'd just feasted on her.

"It's my business when you nearly get yourself killed. What the devil did you want to run away for? Surely I didn't do anything to frighten you, did I?" He smoothed the hair straggling out of her braid.

She jerked her head away from his hand. "Of course not. I just wanted to be alone."

"Really?" He captured her eyes with his.

"If you must know, I was embarrassed." She gasped at her own frankness. He knew she must feel baffled by the way the truth had popped out.

Maintaining the gentle pressure of his mind on hers, he prompted, "Why in the world would you be embarrassed?"

"Humiliated. The way I acted when you, you know, touched me." The heat radiating from her skin made him want to absorb every drop of her essence.

"I enjoyed every minute of it. And so did you, didn't you?" He stroked her head, and this time she didn't resist. His hypnotic gaze and touch already had her partly tamed. "Here, you're thirsty," he said. He held the cold soda can to her mouth. She drank half of it and licked her lips in a maddeningly sensual way. He held her close and crooned a wordless song of languid pleasure until she went limp in his arms. "Don't worry about it. Lie down and rest. Everything is all right now."

He lowered her head onto the pillow and turned her on her side to unzip her dress. After peeling it off, he folded back the covers and tucked her in with the sheet up to her waist. He knew he ought to leave now, but her half-closed eyes watched him with drowsy lust that sparked a burning in the pit of his stomach.

Damn, I want her again! I can't remember the last time I was this hungry for a donor! If he couldn't remember, he told himself with an ironic smile, maybe the answer was "never". In any case, resisting temptation had never been his forte. Earlier, he could have satisfied his thirst without bringing her to climax. Her arousal alone would have spiced her blood. Her eagerness, though, had inflamed him past caution. Now the sight of her bare breasts, flushed with passion, and the aroma of her female musk, tinged with traces of soap and bath powder, overcame the remnants of his scruples. After all, what harm would another sip do?

Turning down the sheet, he scanned her aura, rose-tinted with desire. The blood humming just below the surface of her skin radiated heat, denser at her lips, the tips of her breasts, and the triangle between her legs. He kissed her while his fingers skimmed over her breast and abdomen, to the center from which the fragrance of her arousal emanated. With splayed hands he swept down her body, up again, over and over. Her excitement coursed along the path of his caresses to thicken and pool at her core. Rainbows of scarlet, magenta, and gold whirled in her aura. He stretched the elastic of her panties to probe her wetness. Her wiggle of pleasure almost goaded him into biting her at once. Clamping down on the impulse, he paused to slip off her panties.

Sighing, she wrapped her arms around his neck. His jaws ached, the roots of his teeth tingled, and saliva flooded his mouth. At the same time, her emotions and sensations swirled around him. He felt the mild confusion underlying her excitement and smoothed her forehead to erase that perplexity, before suckling her nipples and stroking the damp curls on her mound to stir her appetite afresh. Her legs eased apart, and she murmured wordless sounds of impatience. Licking the curve of her neck to prepare it for his teeth, he tasted salt and talcum. He felt the taut straining of her breast in his hand, the peak tantalizing the sensitive hairs in his palm. He felt the growing heat and tension spread from that point to the apex of her thighs. The air that enveloped them thrummed with the echo of her heartbeat.

He couldn't wait any longer. He nipped her throat with the razor-edge of his incisors, drawing a hot, tangy-sweet trickle of blood. The frenzied lapping of his tongue made her groan aloud, clutching his shoulders and pressing her heels into the mattress. Her urgency hammered at his consciousness. Exploring her secret places until he felt her excitement reach its highest pitch, he invaded her slit and simultaneously strummed the tight bud nestled in the curls. A keening cry burst from her. Her sheath clenched around his fingers. Flavored with her ecstasy, her blood rushed to his head like sparkling wine.

More than food, more than a sweet, intoxicating liqueur, her elixir ignited a miniature starburst in every cell of his body. He sometimes felt sorry for his prey, who experienced fulfillment only as a brief, localized spasm in the genitals. When he shared Eloise's climax, it flooded his entire being and went on and on, as long as his need demanded.

He goaded her to convulsions of delirium again and again. Finally, when both of them trembled with exhaustion, he blotted the tiny incision with a tissue until it

stopped bleeding. "Sleep now," he murmured, stroking her hair. She relaxed onto the pillow with a long sigh, her eyes closing. "The wound will heal quickly. You won't even notice it. Forget the details of this night. Just remember that we shared pleasure. I'll see you soon." He kissed her forehead.

Soon. Their next meeting couldn't happen soon enough for him. If she responded this passionately in a mesmerized trance, how would she react if he took her in full awareness? That way lies madness, old thing. Plenty of women relished the fantasy of a vampire's kiss. More often than not, forcing them to accept the fantasy as real meant

disaster.

Chapter Five

Eloise awoke dizzy and dry-mouthed, with sunlight beating on her eyes. Why hadn't she closed the curtains the night before? Come to think of it, she didn't exactly remember going to bed. What was the last thing she remembered? Staggering to the bathroom sometime in the wee hours.

Okay, not very useful information. Before that? Blinking as her eyes adjusted to daylight, she flipped back the covers. She was naked. Oh, Lord, did Claude undress me and put me to bed? Why couldn't she recall any details? Only a muddled impression of lips and hands exploring her most tender places, followed by multiple explosions in a spot that tingled at the mere thought.

Yet she knew no penetration had occurred. In fact, from what few images she could retrieve, Claude hadn't even taken his pants off. So what did he get out of reducing her to a puddle of molten lava?

She rolled over and buried her face in the pillow with a groan. And this was the man she expected to work with on the project that would save her from losing her home? She'd probably swoon the moment she met his eyes, like one of the fainting heroines in her script.

The script. Had he meant everything he'd said, or had the whole conversation been a ploy to get her clothes off? At that thought, her attention strayed to the way the sheet felt on her bare skin. Vague memories of where his fingers had roamed woke a deep ache inside her. She tucked the spare pillow between her legs and rocked, suddenly overwhelmed by sensory echoes of Claude's cool touch and flickering tongue. The ache blossomed into shudders of release.

She lay panting and trembling until her breath slowed to normal. What's he done to me? Thrusting the pillow aside, she sat up and surveyed the room. Claude's cape and bow tie had disappeared. In place of the synopsis and partial, a business card and a sheet of hotel stationery lay on the desk. She put on her reading glasses and skimmed the note: "Thank you for a delightful evening. I'll get in touch with you this week to discuss details of our Varney adaptation. Meanwhile, if anything happens that requires immediate attention, call one of the numbers on my card."

Delightful evening? Yeah, she could endorse that description, but she'd have been much more delighted if she could have remembered exactly what she'd done. She hadn't imbibed enough wine to get blackout-level drunk, and Claude couldn't have found a chance to drug her drink, even if he'd have reason to do such a ridiculous thing. Immediate attention? Oh, wow, I'd love some more of that attention!

She mentally gave herself a sound shaking and headed for the shower. Next time she met Claude, she'd keep the encounter all business.

* * * * *

Home in Pasadena on Monday, Eloise focused on work—the novel she had assigned herself as her summer's project. There didn't seem any reason to compose more of the Varney script until she'd discussed it further with Claude, to whom she didn't devote a minute's thought after leaving the convention. No more than a minute each hour of the day, anyhow.

About nine on Monday evening, sitting at the computer in her home office, she answered the phone and heard an unfamiliar male voice. When he began, "Miss Eloise Kern?" she pigeonholed him as a telemarketer. Who else would speak her full name in that tentative tone?

Preoccupied with nothing worse than irritation over his calling so late, she got an unpleasant jolt when he said, "I saw you at the hotel on Saturday with Claude Darvell. Do you intend to associate with him further?" The stiffly formal phrases in a quiet, cultured voice clashed oddly with the boldness of the question.

"Why do you ask, and who the heck are you, anyway?" Her pulse hammered in her ears.

"Someone who knows who and what Darvell actually is. That man is dangerous. For your own safety, stay away from him."

"What do you mean, dangerous? Talk sense or leave me alone!" She heard a tremor in her own voice. She wasn't sure whether the fear seeping into her veins was directed at this anonymous caller or at Claude.

"If I explained, you would not believe me. But I know him well, and I am warning you against him. He is a killer."

"Look here, you—"

The man hung up.

After her breathing steadied, she got out Claude's business card and picked up the phone again.

* * * * *

Claude's surprised pleasure at hearing Eloise's voice turned to alarm when she explained the situation.

"I just got an anonymous phone call from some strange man warning me to stay away from you." The words tumbled out, high-pitched with anxiety.

"Did he say why?"

"No, just that you're dangerous. Do you know who he is?"

"I have an idea." Philip! Damn it, how did he find her?

"Are you being stalked by a crazy fan, or what?"

"Something of the sort."

"Well, what's he bothering me for?" Her tone sounded accusatory, and no wonder.

"Never mind that. The important thing is to keep you safe. I'm on my way over."

"You're what?"

"I'm leaving for your place right now. Stay inside and don't answer the door until I get there." He wished he could exert his will on her over the phone. The best he could do was to inject a decisive tone into the order.

"Claude, I don't know what you think you're doing, but aren't you overreacting?"

"No. You didn't think so when you called me, n'est-ce pas? Now, will you do as I ask?"

"Oh, all right, but when you get here, you better bring some straight answers."

Throughout the twenty-minute drive to Pasadena, Claude fumed at the traffic. Too bad his limited power of shape-shifting and levitation didn't enable him to fly the sixteen miles and avoid the mess. On the other hand, if he changed into a bat like his movie counterparts, he would arrive at Eloise's without a car, which he needed to get her out of Philip's reach. On reflection, it seemed obvious that, despite Claude's efforts, Philip had noticed him with Eloise. The other vampire would then have easily discovered her name and address by hypnotizing a hotel clerk. Claude realized he'd counted too heavily on Philip's unfamiliarity with this time and place. Apparently the man had made efficient use of the month since his revival.

Once off the freeway in Pasadena, Claude had no trouble finding Eloise's townhouse from the map he'd memorized. Instead of stopping, he drove two blocks farther, parked, and walked back. He shrouded himself in a psychic veil to deflect any watcher's vision. At the door he rang the bell and heard Eloise's footsteps approaching. The sound of her rapid, shallow breaths reached him through the wooden panel, along with the rattle of the chain being unhooked. He cursed under his breath at her lack of caution. At the last second though, she remembered to ask, "Who's there?"

He gave his name, holding the illusion of invisibility until the door opened. He slipped inside, then closed and latched it behind him. Eloise looked up at him, eyes wide and lips parted. Her aura quivered with anxiety, echoed in the racing of her pulse.

"Has he called again?" said Claude.

She shook her head. "What's the idea of scaring me half to death? And what are you doing here anyway?"

"What, not glad to see me?" Before she had time to object, he wrapped his arms around her. She leaned her head on his chest. He smoothed her unbound hair until her strong, young heart slowed to a steady beat. "It's all right, cherie. I won't let him near you."

Sighing, she pushed away from him. He let her go. "Who is this guy, and why should I be afraid of him? He claims you're a killer. What does that mean? You owe me an explanation."

He followed her from the entryway into the living room, furnished with a wing-backed couch, two matching chairs, and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. "It's too complicated to explain. I can tell you that he's a former friend who thinks he has a

legitimate grudge against me, and he'll take it out on you if he can. But I can assure you I haven't killed anyone." He reinforced the last sentence with a psychic nudge. True enough, he hadn't murdered Philip's woman, although he could understand why Philip saw it that way.

Standing in the middle of the room with her arms folded, Eloise glared at him. "Yeah? Why me? You and I just met."

"Ah, but he doesn't know that. He must have seen us together at the convention, noticed that I spent several hours in your room—"

She blushed. "And somehow got my name from the hotel staff. Okay, I get the picture. That doesn't explain why you rushed over here."

"To take you to safety, of course. We're going to my house on Big Sur."

"What you mean we, white man?" she quoted the old Tonto joke. "You hit the freeway back to Beverly Hills. I'm not going anywhere."

He closed the distance between them in two strides, prepared to grab her if she decided to stalk out of the room. "Do you have any obligations that would make it impossible for you to leave for a few days?"

"No, I'm not teaching a class this summer, but that's beside the point. I didn't ask you to show up and whisk me away on your white horse."

"Actually, it's a dark blue Mercedes." His lips quirked in an involuntary smile at the indignation sparking from her. "This man knows where you live. I simply want to take you somewhere, temporarily, where he can't find you."

"You haven't given me a good reason to dive down a rabbit hole. And even if you had, I can take care of myself."

"Not against this threat, you can't, damn it." He caught her by the upper arms, just below the short sleeves of the clinging T-shirt she wore. Oh, hell, trying to be patient with ephemerals never gets me very far, anyway. He captured her eyes and gave her a gentle

psychic nudge. "You'll be safer with me. Let me protect you."

Her folded arms and clenched fists relaxed, and the resistance melted out of her. "Protect me? Okay. I'll be safer with you."

"That's right. You'll be safe in my house up the coast."

"Uh-huh." Wrapping her arms loosely around his waist, she leaned on him again. "Safe."

The heat of her flesh and the throbbing of her pulse tempted him to put off their departure long enough for a kiss or two, if not a quick nibble. The trusting way she snuggled up to his chest made his throat go dry, even though he'd implanted that trust himself. But this was no time for dalliance. For all he knew, Philip might be watching the house.

With a murmur of regret, Claude pushed Eloise to arm's length and gazed into her eyes again. "Go pack whatever you'll need. And you may as well bring your Varney materials. We can work on the thing while we're down the rabbit hole."

The last remark penetrated her daze enough to evoke a vague smile. He paced the room, ears pricked for any sound of a third person lurking outside, until she reappeared with an overnight bag, briefcase, and purse. He noticed that part of the fog he'd imposed on her brain had evaporated.

"Claude, where are we going again, and why?"

Staring into her eyes, he said with all the firmness he could muster, "We're going to my other home, about three hundred miles up the coast, where you'll be safe. Take my word for it and don't worry."

Her eyelids drooped. "Okay, not worried."

"Wait a second." He moved to the window and peered out between the curtains. No sign of Philip. Not that there would be, if the stalker had psychically cloaked himself. Hesitating for that reason would accomplish nothing.

Claude put an arm around Eloise to hold her as close as possible while they walked out the door. He rebuilt his shield of illusion, extending it to cover her, too. As long as she stayed in physical contact with him and didn't do anything to attract attention, both of them should remain "invisible."

"What are you doing?" she murmured, locking the door on the way out.

"Nothing you need to worry about. Just walk with me quietly."

They made the two-block trip to the car without incident. Claude only hoped Philip wasn't lurking unseen along the way. After stowing Eloise's things in the back seat, Claude belted her into the passenger seat up front and gave her another order to relax. "You probably need rest. Why don't you take a nap?"

Immediately, her head slumped, and her eyes closed. Good, I haven't lost the touch. It was a wonder his own anxiety hadn't kept hers alive. His barely leashed fear for her baffled him. Why did he suddenly care so much about an ephemeral's welfare? Mentally shaking off the question, he started the car and headed westward to the coast.

Chapter Six

Her neck felt stiff, her eyes gritty. Bewildered to find herself in a moving car, Eloise looked around with a momentary heart-stutter of panic. When she saw Claude in the driver's seat, the fear subsided. He wasn't scary, just overbearing and infuriating. She rubbed her face. "Where are we?"

He glanced over at her. "On Highway One, north of L.A., on our way to Big Sur."

"But why—" A second later, the evening's events came back to her. "Oh, yeah, you talked me into skipping town with you. How on earth did you do that?"

He shrugged. "No doubt you recognized the irresistible logic of my argument."

"The one where you claimed some guy is stalking both of us, but you wouldn't tell me why? That argument?"

He just flashed her a smile.

"And you still won't tell me? Oh, I give up!" She stretched her legs, bemused to notice that she'd left home in the middle of the night in shorts, a T-shirt, and sandals. "I hope you realize I can't make a three-hundred-mile trip without stopping."

"Of course. I trust you won't run away, though."

"Where to? You think I'd try to hitchhike back to Pasadena? No, I'll stick with you, even if you did kidnap me."

He laughed. "The highwayman came riding, riding, up to the old inn door." Recognizing the poem, she retorted, "Don't expect me to make with the sappy devotion like Bess, the landlord's daughter."

At the next roadside convenience stop, he pulled in to fuel the car. After using the facilities, Eloise bought a bottle of water and a handful of snacks. It crossed her mind that it would serve him right if she did disappear, but caution prevailed.

Back on the road, he said, "You don't happen to have a dashing highwayman who'll ride to your rescue, by the way? I mean, a fiancé or the equivalent who'll challenge me to pistols at dawn because of our temporary elopement?"

She blushed at that word. If she had to elope with anyone, Claude would rank high on the list. "No, not since graduate school." She'd broken up with her last fiancé-equivalent when he'd taken his domineering behavior one step too far. She'd recognized

his true character when he'd announced to her that they were going to get married and move to New Jersey, where he'd accepted a job, instead of consulting her first. Claude, at least, was only kidnapping her as far as central California. By the scenic route, no less. Of course, she would have been able to enjoy the oceanfront scenery better if it hadn't been the middle of the night.

"I didn't know you had a house up the coast," she said.

"I try not to let it get around. My official bio mentions the penthouse in Los Angeles, the townhouse in London, and the chalet on Lake Geneva. Since this other place doesn't get publicized, I'm hoping the man who called you won't know it exists."

"You really are rich, aren't you?" She blushed deeper, wondering why his presence made her blurt out such things. "I mean, I can't help asking why you bother to work. You must love acting."

"Yes, and I find the human contact—stimulating."

Eloise shivered. How did that one word spark such vivid memories of the sensations he'd incited in her Saturday night? She stared out her window, glad he couldn't possibly see her flushed cheeks in the dark. "It's just hard for me to imagine having four houses. I'm having enough trouble hanging onto one."

"What do you mean?"

She told him about her problem with the condo conversion. "I really want to buy the townhouse. I planned to all along, but I didn't think it would happen so fast. If I can't swing the mortgage, I'll have to look for a new place, and you know L.A. real estate prices. I shudder to think how hard it'll be to find another decent rental I can afford."

"The down payment is the snag, then?"

"Yes, it's taking a while to save up, with my mother's nursing home fees and all." At his questioning glance, she said, "Alzheimer's. My dad died years ago, and I'm an only child, so it's all on me."

"Can you not borrow the balance of the down payment?"

The rich really did live in a different world. "It'll be enough trouble getting approved for the mortgage. Do you have any idea how loan officers react to the word 'writer' on the 'occupation' line? They see it as equivalent to 'unemployed'. Sure, I have my teaching income, but that's part time. If I took a full-time faculty post, I wouldn't be able to keep producing two novels a year."

"I see your quandary," he said. "But I sense the townhouse means more to you than an investment."

How did he know? "My father was a career officer in the Navy. We never owned a

house until he retired to San Diego. Then he died of a heart attack before he had time to enjoy it. And when Mom went into full-time care, we had to sell the place. So a home of my own has been my dream for a long time."

"Then the Varney project has special importance for you."

"Yes, and now I've bored you with all my problems," she said, embarrassed at having complained about her financial bind to a man she hardly knew. "So it's your turn to spill secrets."

"What secrets? You've read the publicity bio."

"Which doesn't mention a lot besides the three houses, your Anglo-French background, and the fact that acting runs in your family."

"That's all there is to tell, essentially. I've led a fairly dull life, for which I'm thankful. You know the curse about interesting times."

The official biography didn't even reveal where his money came from. "Inherited wealth" didn't say much. The list of his movies stretched back over twenty years, raising the question of his age at the start of his career. He looked just barely old enough to make the dates plausible, and the bio was frustratingly short of specifics for the early period. As for the continental side of his lineage, except for the occasional French phrase that spiced his conversation, he spoke with a thoroughly British accent. The bio said he'd been born in France but had spent most of his life in England.

Obviously, questioning him wouldn't pry loose any information. Eloise decided to rest and enjoy what she could see of the view.

After five hours, including two more rest stops, the car wound along the stretch of road high above the Big Sur coastline. Though she still couldn't see much in the dark, she heard the waves through Claude's open window when he slowed down and turned off the highway down a narrow lane that led toward the shore. A private drive, she realized when he pulled to a stop in front of what looked like a two-story house. Getting out, she saw it from a different angle that revealed a third, lower floor, split-level style, in back. Gnarled cypress trees shaped by ocean winds huddled next to the house. Motion sensors switched on floodlights to illuminate the carport and front door. She caught an impression of redwood siding and sloping roofs before Claude escorted her inside.

"Enter freely and of your own will," he said as he waved her into the foyer.

"Thanks, Count," she said, acknowledging the quote from Dracula. "I hope you don't have dungeons and a crypt. Not to mention a harem of lady vampires."

His hand rested lightly on her back, making her shiver with pleasure out of proportion to the casualness of the contact. "Why would I need a harem with you under my roof?" He steered her toward a staircase but then broke off the touch.

Feeling mildly let down, she followed him to the top floor. There he showed her to

a corner bedroom with a door opening onto a balcony. The other outside wall held a window with a double bed under it. Claude strode over to the door and opened it to let in the salt-flavored breeze and the sound of the waves. "It should be safe enough to leave this open, if you like."

"Why shouldn't it be? Do you think your former friend, or whatever he is, would fly in the window like a bat?" She walked over to the balcony to look out. Aside from a streak of moonlight on the water, she couldn't see anything. "No street lights, no neon signs, just the night. It's beautiful—but strange. To me, anyway."

He placed his hand in the middle of her back, then skimmed down to her waistline. "I'm delighted to have a chance to share it with you." He reached under the hem of her shirt to stroke the bare skin at the small of her back.

Stifling a gasp at the coolness of his touch, she turned toward him. His other hand reached up to smooth her hair, lingering at her temple where the pulse throbbed. His

fingers, almost chill in contrast to her own flushed face, felt refreshing. So how could that coolness ignite such a fire at her core?

He leaned toward her, nuzzled her hair, kissed her forehead. And stopped. Instead of tracing a path to her parted lips, he straightened up. No longer touching, he stepped away from her. "You must be exhausted, after being kidnapped." An ironic smile punctuated the sentence. "Sleep as long as you want." He retreated so fast she could almost imagine being near her made him nervous.

Which made no sense, considering his behavior on their first meeting. Unless the excitement vibrating through her body was contagious.

Nevertheless, by the time she finished taking a hot shower in the bathroom next door, her tension drained into utter weariness. She fell asleep minutes after crawling into bed.

* * * * *

Claude lurked in the hall outside Eloise's room, listening to her breathing slow to the rhythm of sleep. The last thing he should do was invade her dreams with his hunger. He'd brought her here partly for protection and partly for work on the script, not to serve as his live-in buffet. Yet her avid response was so hard to resist. Not only did her body open lavishly to his touch, so did her mind. He recalled how freely she had poured out her problems in their conversation. The down payment she fretted about would, he knew, amount to pocket change for him. Anyone who survived for centuries could accumulate a comfortable fortune, as long as he didn't make himself a target by flaunting it. Claude knew there was no use offering money to Eloise, though. She wouldn't accept a gift or even a loan.

All the more reason to focus on the movie project, to give him a legitimate pretext for handing her the solution to her financial woes. Besides, repeatedly feeding on her could expose her to greater danger from Philip. Claude's mark on her aura would make it plain that she meant more to him than a casual donor. If Philip wanted revenge for the loss he'd suffered so many decades before, he would leap at the chance to prey on

Claude's pet.

Not that he planned to make a pet of Eloise. Yet the drumbeat of her heart, audible through the closed door, drew him like a moth to flame. Except that his appetite was the flame that might consume her. Even while he rehashed the arguments against tasting her again, he opened the door, slipped inside, and glided to the bed.

Well, I never claimed to have a conscience. He sat on the edge of the mattress, spreading a net of hypnotic influence to keep her from waking at the disturbance. With a sigh, she turned in her sleep. The sheet slid an inch to reveal the curve of a breast. She wore a low-cut, satin nightgown. When Claude traced a line from the hollow of her throat to the V between her breasts, her pulse accelerated. He felt the blood rushing through her heart under his open hand. The tiny hairs in his palm bristled with eagerness to stroke every inch of her smooth, warm flesh.

With his other hand, he turned down the covers. The nightgown was tangled around her hips. He skimmed up one exposed thigh and down the inside of the other. Her lips parted to emit a soft moan.

He kissed her forehead, jaw line, throat, the pulse fluttering against his lips like that moth he'd visualized, now trapped in a spider's web. "This is a dream, ma belle," he whispered. "Only a dream. Embrace me."

Her arms twined around his neck. Licking and nibbling her throat and the curve of her breast, teasing both her and himself without piercing the skin, he ran his hands over her body, barely touching, stirring the hues of her aura into whirlpools of rose and crimson. Her nipples and mount of Venus, engorged with blood, glowed like clusters of painless sunlight.

Ravenous from the aroma of the sweet nectar between her legs and her excitement sparking like miniature stars everywhere he caressed her, he chased that excitement to its source and tickled the taut nubbin of flesh that begged for his attention. Her hips undulated while she clung to him and moaned her pleasure, although her conscious mind still slept.

"Open to me," he murmured. Not a moth, he thought, but a bee ready to drink her honey. He would never let his sting cause her pain, though.

Her thighs parted. He dipped a finger in her dewy center and stroked her throbbing bud. Throwing her head back on the pillow, she arched her spine and keened in ecstasy. Her heart hammered in time with the pulsation of her climax.

At the instant that her release would imbue her blood with the sweetest flavor, he nipped the swell of her breast. With the trickle of blood, her passion fountained forth, as intoxicating as strong mead.

His teeth-roots ached too badly for gentle licking to satisfy him. He fastened onto her breast and sucked hard. Her elixir flooded his parched throat and suffused every cell of his body. When he strummed her most sensitive spot again, her second climax

shot through him like a bolt of lightning.

If only he could keep her forever, not as a pet, but as something more. How would it feel if she opened her eyes and her mind, recognized his true nature, and still welcomed him into her embrace? He yearned to warm himself at the flame of her innermost core. Realizing the folly of that wish, he longed to spend the rest of this night, at least, sipping her sweet nectar. But he forced himself to listen to the voice of moderation.

After the long night's drive and the self-indulgent way he'd behaved at the convention only a couple of nights earlier, he knew she needed rest. He reluctantly forced himself to remove his mouth from the incision and calm her with languid petting, rather than goading her to fresh excitement.

"Remember, my dear," he said as he straightened her nightgown and covered her with the sheet, "this was only a dream."

Life would be simpler if he could delude himself into believing the same thing.

* * * * *

A cool wind swept in through the open balcony door. Thunder cleaved the night. In a flash of lightning, Eloise saw a tall man in a black cape silhouetted in the portal. At the neck of his ruffled, white shirt, he wore a ruby pin like a globule of fresh blood.

When he strode toward her bed, she recognized Claude.

At that point she realized she was dreaming. She decided that was all right. In a dream she could indulge any craving without fear of consequences. She opened her arms, and Claude swooped down upon her.

His hot mouth feasted on her lips, her neck, her breasts. Somehow their clothes dissolved. His hands roamed over her bare skin. She felt his tongue bathing both nipples, then flickering down her abdomen to her mound, where he probed inside the nest of hair for the sheltered nub of flesh. His tongue tip found the flashpoint of her need, quicker than she could have herself. She screamed aloud when the convulsion ripped through her.

Then he licked his way up to her neck and lay on top of her to press his leg between hers, in the place that still burned and tingled. Her tight nipples strained against his naked chest. She felt a sting at her throat, followed by a thread of hot liquid and the lapping of his tongue. He groaned with pleasure, and her voice joined his. She wrapped her legs around his thigh and squeezed. Delicious melting sensations flowed from her throat through her quivering nerves to that hot center. She shuddered in release until exhaustion overcame her.

When Claude sat up, another flash of lightning showed dark stains around his mouth. Licking his lips clean, he pulled up the covers over her. "Sleep, my dear, and remember this was only a dream."

"Yes, I know," she murmured as he faded into mist. Only in a dream could she imagine Claude to be a real vampire instead of an actor who sometimes played one.

Chapter Seven

Birds chirping outside the window woke her. With her eyes still shut, Eloise listened to the other noise in the background, waves on a beach. A cool breeze drifted across her face, carrying the aroma of salt water. What was she doing beside the ocean?

She opened her eyes. Sunlight streamed in through a door that opened onto a balcony. Oh, right, Claude's Big Sur waterfront house. He'd kidnapped her. Well, as kidnappers' lairs went, she could enjoy this one. Especially if the sea air always inspired dreams like the one she'd had the night before. Feeling warmth flood her whole body, she hurried to the bathroom next door for a cool shower. If she expected to make a movie deal with Claude, she had to get a grip and act like a professional writer, not a swooning fan with a mad crush.

After dressing in jeans and a lightweight, tunic-style blouse and tying back her hair in a ponytail, she thought to check her watch. She'd slept until almost two in the afternoon. Her stomach reminded her that she'd also slept through breakfast and lunch. Still, curiosity demanded a quick tour of the house. The top floor, besides her bedroom and the bath, contained two other bedrooms, open and untenanted, and a closed door at the opposite end of the hall from her room. The absence of any sounds of life suggested Claude was asleep behind that door.

Stairs led to the main floor where they'd entered the previous night. Jokes aside, the place didn't look like a haunted castle. The foyer opened into a sunken living room with wall-to-wall carpet, a fireplace, and an elaborate stereo system. Across the hall was an office. Despite her hunger, she couldn't resist pausing to examine the vintage movie posters and old photographs on the wall behind the desk, obviously part of Claude's family history.

One black-and-white poster advertised a film adaptation of *The Sorrows of Satan*, from a lurid early twentieth-century novel. The star bore a striking resemblance to Claude, allowing for the devilish eyebrows and other exaggerations of the illustrator's style. His grandfather, or would it have to be great-grandfather? She'd never heard of the movie; it must be one of many silent films that hadn't survived. Photos from the 1940s era showed group poses that featured a man with a widow's-peak haircut and a pencil-thin mustache, doubtless Claude's father or uncle. She made a mental note to ask him, but now she had to scrounge some food before she keeled over from starvation.

Toward the back of the house she found the dining room and kitchen, which looked as clean as a model home in a very expensive housing development. The kitchen struck her as oddly empty, with nothing on the spacious counters except a blender and microwave, and nothing on the walls, not even a rack of carving knives. The cooking island in the middle of the room displayed food, at least. A box of granola and a bowl of apples didn't inspire gourmet fantasies, but her stomach decided they were better than nothing.

The refrigerator held milk, orange juice, and nothing else. Rather than snooping in the freezer, she settled in the breakfast nook to gobble her cereal, apple, and glass of juice. When she rinsed her dishes, she couldn't resist a peek in the cabinets. Other than the one where she had found the bowls and glasses, most of the cupboards were bare. Did Claude always live like Mother Hubbard? Or maybe he just didn't spend a lot of time in this house.

On the lowest level, she found a half-bath, a small sitting room with a wide-screen TV, and a den with bookshelves lining all the walls except one, which featured sliding glass doors that opened onto a patio. She stepped outside, drawing a deep breath of the salty air. The house perched on the edge of a cliff above the shore. Wooden steps led from the patio down to the rock-strewn beach. The stony bluffs, too steep for walking or even comfortable climbing, formed a semicircle that completely enclosed what appeared to be Claude's private beachfront property. An effective way to ensure privacy, she mused.

Back inside, she still didn't hear any sign of life. She wandered into the TV room, where she discovered a bookcase full of videotapes. Finding a Vincent Price collection on one shelf, she grabbed *The Fall of the House of Usher* and snuggled into an enormous armchair to watch the movie. Nothing was missing but the popcorn.

* * * * *

Just as the *House of Usher* started to topple into the lake, a touch on her shoulder jerked her out of the world on the screen. She turned with a gasp. "Good grief, Claude, warn me before you sneak up on me." She switched off the VCR.

"I am told I have a quiet footstep," he intoned in a Bela Lugosi accent.

"Too bad I don't have a mirror handy to test you with." Her pulse still raced from that momentary touch. She scanned his tall, greyhound-lean form, ravishing even in casual slacks and an open-necked polo shirt.

"Good, those secrets you asked about are still safe," he said. "I hope you found everything you needed. I apologize for the minimal breakfast selection, but I don't keep this place well stocked."

"That's okay." Following him up to the main floor, she said, "I love your house, and you have an incredible view from the patio."

"Wait until you see it at night. By the way, you didn't go outside, did you?" he asked as they entered the kitchen.

"Only for a second. What about it?"

"Please don't." He caught her arm and frowned. "Not without me."

His fingers felt like a brand on her skin. "Why on earth not? Come on, kidnapping is

one thing, but I don't know if I can stand for house arrest."

"Confound it, I'm trying to protect you! Can't you take my word that I know what I'm talking about?"

She pulled away from him. "I would if you'd explain yourself." When he continued to glower at her, she said, "Oh, all right, I won't roam around outside by myself."

He visibly relaxed. "That's better. Now, you must be hungry. Again, I'm afraid my supplies are limited." He opened the freezer. "Would you prefer chicken, beef, or fish?"

"Uh, chicken, I guess."

He confirmed her impression of him as a stereotypical bachelor non-cook by taking out a frozen fried chicken dinner and popping it in the microwave. While Eloise sat at the polished redwood table in the breakfast nook, Claude got a can of beef broth from one of the almost-empty cabinets and started it simmering on the stove. He then opened a bottle of cabernet and poured her a glass. "Here, have a drink. Have several."

"That's all you're eating?"

"I'm not hungry—now. Anyway, I suffer from a mind-boggling array of food allergies," he said, sitting opposite her with his own wineglass. "I survive mostly on a liquid protein diet."

"So you just keep the bare minimum of food around for visitors." That explained why the kitchen looked as if a famine had struck central California.

"Of which I don't have many here, as I said." He gazed at her over the rim of his glass. "I'm delighted to make you an exception."

Blushing under his intense scrutiny, she lowered her eyes to the table, glad the microwave interrupted the moment with a beep.

After he'd served her microwaved dinner and his mug of broth, he turned the conversation to the Varney plotline. "Now, about the opening scene. I leap out Flora's window, and her father and brother charge in pursuit, and one of them shoots me, yes?"

"Right."

"Jolly good. In the book, the rays of the moon bring our Byronic bloodsucker back to life. Shall we use that?"

"Why not? It'll give the movie a fresh slant compared to all the other vampire films. In fact, I was thinking we should deliberately make it old-fashioned, just on the edge of camp but not quite."

"I like the way your mind works." He raised his glass to her. "So our baffled heroes

search hither and yon, without finding a trace of the midnight intruder."

She smiled at the melodramatic flourish he gave to the words. "The next day, Varney shows up, the elegant gentleman who has just moved into town, offering to buy the mansion. So far, we're sticking to the plot of the book."

"Which we have to deviate from eventually, on account of those inconvenient 800 pages. Have you considered doing anything with the sexton who unearths the truth about Varney and blackmails him?" Claude delivered the "unearth" pun with a completely straight face.

"If we keep it simple. What if Varney spends the first night in his family crypt, and the sexton catches him rising from the grave at sunset the next day?"

"Why doesn't Varney just kill the blighter?"

"Good question." Eloise stirred gravy around in her mashed potatoes. "The sexton fends him off with a cross, maybe? After all, they're in a churchyard."

With a thoughtful frown, Claude took a long drink from his mug of broth. "I suppose we're stuck with the bit about waving crosses in the vampire's face. Audiences expect it, and it's a convenient icon to brand him as a cursed creature of the night and all that." He emptied the cup and licked his lips.

Suppressing a shiver, she forced her eyes away from his mouth. "Okay, he retires to his tomb, wakes up at sunset and gets into a confrontation with the sexton, then visits the Bannerworths and tries to charm them into selling the house. Oh, and somewhere along the way he has to move into rented quarters."

"Indeed." Claude refilled both of their wineglasses. "I always wonder about those vampires who live in mausoleums and still manage to have elegant wardrobes and perfect grooming." While pouring her wine, he leaned over her a few seconds longer than necessary. She felt his eyes linger on her long after he returned to his seat.

"That's as far as I've planned in any detail, except for the ending, anyway." She picked at her fried chicken, trying to suppress her awareness of Claude's intense gaze. He acts like my eating is the most fascinating spectacle he's seen all week.

When she finished the meal, Claude suggested moving into the office. They brought the rest of the wine along. Eloise switched on the computer and inserted the disk she'd brought with her. "Do you have any ideas about the middle?" she asked, loading her file of unfinished plot notes. "Middles are always the hard part. Varney will try to seduce Flora, of course."

"Of course." Claude pulled up a chair beside the desk, so close that Eloise could feel his breath ruffling the fine hairs on her arms. His nostrils flared as if sampling her scent. "When I call on the Bannerworths, I pay particular attention to the innocent Flora. She doesn't recognize me, naturally."

"Sure, it has to work that way. You'll have to appear in heavy makeup, with huge fangs, in the first bedroom scene, so the audience can believe she doesn't know it's you." She typed a note to that effect. "But she still feels uneasy. Something about you strikes a chord. I mean something about the vampire," she hastily corrected.

"Does it? What kind of chord?" He gave her a teasing half-smile.

"She's nervous, but fascinated. It's a 'dove mesmerized by a snake' kind of thing." Feeling her face grow hot under his eyes, Eloise focused on the computer screen.

"And Varney knows exactly how she reacts, no matter how hard she tries to disguise it," said Claude, edging still closer. "He gloats over her fascination."

"How does he know?"

"What? Have you forgotten vampires can read emotions? He senses every feeling that flashes through her mind. He knows that underneath her fear, she craves his touch." He lowered his voice to a silken purr.

"He does, huh? Who made this rule about vampires reading emotions?" She flicked a brief glance at him, then took a gulp of wine to distract herself from the new blush she felt creeping over her skin.

Claude shrugged. "Stands to reason. It goes along with their hypnotic power of mind control. They have to read it to control it, you know."

"Right." She forced a shaky giggle to deflect her own thoughts from the way he seemed able to creep into them and control them. "Mind control and emotion reading. Check." She typed the phrases. "No bat transformation, I hope? That's not in the book."

"Then let's skip it, by all means. He doesn't need wings to seduce Flora."

"Seduce? I thought he was trying to terrify her."

"Ah, but once he meets her in a less tumultuous situation, he changes his mind. Her wide, innocent eyes ensnare him." Claude captured Eloise's eyes, making her feel like a shard of metal in the grip of a magnet. "He can't resist the aroma of her blood and the liquid pulsation of her heart." His lips grazed her hair, and he inhaled as if savoring its aroma. He placed one finger on the hollow of her throat. "He lures her into his web under the very eyes of her father, brother, and jealous suitor. He's determined to own the house and make her his bride as well."

Eloise felt her pulse throb under his fingertip. "But he doesn't," she said, forcing her voice to remain steady. "He doesn't possess Flora in the end."

"Quite right." Claude retreated to lean against the desk at arm's length from her.

"According to your outline, you plan to use the double heroine device. The other girl, Clara, will be the expendable one."

She laughed, glad for the break in the tension. "That's such a crude way to put it. I'd rather think of Clara as the red shirt, like a Star Trek security guard."

"Varney turns to her as a consolation prize when Flora's family learns how to protect her from vampires," said Claude. "He's lonely for the embrace of a beautiful woman."

Eloise's skin prickled under his penetrating gaze. "Vampires get lonely?"

"Of course. The blood is the life, as they say. Not just food, but total fulfillment. When Flora rejects Varney, he needs a substitute."

She broke away from his stare and focused on the computer screen. "But he gets carried away with Clara—"

"And accidentally transforms her—"

"She rises from the grave and starts preying on the innocent—"

"So the vampire-hunting fanatics invade her resting place and drive a stake through her—"

"Which awakens Varney to the true horror of his existence. Realizing he'll never find peace, he decides to commit suicide in the crater of Vesuvius," Eloise finished.

"The graveyard scene should incorporate all the familiar details from the vintage vampire films. Torch-bearing peasants and the lot. The writhing undead corpse spouting fountains of blood."

"Sure, and vampire hunters loaded down with crosses, garlic, and holy water."

Claude folded his arms and declaimed, "Garlic in a basket for the vampire in the casket, and a holy water flagon to keep her cape a-draggin'."

Eloise gave him an incredulous stare.

"I'll need a few minutes of rehearsal," he said, "if you want a better Danny Kaye parody than that. Holy water flask for the undead-splashing task?"

She shook her head. "You stick to performing the lines, and let somebody else write them."

Brandishing the wine bottle, he said, "Empty. Would you like some more?"

She finished typing her notes and stood up. She felt lightheaded and a little wobbly. "Maybe just one glass."

In the kitchen, she leaned against the center island and sliced an apple while he opened another bottle of wine. With the length of time that had passed since her not-so-

filling dinner, maybe she needed some ballast in her stomach. The paring knife slipped and gashed her left thumb. Her arm jerked, banging her elbow on the counter. She yelped in pain.

Claude zipped over to her. "Are you all right? Let me see." He raised her hand to his lips and kissed the cut, while he massaged her elbow. Instantly, warmth erased the pain in the joint, spread in concentric circles, and radiated up her arm. She felt his tongue lick the wound before he started sucking it. The sting from the knife blade vanished, replaced by an electric tingle that made the skin prickle all over her body. Only half aware of what she was doing, she closed her eyes and leaned on Claude's chest.

He removed his mouth and stepped back, holding her hand lightly. Dismayed by the sudden interruption of the dreamy contentment that had enveloped her, she stared up at him.

"There, it's stopped bleeding," he said. His breathing sounded as labored as hers. "Why don't we sit outside awhile?"

Why hadn't he taken the embrace any further? Heck of a time for him to develop scruples on the subject, she thought.

Carrying their glasses, the bottle of wine, and Eloise's apple, they descended to the patio exit. "This should be safe enough," Claude said as he pulled up a deck chair for her, "even if someone's watching the house." They sat in the dark under overhanging eaves, where any observer would have to get exactly the right angle to see them at all. Because the predawn fog was still hours away, they had a glorious view of the star-sprinkled sky and the ocean bisected by a ribbon of moonlight. A cool breeze ruffled her hair.

"Who could be watching? Didn't you say nobody knows about this house?" She munched on apple slices while he filled the goblets. His fingers brushed hers when he handed her the glass. Flinching away from the contact, she splashed wine over the rim. Blushing, she wiped her hand on her jeans. The flush of warmth on her face and neck crept down her chest all the way to her stomach and thighs.

"I said it hasn't been publicized. It's hardly top secret. The stalker, if you want to call him that, could find the place if he tried hard enough. I'm hoping he won't manage to."

"I still think you're overreacting. After all, you're the one he's out to get, not me. If anything, he seemed to be warning me, not threatening." She took a bite of apple and a sip of wine, a light, semi-sweet Riesling that harmonized well with the taste of the fruit. "How long do you expect me to stay here, anyway?"

"I wouldn't mind having you stay indefinitely." He lifted her hand, planted a light tongue-flick of a kiss on it, then quickly released it.

When she glanced up, startled, she thought she saw a glint of red reflected in his eyes. Since he instantly looked away, she couldn't double-check. It had to be an optical illusion. Oh, boy, maybe that cabernet was stronger than I thought. "As much as I'd enjoy a

life of luxury as a prisoner in your castle by the sea," she said with an attempt at a light touch, "I do have my own life and work to get back to." Doubtless that word "indefinitely" meant nothing, anyway. The man was an actor, expert at charming people with empty phrases.

"So you do. Our script, for one thing."

"You seem pretty sure it'll get filmed," she ventured, hoping she didn't sound pushy for trying to pin him down.

"It will. The backers I mentioned owe me a favor."

"Do you plan to direct as well as produce and star?"

He laughed. "Deliver me from that! No, I have a director in mind, one who'll stick to my intentions for the tone of the thing."

"Such as not making Varney one of those spineless undead whining about his cursed existence," she teased, recalling what Claude had said on their first meeting.

"We'll have to tread a fine line, giving him a plausible motivation for suicide without turning him into just that."

"Well, I think it has to inspire him to a change of heart, when he takes the risk of fleeing to the Bannerworths, and Flora hides him from the mob," she said.

"Redeemed by the love of a good woman?" he said with a wry smile. He rested his fingers lightly on her wrist, as if counting her pulse. It sped up accordingly.

"Not love." The word made Eloise's head buzz like a nest of hornets. He didn't mean a thing by it. He was only making conversation about a pulp horror novel. "She thinks of him more as a friend, since he stopped pressuring them to sell the house and showed her where to find the secret cache of jewels to pay off the family's debt."

"Oh, yes, I almost forgot about the hidden treasure."

"After she helps him escape through the secret passage—"

"There's a secret passage, too?" Laughter tinged the question.

"Sure, you can't have a Gothic mansion and a hidden treasure without a secret passage," said Eloise. "Then he sneaks to the home of the local vicar and confesses his evil past. The vicar assures Varney he's not beyond forgiveness, and he decides the only way to redeem himself is by seeking the true death."

"Romantic fiction aside, do you believe a vampire can be redeemed?" said Claude in an oddly serious tone.

"Theoretically, if they existed?" She shrugged. "If they had consciousness, instead of

being demon-animated corpses, they would have free will, too. So they could choose goodness. And if God made everything, He must have made vampires for a reason, if only to remind us ordinary human beings that we're not the rulers of the universe. So I'd think He would accept a vampire who repented."

"Well, when you put it that way, it's only fair. The trouble with the usual scenario is that your average vampire in search of redemption wants to be 'cured'. If a supernatural predator decides to mend his ways and stop ripping the occasional victim to shreds, why should the package have to include renouncing all those 'creature of the night' fringe benefits?"

"Like immortality and assorted super-powers? Good point."

"And invading the bedchambers of nubile maidens." With a fingernail, he traced a circle on the back of her hand. It seared like a lambent flame.

"Definitely an important perk." She tried to maintain a light tone, though she had trouble catching her breath.

"Next time, let's write a script about a vampire or some other dark-prowling predator who doesn't have to get cremated in a volcano," Claude said. "Here's to creatures of the night."

She raised her glass to clink with his. "I'll drink to that." Her nerves fizzed with delight at the hint of a "next time."

They finished the bottle in silence except for stray remarks now and then. When she stood up, Eloise felt a pleasant floating sensation but no actual drowsiness, after sleeping more than half the day. As a writer, she liked to keep a late schedule whenever she could, anyway. Nighttime held fewer distractions, such as the afternoon and early evening plague of telemarketers, not to mention friends who mistook "working at home" for doing nothing.

"Would you care to watch a movie?" Claude said as they went inside, his hand under her elbow to guide her. "Unless you're too tired? Maybe you'd rather go to bed."

She felt a quiver in the pit of her stomach. Go to bed and dream of his hands, his mouth, his body covering hers? She eased her arm out of his gentle clasp, hoping he didn't notice how shaky her balance still was. "No, not at all. Do you have tapes of your own films?"

"Living near Los Angeles, you must know actors' egos better than that. Of course I do. Maybe you'd like to see the director's cut of the first Count Orloff opus?"

She agreed. They spent most of what remained of the night watching that video and its sequel. To her vague disappointment, Claude stayed on his side of the couch throughout both movies. True, she wasn't eager to face the decision of whether to maintain a dignified shield or melt into his arms. On the other hand, she didn't relish the implication that he'd lost interest in her body. Did his occasional sharp glance at her

during the delectably romantic moments in the films mean he guessed how the scenes affected her? Could he somehow sense the flutter in her stomach, the pulsation between her legs, the trickle of wetness when he seemed about to move toward her, and the letdown she felt when he returned his attention to the TV?

At the door of her room, she thought for a second that he wanted to revive the spark between them. His hands alighted on her upper arms, moving up and down the bare flesh in a distracted manner he seemed hardly aware of. He bent over her, his mouth hovering near hers. She parted her lips and waited. Emitting a long sigh, he kissed her cheek and drew back. A knot of frustration coiled low in her abdomen.

"Why don't you work up a few more pages of dialogue?" he said in a husky voice better suited to sensuality than business. "I'll be interested to see how you visualize those conversations between Varney and Flora."

"Okay," she murmured, involuntarily swaying toward him. "If you'll read the lines with me to check how it sounds."

"With pleasure." He let go of her so abruptly that she almost stumbled. "Sleep well, cherie." His voice caressed her. He spoiled the impression, though, by adding, "And remember, after you get up, stay inside the house."

"Will you cool it with the ominous prohibitions? You make me feel like Bluebeard's bride!" She retreated into the bedroom, closing the door with a firm click that didn't quite rate as a slam.

Chapter Eight

The next day, she again woke before Claude. She remembered a note in his publicity bio that his career had started in legitimate theater. That experience must have given him a permanent fondness for keeping late hours. After breakfast, she tackled the pivotal character-changing scenes she and Claude had discussed. Hours flew by while she typed page after page of dialogue. She had no trouble putting seductive speeches in Varney's mouth when she visualized him as Claude.

Dream on, girl, she cautioned herself. Any day now you'll have to go home and turn back into a pumpkin. She couldn't fool herself that Claude's flattery and seduction meant anything to him beyond a temporary diversion. Judging from the way he'd behaved the night before, he must have already regretted their intimacies at the con. No doubt her unconscious mind approved, because she'd had no erotic dreams this time. Her nipples puckered at the memory of that vivid dream the previous night. She crossed her arms over her breasts to stifle the feeling.

By five o'clock, though, she fidgeted with restlessness that made hash of her concentration. Given Claude's obvious resolution to keep distance between them, what gave him the right to forbid her to leave the house? She would take a walk on the beach if she darn well pleased. Especially since the day was almost over, and he still showed no signs of emerging from his cave.

Snatching an apple from the kitchen, she stomped out the patio door and down the steps to the beach. She scuffed through the sand to the seaweed-strewn rocks at the

edge of the water and crunched her way through the fruit. By the time she buried the core, the exercise and sea air had cooled her temper a little. So what if Claude saw her as a writer instead of a sex object? Wasn't that what she'd originally preferred? And if he had a controlling streak, she could live with that for another day or two. If he delivered orders, she didn't have to obey them. The important thing was that the check, figuratively speaking, was in the mail.

Just as she considered going inside, a white shape caught her eye. A man walking across the beach toward her. He must have descended the steps while she'd been looking the other way. When he got closer, she saw that he wore a white suit, a straw hat, and, of all things, white gloves. Tall—well, at five feet four, she thought of most men as tall—with untidy, dark hair, he looked scarecrow-thin even in a jacket with padded shoulders.

He strolled right up to her and tipped his hat like a gentleman in an old movie. Now she could see that he had a neatly trimmed mustache, which, along with the suit and hat, gave him a barbershop-quartet appearance, somewhat spoiled by the sunglasses he also wore. "Miss Kern?" he said.

"Do I know you?"

"No, but I've been looking for you. I'm deeply concerned that you're staying in Claude Darvell's house." His suave tone held no hint of a threat.

Nevertheless, her heart accelerated. She folded her arms and took a step backward. "You're the one who called me the other night. What do you want?"

He spread his hands. "Only to help you. You are in danger as long as you're within his reach."

"Sorry, I don't find vague threats very convincing." Could she evade him and run for the house? He stood between her and the stairs. If she tried to dash around him, he could probably catch her in seconds with those long legs.

"Miss Kern, are you a Christian?"

She gaped at him. Was he a religious fanatic as well as a crazed stalker? "Well, yes, I belong to a church." Next, she expected, he would ask if she were saved. That always struck her as an intrusively personal question, along the lines of, "Do you love your husband?"

Instead, he asked, "Do you have a crucifix with you?"

"Uh, no, left mine at home." Okay, that settles it, certified nut.

"Then you must accept this." From his coat pocket he produced a silver crucifix on a chain.

She stared at the minutely detailed Christ figure. "For goodness' sake, why?"

"Trust me, Miss Kern. I have known Claude for many years. He is a demon in human form. You need this for protection."

"You're out of your mind." She dodged around him and sprinted for the steps. Or tried to, with the sand dragging at her feet.

He darted into her path and grabbed her arm. "Please, I don't intend to hurt you. Listen to me!"

"I don't have to listen to any of this insanity!" She tried to pull free, but her efforts hadn't the slightest effect on his grip.

"Claude killed my beloved."

Astonished, she forgot to struggle. "He what?"

"He caused her death. He's dangerous to women."

"How did he cause it? Not that I believe a word of this."

"He is a vampire. A bloodthirsty demon who only appears human. He lurks in the shadows and sucks the life out of innocent women."

Though her heart still hammered with fear, disgust kept her from outright panic.

"Couldn't you come up with a more original fantasy? You've seen too many movies."

His brow furrowed in apparent confusion. "This has nothing to do with movies. I'm telling you the truth, for your protection." With the hand that still had the silver chain looped around it, he took off the sunglasses. His eyes pierced hers. "Listen carefully and do as I say."

A wave of faintness swept over Eloise, as if the sun's glare had caught up with her. Her fear evaporated.

The man's voice sounded like an echo reverberating through a tunnel. "Take the cross. Test it for yourself. Go into Claude's lair while he sleeps and place the holy symbol on his flesh. You will see that I'm right."

That didn't seem like too much to ask. In fact, the suggestion sounded quite reasonable. "Okay," she muttered. "But you can't be right. No such thing as vampires."

"Make the test, and form your own conclusion. Then, for your safety, get away from here as soon as you can."

"Sure, whatever you say."

She felt him press the crucifix into her hand. A minute later, she found herself

alone, climbing the steps to the house. The man had vanished.

Feeling as if her head were floating, she drifted upstairs to Claude's closed bedroom door. With the cross dangling from her fingers, she opened the door and tiptoed inside. Still in a daze, she walked through a sitting room into the bedroom beyond. She came to a halt beside Claude's bed, dimly visible in the heavily curtained chamber. He lay on his back, so still she couldn't see him breathing.

Her brain snapped into focus. She blinked, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the low light. What the heck am I doing, barging into his bedroom? Still, without conscious decision, she turned back the covers and extended the cross toward his bare chest.

The symbol grazed his skin. His eyes snapped open, blazing crimson. The air around him rippled. His face blurred into a dark-furred, tigerish mask, with fangs and pointed ears. With a wordless snarl, he clamped onto her wrists. She let out a shriek and tried to pull away. His claws held her like a pair of handcuffs.

The next instant, he morphed back to normal. No fangs, no claws, no fur. In his eyes, though, pinpoints of red still gleamed.

Swallowing her heart, Eloise blinked, trying to convince herself that his eyes didn't shine. They did.

"Bloody hell!" He released one of her hands, the one holding the silver chain. "Get that thing away from me!"

She dropped the cross on the nightstand. Since he still held her tightly by one arm, she couldn't run away. Even if he'd let go, she thought she probably wouldn't be able to move. The few seconds of transformation had stunned her like a punch in the head. Before she could catch her breath, Claude flipped her onto her back and pinned her with his body. "What in hell possessed you to do that?"

Her ribcage seemed to compress her lungs like a corset of steel. She had to gulp air to squeeze out an answer. "A man on the beach. Gave me the cross, told me to test you. Seemed like a good idea at the time."

"On the—? Damn it, I ordered you to stay inside!"

His anger swept over her like a gale-force wind. She summoned her own outrage to beat it back. "I don't take orders!"

He twined his fingers in her hair. When she struggled to escape his burning stare, he tightened his grip to keep her head immobile. Conscious of his weight on her, she felt her stomach churn with a mix of fear and excitement.

"Oh, damn, your heart's pounding. You're afraid of me."

"Well, yeah, I'm not stupid." A half-hysterical giggle escaped her.

He loosened his grip and smoothed her hair. "I have no intention of ripping your throat out."

"That's a relief. What are you going to do?" Now that the immediate terror had faded, she became aware of his legs trapping hers, her breasts against his chest, and his face inches from her own.

"I should make you forget all this."

"Vampire mind control? Haven't you done enough of that already? You hypnotized me at the con, didn't you?" His silence confessed to the charge. "If I wanted a man to manipulate me and order me around, I'd have stuck to that guy I broke up with in grad school." She dug her nails into his shoulders.

He winced. "I was only trying to protect you. Philip—the stalker—could have killed you."

"He didn't do one thing to threaten me. He just talked crazy. Anyway, why would you care if I get hurt?"

"Damn it, woman, of course I care!" He tangled his fingers in her hair again. When she gasped, he covered her open mouth with his. His tongue thrust inside, grazing her teeth.

The swirl of his tongue around the inside of her lips sent sparks dancing along her nerves. She squirmed under him, eager to feel the pressure of his body on her tender parts.

He broke off the kiss, heaving ragged breaths. "I promised myself I would not do that." He sat up, with the sheet still covering him from the hips down. As far as she could see, he didn't wear anything in bed. "We need to talk."

"We certainly do." She sat up, too, her head reeling and her cheeks hot with the brew of emotions that simmered in her. "Truth?"

"Very well, ma chere. The whole truth and nothing but. Not here, though. Go into the next room and let me get dressed first." He cupped her chin to raise her eyes to his. "You won't run away, I trust?"

Run where? "Not a chance."

Eloise retreated into the adjacent sitting room. After opening the curtains halfway to let in some light, she saw a matching couch and chair, a bookcase, a miniature refrigerator, and a wet bar with a compact-model microwave oven on its counter. She sat on the couch and waited, glad for the few minutes of solitude to tame the hive of bees in her skull and the spiders skittering in her stomach.

Soon Claude emerged from the bedroom, barefoot, in a pair of blue satin jogging shorts and a T-shirt. He went to the bar, filled a glass with ice, and got out bottles of gin and tonic. "Care for a drink?"

"No, thanks, I want my head clear. If that's possible around you." She glared at him.

"Well, I need one." When she flinched, he added with a wry smile, "Not that kind. Not right this minute, anyway." After he'd mixed his gin and tonic, he took a seat at the other end of the couch from her, out of the direct sunlight from the window. "Tell me exactly what happened when you met Philip."

She summarized the encounter. "He said you're a vampire, a demon in human shape, as he put it. I'm not sure how it happened, but the next thing I knew, I was in here testing the theory."

"Of course," Claude sighed. "I should have known. He caught you off guard, so he hypnotized you. I should have known you wouldn't do anything like that on a mere suggestion. Regardless of what you saw just now, I'm not a demon."

"You changed—" Her breath caught in her throat, cutting off the words.

"I apologize for that. A defense mechanism. You startled me out of a sound sleep, after all."

"What about the cross?"

"A psychosomatic reaction. I'm not a creature of the devil, and I'm not undead, either. Though if you'd looked for a pulse a few minutes ago, you'd have had trouble finding one. Suspended animation looks a lot like death."

She folded her arms in resistance to his reasonable tone. "I don't hear you denying you're a vampire."

"I don't deny it." He took a swallow of his drink. "But I'm not supernatural. We're another species, long-lived, with a specialized diet."

"Liquid protein."

He nodded.

Her numbed brain woke up and processed clues from the past few days. "Oh, God, you drank my blood! How many times?"

He gazed into his glass as if embarrassed.

"Come on, level with me. At the con?"

"Yes, and the night before last, after we arrived here."

A flush spread over her body. "Then all those feelings I thought were dreams came from you? And that's why I can't remember much about Saturday night?"

"Granted." He drained his glass and got up to mix another drink, heavy on the gin.

Her throat tightened with indignation. "You—I don't believe this! You made up all that rigmarole about producing my script just to feed on me."

"What?" He whirled around to face her, glass in hand. "Bloody hell, do you seriously think I'd go to all that trouble just for a little refreshment? I can get that from the vampire groupies."

Her pulse hammered in her temples. "Well, isn't that what I am to you?"

"Eloise, no!" He hurried to the couch and sat near her. She edged as far away as the space allowed. "I feasted on your mind, your passions, not only your blood. That's why I didn't want to take any risk of letting Philip see us together. He would realize instantly that I care for you. And I meant it when I said I'd like to have you stay here."

"How can I tell what you mean? You turned me into a puppet, like one of those blow-up sex dolls, and wiped my memory on top of it. Anyway, you're an actor. You could turn on the charm at will even if you weren't a vampire."

"Please, ma belle, let me prove that isn't true." He caressed her shoulder and gazed into her eyes. In this light, his no longer glowed red, but they still held an inhuman sheen of silver that she could hardly believe she'd missed before.

She jerked away from his touch. "Don't look at me."

"I've vowed not to mesmerize you again."

"I don't trust your vows. Not yet."

He stalked to the bar and leaned against it, half-turned away from her. "Very well, I'm not looking at you. Now will you listen?"

"I'm listening. What do you mean, you vowed not to do it again?"

"I want you as a friend, an equal." He gave a dry chuckle. "Something we don't say to ephemerals very often. Many of my people would think I'm going soft even to consider it."

"Ephemerals? That's what you call us? Here today, gone tomorrow. No wonder you think you can treat us like puppets."

"I don't." He gritted his teeth, with a muted growl. "Some ephemerals. Not you."

"Well, at least you admit it." A new thought chilled her. "How many people have

you killed?"

"Oh, for hell's sake!" He slammed the glass on the bar. "I don't kill for food. I take no more than they can spare, and I reward them with pleasure. Pleasure that I thoroughly enjoy sharing. I've killed in self-defense now and then. Not often. I told you, I prefer the quiet life."

"That Philip guy said you killed his beloved, or caused her death, anyway. Is that how he knows you're a vampire?"

"What do you think he is?"

"He's one, too?" Speechless for a minute, Eloise sorted out this new bit of data.

"Wait a second, he walked around in broad daylight."

"You've read enough books like Dracula and Varney, not to mention reams of folklore, that you shouldn't believe that tripe about vampires bursting into flame in the sun."

"Yeah, but he was out on the beach with no shade at all."

"Goes to show how much he's willing to suffer for the satisfaction of harassing me," said Claude. "How was he dressed?"

"White suit, gloves, hat, sunglasses."

"You see? Probably sunscreen, as well. I could walk on the beach in that costume, too, but I wouldn't enjoy it much."

"What about the cross? It didn't seem to bother him."

Claude fidgeted with his glass as if self-conscious about the topic. "I suffer from a phobia for religious objects. He doesn't. He was fortunate enough to grow up in the enlightened atmosphere of Victorian England. I was born in a French village in 1738, when rural folk still seriously believed demons might walk among them. It was also the height of the vampire-hunting craze in Greece and Eastern Europe, as you know. I became infected with the superstitions of the culture around me."

"Really? Does that happen a lot?"

"It can. We're highly adaptable, especially in childhood. We have to be, to fit invisibly into your world. We tend to pick up human attitudes unless our mentors are very careful." He sat down, more relaxed now, but still making a point of not looking directly at her. "It still happens to some young vampires today, if they're allowed to watch horror movies."

She had to laugh at the image of stern vampire elders censoring their children's viewing habits. "Tell me about Philip. Who was the woman, and why does he blame you for her death?"

Claude sighed. "He's not far wrong, but I never intended her any harm. I suppose I'd better tell you the whole story."

"Yes, please do." She folded her arms and frowned at him, determined to shield herself against his charm until he offered her some basis for trust.

Chapter Nine

"As I said, I grew up in France. I stayed there until the Revolution, when I relocated to England. I had no desire to meet Madame Guillotine. Decapitation kills us as easily as you. In the middle of the nineteenth century, I wandered into an acting career mostly out of boredom. I discovered that I enjoyed performing before audiences. Their emotions could be quite—intoxicating." He smiled like a cat licking milk from its whiskers. "If you researched the late Victorian theatrical world in depth, you might stumble across an obscure actor named Claude D'Arnot."

"You."

He nodded. "If you noticed the photographs and posters in my office, you must have guessed by now that all those ancestors of mine were actually myself."

"And you hang the pictures in plain sight? In a vampire movie, that would be my first clue that you're immortal."

He laughed. "In real life, of course, nobody nowadays would come up with that theory. They'd think what you probably did: 'What an amazing family resemblance.' Right?"

"Well, yeah."

"That's part of my camouflage. Who could suspect I would display my past lives that brazenly if I really were immortal? But all that came after the story I'm telling you now," he continued. "By the 1890s I'd temporarily given up the stage. I became involved with a young woman who practiced as a medium. I helped her get out from under the thumb of her charlatan of an uncle who used her in spiritualist scams. She knew my true nature, and we stayed together for several years."

"Were you in love with her?" Eloise tried to convince herself that she asked from mere curiosity, not because she cared about Claude's past liaisons.

"That's a human emotion. I'm not sure I know what it means. I was addicted to her, the inevitable result of feeding from the same donor for any length of time. In an exclusive relationship like that, the roots strike very deep."

"Exclusive? How could she stand the blood loss?"

He sighed. "We don't come close to draining our donors. I don't need more than a few sips, when the emotions are so intense. Quality makes up for quantity. Bulk nourishment comes from animals."

"Okay, you had an addictive relationship." Eloise felt sick at the implication that he might think of her, too, as some sort of drug. "Where does Philip come in? Was that the woman he accused you of killing?"

"No, that was later. My donor began to have doubts about me. Intellectually, she knew I wasn't supernatural or demonic. Emotionally, she couldn't quell the fear that her soul was somehow tainted. She wanted to break it off. Knowing neither of us could resist the lure of our mutual addiction, I had to get as far away from her as possible. I'd

known Philip Trent in London for a few years, before he'd moved to San Francisco. He suggested I might enjoy living there, so I made the move in 1902."

"You were friends then."

"Yes, what I originally told you about him was essentially true, although not the whole truth. I decided it was time to assume a new identity, so I changed my name. I picked 'Darvell' because that was what my mother called herself at the time."

"You've got a mother?" she blurted out.

"Did you think we reproduced by spontaneous generation? She's dead, though. The only family I have now is a half-brother. But you don't want to get sidetracked onto the subject of genealogy, do you?"

"Oh, no." She made a mental note to satisfy her curiosity about vampire family structures some other time. "Go on about Philip."

"There I was in California, making a fresh start. I was determined never to get attached to another ephemeral. Not that my emotions had been engaged to any depth, or so I told myself, but the break was still painful. I plunged into the San Francisco night life with Philip, flitting from one lovely female blossom to another like a pair of honey-sipping wasps."

"I can imagine, rolling in money on top of that charm of yours," she said in a caustic tone, to fend off the memory of how she'd felt when Claude had stung and sipped her.

"A few years after I joined him, Philip became enamored of a woman, a naive ingénue he had no business fixating on. To cut short the distressing details, I didn't realize how he felt about the girl. We have a taboo against preying on someone else's donor. But I assumed he thought of her as a casual victim, so I ignored the rule."

"You claimed you'd never killed for food."

"Don't jump to conclusions. I didn't drain the girl." Claude got up and paced while he continued, "I got careless about erasing her memory. The next time Philip visited her, his bite triggered the recollection of mine."

"So then she figured out he was a vampire, too?"

"Exactly. Of course, up to that point she'd been a rational young woman of the new century, who would have laughed at the idea of vampires. She was terrified, thought she was losing her mind."

"I know the feeling," said Eloise, thinking of the moment when Claude's face had transformed into a raging beast's.

"That night, Philip stormed into my flat, furious about the way he'd had to leave her in hysterics. I handled the blasted thing all wrong. Instead of apologizing for my trespass, as vampire etiquette demanded, I made light of it. Asked him why he made such a fuss over an ephemeral. After all, he could always find another pet."

"Pet?" She almost choked on her indignation at the word.

"That's how most of our kind view their repeat donors. I had to pretend I thought that way, to keep from admitting to myself how the loss of my own 'pet' had hurt me."

"So how did Philip react?" She reserved judgment about his claim to have been hurt.

"Said he was in love with the young female. Of course, I laughed at the very idea. When he reacted by trying to throttle me, I had to take his infatuation seriously. I offered to talk to his young lady and undo the damage I'd done. Needless to say, he wasn't about to let me near her alone. We went to her place together."

He poured himself a straight shot of gin and gulped it down, then resumed pacing. "I don't want to dwell on the details. We had to force our way in. When I tried to mesmerize her, she screamed and waved a cross in my face. Philip tried, and when he put his arms around her, she slapped him. He wouldn't use physical force on her, so when she ran outside, all we could do was chase her down the street."

"Why didn't the hypnotism work?"

Claude shrugged. "She had faith in the cross. It gave her a focus for resistance." He picked up a corkscrew from the bar and tossed it from one hand to the other. "She fled a couple of streets over, into a Catholic church. Philip followed her all the way to the altar. I stopped at the door. That was when the earthquake started."

"Oh! The big 1906 quake?"

He nodded, still fiddling with the corkscrew. "I shouted at Philip to run for it. He wouldn't leave the girl, and she ducked behind the altar and refused to go with him. When the roof collapsed, I cleared out."

"You mean they—"

"Both of them, buried in the rubble." He stabbed the corkscrew into the top of the

bar, where it protruded like an arrow in a target. "After the quake, I went back to check. The whole church had crumbled into a heap of bricks."

Eloise's stomach knotted. She swallowed a mouthful of acid. "But Philip's alive."

"About a month ago, the church started a building program, which included archeological excavation of the present parking lot. They found two bodies, or, rather, a woman's skeleton and the strangely preserved body of a man."

"So he woke up? What would it take to kill a vampire permanently?"

"Decapitation, cremation, stake through the heart if it's left in place long enough. The usual." His lips quirked in a humorless smile. "Anything on the standard list except sunlight, which just gives us headaches that won't quit. Luckily for Philip, the falling debris didn't separate his head from his body or crush the brain beyond regeneration."

"And now he's out to get you."

"I'm afraid so." With a sigh he sat down with arms flung wide along the back of the couch. "To me, a long human lifetime has passed since the quake. To him, it's little more than yesterday. No wonder he's still furious."

"But you didn't kill his girlfriend, donor, whatever. If you helped to cause her death, so did he. You couldn't have predicted how she'd react, much less that an earthquake would hit right that minute." Eloise wasn't sure why she felt like defending

Claude, after the way he had treated her at the convention. "Anyway, it's a relief to find out you're not a murderer, much less a demon. I won't have to sell my soul to get my script produced."

He laughed. "And I'm relieved you haven't run out of here screaming in terror."

"It was close there for a while," she said. She still couldn't wrap her mind around the change she'd witnessed when the cross had grazed him.

"Unfortunately, it's clear Philip doesn't see the situation your way. I'm afraid he'll use you to punish me. He thinks I destroyed the woman he loved, so what better way to get revenge than through someone I care about? The last thing I want is to see another ephemeral killed on my account, especially you."

"How could you possibly feel anything special about me? You hardly know me." She heard an edge of harshness in her own voice. It jolted her to realize how much she wished Claude did care about her.

"But I do know you. Intimately. For vampires, a night or two is all it takes. We can read emotions, remember?"

Shocked, she stared at him, met his intent gaze, and hastily looked away. Her

cheeks flushed. "You mean all that stuff about Varney sensing Flora's reaction wasn't just theoretical? You know every thought in my head?"

"Not thoughts," he said. "Emotions, sensations. For true telepathy, we would have to bond—share blood both ways."

She hid her face in her hands. "I don't believe this," she muttered. No wonder his lovemaking fulfilled her needs so perfectly. He saw, scented, and tasted every impulse that flitted through her body and mind. "Oh, God, it's like you stripped me naked." Remembering how she'd awakened in her bed at the hotel, she said, "You did, but this is worse."

She hurried to the window, staring at the sun low on the horizon above the ocean. "How could you do that to me and then call me a friend? You—actor!"

"Cherie, please don't!" He crept up beside her and reached for her arm.

Shaking off the tentative touch, she said, "And don't try to charm me with bilingual sweet talk."

"Why does it upset you this badly? You enjoyed the encounters as much as I did."

"That's not the point." She swiped at the tears spilling from her eyes. "You played me like a musical instrument. You never gave me a chance to accept or refuse."

"Suppose I'd told you the truth from the beginning? Assuming you believed me, would you have leaped into my arms?"

"I don't know. And since you didn't take the risk of being honest, we'll never know."

"Didn't you understand when I said I'd vowed not to mesmerize you again? After I realized I wanted you as a companion, not just a food source or even a business associate, I stopped 'playing' you."

She could almost hear his teeth grind. "Confound it, Eloise, look at me!"

She turned in a slow circle toward him. Her breath rapid and shallow, she avoided his eyes. "You think it's that easy to make me trust you?"

"What can I do, then?" Some emotion roughened his voice. She didn't dare let herself assume it was pain at her rejection.

"What did you change into when I touched you with the cross? Show me."

"Oh, hell, do you have to ask for that?" When she just glared at him, he said, "I apologize for the lapse in control. We have a limited ability to shape-change. It's an ancestral form encoded in the genes, a vestigial skill, not much use in the modern

environment."

"Limited? No bats, wolves, clouds of mist?"

"Don't we wish," he chuckled. "No, just what you saw. Well, and a spot of levitation."

"That's all? Gosh, what a letdown." She maintained the sarcastic tone to shield herself from the attraction that could easily override her judgment. "Come on, demonstrate."

"Yes, that's all. Any elaborate transformations you might see are purely illusion, including a veil of invisibility that's almost as good as mist." He narrowed his eyes in concentration and faded from her sight. Before she could blink, he reappeared as a blurred outline then sharpened into solidity.

"Oh, wow." Gray patches gathered before her eyes. She stumbled backward to lean against the wall.

Folding his arms, he focused on a point somewhere past her shoulder and blurred again. A dark velvet pelt spread over his face and arms. His ears grew points, his eyes glowed red, and fangs sprouted in his mouth. A shadow of silver wings momentarily hovered behind him. After a few seconds, the change reversed itself like a tape on rewind, and he reverted to normal. Stretching his arms wide, he rose from the floor and floated toward the ceiling. He drifted to the floor, where he stood with his hands extended toward her, palms up. "Please don't be afraid."

"I'm working on it." She reached out to run her fingertips over his right palm. "You're real. Not dreaming. Not crazy."

"No. I'm real." He shivered when she repeated the light touch. "Easy." "Hey, little hairs." The folktales had preserved the facts about vampires in random hit-or-miss fashion, it seemed.

"Yes, and they're sensitive." He drew back and folded his arms. "If I can't touch or look at you, it's unfair for you to take advantage."

She couldn't decide whether he was teasing or serious. "How sensitive can they be, if you use your hands normally all the time?"

"Firm grasping doesn't trigger the response. Other kinds of touching do."

"Great, I have a way to get back at you for some of the things you did to me Saturday night." She clamped a lid on the turbulent images of those things.

He drew a hissing breath. "Does that mean you may allow it to happen again?"

"Don't push it!" she snapped.

"Very well." He backed up, hands raised in surrender. "I swore I'd leave your free will intact, and I won't break my word."

"Damn it, Claude, don't you have any idea how I feel, knowing you practically turned me inside out and hardly let me remember any of it?" After a pause for thought, she said, "Oh, yeah, you know everything I feel."

"I know you're angry and frustrated, understandably."

"Talk about unfair advantage!" She flung herself onto the couch. "Let me get this straight. You drank my blood, and that's like sex for you."

He sat down, too, still keeping his distance. "We breed so infrequently that reproductive sex means very little to us. I've never been chosen as a stud, but I can't miss what I've never experienced. And it doesn't matter that a male vampire can't mate with a human female. We get our satisfaction from our donors' arousal and fulfillment."

"The emotion-reading thing." She couldn't suppress a mental flashback to her "dream" of the other night. A shadow of that excitement tingled through her body.

"I told you I feasted on your passion. Those of our kind who have produced offspring say the blood-sharing is far more intense than ordinary sex."

"And you made me forget the whole thing." She gulped a deep breath to gather her nerve. "If you want to make up for lying and manipulating, you can start by doing it all over, with me fully conscious."

He became very still. "Eloise, are you sure you want this?"

"Why not? You said you don't take enough to do any harm." She hugged herself, feeling as if her heart might burst out of her ribcage.

"It's harm to our relationship that concerns me. Don't tempt me into this if you might regret it."

She shook her head. "Why worry about closing the barn door after the horse goes to water?"

"The more often we indulge," he said, "the easier it will be for Philip to notice my mark on your aura. It'll be obvious that I have a special interest in you. I don't want to make you a target."

"If we're supposed to be friends and equals and all that, I get some input on that decision, too."

"Damn. I never did develop the habit of resisting temptation." He ran his fingers through his hair, got up, and paced to the bar and back. "What you should do is leave right now. Call a cab, go to the airport in Monterey, and catch the first flight south."

Make Philip think you took his advice and rejected me. Then he'll leave you alone."

"What if I don't want to leave right now?" She stood up, hands on her hips.

Claude took a step toward her, reached for her, let his arms drop, and then, with an inarticulate growl, grabbed her. "We'll discuss it later."

He pulled her to him and captured her mouth with a hard kiss. She gasped in a spasm of alarm. She knew he must hear and feel the hammering of her heart.

He raised his head to impale her with his violet-silver, red-tinged eyes. "You are afraid. I won't continue if you have doubts."

Wrapping her arms around his waist, Eloise shook her head. "Not afraid, just startled. I don't have doubts. I want to experience this. But slower."

He rubbed up and down her spine as if petting a kitten. "Yes. Forgive me for pouncing so hard." Easing her head onto his chest, he stroked her hair and sighed. "It's been so long since I've enjoyed a woman who's fully aware. I got carried away. You know, you'll still have to leave sometime within the next day or so. We have to get Philip off your trail."

Was he trying to get rid of her? She looked up at him. While he could read her emotions, she had no clue as to his. "Okay, whatever, just call me Scarlett." When he quizzically raised his eyebrows, she said, "I'll think about it tomorrow."

"Very well, I can't refuse a lady's wishes. Where? Couch or bed?"

Her breath caught in her throat. "Bed. Yours. You invaded mine enough already."

Chapter Ten

He picked her up and carried her into the other room. She kicked off her sandals on the way. Placing her on the satin sheets, he removed the tie from her ponytail and ran his fingers through her hair, making her scalp tingle. When he rolled up the hem of her T-shirt, she said, "Wait. You have to undress, too."

"Why? I told you ordinary intercourse doesn't happen." His fingers skimmed the waistband of her shorts. His cool skin on hers made her shiver.

"Equality. If I have to be exposed, so do you."

"Fair enough. Come to think of it, skin-to-skin contact sounds very pleasant." He peeled off his shirt. "Your aura glows red with heat. I want to bathe in it."

His resonant voice made her insides vibrate, like feeling the notes of a pipe organ through the floorboards. "And I need to see better," she whispered. "Need light." The heavy drapes made the room dim even now. When the sun finished setting, it would be too dark for her. Claude, she suspected, could see like a cat.

"No electric light," he said. "Too harsh." He opened the nightstand drawer and produced a fat candle, which he set in an ashtray and lit. The scent of vanilla wafted from it. "That should last several hours." He removed his shorts and sat on the edge of the bed.

Eloise scanned his lean, pale body in the candlelight. An inverted triangle of fine hair covered his chest from the nipples down, tapering to a point at the navel. From there, a thin line of hair arched down to the groin, where his cock lay at rest against his thigh. A shuddering breath escaped from her. Her abdominal muscles tensed, but not with fear, when his fingers crept under her T-shirt. He rolled it up, the backs of his hands brushing her skin, skimming the inside curves of her breasts.

She lifted her arms to let him pull the shirt over her head, then leaned on her elbows to give him access to the hooks at the back of her bra. When he tossed it aside with the shirt, a draft from the air conditioner raised prickles on her skin. His fingertips brushed her neck, swept down between her breasts, and settled at her waist, creating a fresh wave of shivers. Wetness pooled between her legs. Could he tell how aroused she was? Of course, he sensed everything she felt. A flush suffused her body. He spread his hand on the bare skin just above her beltline. "When blood rushes to your skin that way, it's all I can do to wait." He rubbed her middle in a circular motion, with the lightest possible contact. "Your warmth makes my palms tingle. If only you could see how your aura turns deep red here, when you become excited." He moved down the front of her shorts to the apex of her thighs. "And you smell delicious."

She couldn't suppress a wiggle of her hips. "So taste me."

He bent over and licked first the right nipple, then the left, each in one long stroke. The heat of his tongue contrasted with the near chill of his hands, one of which explored her inner thighs while the other cupped her mound.

"Not fair," she gasped. "I want to drive you crazy, too."

"You already do." He unzipped her shorts, and she raised her hips to let him strip them off. Reclining beside her, he leaned on one elbow to tickle the inside of her legs just below the nest of curls.

She grabbed his hand and ran her thumb over the delicate hairs in the palm. "How does that feel?"

He closed his eyes. "Maddening. If you want me to go slowly, don't do that." He freed his hand and returned it to the space between her legs. One finger grazed her inner lips. She felt herself melting.

"Are you hypnotizing me now?"

He nuzzled her neck. "I promised not to."

"Then how do you do this?" He probed her slit, which throbbed eagerly. She squeezed her legs shut on his hand.

"I stir the currents of your aura. I follow the path of your arousal. I feel exactly when your excitement rises." He spread a sheen of wetness up to her clit. "I feel you want me to touch you here." His fingers swirled around the tight knot of sensation and zeroed on the spot where it burned hottest. He echoed her earlier question. "How does that feel?"

"You know how," she said through gritted teeth. "You read my emotions."

"But only from the outside." He lapped each of her nipples again, then abandoned the aching peaks to lick her throat. "We're not bonded, so I can't share your sensations from inside. What does human arousal feel like?"

"Like my skin's on fire. Especially there." Sparks danced from his flickering tongue at her neck to her taut nipples and the swollen bud where his fingers played. "Like I'm melting into a puddle of hot lava. And tight. Like my clit's about to burst."

His teeth stung her throat. A rush of warmth quenched the minor pain and transformed it to a bolt of electricity that zapped from that spot straight to the center of her need. He responded to the arching of her hips with a frenzied rubbing of her clit. His fingers plunged inside her. The suction of his lips at her neck pushed her over the edge. Her clit pulsed like a second heartbeat, and her sheath convulsed to the same rhythm.

Still lapping her blood, he lay on top of her, tucking one leg between hers. The pressure gave her all the stimulation she needed to shudder through wave after wave of overlapping climaxes that seemed to last forever.

Finally, when she felt ready to faint from sensory overload, he stopped drinking, with one last flicker of his tongue. He rolled on his side, bringing her with him in a tight hug.

After a few minutes, her head stopped spinning. "I see what you mean about addictive."

His breath ruffled her hair. "Yes, and I'm afraid I've already gone past the point of no return with you. After this, nobody else could satisfy me."

"Did it really feel as incredible to you as it did to me?"

"Oh, yes." She heard amusement in his voice. "Probably more."

"I can't imagine how. Especially if you don't even feel anything, well, down there."

"What gives you that idea? The sensation centers on tasting your blood, but it involves my whole body. Every inch of my skin becomes hypersensitive. When you spend, I ride the wave with you. If you could imagine what it's like to feel your heart pounding, feel your hot flesh pressed against mine...Damn, I'm getting thirsty again."

She giggled. "Nothing wrong with that. I'm still here." She reached between them to stroke his chest. The hair felt like velvet. She traced it to his navel and below. When he didn't object, she fondled his quiescent penis. "So you don't mind this?"

"I like it. I enjoy any contact with you. This is new to me, though. Never had a donor touch me there before."

"Really? Why not?"

"There was no reason to." He ran his hand down her spine to explore the curve of her derriere. "Ah, like silk. I've never been naked with a donor before."

She tilted her head to look into his half-closed eyes. If true, that statement added weight to his claim that he thought of her as special. She squeezed his shaft. It began to harden. "I thought you said you can't—perform—with human females."

"Again, never had any reason to try. I don't produce or expel sperm. But, as you see, direct stimulation does have an effect."

She made a cylinder of her palm and pumped up and down his shaft. It became engorged. She heard a rumble in his chest that almost sounded like a purr. "If you wanted to, we could, well, you know." Suddenly shy, Eloise paused her caresses. What if he found the idea unappealing? If so, she didn't want to coax him into the act.

"We could couple. Interesting." He thrust into her hand. "Please continue. That's giving me a hell of an appetite."

The husky note in his voice stirred a tingle between her legs, followed by a new gush of wetness. She pressed her thighs together to ease the tickle in her clit.

He nuzzled her neck and growled deep in his chest, making her nerves quiver. "You're ready again. The fragrance of your nectar makes me so thirsty I can't stand it." He licked the hollow of her throat, then traced a path to the inside of her right breast. He nipped the skin. The now-familiar jolt of electricity convulsed her.

Squirming, she rubbed up and down his shaft. She draped her leg over his, desperate for contact to relieve the ache.

The frantic lapping of his tongue paused. "What do you want? Tell me."

Hell of a time to pretend he can't sense it! Between labored breaths, she said, "Rub me—there—before I explode!"

His fingers matched the rhythm of his tongue, and she did explode. "Come in! Please!" When he didn't obey instantly, she shoved him from his side to his back and rolled on top. Ignoring the smile that flitted across his lips, she knelt above him and pointed his cock at her hole. "Now!" She lowered herself on him, and he plunged in to the hilt.

* * * * *

Claude gasped in delighted astonishment at Eloise's sudden attack. The hot, silken wetness that surrounded his shaft made currents radiate from that point throughout his body in expanding waves of excitement. He wanted to plunge still deeper into her, swim in her life-force, merge with her until her energy flowed in all his veins and filled each empty spot to the brim.

She rocked, rubbing her clitoris against the hair at the root of his cock. Her sheath slid up and down on his rod in a smooth rhythm that made his teeth tingle with the need to taste her. He sensed her excitement swelling toward release. Her inner muscles rippled around him. She skimmed her nails over his chest. Tormented by the light contact, he growled, "Harder!" She scratched him, but still not hard enough. When he hissed aloud, she slashed, leaving fiery tracks that made his stomach cramp with need.

His mouth watered, and his jaws ached. He couldn't let her spend without him. He needed to soar with her again.

With a roar, he gripped her arms. "Damn it, I can't reach you!"

She let him pull her into a tight embrace, their bodies pressed together from shoulders to loins. His mouth fastened on her throat. When her blood flowed over his tongue, it completed a circuit of energy that poured through both of them in an endless circle of arousal and satisfaction. Another climax ripped through her, and he shuddered along with her. She screamed, and he echoed her with a howl of ecstasy.

Mine! he exulted. Mine, forever! No one else could touch her. If he had to, he would kill to keep her safe.

He felt her go limp, pleasantly exhausted, on the edge of fainting. Her aura faded to a rose-tinged pastel. He shifted position to pillow her head on his shoulder until the fog cleared from her mind.

"Don't worry," he murmured. "You haven't lost much blood. The exhaustion you feel is the energy drain. And the incisions will heal in a day or two, much faster than ordinary cuts."

"I'm not worried." She rubbed her face against his chest. "That was incredible."

"Vraiment! I never imagined the insertion of one appendage into an orifice could enhance the experience that way." A ghost of the ardor they had just shared warmed his blood, and he heard her pulse quicken, too.

She punched him lightly on the arm. "Ephemerals aren't so inferior, after all."

"I never considered you inferior. Merely different."

She sat up. "You used to, though, didn't you?"

"I don't deny that I've considered all my past donors as sources of refreshment or, at

most, pets. But not you. Not from the first night we met." He fought against the impulse to use his hypnotic power to override her doubts. He wanted her fully aware, free, and willing in their union.

"I don't like the idea that you think of other people as lower animals, either."
Bitterness tinged her voice.

"For you, I'll try to reform." When she frowned at his flippant tone, he said more seriously, "It's not easy to change the habits of a couple of centuries, but I do want to please you. For your sake, I'll revise my attitude toward the rest of your species." Already that "revision" had begun, he realized, for now he understood Philip's anger and grief over his lover's death.

She started collecting her clothes. "You talk as if we have a future. Aside from making a movie together, I mean."

Though he still sensed her reservations, he decided further argument right now would have only a negative effect. He sat up with the sheet across his lap. "I hope so, cherie. Dozens of movies and a very long future—after we deal with Philip. Look, you need nourishment. We'll discuss it downstairs over dinner."

The thought of letting her go, even temporarily, chilled him. He wanted to share thousands of nights like this. He wanted a lifetime to explore her vibrant mind, bask in her scintillating aura, and feast on her intoxicating elixir. But first he had to ensure her safety.

* * * * *

After a shower, she joined him in the kitchen. He served her another of the frozen dinners and poured himself a glass of milk. She gaped at it. "Vampires drink milk?"

"Animal blood and milk form the bulk of our diet. Surely you've come across that detail in folklore?"

She recalled a few tales that accused vampires of drying up the milk of the village cows. "Sheesh, another blow to my romantic fantasies. Okay, what about Philip? Can't you do anything about him?"

"Such as? We're forbidden to kill our own kind except in self-defense. I talked to one of the elders after I found out about Philip's resurrection. I'm not getting cut any slack. Unless he attacks me directly, I can't destroy him without becoming an outcast."

"Oh."

"Not that I want to. He may be a blot on the landscape, but the poor chap was my friend once. The only way I can see to settle the problem without violence is, as I said, to convince him you're not important to me."

Am I? While she didn't want to whine for reassurance, she couldn't shake off the awareness that he had the whole emotion-reading advantage over her. "And if he

doesn't give up harassing us?"

Claude shook his head. "If he wants to make a nuisance of himself, there's no practical way I can evade him. I'm astonished that he found me so fast to begin with. The elder I consulted was quick to point out that if I didn't live this purloined letter lifestyle, Philip would probably never have known where to start looking."

Recognizing the title of the Poe mystery, Eloise said, "Purloined letter, hidden in plain sight. A vampire pretending to be an actor playing a vampire."

"Precisely. The strategy has the added bonus that if anyone notices my eccentricities, such as not eating and avoiding the sun, they're chalked up to publicity stunts."

"With the drawback that the few people who do know vampires exist have no trouble picking up the clues."

"Too true." He finished the milk and sat back in his chair. "I don't know what long-term solution we can arrange, but for now, he has to see you leave. He has to believe you consider me a monster. Then you should be safe."

"For how long?" She banged her fork on the table. "Do you expect me to stay away from you for a week? A month? Until another building falls on your ex-friend?"

"Eloise—" He reached for her hand. "I want you with me always. But not at the cost of your life."

She withdrew from his handclasp. "Am I supposed to leave right now?"

"In the middle of the night? Hardly. I'd feel safer if you wait until day, when he'll be weaker. "

"What are we going to do for the rest of the night?" When the obvious answer popped into her mind, her cheeks warmed.

"Not what you're thinking." He stood up to clear the dishes. "Something to occupy our thoughts, so I can keep my hands—and other parts—off you."

Feeling a second or two of irrational letdown that he didn't plan to whisk her to the bedroom again, she said, "It can't stay this intense forever, can it? The attraction has to cool off eventually, and then what?"

"Au contraire, for all I've heard, the allure between vampire and donor doesn't fade like human infatuation. It only grows stronger with time. There's the addiction factor, you see. It's a biological phenomenon, not merely emotional."

"Addiction. Then how can we possibly know it's anything except biological?" The doubts she'd buried rose up once more. When he said he cared for her, he himself might not even know the truth of that claim.

"Considering how desperately I craved you after the first sip, long before the dependency could have started, I trust the reality of my feelings." Circling the table, he imprisoned her head between his hands and stared at her like a cat with a bird under its

paw. "Other women cloy the appetites they feed, but she makes hungry where most she satisfies."

"Shakespeare, now? I'm no Cleopatra."

"Believe that I see you that way, ma belle."

The pressure of his gaze made her pulse flutter in her throat. "You promised not to use hypnosis on me."

"I'm not. Perhaps you're already beginning to sense my emotions, even without a physical bond." His voice caressed her like a cool breeze on sun-warmed flesh.

"Well, put a lid on them. Let's find something nice and neutral to occupy our thoughts."

Laughing, he said, "Didn't you write a scene or two for Varney today? Bring it on. Nothing like a spot of editing to quell one's ardor."

In the office, they spent over an hour cheerfully dissecting the dialogue she'd composed that afternoon. When Claude delivered her Varney's lines with melodramatic verbal flourishes, exaggerated arm-waving, and villainous leers, she collapsed in a fit of giggles. He also offered serious advice for revision, showing that he'd given a lot of thought to how the story should be staged. She could get to like this routine all too quickly. She had to remind herself that her future probably didn't hold nights of passion and literary debates with a ravishing vampire. More likely, Claude's warnings about Philip Trent masked a wish to nudge her out of his life. In reminiscing about his last donor in the 1890s, Claude had made his anxieties about "addiction" clear enough, hadn't he?

They spent the rest of the night watching movies downstairs. Eloise welcomed the immersion in imaginary realms to keep her brain from buzzing with doubt and fear. If she had to turn into a pumpkin at sunrise, at least she could enjoy these few hours. Claude carefully sat at arm's length from her again, but she undercut his caution by reaching across the space between them to capture his hand. He didn't try to retrieve it.

She delighted in making him squirm by tickling the little hairs in his palm. He retaliated by rubbing his thumb over the pulse point on her wrist. Electric currents raced up her arm, made her nipples peak, and zinged down to the spot between her legs. She squeezed her thighs in a futile attempt at relief. Knowing he could scent the moisture gathering there, she almost wished he would cuddle up to her and start nibbling again. But he maintained his self-control. Damn.

Dawn came too soon. After the little packing she needed to do, she went to the

main floor to find Claude waiting for her in the living room. He clasped her hand and kissed it, a faint brush of his lips on her palm. The contrast between his cool grip and the heat of his mouth made her insides vibrate. "I'd better call a cab for you," he said, "however much I'd rather not."

"I'm already wondering if what I remember from last night really happened." She reclaimed her hand and wrung her fingers together. "When will I see you again?"

"As soon as I think it's safe."

"That's no answer!"

He shrugged. "We can finalize the movie deal and finish the script without meeting face to face. After a few weeks have passed, maybe Philip will cool off enough that I can talk to him, make him see reason."

"Meanwhile, I wait around for you to decide my future?"

"Please don't make this so difficult. I want you near me, but I want you alive even more." He reached around to massage the nape of her neck, and she couldn't summon the strength to evade him. "If anything happened to you, I wouldn't jump into a volcano, but my heart would feel charred to ashes."

"You talk a good line. Prove it."

His eyebrows arched. "How?"

"You read my emotions like large print, and yours are a closed book to me. I don't have anything to go on except your word. You say two-way blood sharing creates a telepathic bond, right?"

"That's right." His voice sounded tight with stress.

"So let's do it. Let me drink your blood and read your mind."

Chapter Eleven

He stepped away from her, spread his hands as if in mute appeal, and lowered his voice. "Eloise, are you quite sure you want this?"

She planted her clenched fists on her hips. "I don't believe it. You're afraid."

"Cautious, rather. So far, we haven't passed the point of no return for biochemical dependency. If you taste my blood, we'll be locked into a bond that we couldn't break without pain. From what I've been told, pain like gouging one's heart from one's chest."

"Told? You mean you don't know?"

He shook his head. "Not from first-hand experience."

Somehow she'd assumed he had bonded with his previous donor. A thread of

satisfaction trickled through her when she realized he hadn't. "Then you've never done this before?"

never?" he said with a wry smile. "No, never. Well, hardly ever," he finished the quote from H.M.S. Pinafore. "Only with my adviser, for teaching purposes. I understand bonding with a donor is very different, the most exquisitely intense union one can possibly imagine." Cupping her chin to make her meet his glittering eyes, he said, "Please make sure you choose this freely. Afterward, neither of us will be able to choose with unclouded minds."

She heaved a deep breath. "Yes, I choose. If you're willing, I'm ready."

"If that's what you need to make you trust me, I'm willing." He added with a shaky laugh, "Eager." His arm encircled her waist. "We'd better retire to the bedroom and get comfortable. When we black out from the intensity, we want to be lying down already."

"You're putting me on, aren't you?" she said as they walked upstairs. "Will that really happen?"

"I don't know. We're exploring uncharted territory here. I've heard it can become that powerful, though."

In his bedroom, she knelt on the satin sheets to watch him light the vanilla-scented candle and undress in its glow. His pale torso looked like a marble sculpture of a Greek god, animated by magic. Towering over her, he twined his fingers through her hair and clasped her to his chest. The slow beat of his heart thundered in her ears. She couldn't resist flicking her tongue out to tease one of his nipples.

It hardened instantly. Groaning, he convulsively tightened his embrace. Through gritted teeth, he said, "Enough." He eased her onto the mattress. "In this condition, my whole body is hypersensitive. If we want to forge the bond, we'd better do it before I forget why we're here." He stripped off her shirt and bra with rapid movements, as if he feared getting distracted. With his help, she wiggled out of the rest of her clothes. "Beautiful." His voice shook.

"You have a vivid imagination."

"When you see yourself through my eyes, you'll understand." He stretched out so that they reclined side by side, facing each other. "Ready?"

She nodded, snuggling closer to him. Her nipples grazed his chest, and his cool thighs pressed against hers. The tip of his quiescent organ brushed the curls on her mound. Warmth spread through her lower abdomen and pooled between her legs.

Claude turned his head to bite his own shoulder. With a hand on the back of her head, he urged her toward the half-inch slash. She hesitantly licked the blood that oozed from it. His body spasmed, his arms tightening around her.

"Yes," he hissed. "Don't stop."

She clamped her mouth onto the wound and sucked. It tasted salty and metallic,

like the heated-iron scent of his skin. A low growl thrummed in his throat. No, she thought, more like a purr.

His palms ranged over her back and the curve of her bottom. His teeth pierced her neck. She felt her pulse leap to quench his thirst. His blood effervesced like champagne in her mouth.

She plunged into his mind like diving into a bottomless lake. At the same moment, she felt him flow into all the crevices of her body and brain. She tasted her blood as he swallowed it, like fine sherry. It warmed him all the way to the pit of his stomach and spread through every vein. She felt the way her breasts and thighs seared his skin. She felt the hairs in his palms bristle when they stroked her. The electricity made her own skin tingle.

Merging deeper into his senses, she shared his vision. To him, she appeared enveloped in a halo of rose-pink and, at the apex of her thighs, turgid red. Surrounding that red haze, she saw a rainbow of coruscating light that radiated from her and undulated with each move she made.

Your aura. Claude's voice in her mind sounded deeper, more resonant, than his normal speech. It reverberated through her insides and made her diaphragm quiver like the surface of a drum. Now you see how beautiful you are.

I can hear my own heartbeat. Not only that, through his ears she heard the blood rushing beneath her skin.

In a surge of still deeper immersion, she felt his delight in her amazement. She sensed him watching himself through her eyes and tasting his own blood on her lips as well as hers in his mouth. When his hand crept between their bodies to caress her breasts, she felt the tingle in his palm along with his pleasure in feeling the ache in her taut nipples. She closed her eyes, overwhelmed by the tangle of sensations.

His hand skimmed over her abdomen to the triangle of hair. When he probed for the bud inside that nest, she began to melt instantly.

You're flowing with honey, he silently told her. And I feel it now, from within. Your wetness, your need.

Her clit was already twitching. She moaned and rocked her hips toward him.

I know, ma belle. I share that ache. His fingers traced spirals around her swollen bud, stroking nearer and nearer to the burning tip. At the moment she felt she would explode if he delayed any longer, he relieved that burning with frenzied caresses that sent her into convulsions that only erupted afresh each time she thought she'd reached the highest possible peak.

She tasted his blood, her blood, felt her tremors of release echoed in his mind, felt his urgency feeding hers, until both of them were sated and had to stop tasting just to breathe.

Excitement still throbbed through her tender parts, though. When Claude guided her hand to his groin, she realized why she felt that way.

I've developed an erection, with no direct contact. Fascinating. He rubbed her hand up and down his shaft. My body mirrors yours. It wants to sheath itself in you.

As soon as he projected that thought, she craved the same thing. Nudging her to roll face down, he climbed on top. She melted all over again. He plunged into her from behind, like a panther mating. And like a cat, he fastened his teeth in the nape of her neck. She felt the penetration of his teeth and his cock, along with the intoxication of her blood trickling into his mouth and the hot tightness of her sheath clenching around him. She felt his rod stiffen still harder in an echo of her clit's swelling. When she throbbed in response, his excitement grew fiercer and fed back to her in an ever-expanding spiral.

She screamed in release, and he answered with a roar of ecstasy. Some time later, she drifted down to normal awareness. The shadow of his thoughts lingered in the back of her mind, but she remained within her own senses.

"Will it always feel like that?" she said.

He shifted position so that he lay on his back with her cuddled next to him. "We can revive it at will and control the depth of the union. We don't have to lose ourselves." His tone sounded less confident than the words.

"You don't know, either, do you?"

"I already admitted this is unexplored territory for me. And I do want to explore again—much further." He disentangled from her embrace. "Do something for me, please. Go out on the balcony."

At her quizzical glance, he gestured toward one set of drapes on the other side of the room. Opening them partway, she found a door onto a balcony identical to the one in her room. Still naked, she stepped outside.

The wind from the ocean made her skin prickle. The early morning sun shed its light on the waves. She felt Claude reaching into her brain and merging his vision with hers.

Incredible! Eloise, I can see through your eyes. I can see the ocean in daylight. Couldn't you do that anyway?

What I see is a blinding glare. And the colors! To me, colors on the blue end of the spectrum look washed out. No, I've never seen the ocean like this. His gratitude pierced her to the heart. You show me a whole new world.

She felt a sudden emptiness, a hollow space at her core. Somehow she knew the feeling originated with Claude. He needed to touch her. She returned to the bed and flowed into his arms. His shields dissolved, layer upon layer, until she felt him invite her into the shadowed cave of his heart. His thoughts showed her a multifaceted crystal of ice that thawed and vaporized at her touch. "Mon amour, I'll never stop needing you." He kissed the top of her head. "But I can't keep you, not until you're safe from Philip. You really have to leave."

Drained, purring with languid satisfaction, she couldn't face the idea of putting on her clothes and facing the world yet. "Yeah, right. Soon. Let's just rest awhile first."

He chuckled. "Very well, ma chere. Just a few minutes."

Chapter Twelve

When she swam up to consciousness, her head lay on Claude's shoulder. He felt as cool and still as marble. No breath expanded his ribs. She swept her hand over his chest, while probing the silence of his mind.

Awareness stirred in him. His eyes opened, the now-familiar crimson gleam in their silver depths fixed on her. He gave her a drowsy, catlike smile.

An instant later, the languor he projected flared into alarm, and he sat up. "Oh, damn, look at the time!"

She rolled over to glance at the alarm clock. After six p.m.

"Confound it, you bloody temptress, I never should have let you lull me to sleep."

"Me, lull you? You're the one who goes into hibernation every day."

"Eloise, you have to get away from here. Now." He stood up and whipped the covers off her. "Suppose Philip's been watching the house all along and started to get impatient? If he decides you've ignored his warning, he might try something more drastic."

"Okay, I get your point." She felt Claude's anxiety beating against her like the wings of a caged hawk. Scooping up her clothes, she went into the bathroom to wash and dress.

When she emerged, Claude had dressed, too, though he hadn't bothered to comb his sleep-ruffled hair. "I've phoned a cab. You go up to the road and wait for it. If Philip's around, he'll see you're leaving. Escaping from the evil vampire's clutches."

"Right, but not for long. If we're physically dependent on each other now..."

"I, more than you. I can't feed on any other human donor. Only you." He rubbed his eyes. "A factor I conveniently overlooked when I agreed to the bond. I can't stay away from you more than a few days."

She threw herself into his arms. His passion and fear for her flowed over her, until she thought she might melt into him and drown all over again. She forced herself to slip out of his embrace. "We'll manage somehow. You didn't think I planned to let you stay away anyhow, did you?"

He nodded toward the nightstand. "I suggest you wear that trinket Philip gave you. Displaying an anti-vampire talisman will lend credibility to the ruse."

"Good idea." She hung the cross around her neck. "Here I go, one ruse, coming up."

Claude walked her to the foyer but stood well away from the door when she opened it. She marched up the drive to the road, overnight bag and purse slung over her shoulders, briefcase in one hand, trying to project revulsion toward all things vampiric. It didn't work. She had no talent for acting. She settled for blanking her mind, so that if Philip spied on her, at least he wouldn't sense her yearning for Claude.

At the edge of the road, she set down her bags and glanced both ways. Claude hadn't mentioned how long the taxi would take to arrive. She blinked in the late afternoon sun. The sea breeze cooled her flushed cheeks. So many things had happened to her since the last time she'd stepped outside in daylight. Now, with her thoughts deliberately blocked from any contact with Claude that might alert his enemy to her true feelings, she couldn't help wondering about the reality of those experiences. Had she dreamed it all? Lost her mind? Succumbed to a complex, brain-twisting form of hypnosis?

She shook her head to dispel the mental fog. Impossible. More impossible than vampires? Well, hardly less impossible. What ordinary human being could hypnotize anyone to that extent, without the aid of powerful psychotropic drugs? And the theory that Claude had drugged her into accepting such a wild tale and imagining they could read each other's minds struck her as more far-fetched than a race of naturally evolved vampires.

She would see him again in a few nights, no matter how carefully they had to avoid Philip's hypothetical surveillance. They belonged to each other now. She had to hang onto that belief.

From the corner of her eye, she glimpsed the movement of a shadow.

She clutched the cross on its chain around her neck. The shadow oozed toward her. A man in white loomed at her side.

She stumbled backward with a yelp of alarm. Philip grabbed her wrist. "What do you think you're doing? Let go of me."

He took off his sunglasses. "You stayed here longer than I expected. I became worried about your welfare."

"Well, you can forget it. You warned me to get away, and I'm leaving." With the cross digging into her curled fingers, she remembered Claude's remark about faith in the symbol as a focus for resistance. Maybe it would help her guard against Philip's psychic perception. She concentrated on keeping her mind blank.

"But why didn't you leave much sooner, hmm?" He scraped a fingernail along her jawline.

Eloise shuddered. "My cab will get here any minute. Just let go of me."

"Could it be that my old friend seduced you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He squeezed her wrist painfully hard. "You can't lie to me. I can see through your flimsy shields."

"Let go or I'll scream." She scanned the road. No cars whose drivers might notice if she struggled. No houses in sight, nobody close enough to hear a cry for help.

"No, you won't." Philip's eyes impaled hers. "Be still."

She froze. Inside, she strained against the psychic manacles, but her muscles remained paralyzed.

Philip picked her up and slung her across his shoulder. A whirlwind rushed past her. The landscape went gray before her eyes. A second later, her vision cleared to show a view of the ocean. At her feet she saw emptiness, dropping straight down to the tide line. She stood on a ridge overlooking Claude's private beach. Philip's arm encircled her waist from behind, tightening like a vise when she made a feeble attempt to wiggle free.

"Go ahead and scream now. I want Claude to know I have his pet."

"I'm not his pet," she whispered.

"More than a pet? No?" The soft voice mocked her. "Then he won't mind if I have a taste." The man's tongue circled her earlobe, then penetrated the ear.

She trembled, swallowing a spasm of nausea. Yet, to her disgust, she also felt a faintly erotic flutter in the pit of her stomach.

"Whatever pleasure he can give you, so can I." Philip's teeth rested on the side of her neck, not quite piercing the skin.

Eloise gave up her attempt to maintain the mental barrier. Claude! I need you!

His response crashed like a tidal wave against her barrier, flattening it instantly. Eloise? She felt him rush toward her.

Seconds after she called, Philip half-turned, still gripping her around the waist.

"Claude. Stop there." The nails of his free hand dug into the skin of Eloise's neck.

She saw Claude standing about ten feet away. Unlike Philip, he wore short sleeves and no hat. This early in the evening, the sun still glared on his unprotected skin and eyes. She sensed his incipient headache and the way the light scorched his arms. Those discomforts faded to the background, though. His fear for her dominated his thoughts.

"Philip, old thing, you don't need to do this. I admit I treated you shabbily. You have a perfect right to your anger. But Eloise has nothing to do with that."

"Of course she does. You destroyed my favorite—my beloved. I'm taking yours."

"What makes you think she's my favorite, much less 'beloved'? That's a human emotion."

Eloise reached for Claude's mind and hit a blank wall. She assured herself he probably had his shield up to keep the attacker from reading him. Yet she couldn't tame the fear that he displayed no emotions because he didn't feel any. Because all the passion and need she remembered had been nothing but an illusion to add spice to the feast.

Philip edged to the very rim of the cliff and leaned so that she momentarily tilted outward above the drop. Her stomach churned. Head spinning, she clung to the arm locked around her waist. A shaft of alarm from Claude stabbed her.

With a cold chuckle, Philip straightened up. "What a disgraceful lack of control, Claude. You broadcast that reaction like a beacon from a lighthouse. Now tell me you don't feel anything for this pet."

"Only what I'd feel if you endangered any ephemeral for pure vengeance. I bitterly regret the death of your donor. I don't want to see anyone else die for my negligence."

"Is that an apology? And a plea, no less?"

"Take it as whatever you'd like." Claude glided a pace or two nearer, stopping when Philip clawed Eloise's neck once more. "I'll apologize all you want. Hell, I'll grovel. Just let her go and face me like a man of honor."

"Now you're talking in human terms. Since when does a vampire's honor depend on an ephemeral's welfare? At least, according to you. I could always find another pet, you said."

Eloise felt the anger boiling under the surface of Claude's mind. "Damn it, I said I was wrong."

"You think a simple apology makes up for her death and all the years I lost?"

"What more do you expect? I can't bring your donor back."

Philip licked Eloise's ear again. His tongue felt the way she imagined a snake's forked tongue might. Fear swamped any trace of arousal. "I'll take this one as a substitute," he said.

Claude bared his teeth. "Not a chance." His hands curled like talons.

"Fascinating. You're in love with this woman."

"Don't be absurd." The chill in his voice sounded almost genuine enough to confirm that she had fantasized those hours of passion they'd shared.

A growl rumbled in Philip's chest. "You know we can't lie to each other. I can see

the strength of your feeling for her."

"We used to be friends. I don't want to kill you."

"You'd make yourself an outcast for an ephemeral? Better and better." He nipped the side of her neck.

She felt the trickle of blood and the flick of his tongue. He didn't continue feeding, though. He obviously intended the violation just to taunt Claude. To underscore the message, he grazed her breast with his free hand.

Claude stood motionless, staring at the two on the edge of the cliff. He spoke inside Eloise's mind: I don't dare charge. He could tear your throat out before I got anywhere near you. His thoughts lay bare to her. She saw a vision of herself lying on the ground with blood fountaining from a fatal wound and felt his near panic at the image. Then what do we do?

The reply came as an unexpected shock: You have to make him drop you.

Her stomach lurched. What?

Rather, you have to make him let go long enough for you to jump off the edge.

Are you nuts?

Claude's mental voice thrummed with tension. It's the only way. I can catch you before you hit the ground. He won't be expecting that.

He expected her to believe he could cover the distance faster than she could fall? She went lightheaded at the mere thought. I don't think I can make myself do it.

It's our only reasonable chance. Eloise, please, you have to trust me.

Trust a man who wasn't even human? Letting him feast on her blood and ravish her body and mind was one thing, but this—! Trusting him too far in this case could have a fatal result.

On the other hand, so could not trusting. The wet suction of Philip's mouth tugged at her throat. At any moment, he might decide to sink his teeth in, just to watch Claude's reaction.

All right, she silently answered. I'll try.

Make her captor let go? How? What did she know about a vampire's vulnerability? Too bad Philip didn't suffer from a religious phobia. The cross wouldn't work as a weapon. What about physiological weaknesses all his kind shared? She rummaged in her memories of the nights with Claude. One "weakness" came to mind, the way he'd practically whimpered when she'd tickled his palms.

Philip had one hand within easy reach, loosely cupping her breast. She insinuated her own hand between his arm and her body. At the same time, she went limp, hoping

to make him think she'd given up resisting. Her fingertips brushed the fine hairs in his palm. He growled into her neck, looked up, and said to Claude, "Ah, she likes it. You see, any vampire can please her. You're wasting energy to concern yourself with this woman." He returned his mouth to the minute wound.

Swallowing her revulsion, she stroked the hairs in a light spiral pattern. He moaned with evident pleasure. She leaned into his arm, toward the cliff's edge.

Now, Eloise, Claude urged. I'm ready.

While she mechanically kept up her fake seduction, her brain screamed, I can't do this, I just can't!

Then let me help you. I promised not to override your will, but if you give me permission, I can make you jump.

Let him take over her mind and body? Operate her like a puppet? Still, if she didn't have faith that he would release his control the instant after he caught her, she might as well admit she didn't trust him at all. Fine! Do it!

She dug her nails into Philip's palm and gouged the most sensitive spot. With a howl of pain and rage, he momentarily spasmed and relaxed his grip. She mentally reached for Claude and felt his will wrap her mind like a spider's silk. He slipped inside her nerves and muscles like a man putting on a cloak.

Her body launched itself into the void. The surf on the rocks rushed toward her. Her head reeled, and her stomach turned inside out. A scream ripped from her throat.

Chapter Thirteen

A blur of motion swooped under her. She landed in Claude's arms. He sprinted down the beach and halted in a swirl of sand.

Shaking, but with her feet on the ground, she clung to him. Her head spun as if she had just crawled out of a roller coaster car.

"It's all right, cherie." His hands stroked her head and her back. "I have to leave you for a minute. Stay here."

Like I can do anything else? When he let go of her, she collapsed onto the sand. She watched him levitate up to the ridge toward Philip, who crouched there roaring in fury.

Claude charged at the other vampire and slammed him to the ground. Philip rammed a fist into Claude's face and broke his hold. Through the blood-bond, Eloise's nerves echoed the pain of the blow. The two men rolled over, Claude underneath now. He rallied instantly, shoved his opponent off, and flipped him onto his back.

Though the pounding of the waves made it hard for Eloise to hear the next few words, she picked up the conversation through Claude's mind.

"Talk about wasting energy, old man. Don't bother struggling. I'm stronger than you are. You probably haven't fed worth a damn in the past few nights, with all your time spent stalking Eloise. I've feasted well." He punctuated the sentence with a hard slap to the other man's face.

"Go ahead and kill me," came Philip's sullen response. "I detest what this world has become. Noisy, artificial, foul-smelling—"

"I said I didn't want to kill you. But I'm sure as hell not going to let you run loose. Perhaps another long stretch of undeath will help you see reason."

"In other words, you plan to kill me temporarily." The other vampire's weary voice held a sardonic edge.

"Call it whatever you wish. The point is to make Eloise safe from you." Claude wrapped his hands around Philip's neck.

"Fine. At least I got to see you besotted with an ephemeral. When you thought I might slaughter your woman, you were terrified. That's satisfaction enough."

Claude tightened his grip until Philip stopped breathing and his body went slack. Through Claude's ears, Eloise heard the other vampire's heart fall silent. Is he dead?

Only dormant. And I'll make sure he stays that way for the foreseeable future. Picking up the body, Claude sprang off the ridge and hovered above the ocean surface. He raised the body over his head. With a strength she couldn't have imagined, he heaved the inert form offshore, the distance of a couple of football fields. It sank instantly.

Claude floated down to her side, helped her stand up, and folded her in a tight embrace. "He won't drown, but he won't wake up, either. Not as long as he stays underwater."

"He'll wash ashore, though, won't he?"

Leading her toward the stairs that ascended to the patio, he said, "Not anytime soon. You see, he's not dead, so his body won't float like a corpse. On the other hand, let's hope for his sake the local sea life doesn't find vampire flesh appetizing."

Her stomach knotted.

"Forgive me for subjecting you to all this."

She swallowed. "It's Philip's fault, not yours."

"I'll report to the elders and ask their advice. Eventually, I may have to dredge up and revive him myself. When and if I feel sure I can keep him away from you." She edged away from Claude, her fingers groping for the crucifix around her neck. "But you almost killed him..."

"Oh, damn. Please don't fear me." His hand rested lightly on her arm. "I bear no malice toward the poor blighter. Now I know how he felt when his lady died. The same way I'd feel if I lost you." He opened his mind and showed her a bleak expanse of desert baking under a remorseless sun. He glanced briefly at the cross. "You said you believe I'm not a demon, that your Deity made my kind for a purpose."

She clutched the crucifix like an anchor. "I do believe that. I know you're not evil." Slowly, her grasp relaxed, and she unhooked the silver chain.

"I'm not asking you to forsake your religion," he said. "Only that it not make a barrier between us."

"It won't." She tucked the cross into her pants pocket and allowed Claude to put his arm around her waist.

He helped her into the den and settled her on the couch. "It's a relief to get out of the sun. I need a drink of water. Let me bring you one, too." When he returned with two glasses of ice water, he said, "I wouldn't blame you if you wanted to leave anyhow, right this minute. Your choice. Needless to say, whatever you do won't affect our movie deal."

She took a long gulp of the water. Her stomach began to calm down. "Good grief, I forgot all about the cab. He probably came and went already."

"I can drive you to the airport myself, if you like." He sat on the edge of the couch, at arm's length from her. She felt the uncertainty preying on his mind.

Uncertainty of what? Her feelings or his own?
"That depends," she said, staring into her glass.

"On what?"

"What Philip said." She forced the words past a lump in her throat. "That vampires can't lie to each other."

"No, the most we can do is conceal our emotions, not disguise them."

"He also said you're in love with me. Well?"

The surface of Claude's mind churned like a windswept lake. "If he saw that in my aura, it must be true."

Moisture blurred her vision. "Again with the non-answer."

"Cherie, I don't know how to answer. I have never experienced an emotion like this before. As if you've already grown roots into my heart." His eyes widened. "Oh, hell. Poetic justice at its best. I'm not just addicted. I am in love with you."

"Do you have to sound like it's a fate worse than death?" Her voice rasped with suppressed tears.

"Not that. But still terribly strange. I. Love. You." He moved next to her, clasped her hand, and kissed it. Sparks danced up her arm and over her entire body. She felt the same electricity sizzling through him. "Eloise, our bond gives me access to your deepest thoughts and desires. But it doesn't analyze and define them. You have to tell me in words. Do you love me?"

Trembling, she let her hand rest in his while she considered. "You threatened to make yourself an outcast by destroying Philip for me. You guided me to escape from him and then released control instantly, the way you promised. You could mesmerize me into any emotion you want me to feel, but you're not." She laid her free hand on his chest, and he shivered, his eyes half-closed. "I love you, Claude."

With a groan, he drew her into a tight embrace. She twisted around, trying to press her body against his. She ended up in his lap, her head on his shoulder.

"Stay with me. Marry me."

She insinuated her hand into his shirt and heard a purr in his throat when she skimmed her nails over his chest. "Marry? That's so human of you."

He nipped her earlobe without piercing the skin. "Human? Please, no insults. Mon amour, I promise not to treat you like a pet. Keep your own home, if you need a refuge sometimes. And, of course, your own work and bank account. I want marriage under your laws, though. I'll have no lurid supermarket tabloid speculation about you. I want the world to know you belong to me. Legally and permanently."

"As long as you know it works both ways. You belong to me, too."

"Certainement. That's what the blood-bond means." He hugged her so tightly she had to gasp for breath. "You hold my life in your hands, forever. We possess each other as long as our hearts beat."

Tracing a scratch on his collarbone with a fingernail, he guided her lips to the wound. His mouth fastened on her neck, and the life-force flowed between them in an unbroken circle. Their hearts pulsed in unison. Like two rivers pouring into one sea, their blood and passion merged. Forever.