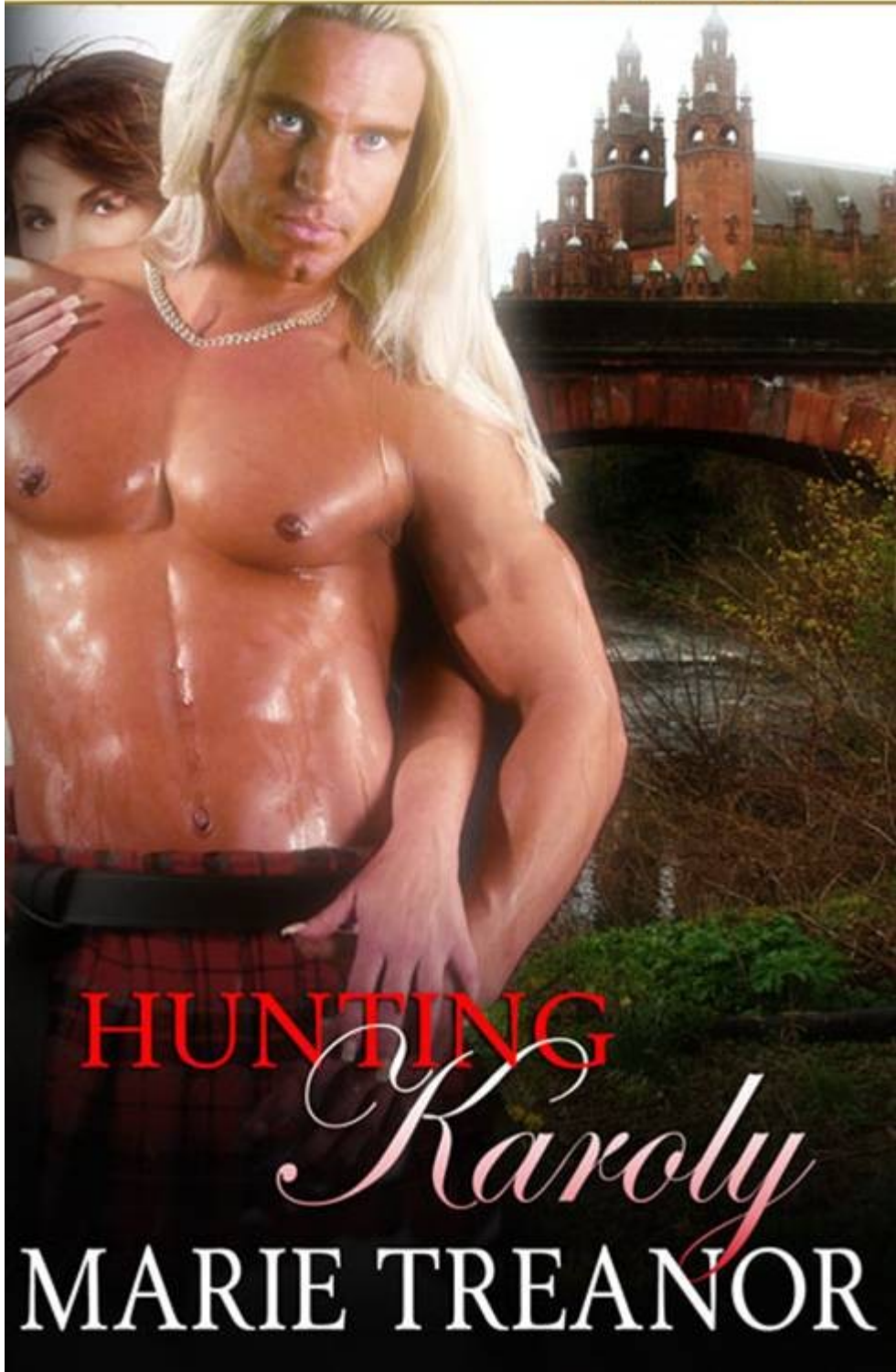


ELLORA'S CAVE TWILIGHT



HUNTING

Karoly

MARIE TREADOR

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Hunting Karoly

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HUNTING KAROLY

Marie Treanor

Dedication

To the Transylvania trio and to my new editor, Meghan Conrad, for all her help, advice and input.

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Chapter One

Aren't weddings great?

Well, no, actually, they're shite. I don't know about you but I find it incredibly depressing to watch my friends growing up and away from *me* while actually celebrating the fact. However, for Maggie, my best friend forever, I made a special effort to smile and dance. I had to, really, since I was her bridesmaid, easily spotted across the most crowded room by my flouncy, frilly pink dress and incongruously short hair. Ugh.

Of course, on the bright side, my post of honor did bring with it certain mitigating factors, namely an inexhaustible supply of free booze and a temporary claim on the best man, who was by anyone's standards drop-dead gorgeous.

Falling into a vacant chair to recover my breath and my drink after dancing a hectic Dashing White Sergeant, I followed his weaving progress across the dance floor with predatory eyes.

Although apparently an accountant, like Maggie's new husband, he had the distinct advantage of not looking like one. His long black hair curled around his neck, his fringe falling across his forehead with fetchingly boyish charm and in full Highland dress, he looked stunning. Not all men can wear a kilt with conviction but Davie Nicholls could. It swung around his strong, brown legs as he walked, his sporran bouncing jauntily over the potential source of my joy. Now that the formalities of the evening were finished, he had allowed his jacket to flop open and loosened his shirt at the throat to reveal a few rogue chest hairs. Sexy.

I almost purred.

The dancers blocking his way were indulging in the positively lethal version of Strip the Willow for which Maggie's family is justifiably infamous. I know several people who reject all wedding and ceilidh invitations solely in case they're obliged to

partner McLeods for Strip the Willow. I admired the easy way Davie wove among these energetically twirling sets, single-mindedly preserving his pint from the smallest loss as he side-stepped the flying figure of Maggie's Uncle Bill, who had been somewhat carelessly catapulted into his path by Big Aunty Cenga. For now that Davie's misery – his truly dreadful speech – was over, he could and did join the rest of us in the main purpose of all Scottish weddings, which is, of course, to get well and truly plastered.

"Hi, Jenny," somebody said, dropping into the chair beside me. "Good haircut." Reluctantly, I dragged my eyes away from Davie Nicholls, ready to defend my enforced crew cut as a fashion statement, and looked into the face of an old friend. Instantly, I grinned.

"Nick! How's it going?"

"Just dandy." Nick grinned back, pulling down his jacket, presumably so that I could admire the figure he presented in his kilt. "Belle of the ball or what?"

"Definitely what," I allowed.

"Don't mock. It's the only chance I get to wear a skirt. Although since all the other eligible men are in skirts too... Wow, fabulous muscle tone, don't you think?"

Following Nick's gaze back to Davie Nicholls, I said, "Very. And he's straight, so lay off."

"How do you know he's straight?" Nick asked.

"Because he looks it," I said serenely, and Nick snorted with laughter before quite suddenly sobering and sitting straight up in his chair. At the same moment I felt a shiver run all the way up my spine, a tingle of anticipation – or excitement – that I was at a loss to account for. Until my searching eyes followed Nick's.

There, in the doorway from the main hotel to our function suite, I beheld a vision both dazzling and bizarre. Spandau Ballet meets Bonnie Prince Charlie, with Legolas somewhere in his ancestry. The man was simply beautiful. Well, no, not *simply*... But if Davie was drop-dead gorgeous, I'd run out of superlatives for this one.

With his long blond hair drawn behind his head and tied at the nape, he looked as if there were some shining halo about his handsome, fine-featured face, yet there was nothing angelic or remotely feminine about him. His chin and full, curiously decadent lips were firm, his long, thin nose almost predatory. He stood straight, his posture disdainful as he paused in the doorway to rake us over with his flashing eyes.

Although he, like many of the male guests, was in Highland dress, his was somewhat...unconventional. For a start, his white shirt had full, almost billowing sleeves. Then, instead of the usual dark jacket with silver buttons, he wore some sort of tartan plaid which flowed down from his left shoulder across his chest and disappeared into his kilt as if it was all one garment, like that of the pre-Culloden Highlanders.

In fact, he looked more like a warrior from Walter Scott than a guest at a not entirely respectable Glasgow wedding. A well-used sword clanking at his hip would have been more fitting than a decorative skian dubh stuck in his sock. Except he wasn't wearing any socks. His legs were strong and muscled, at least as far as the knees where the hem of his kilt began... I swallowed. For some reason, I felt again that odd, shivery tingle. I didn't know if I liked it or not.

Nick breathed, "All right, Jen, I give in. The best man is yours. *That* is definitely mine!"

I said faintly, "How do you know he's gay?"

"I don't care if he's gay. Who is he anyway?"

"Absolutely no idea. I'm sure he wasn't here for dinner." Lifting my glass to my lips, I discovered it was empty. "Bugger."

Without taking his eyes off the stunning stranger, Nick reached across to the next table, picked up an almost-full glass and passed it to me. Without looking, I took the glass and sniffed the contents. Gin. Shrugging, because it had got to that stage in the evening yet again, I took a sizeable gulp and continued to watch the newcomer walking across the floor.

He didn't thread his way among the dancers as Davie had. Instead, he paced around the outside like some graceful, watchful panther. He never bumped into the closely packed tables, never trod on anyone's toes and people in his path simply seemed to move for him. Some of them even apologized.

"Maggie," said Nick, grabbing the bride's hand as she swished past us and pulling her into the chair beside him. Her fluffy wedding gown flounced around her. "Who is that gorgeous man?"

"Bloody hell," she said admiringly when she had followed his pointing finger. "Never seen him before in my life... Must be one of Jack's lot. Nice turnout though, eh?"

"What about me?" Nick demanded, moved by pique to stand and twirl for her edification. His kilt swung high, almost embarrassing us with whatever he did or didn't wear underneath.

"Aye, very braw," said Maggie, barely sparing him a glance from her observation of the stranger. "Well. Bride's duty to do the welcome thing!" And with that she rose and bore meaningfully down upon her unsuspecting new guest.

"Escort!" Nick offered, bounding after her in the hope of an introduction. I laughed aloud. Naturally, it had entered my head to tag along too, but I am nothing if not a realist and men like the handsome stranger, no matter how eccentric, don't look at women like me. Actually, neither do men like Davie Nicholls as a rule, but at least he seemed a doable ambition, just as a one-night stand. A lumber, in my native parlance.

Yes, you're right, I was *very* desperate. I'd had a bad week. Hell, I'd had a bad several months and I'd been looking forward to this weekend for so long, relaxing at last among trusted, comfortable old friends, getting rip-roaringly drunk with them... Only when I'd met up with everyone last night for the first time in ages, all they'd wanted to talk about was Maggie's husband – depressing – and my new job in England – vilely depressing – so even with far too much wine it wasn't exactly easy to lose myself in forgetfulness. I realized then that what I needed was a man, a good-looking,

strong man to distract me with blind lust and sinful pleasures of the flesh. Just for one night.

Since meeting Davie, the lust was going well enough. The sinful pleasures, however, were disappearing with Jackie MacBride into the conservatory off the main hall.

Well, I decided, swallowing the last of someone else's gin, sooner or later I was going to have to take charge of my life. It's better to have fought and lost and all that stuff...and Jackie MacBride could keep her slutty little claws out of my lumber.

Purposefully, I stood up.

"Jenny!"

It was Catherine, yet another old friend from school and one I hadn't spoken to yet this weekend. She hadn't been at the previous night's bash on account of the fact that she didn't drink and had long ago got bored or embarrassed watching her best friends fall over in pubs. Now, in the words—possibly apocryphal—of the late, great Humphrey Bogart, I don't trust any bastard who doesn't drink. Except Catherine. I forgave her because most of her family are alcoholics. In fact, if it were my family, I wouldn't drink either.

So, surrendering, purely temporarily, of course, to the unspeakable Jackie, I sat back down and tried to catch up with Catherine. But since she opened the conversation with, "Are you pissed again?" this was rather difficult.

"What do you mean 'again'?" I protested. "I haven't been as much as tipsy for bloody ages!"

"Aye, not since last night."

Remembering last night, I grinned. "Well, that was fun. But before that, I promise you, it's been months!"

"Are you telling me they don't drink down there?"

“Not allowed to, are we? Not without a damned good reason and a special permission form signed in triplicate.” Then, dragging my gaze from the closed conservatory door to her startled eyes, I tried for a light recovery. “Well, got to keep our wits about us.”

Catherine stared at me. “What are you researching? Bomb disposal?”

I laughed. “Sometimes I wish it was!”

“No, seriously, Jen, what are you up to? It’s nothing *dangerous*, is it?”

“Of course not!” I scoffed. Not if you were anyone but me. I had destroyed the best part of a house while I was actually still in it—got trapped in a cupboard and set fire to my own hair. Which was why it was now so short.

Catherine said, “I thought it was just more...librarian-type stuff you were doing, but in a research library.”

“Well, so it is,” I said with a dismissive wave. “Sort of...” It was the best story. After all, I was a librarian by profession. My last post had been as a high school librarian in one of Glasgow’s hairier housing schemes, which explains why I had been such easy meat for *them*. They had turned up at the school, subtly testing the kids for psychic potential and somehow had decided *I* had it. At the time it had seemed like an amusing and cushy way out.

Four months later, I suspected they were fully aware of their mistake. I just wished they’d hurry up and give me the boot, because the harsh training and the awful situations, combined with my humiliating inability to deal with either, was making me look at even the most diabolical and ignorant children of my home town with a worrying degree of nostalgic affection.

But I couldn’t tell Catherine this. I couldn’t tell anyone. For a start, they wouldn’t believe me. Sometimes I didn’t believe me.

“I miss home,” I said, just to get a little of the sympathy I craved.

“That bad?” said Catherine, deadpan and just as she’d intended, I laughed. Hastily, I turned the conversation on to her life and for a while forgot all about Davie and Jackie.

In fact, I remembered my mission of sin only on my way to the bar to collect another drink. That done, I took it with commendable casualness to the conservatory. And got the shock of my life.

At first I thought it was empty. Compared with the chaotic rabble and loud music of the main hall, the conservatory was peaceful as the grave and almost as dark. Someone had turned the lights off, so the only illumination was borrowed from the room next door. By its feeble glow, in the shadows of one corner, I made out two figures, arms around each other.

Davie and Jackie. I recognized the tartan of his kilt.

Right!

Metaphorically rolling up my sleeves, I closed the door with a purposeful click and marched across the room. Through the glass above, a cloud moved on, letting an unkind beam of moon light shine directly in upon the lovers and I saw that it was not Davie and Jackie. It was Davie and Nick’s handsome stranger.

The glass fell from my nerveless fingers, shattering on the ceramic floor at my feet, splashing house red over my strappy white sandals. At the sound, the stranger raised his head from nuzzling Davie’s neck and looked straight into my eyes.

God, his were beautiful. Green and gleaming, reflecting light even in that gloomy corner and unfathomably deep. But it wasn’t his beaux yeux that kept me rooted to the spot. It was...recognition.

Those bastards at the Centre had been right all along. I *was* psychic, just not in the ways they’d been looking for. But I knew *him*. I knew what he was just from his eyes and the cold frisson was terrible, a thousand times stronger than the shiver that had shaken me when I first saw him. That could have been anything—attraction, desire. This was earth-shattering. I saw his cold soul, older than time, and the awesome power of his destructive evil.

He was a vampire.

Chapter Two

He knew that I knew. Slowly, a smile began to form on his full, sensual lips and the terror galloped through me 'til I thought I would be completely crushed.

Then a lamp clicked on by the window, causing both me and the vampire to look across the room. Bathed in light, Maggie got up from a sofa, still in her fine white wedding gown—not quite spotless, since someone had spilled red wine on the sleeve, but still looking pretty regal.

“Hi Jenny.” She walked straight past me. If she noticed her best man clutched in the arms of the kilted vampire, she didn’t mention it. “Back to the guests, I suppose...”

Fear for her finally broke through my torpor. Why had she been sitting there motionless in the dark, unless...? My mouth opened to demand if he had hurt her, but something—the dull, objectionable training perhaps—stopped me. Maggie was walking and talking and leaving the source of the danger. Davie was not.

I turned back to the vampire.

“Let him go,” I said hoarsely. I was surprised any words came out at all. I was even more surprised when the vampire obeyed, casually releasing the best man so that he slumped gracefully to the floor, revealing a long expanse of muscled thigh. I just wished I’d seen it in other circumstances. A thin trickle of blood ran down the side of Davie’s neck into his collar.

“Is he dead?” I whispered in horror. I don’t know why. It wasn’t as if the vampire was about to call an ambulance

Astonishingly enough, the evil one answered me.

“Of course not,” he said irritably. “Why would I leave dead bodies lying around?”

His voice was another shock. Smooth, deep in timbre and curiously beautiful but yet with an accent that came perilously close to Bela Lugosi.

“Oh please!” I said, rolling my eyes. “How gullible do you think I am?”

The vampire misunderstood. Frowning, he said, “For your information, he’s asleep because he is dead drunk. And he tastes disgusting!”

He kept the accent. More worrying, he started to walk toward me, his kilt swinging subtly with his graceful, cat-like movements, for all the world confusing evil demon with noble Highland warrior.

His words, however, were merely carping. “What is the matter with the people in this town? What do they eat, for God’s sake?”

“Meat and cakes,” I said, surprising myself as much as him. He actually paused in his stride to stare at me.

“What?”

“And chips,” I babbled. “Lots of chips. No fresh fruit or vegetables. Curry.”

For a second, a frown puckered his smooth, pale brow. Then, to my amazement, a definite glint of amusement sparked in his inhumanly cold eyes. They shifted to my throat. “Thank you for taking the trouble to answer me. Do *you* eat your vegetables?”

I didn’t doubt his meaning. Besides, he started to walk toward me again, so I backed away from him, desperately cudgeling my numb brain for the correct defense against a vampire. But if anyone had told me such useful information in any of the training sessions I had snoozed through over the last four months, it had already got lost in among my treasured lore from Dracula and Anne Rice.

Stumbling backward into a table, I knocked over a lamp. The vampire leapt forward so fast that he actually blurred before my eyes. I tried to scream, though only a pathetic squeak actually broke from my terrified lips. But the vampire didn’t attack me. He caught the lamp before it smashed on the floor. Then, coming back into ordinary focus, he carefully set it back on the table, his beautiful, lean body bending over mine to

do so. His kilt swished coarsely against my thinly covered thigh, the sleeve of his shirt brushed my bare arm. My entire body froze with fear and something else I couldn't name.

He straightened slowly. No warmth, none at all, radiated from his flesh. His gaze traveled from my hips up over my waist and breast to my neck, where it lingered before moving on to my lips and finally, my eyes. A strange, flickering gold danced among the pale green of his, a faint, clearly predatory smile on his lips. If cats could smile, I thought, they'd do so exactly like that while playing with the mice they were about to consume.

Weirdly enough, my other thoughts were to do with the awful pink dress I wore. Maggie's mum had chosen it for me. It wasn't cheap, but it was a typical bridesmaid's dress, full of flounces and frills, and it did nothing for me. It reflected the bride's mother's taste, not mine, and for some reason it seemed important to explain this to the vampire before he drank my blood. I even opened my mouth to say God knows what when, mercifully, the undead spoke again.

"Well? What *do* you eat, little vampire hunter?"

Vampire hunter? Who did he think I was? Buffy? Right now I would have given much for just one of the Slayer's powerful kicks. Even the ability to shuffle one foot would have been good. Still, at least I managed to gather my wildly confused wits enough to demand, "Did you hurt Maggie?"

"Who is Maggie?" he asked without much interest. His gaze had fallen to my throat again. One thin, pale hand lifted, two long, finely tapering fingers brushed the skin of my neck. I gasped. Though neither warm nor cold, they didn't feel remotely neutral. Electricity sparked, tingling through me, and more worrying than anything, it wasn't even unpleasant. The opposite, in fact.

"The bride!" I gasped. "She just left."

"Poultry and cheap red wine," he said disparagingly, without looking up from my neck. His fingers stroked my skin and those sparks were getting worse, shooting right

through my whole body, creating some half-understood but overwhelming desire that was only mostly to do with sex.

“You did bite her!” I accused, trying to distract him before I became totally lost in what he was doing to my throat.

“Of course I did,” he chided. “I’m a vampire.”

His fingers slid around to the back of my neck and closed. I gasped again, involuntarily twisting my head. I prayed he would mistake my reaction for fear, but the truth was his touch gave me some fearful pleasure I had never encountered before, triggering new desires that were almost scarier than him.

Suddenly, every inch of me was aware of his tall, strong body. Backed into the table as I was, I couldn’t have moved if I’d tried and now I didn’t want to. I wanted him to touch me more. And the knowledge that it was wicked and forbidden and dangerous only added to the excitement. He hadn’t killed Maggie or Davie, after all, and he must have known that even if I recognized him for what he was, I was no threat. I wondered, with trembling anticipation, what his bite would feel like.

His fingers caressed the back of my neck. Without warning, his body came to rest against mine. This time there *was* warmth—or perhaps it was just my own flushed body heating his—and something hard, his sporran, pushed sweetly against my crotch. I realized I was moist down there, growing wetter and hotter by the instant. A sound like a moan escaped my lips. My nipples felt painfully tight and hard against his chest and I wished very badly that I’d been laid in the last few months so that I didn’t disintegrate so quickly into this gibbering glob of desire for someone—*something*—so evil that even I had felt it across a crowded room.

But the truth was, I wished vampires fucked and I wished very badly that this one would fuck me quickly, here and now.

Involuntarily, my hips pressed forward into his and I saw him smile as he bent his head. Something flashed in his eyes just as they passed out of my view. His fingers gripped my nape more firmly, his other arm suddenly swept around my back to hold

me to him and I closed my eyes, letting the wild sensations of pleasure and desire wash over me, fill me.

I felt his lips on my neck, silky smooth. My head fell back against his arm, my mouth opened with a soundless cry of want and anticipation. My hands clutched his biceps, clinging to the hard, muscled flesh for support. His lips felt so good, teasing, sensuously sucking, that I wanted them everywhere on me. His tongue flickered across my skin, tasting, and it was so wonderful, sending such delicious shivers of pleasure through my whole body that I would happily have died just to feel it again. But I wanted more, I wanted his teeth, which I would surely feel any moment. I wondered if it would hurt, what sort of weird, perverse joy it would give my suddenly depraved body...

But his lips were still. I could hear my heart pounding. My fingers gripped convulsively on his arms, waiting. But he didn't move. Then, slowly, he lifted his head. His eyes were so dark they looked black, almost opaque save for those flashing flecks of gold as they stared down into mine. Bewildered, stupid with unsatisfied hunger, I stared back.

He said, "Do you know, I drank from a homeless man when I first came here and I was out cold for three nights?"

I drew in my breath, hearing it shudder.

"What is it with me?" I demanded. "Why do men only want to talk?"

Unmistakable laughter flickered in his beautiful face, lightening his stunning green eyes, curving his smooth, sculpted lips. And at last the humiliation—not just at his rejection but at my pathetically easy surrender—jerked me into action.

Letting go of his arms, I balled my hands into fists and pushed violently against his chest. Nothing happened. He might have been a tank or a stone wall for all the impression I made. So I tried instead to push back the table behind me with my bum, using his chest as leverage. The table rocked and I heard the clank of glasses knocking together before he did the blur thing again and grabbed whatever I was knocking

down. He did it, however, without letting me go, so when I could see him once more, I was icily sarcastic.

“For a vampire who drinks the guests’ blood, you’re very careful of the hotel’s property!”

“I don’t want to attract attention.”

“That’ll be the reason for the Bonnie Prince Charlie outfit and the ‘children of the night’ accent.”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about,” he said tranquilly. The hand not holding me was busy doing something behind me. I heard the sound of liquid splashing on to glass. “Besides,” he added, straightening and presenting me with a glass of red wine, “if we’re offering criticism, you are singularly inept for a vampire hunter.”

“Tell me about it,” I said, snatching the glass from his fingers with the vague idea of dashing the contents in his face. “They’ll love this down at the Centre!”

His hand released me. Casually, he reached behind me again, his nearness causing a fresh stab of desire to slice through my stomach. He came back into view with another glass half full of the same ruby liquid. Unless it was blood.

He said, “There is a Centre for vampire hunters now?”

I took a hefty swig from my glass. The remaining contents would still make a fine mess of his pristine white shirt. “For psychics of all kinds, people with ESP who can fight evil spirits.”

His eyes mocked me over the rim of the glass. “That’s what you do?”

“No. It’s what *they* do while I’m setting fire to my hair.”

His lips twitched. “So that’s what happened to it?” Unexpectedly, his free hand ruffled through my short spikes as if I were a Labrador. “I thought it was a little martial for bridesmaids’ fashions.”

“Yes, yes,” I snapped, “and it doesn’t go with this stupid dress either!”

“Oh I don’t know. I like it. It makes you look like a street urchin dressing up in someone else’s posh clothes.”

“And that’s good how?”

“I don’t know if it’s good at all,” he said, elegantly sipping his wine, “but it’s certainly sexy.”

I blinked in astonishment. “*Sexy?* What do vampires know about sex?”

His smile took my breath away. For an instant, his amazing eyes went dark again, drinking me in, swallowing me.

“Everything.”

Heat flooded my body. My pussy was so wet the moisture began to trickle down my legs. I had a brief, insane vision of him licking it clean. What was the matter with me? I could sense his evil, so why did he affect me this way? Just because he looked as he did? As if he knew precisely what he was doing to me, he smiled, moving away to sit on the sofa facing me, one arm casually along its back. The kilt, of some muted blue and yellow tartan, dipped between his powerful-looking knees. My gaze, inevitably, came to rest at his crotch, where I made a discovery.

“You’re not wearing a sporran!” I exclaimed. So what in God’s name had I felt digging into me? “Oh...!”

He smiled again. I took a huge gulp of wine, then another before I asked blatantly, “How do vampires get erections when they have no blood?”

“Of course we have blood – it’s just not our own.”

I shut my mouth. Against my better judgment, I crossed the room and sat down beside him. I needed to sit somewhere before my knees gave out. “I can’t believe I’m having this conversation.”

“Why, what do vampire hunters usually talk about?”

"I'm not a vampire hunter," I said impatiently. "I've never even *seen* a vampire in my life, apart from you. And in case you hadn't noticed, I was never the one doing the hunting!"

"But you're still here."

I frowned. "*Why* am I still here?"

By way of answering, he lifted the wine bottle.

I sighed and held out my glass. "You think I'm a total wino. You think if you drink my blood you'll pass out for three nights."

"I'd certainly get a little tipsy."

"I'm not tipsy," I confessed. "I'm completely rat-arsed."

Glancing at him to see the effect of this admission, I saw the gold lights dancing in his eyes. Was he laughing at me again?

He said, "That's another thing about this city. I speak seven languages fluently, including English, yet I understand only one word in five of anything that your people say to me. What the hell is 'rat-arsed'?"

"Drunk," I said. "*Extremely* drunk. Like Eskimos have lots of words for snow, Glaswegians have a thousand for drunk. Fu', maroculous, arse-holed, stocious, pissed, steamboats..."

"Steamboats?"

"Don't ask. And don't mock. This is a fine city." I sniffed, growing maudlin. "Oh it has its problems, sure, but there's nowhere better..."

He blinked at me. "Are you encouraging me to *stay* in your fair city, vampire hunter?"

"Why should I care?" I muttered into my glass. "I won't be here."

"You will be at your Centre, fighting spirits?"

"Or not," I said darkly.

"How did you set fire to your hair?"

By the time I'd explained that, both of our glasses were empty and he was laughing quietly. More surprisingly, perhaps, so was I, realizing for the first time that it was a funny story more than a personal tragedy.

Reaching across him for the bottle, I hiccupped. "All right, Charlie," I said, splashing the last of the wine into the two glasses more or less equally, "What's your story? What's with the accent?"

"I do not have an accent," he said with dignity. "My English is perfect."

"Leesten to heem," I mocked, "creature of the night...!"

"It's been a long time since I tasted a vampire hunter," he said conversationally.

I hooted derisively into my wineglass. "You won't touch me—I'm too pissed for your refined taste buds."

"Are you sure about that?" His deep, suddenly soft voice caused my stomach to lurch. I glanced up to find his darkened eyes on my lips. Worse, his hand resting on the sofa back moved and grasped my hair. Not that there was much for him to get hold of, but he managed to pinch enough of it between his strong, cool fingers to tug my head back.

His touch on my scalp was electrifying. Terror and lust seemed to have become the same thing, especially when his mesmerizing gaze dropped to my exposed jugular.

"A word to the wise, little vampire hunter," he whispered. "Never bank on it."

His other hand, still holding the wineglass, came up. Two of his fingers uncurled from the stem and he brushed his knuckles across my neck. I shivered. "Besides, although you have a delectable throat, there are other ways to taste."

His long, pale fingers trailed down the length of my throat and lingered over the hammering pulse at the base of my neck. His lips curved, very slightly but enough to reveal the points of his lethal fangs.

Oh Jesus.

Those devastating fingers moved on, tracing a line down the center of my chest to my cleavage, where they parted so that each could brush the naked curve of a breast. His gaze lifted to mine, to see, perhaps, if the heaving of my breasts was due to desire or fear. Then he slid both fingers down between my breasts.

I gasped and he smiled, slowly withdrawing his fingers so that both knuckles and fingertips grazed my skin. The effect was more arousing than most sex I'd ever had, but my erratic – all right, my pissed – mind was distracted by other matters.

“How do you do that without spilling any wine?”

The laughter I'd become so attached to sprang back into his eyes. He released my head and drew back a little.

“Practice,” he answered. “And sobriety.”

“Sobriety?” I hooted. “After drinking half a bottle of wine? To say nothing of Maggie and Davie.”

Somewhere, in the tiny part of me still remotely attached to reality, I couldn't believe I was being quite so blasé about all this. Several unreadable expressions flitted across his pale, beautiful face. None of them detracted from the drunken companionship I felt for him by now, particularly as his hypnotic green eyes as well as his lips were still smiling at me. I was very aware of his arm still resting along the sofa top, just touching the back of my head.

“You were telling me,” I reminded him, “about the accent.”

He said, “I was born a Magyar, in what is now Romania.”

Grinning, I said, “Transylvania?”

“If you say so. I am traveling for my health.”

I stared at him. “You're taking the piss.”

“Mental health,” he corrected. “In a word, I was bored. I arrived here a week ago.”

“And the Prince Charlie stuff?”

His lips twitched. “While I was out cold...”

“After biting the wino?”

“Exactly. He stole my clothes.”

Breathless with suppressed laughter, I gasped out, “Oh dear...”

“This was outside the back door of Kelvingrove museum. I lay naked under a carpet undisturbed for two nights. On the third, I followed the night guard inside and stole this.”

I frowned. “Why didn’t you just steal the guard’s clothes? They’d have been less conspicuous!”

He shrugged. “I liked this better. Anyhow, no one questions me. I come here every night. Someone is always getting married, so I blend in with the wedding parties, although on the whole it is safer to drink from the staff. I limit my intake from the guests.”

Involuntarily, I glanced over at Davie, still sleeping like a baby in the corner. “Do you ever kill anyone?”

“Of course I do. I’m a vampire.”

Uncertainly, my eyes came back to him. He didn’t look sad or ashamed. He didn’t look proud or scary either. He simply stated a fact.

“If I’d ever believed vampires really existed,” I said, “I’d never have believed in one like you. And I can buy into every kind of vampire you like—the aloof and evil kind, the savage animal kind *and* the vampire with a soul kind. I’ve been in love with Anne Rice’s Louis since I was fourteen! But you’re just weird.”

To some, my words might have sounded like a criticism, a statement of disappointment. *He* actually seemed flattered. I saw a definite softening in his cold eyes and the skin around them actually crinkled as he smiled. Fascinated, I watched the smile die and the skin smooth out almost as pristine as a child’s once more.

For some reason, my breath caught. I felt his touch, featherlight on my cheek. His head bent nearer mine and I saw his lips part. My heart began to drum because he was

finally going to kiss me. The butterflies in my stomach went wild with anticipation. Then the door of the conservatory crashed open, letting in a sudden wave of noisy laughter and music. The overhead light blazed, blinding me, and Nick's voice called out, "Oi, Jenny! Davie! Are you in here? Maggie and Jack are leaving!"

I blinked to clear my vision and a frisson of renewed fear rushed up from my toes. Though close enough to kiss, the vampire's presence had changed suddenly—or perhaps I'd just woken up to the fact that his idea of drinking companion wasn't mine. His cold, hard eyes gazed beyond me, presumably at Nick, as if assessing his next meal.

With a sickening jolt I realized my pleasant private party was about to turn nasty and that the only possible winner of the fight to come was the vampire.

While I still tried to reorient myself, I heard Nick say uncertainly, "Davie?"

Quick footsteps sounded and then Nick swung into view, kneeling beside the best man. The vampire stood, a blur of quick, menacing motion and belatedly, I scrambled into action, catapulting myself off the sofa to stand between him and Nick.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled like thorns. I needed to be watching the vampire and yet I couldn't if I was to address Nick with any semblance of normality.

"He passed out," I managed—he would never know how guiltily.

Nick glanced toward the sound of my voice. "Aye, so I see..." Catching sight of the vampire beside me, he did a double take and his eyes grew wide. "Well! Quite a night, Jen! And I thought I was the belle of the ball."

Ignoring that, I went somewhat belatedly to help Davie. As I walked forward, I felt the vampire move, knew an instant of terror as his cool fingertips trailed sensuously along my bare arm. I shivered, because despite the fear, his touch still inspired a lust I couldn't deal with.

"What's your friend called?" Nick asked as I crouched down beside him and gently slapped at Davie's mumbling face. He didn't look like much of a lumber any more.

“Charlie,” I said with the ghost of a laugh. It was hysteria. Davie shook his head and opened his eyes blearily. Without considering what I did, I brushed the dried blood off his neck with the backs of my fingers. I could see no wounds.

“Fair enough,” said Nick. “Hey, Charlie, any chance of a hand over...? Where’d he go?”

I looked round quickly, but apart from the three of us, the room was empty.

Chapter Three

“Jennifer! Phone!”

My mother’s eternally accusing voice cut through my dreams with the force of an axe through butter. Without opening my eyes—I knew how bright daylight was—I shouted, “Tell them I’ll call back!” Or at least I tried to. No sound came out the first time, so I swallowed my dry throat and tried again. This time it worked—up to a point.

“I can’t!” shrieked my mother. “It’s your work, for Christ’s sake!”

“Oh shite.”

How in God’s name was I meant to deal with these bastards in this state? Besides, didn’t I have something very bad to tell them? Or decide whether or not to tell them. Oh yes. The vampire.

Hysterical laughter caught in my throat as I swung my legs out of bed. I groaned when the dizzy headache hit me full force. How could I possibly tell them that? That not only had I let a vampire feed from at least two of my friends, but that I had sat around getting drunk with him afterward?

I wasn’t even going to *think* about wanting him to bite me. Or kiss me. Or worse. No, I wasn’t going there.

Staggering out of the bedroom, I found my way to the phone in my mother’s room.

“Hello!” I said into the receiver, with what I hoped was efficient morning cheer. “Jenny Jordan.”

“You sound dreadful,” came the clipped tones of my boss, Nigel Devon. “Are you ill?”

"No," I said, disgruntled at the failure of my cheer to impress him. A moment later, I could have kicked myself. Not only could I have wangled myself an extra couple of days off, I could have avoided the following conversation.

"Good, because there's a bit of a situation up there."

"Up where?" I asked, since Nigel had a habit of thinking about the whole of Scotland as if it was some sort of village where everything was within walking distance of everything else.

"Glasgow," he said impatiently. "You *are* in Glasgow?"

"Oh yes," I sighed.

"Well, I think you've got a vampire."

I dropped the phone. This was probably a good thing since it meant that at least Nigel didn't hear the strangled squawk that escaped from my lips. However, I did have to explain about my clumsiness and endure his contempt again while I desperately tried to fathom how he could have found out about me and the vampire so quickly.

"Right," he said at last, "are you holding the phone with both hands?"

I stuck my tongue out at the mouthpiece. "And both feet," I said to annoy him.

Ignoring that, he went on, "There have been several attacks around the city, including one night watchman at Kelvingrove Museum. The worrying thing is, this is probably just the tip of the iceberg, because if this vampire is the one we think it is, then most of his victims never remember they have *been* attacked. He uses some sort of hypnosis combined with a healing power..."

"Then he doesn't kill his victims?" I said eagerly, too eagerly, though fortunately Nigel misunderstood why.

"Don't sweat it, Jenny," he mocked, "I don't want you to *contain* the vampire, just see if you can find out roughly the area he's hiding in. And yes, he does kill, though usually when he's bored and ready to move on. The rest of the time he prefers a quiet

life with as little aggravation from local police and people like us as possible. Do you have a computer there?"

Struggling to keep up, I floundered, "Yes, my laptop..."

"Fine. I'll email the locations of the attacks and you can try to find some likely hiding spots for the vamp. Frank and Hilda will contact you when they get up there tomorrow. I'll send some notes on vampire lairs as well."

"Thanks," I muttered.

"Right. Try not to screw this up completely, Jenny."

Though I stuck my tongue out at the phone again, I couldn't really blame Nigel for his distrust. Sighing, I simply said, "I'll try...Nigel?" I added hastily as he seemed about to hang up. "Who is this vampire? Where did he come from?"

"We think...believe it or not...Romania."

* * * * *

The notes Nigel sent by email turned out to be bugger-all use. There was nothing there about vampire lairs and I was left in total ignorance as to whether they slept in coffins lined with their native soil like in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, or if they just pulled the blinds and kept out of the sun.

On the other hand, he did send the report received from his counterparts in Hungary, where the vampire had apparently spent much of his time. Plowing my way through the dizzying translation, I learned that, interestingly enough, they called my vampire Karoly—Hungarian for Charles. It seemed that in my sardonic humor I had actually hit on his real name. He had been around, they thought, since the fifteenth century, originally a minor nobleman of Transylvania, who, once "turned", had terrorized the surrounding countryside for generations.

To their knowledge, he had made no new vampires for the first hundred years of his existence, even though he had continued to live in the castle with his wife and servants until they had died out. After that, he had lived a reclusive life for some years.

Then had come a spate of travel and subsequent wake of terror and destruction, alternating with periods of quiet at his ruined castle.

Nowadays, his castle was completely flattened and though there were still occasional reported sightings of him in the area, he appeared in many places, most recently Hungary, usually with the low profile Nigel had mentioned and which he himself had hinted at to me last night. *"Why would I leave dead bodies lying about the place?"* Then came the indiscriminate carnage as he prepared to move on.

Over the centuries, he had lived with several companions, mainly female, the most recent of whom had been killed by a "specialist" in Paris last year. To the knowledge of the Hungarians, he had come to Britain alone.

So, I thought bracingly. This wasn't too bad. I had just one vampire to track down and he was in low-profile mode, unlikely to kill!

Apart from the one at Kelvingrove, there were only four attacks that Nigel knew of, scattered across the city of Glasgow. Even these were merely deduced from unexplained puncture wounds in people's necks. Only one woman—and she was generally considered unstable—appeared actually to remember being attacked.

Kneeling on the floor with the map of Glasgow spread out before me, I hung on to my mother's huge dog to stop him sitting on it. Gazing helplessly at the locations of each attack, I knew there was no way I could narrow down the area of the vampire's lair. Even including the city center hotel where Maggie's wedding was held and where the vampire had told me he came every night, didn't help. It was nowhere near any of the other known attacks.

Worse, I was fairly sure Nigel knew very well that his information would be no use to me, that I would be able to do nothing with it. Hilda and Frank would be able to blame me when they couldn't find the vampire tomorrow.

It's true I'm not much of a psychic, but contrary to popular belief, I'm not stupid either. This vampire had been around long enough to be familiar in several countries, famous enough for it to be known when he had left one and arrived in another. Yet no

one had ever caught him. No one had ever stopped him. No one was likely to stop him here either, but Nigel could still keep the reputation of his beloved Centre if he could just blame bumbling probationer Jenny for this fiasco along with all the rest. It was only a matter of time 'til I got fired anyway. What a godsend this wedding had been, I thought bitterly.

Rocking back on my heels, I finally let the dog lie down in the middle of the map, from where he swished his tail at me and with huge, soulful eyes requested a walk.

Well, I could let them do it. I hated their damned Centre anyway. Even school libraries beat that shit and God knew it would be no hardship to come home. My mother would tolerate it and Dog would be delighted. My friends would never bring up the subject of my failure. I could get another job, another flat...

And yet it went against the grain to let the bastards win. That was the only reason I hadn't told them to stuff it already. I was determined to show them—*something!* They treated me like some sort of hybrid of country bumpkin and blithering fool, determinedly misunderstanding my accent and ridiculing me 'til I was twice as clumsy as normal. But I *wasn't* a country bumpkin. I had grown up on rougher city streets than most of them had crossed and I was at least as streetwise as they had learned to be since. Nor was I ignorant or foolish. I had a good degree from Glasgow University and a postgrad diploma from Strathclyde to prove it. What I *wasn't*—and this did hold me back, under the circumstances—was a good psychic.

Although I'd bloody recognized that vampire! As soon as I'd seen him, I'd spotted something powerful in him and when I'd looked into his eyes, I'd known immediately, without doubt, despite the fact that I was rat-arsed and despite the extreme unlikelihood. And he had known me! He had called me vampire hunter!

Well, he had called me "*little vampire hunter,*" but it was the same thing, wasn't it? Almost?

Excitement began to mount. This was something I *could* do. I didn't need Nigel's silly maps. I knew if I went back to the hotel, I would be able to *feel* where he had been. And follow him to wherever he had gone.

I stood up so fast that the dog leapt up with me and began to bark.

"All right, Dog," I said. "Let's go and find my Bonnie Prince Karoly!"

* * * * *

It was a typical spring day in Glasgow – gray, wet and cold. The Caledonia Hotel overlooks the River Clyde. Since it's made up of several converted Georgian or early Victorian terraced houses, both the architecture and the inner features of the hotel are beautiful, which is why it's so popular for weddings. Poor Maggie, who'd only booked a year in advance, had had to make do with a Friday rather than the Saturday she'd originally wanted for her reception.

Today, on this miserably drizzling Saturday afternoon, there were two wedding receptions being prepared. Leaving the outraged Dog tied to the railings, I walked up the steps and into the hotel. One sign proclaiming "Drummond wedding" pointed upstairs to the smaller function suite and the other directed guests along the passage to the rooms where we'd celebrated Maggie's nuptials yesterday. Since it was still a little early for guests, the hotel staff were all busy elsewhere and I made it to the empty dining room unchallenged.

Here, I paused in the doorway, as *he* had when I had first seen him. If I closed my eyes, which I did, I could feel the same tingle I had then. It could have been memory, just because he'd looked so damned gorgeous standing there proud as a king in his stolen antique kilt...

Slowly, I walked into the room, following the path I had seen him take before I'd got distracted by Davie and Jackie. The tingle came with me. Gradually, I managed to blot out the hotel noises, the banging crockery in the distance, the shout of laughter

from the kitchen and just concentrate on myself, on the air I stepped through. The tingle grew stronger.

The door to the conservatory stood open. When I walked through it, it was as if somebody hit me. I truly felt his presence like a blow, the same chill of knowledge and recognition that had struck me the moment I gazed into his eyes last night. Only now I was looking for it, open to it, and it felt magnified a thousand times. Testing it, I sat where he had sat on the sofa and gasped out loud at the sensation that shot up my spine. Something equally dark, yet hot, stirred between my legs, reminding me against my will of the vampire's hypnotic, electric touch...

Hastily, I stood again. To air the room, no doubt, the garden door was open too. I stepped outside into the relentless drizzle, wondering if all trace of his presence would be washed away by the rain. Wandering aimlessly about the lawn and patio, I could still sense him, but far less than inside. Though he had been here, it was probably not as recently as last night...

So where had he gone while I spoke to Nick? This door had been locked then, so he hadn't come out here... Now I knew what I was looking for, I went back inside, through the conservatory and the dining room and back along the passage to the reception hall. Everywhere, I could sense him. When I touched the handle of the front door, I knew he had touched it too. The force of it nearly burned me.

Going back into the street, I untied the wet and grateful Dog and began to walk along the road. As I grew used to the novel feeling, I found I could pay at least a minimum of attention to my surroundings and still sense where he had been. And he had been in this street many times, just as he had said. So was his lair near here? I rather thought so, though the daunting task of finding it was not one that greatly appealed. Besides the hotel and other old houses, the disused warehouses and tenements nearby, all with suitably dank and dark-looking cellars, we were right on the river here and it was not outwith the bounds of possibility that he was hiding in one of its maintenance tunnels or drains or whatever they were. I really didn't fancy investigating there.

Perhaps I would just give what I knew to Frank and Hilda tomorrow. Only, of course, they were under no obligation to believe me. And I did really like this recurring vision of showing them the vampire's dead body with my stake through his heart...

At the next corner stood an old church, still in use judging by the services listed on the board at the door. He had passed here too, though when I quickly ran up the steps and touched the door handle, I got nothing. Well, Nigel's helpful notes had said that most vampires avoided holy places. I turned down the next street, away from the river, and walked toward an old warehouse, or a factory perhaps, mostly boarded up. It seemed a likelier prospect. Certainly he had come this way and recently.

My heart beat louder now with the prospect of success, but when I touched the stone walls, the door handles, I felt nothing. He wasn't there. Sighing, I dragged Dog back the way we had come. I realized I was really no further forward. I knew he had been here a lot, but then I had known that last night. His lair could still be anywhere in the city.

Dog pulled me hard across the road back toward the church, apparently for the sole purpose of lifting his leg on the railings that surrounded it. While Dog decanted in the rain, I peered through the railings to the scrubby ground surrounding the church building. Here, toward the back of it, the ground dropped steeply down to a small door low down on the building, as if to an undercroft.

Frowning, I grasped the railings to look more closely – and felt a shock run through me from fingertips to spine, so powerful that it made me gasp aloud. He had touched these railings, possibly often and certainly recently.

Dog was large, but mostly fur and bone, so he went through the railings easily enough when I pushed. Getting myself over was harder, though far from impossible, remembering the adventurous child I had once been.

In moments Dog and I were both down the slope. However, doomed to disappointment once more, I got no reaction from the low door. Touching the walls, I was sure there was *something*, yet I could see no way in.

Dog, snouting about in the scrubby, overgrown bushes, gave me the idea to look at the ground. A man in the street, his collar pulled up against the rain called down once, "You all right, hen?" and I shouted back cheerfully that I was fine, just looking for the dog's ball, with which he appeared to be satisfied, for he walked away.

A minute later, I found the trapdoor.

It was well hidden, efficiently disguised with loose earth, a bush carefully dragged across it, but I could feel now that he had been there. The whole ground positively reeked of him. I managed to heave the heavy door open. Then, my heart thundering, because this time I *knew* I was right, I jumped onto the steps leading downward, dragging Dog with me, and quickly pulled down the trapdoor before anybody noticed. All my efforts would be in vain if the general population discovered me murdering somebody down here.

With the door shut, it was pitch black and silent save for Dog's slightly anxious panting. Fumbling, I found my torch and switched it on. The beam offered some comfort and at least enough light to get down the steps. They led down to what appeared to be a huge area under the church. It might have been a bomb shelter during the war, I thought.

On the last step, I paused, my hand gripping tightly onto Dog's collar, the beat of my heart so loud that it deafened me. The beam of the torch trembled as I shone it around the undercroft. In the far left corner lay an indistinct, vaguely mattress-shaped shadow that looked as if it might be his sleeping space. Carefully, I kept the direct beam away from there, shining it instead on a clean white shirt hanging on a stretched rope.

He does washing?

The amusing idea somehow restored my fading courage. Reaching inside my pocket for the ready sharpened stick, I took the final step into his lair.

Abruptly, without any warning, something leapt from above, flashing indistinctly before my eyes. With a light yet sickeningly solid thud, it came to land directly in front of me.

More bemused than terrified—I had no time for the fear to get properly started—I found myself staring through the torch’s glow at the only too-familiar figure of the tartan clad vampire.

It was only a glimpse before his arms slammed around me like a vice, pinning mine to my sides, preventing my hand from leaving my pocket, with or without the weapon. In the same instant, he pushed my head up and to one side with the heel of his hand and his parted lips drew back from his lethal teeth.

I was held helpless, stunned by his sheer, irresistible strength. But even through the upsurge of fear, I was aware of the wild, almost animal beauty in him. Fascinated, appalled, I couldn’t look away. Even though it hurt my eyes to strain them so far to the side.

He still wore his kilt, though the chest plaid hung loosely down from his waist. His long, fair hair tumbled free about his face and shoulders. His shirt was open and askew, the old-fashioned lacing untied to reveal his naked chest, broad and muscled. I could see one of his prominent dark nipples pointing at me accusingly. Droplets of water glistened on the smooth skin, as if he’d been washing himself as well as his clothes. Above, I caught a glint of murderous ice in his handsome face and realized too late that against this monster, I hadn’t a prayer.

He could puncture my vein in an instant, drain me completely, break my neck as easily as a doll’s. The choice was entirely his.

My helplessness brought with it a pang of frustration that I would not now be able to show off to Nigel and his cohorts. Probably they would never know that I had even tracked the vampire to his lair.

“Aren’t you supposed to be asleep in your coffin?” I blurted irritably.

Recognition spread across his face. He actually looked pleased to see me, which was hardly flattering in the circumstances. His teeth disappeared and his whole body relaxed, although he didn’t release me. In fact, they drew me closer in against him. His

brutal hand on my jaw shifted subtly from a potent threat to something approaching a caress. His eyes gathered a hint of warmth. He even smiled.

“Coffins are so constricting,” he complained. “Besides, I don’t sleep.”

“Just my bloody luck. An insomniac vampire!”

For a second, his eyes held mine. I wondered if he was actually hurt by what he must have been able to read there.

He mocked, “Little vampire hunter, don’t you ever just say hello?”

He was still devastating. Humiliatingly, my body greeted his with a flood of sexual moisture. Through my jeans and the heavy fabric of his kilt, I could feel the outline of his lean hip bone and, surely, his hardening cock against my abdomen.

“It wasn’t meant to be a social visit,” I managed.

He moved, deliberately rubbing against me. My pussy clenched and I swallowed hard, fighting a losing battle against desire.

He said, “What were you going to do? Throw holy water over my sleeping face? Stab me through the heart with a wooden stake?”

Guiltily, I released my grip on the stick in my pocket. Almost as if he knew it, he dropped his arms and let me go. Disappointment raged, warring with relief. And yet the danger wasn’t passed. It had only begun.

“Actually,” I said, while he had the gall to hold out his hand toward my nervous Dog, “I thought I’d just leave the trapdoor open and let nature take its course.”

“Cruel if fitting,” he acknowledged. My treacherous hound, who’d merely sat back on his haunches growling with what he no doubt imagined was quiet menace while the stranger assaulted me, moved forward to sniff his long, pale fingers. Not exactly reassured by whatever he smelled there, Dog flattened his ears and shook his shaggy coat, spraying us both with canine-scented rain, then lay down watchfully. “On the other hand, I should tell you I have another way out.”

“You would,” I muttered.

The vampire stepped back, gracefully waving one arm into the room. "Please, make yourself comfortable. I'd offer you some refreshment, only I don't keep anything in." He smiled faintly. "As you know, I dine out."

My breath caught on unexpected laughter. Against my will, I still liked the bastard.

"I can't stay," I said hastily, wildly. Jesus, how was I to get out of here now?

"No?" he said, still watching me. "You just dropped in to kill me?"

"Well you needn't say it like that!" I exclaimed, suddenly and for no reason incensed. "Don't pretend you wouldn't kill me, just to improve your *mental health!*"

A smile began to play around his oddly decadent lips. "Actually, you are excellent for my mental health. I have no intention of killing you today." He walked away from me, turning his back without compunction and going toward the mattress I had already glimpsed in the corner near the drying shirt.

Well, I'd clearly put the fear of God into him!

As I watched he reached up to the wall above the mattress and flicked a switch. A battered electric lamp came on with an ominous buzz, flickered and settled down. By its pale light, the vampire folded himself gracefully onto the mattress, propping his back against the far wall and drawing one knee up to his chest. Behind him, shadows loomed up the wall. Carefully, I didn't look at the gaping kilt.

"Please, sit down," he invited, indicating the mattress space beside him. I hesitated. Beside me, Dog stood up and began to trot around the room, sniffing. I could have fought him for control of the lead and tried to drag him back toward the trapdoor, but I knew from experience who would win that fight and for some reason it seemed important to keep what dignity I had left before the vampire.

Sighing, I moved slowly across the room and sat gingerly on the edge of the mattress. To avoid looking at the vampire's legs, I watched the dog as he sniffed his way about the room. I just hoped the vampire didn't keep any of his left-over meals lying around for him to find.

“So,” said the vampire conversationally, “did *you* find me, or was it the dog?”

My mouth was already open to claim my own skill, not without pride, when I remembered Dog sniffing the bushes around the trapdoor. Sighing, I confessed, “It was the dog, of course.”

As I spoke I cast him a quick, fierce glance, daring him to make fun of me for it. I’d get enough of that tomorrow from Frank and Hilda. But somewhat to my surprise, the vampire’s smile was openly disbelieving.

“I was joking,” he assured me. “I know it was you.”

“And how do you know that?” I demanded, scarcely immune to flattery, but innately suspicious of it.

“Because I could find you just as easily.”

My breath caught in a sudden slam of fear. Stupidly, I had never even considered that. There were so many things I had never even considered, through my drunkenness and subsequent hangover, not least of them being that the vampire, quite unaware of my total incompetence, could easily regard me as a threat to be eliminated. If it was true, if this recognition worked both ways, then he could easily have tracked me to my mother’s house and killed both of us while I slept the dead sleep of the inebriated.

His terrible green eyes held mine easily, mockingly. “Relax,” he advised. “I’ve already said I’m not going to kill you.”

“Today,” I pointed out. “You said, ‘today’.”

The vampire shrugged. “No point in looking further ahead. Live each day as it comes.”

“Lessons in life,” I muttered, “from Bonnie Prince Karoly of the Undead!” A second longer, I withstood his amused, unblinking gaze. Then, restlessly, I looked away. I knew I couldn’t kill him face to face even if he spread his arms and let me. I had to get out of here before... before I wasn’t very sure what, but I knew I had to leave. Quickly.

Dog snuffled about the far corner, making his slow way back toward me. Soon... My anxiously searching eyes fell on the bare mattress beside me, on my own grotesque shadow, on a twisted black ribbon like the one that had tied his hair back last night, on a jewel on a gold chain. Part innate curiosity, part desperation to be doing something, anything other than looking into his hypnotic green eyes, made me pick up the chain.

It seemed to hold some kind of locket, made of solid gold, intricately carved in a vaguely Byzantine design. To me, it looked very old. I risked a quick glance at him to see if he objected, or even noticed.

He noticed. His gaze was not on me, but on the locket held in my hands. I said, "Can I open it?"

"If you like." Slowly this time, his eyes lifted to mine. I lowered my own to the locket, inserted my nail and pried it apart. Inside was a miniature portrait, faded but still colorful, of a dark-haired woman with large, laughing eyes and a quizzical smile. It was old, too, I thought, possibly as old as him.

"Beautiful," I observed. "Who is she?"

He didn't answer until I looked up at him again and then he held my eyes deliberately, a faint smile playing on his lips. "My wife."

"You've kept her *picture* all these years?" I taunted, suddenly fiercely glad of the opportunity to mock back. "Couldn't you cope with the real thing?"

"*She* couldn't," he said, and when my eyes widened, ashamed, for some reason, of my ill-natured remark, he added, "Well, could you?"

"Could I what?" I muttered, standing up and dropping his wife's portrait back on the mattress. He moved too with that blurry grace I remembered from last night, so that suddenly he stood facing me, his kilt close enough to brush my legs.

"Become a vampire. Live forever."

"On the blood of others? No!" I said, revolted.

The vampire sighed. "That's what she said. Who wants to live forever?"

Unexpectedly, I read something behind the self-mockery in his cool, green eyes.
Hurt?

“You miss her!” I blurted. Suddenly I wanted to know everything about him, how he’d become a vampire, what his life had been like before, how and why he had continued to live his old life in his new state for so long...though the locket at least gave me some clue.

But the vampire clearly did not like pathos. His long, fair lashes swept down across his cheek. He said, “After five hundred years? Hardly. I’d have missed you, though, if you hadn’t come to me.”

My heart thumped harder. Fear and something else swirled around the base of my stomach. I began to deny, “I didn’t *come to you*...!” But he interrupted, his hand lifting to ruffle through my short, spiky hair.

“Yes you did. You came to kill me, which is hardly polite. I have to tell you in all modesty that you could not kill me. On the other hand, I could kill you as easily as you breathe. I spare you, for a price.”

“What price?” I forced myself to be still under his hand. His fingers in my hair made every nerve ending shriek with an awareness that might have been fear. Some of it certainly was. The vampire smiled, sliding his hand around to the back of my head, stroking harder there with two fingers until I gasped without meaning to.

“A kiss,” he said.

“No!” I gulped, slapping my hand to the side of my neck.

“Not there,” he reproved, bringing up his other hand. “*There.*” And one cool finger touched my lips, so gently that I barely felt it. “There are many ways of tasting a vampire hunter...”

My breath caught and his finger moved, light as a butterfly wing, tracing the outline of my upper lip and then my lower. Anxiously, I began to close my mouth against his touch, before I realized I would only shut it around his caressing finger.

I couldn't talk, couldn't move, couldn't cry out. And yet my trembling body was speaking, I just couldn't understand the words. His thumb joined his finger, slightly bolder, firmer in its exploration. His green eyes still teased, the gold flecks dancing. Then, as I watched in helpless fascination, the gold grew darker, blending with the green into a whirling spiral that seemed to draw me inside. My whole body flushed hot, afraid and indescribably desperate.

His head bent unhurriedly. Fighting the weird hypnosis, I flung up my own hand to grasp his wrist, to pull his fingers from their relentless seduction of my lips. But my tugging had no effect. His fingers, warm now, did not stop, his head continued down to mine until he could cover my mouth with his.

For a second, I felt his lips and fingers both. I heard my own shuddering breath. Then his fingers slid free to hold my head and his mouth took mine ruthlessly.

The vampire could kiss. I suppose five hundred years of practice helps. Certainly with the first touch of his sensual lips, I was lost. They stroked mine over and over before drawing my upper lip into his silken mouth to let his tongue explore. His tongue wound itself around my mine, pulling it into his own mouth and his lips clamped harder. He turned his tongue in my mouth over and over, kissing deeper and deeper until I felt I was drowning in him. His teeth were sharp, nibbling my tongue, my lips, warning me of the danger and yet only arousing me further.

And God, I was aroused. Even before I had found him here, I had trained my senses to be aware of him, so I suppose it wasn't surprising that every sensation seemed impossibly heightened now. My poor, ravaged body didn't know what hit it, completely lost in the most powerful desire it had ever known, a willing slave to a mere kiss. I hung helpless in his hands, aware of nothing but his mouth and its terrible, tender ravishing.

I don't know how long it lasted. It seemed forever since I was oblivious to everything before it and everything outside it. And yet when he began to draw back I knew it was too soon. I heard myself moan in protest. Though his lips left mine, they

were still so close that I could sense their every tiny movement almost brushing against my mouth as he whispered, "Sweet, so sweet..."

Then, as I realized several things at once, my eyes snapped open. I knew I could not feel his breath on my lips, because he had none. And I understood at least some of what he had done to me. Defeated me utterly with one kiss.

"You bastard," I said into his intense green eyes. It came out as a low whisper. "You complete bastard."

He knew what I meant. His eyes gleamed. Those wicked, corrupt lips curved upward. "Come now, that's no way to talk to someone you've just kissed so passionately."

But I wasn't having that. "I didn't kiss anyone! You did!" It sounded petty and childish, even to me, making me even madder.

He laughed softly. "Oh believe me, I was there. There were two of us in that kiss and your part was more than enough for this..." Deliberately, he drew me into his body, letting me feel his hardness, the entire length of his fully erect cock jutting against me.

Only a drunk, I thought wildly, could ever have mistaken that for a sporran. But I was too furious to concentrate on such trivia, too consumed now with anger and humiliation and, somewhere, shattering loss because I understood at once that his kiss had spoiled me for all others.

Mockingly, he said, "Little vampire hunter, you kiss like a demon..."

That did it. Taking him by surprise, I thrust my numb hand inside my pocket and drew out the sharpened stick, forcing it between us before he even noticed my action. When he did, it didn't wipe the smile off his face, though it did hold it there unmoving for several heartbeats. His eyes stared back into mine, reading, I suppose, everything that I didn't bother to hide. My breathing was fast and loud in my ears. I had never been so angry, even with Nigel.

I said, "Get away from me."

“It was a compliment,” he said mildly. He still held my face between his smooth, cool hands.

I swallowed, because he still hadn’t moved and because I wasn’t sure what I could do about it. And because I could still feel his huge erection pressing against my abdomen, twisting my anger to lust, tempting me—how far, I prayed he’d never know—to reach under his kilt, take his cock in my hand and impale myself upon it. I yearned, with terrifying force, to feel it inside me, filling me, pushing, fucking... I knew it would be good enough to die for.

But I couldn’t die here and I wouldn’t give in.

Reaching desperately for the thread of the conversation, I rasped, “I don’t accept it as such.”

I pushed the stick against his chest and stepped away from him. The loss of his cock’s pressure against me was a sharp, clamoring pain.

His hands fell back to his sides, leaving my face cold too. I backed farther away, toward the steps, while he watched unblinking, unmoving. I knew he could stop me if he wanted to. I knew he could move so fast that I wouldn’t even see him, let alone have the time to hurt him, kill him...

So at the steps, I simply turned and bolted, running up them, shoving at the trapdoor and tumbling out into the wet grass and daylight. I had got to my knees and was reaching for the trapdoor to close it before I remembered.

“Dog!” I whispered in dismay.

Pushing myself backward several paces in self-loathing, I covered my face with my hands, wildly wondering what to do. I couldn’t leave him there alone to be harmed, perhaps killed or worse. Were there such things as vampire dogs?

A muffled yowl had me starting to my feet, determined to go back for him before the vampire could hurt him further. But before I got near the trapdoor, Dog came flying out of it with another howl and the trapdoor slammed shut in a cloud of dust that looked like smoke.

I fell upon him in relief. "Are you hurt? Are you hurt?" I asked him stupidly. Dog just licked my face and wagged his tail 'til I finally noticed that the fur below it seemed to be slightly singed.

Frowning, I got slowly back to my feet to begin the long, depressing walk home through the rain.

Chapter Four

My mother drove me nuts. Of course, she had been driving me nuts for thirty years, but that night she reached new heights. Being no fool, she understood that I was not entirely happy with my new job in the south and assumed – mistakenly, as it happened – that my jumpiness was down to having to go back to it. She harped on about that and how I should either try harder or move on but for God’s sake stop moping around and fix my own life for so long that I wanted to strangle her.

I compromised by storming out of the room and going to bed. Only I couldn’t actually go to bed, so I sat cross legged upon it in pajama bottoms and a t-shirt. Wound tight as a coiled spring, with my sharpened stick clutched in both hands, I tried to wait through the night.

My senses straining for the faintest trace of him, my ears alert for the remotest sound, I listened only to the familiar, unmistakable noises of my mother going to bed, of the usual shouting and laughter in the street at chucking-out time on a Saturday night. Somebody threw up on the corner of our street, much to the amusement of his mates and the ire of his extremely loud girlfriend. In the distance, I heard a police siren. It was Saturday night, but I couldn’t help relating every sign of distress to *him*.

Tomorrow, Hilda and Frank would be here. I could tell them exactly where to find their vampire – providing he didn’t move in the interim, which I was fairly sure he wouldn’t. And even if he did, I understood with a new confidence that startled even me that I could find him again. In the meantime, since I had failed to kill him, or do anything with him at all except give him another laugh, I could only sit here in constant vigil to protect my mother’s life. And my own.

Weirdly, I trusted him to keep his word. He wouldn’t kill me today. But today ended at midnight and he’d said nothing about my mother.

I was knackered. After two heavy nights' drinking in a row, I needed a long, peaceful sleep, so it wasn't surprising that it grew increasingly difficult to keep my eyes open. Twice I caught myself nodding off, coming to again with a jump to grasp my stake more firmly.

* * * * *

I opened my eyes with a feeling of excitement I was too sleepy at first to place. Then I realized it came from the firm but light pressure on my pubic bone. I pushed my hip upward into it and something pushed back. I turned my head and saw him sitting beside me on the bed.

My heart turned over. I was lying down, still in my pajama trousers and t-shirt, and he just sat there, his hand resting on my crotch to wake me.

Wildly, I struggled to sit up, but his hand pressed harder to keep me still. "Sh-sh," he said. "Don't panic. I've only come for another taste..." His smile was wicked, his eyes gleamed and I thought, *he's stronger than me, there's no point in even trying to resist him.*

I knew I wanted another of those blinding, heart-stopping kisses. I thought that if he just kept his hand where it was while he kissed me I would come, tasting the sweetest, wildest, most intense orgasm ever...

I couldn't tell him that, of course, and I knew it was wrong of me, more wrong than anything I had ever done, but in that moment I wanted it so badly that when he bent for my mouth I never even thought of refusing him, let alone fighting him.

My lips fell open, my eyes closed in anticipation. Moisture pooled in my pussy before he even touched me. As before, I sensed his breathless mouth above mine, hovering as he said softly, "There are many ways to taste a vampire hunter..."

I bit back a moan, waiting feverishly for the wave of sensual pleasure to wash over me with his kiss. I felt the weight of his hand shift, sliding down between my thighs, making me gasp. My eyes flew open to see that he wasn't watching my face but his own

hand, spreading across my pussy. The fabric of my pajamas felt wet, was no doubt stained dark with my moisture. He smiled. Sliding the side of his hand along the length of my pussy, he turned his head, bringing his eyes back to mine, watching my reaction.

“Bastard,” I whispered. “Bastard.”

“Tell me to stop,” he challenged softly, turning his hand, probing around the wet entrance to my pussy, pushing the cotton inside me with one finger. I swallowed. The best I could manage was to pretend I couldn’t hear him. My clitoris throbbed with such need that I couldn’t have stopped him if my life depended on it. Which it probably did.

His fingers left me. I gasped out with unstoppable frustration and he smiled, both hands on my waistband. Abruptly, they swept upward, pushing my t-shirt up over my breasts and his palms brushed my tight nipples, hardening them unbearably. My head moved helplessly from side to side. He took one of my hands, lifted it to his mouth and there, smiling at me with his decadent, sensual lips, he sucked one finger inside, moving his lips up and down it in deliberate simulation of oral sex. Then he released my finger, placing it on one of my nipples and circling it around and around.

His eyes glowed almost completely gold as he sucked his own finger, watching me all the time. Pulling it free with a satisfying slurp, he yanked down the waistband of my pajamas with his free hand and plunged his wet finger straight inside me.

I couldn’t help it. I cried out and he laughed softly. His finger caressed the inside of my pussy, pushing insistently into the throbbing depths, stroking places I hadn’t even been aware of possessing. Then, slowly, it spiraled its way out, spreading my juices all around the labia, rubbing tenderly across my clitoris until I moaned aloud. He smiled again, so that I could see his teeth, the long, pointed incisors of the vampire, and instead of being afraid, instead of wrenching myself free and grabbing for the lost stake, I felt a pang of lust so strong that a flood of moisture broke free and ran down between my bum cheeks. I wanted those teeth on my neck, nibbling, biting. I wanted to feel them stroke the lips of my pussy, I wanted...I wanted...

Jesus, I wanted this.

He shifted position to the foot of the bed, moving with fluid grace until he sat between my legs. Deliberately, his fingers spread me open, his eyes drank me in. My pussy pulsed so hard I thought it would come without any further help from him. Slowly, his head lowered, just as it had this afternoon, only this time his mouth captured my lower lips and my own ecstatic noises rumbled in my throat. I thought I would die of that pleasure.

I didn't. His silky lips caressed me, his tongue probed among my labia, flickering across my clit. And God, yes, his teeth slid along the length of my slit, brushing my clitoris until I moaned aloud. Then his whole mouth closed on me, pulling, while his tongue swirled and pushed inside me with sexy little thrusts. His teeth nibbled and grazed on my labia, on my desperately swollen clitoris. I was sure I could even feel them at my entrance. He held my bottom to keep me still, his hands kneading my buttocks, his fingers occasionally delving into the wetness of my pussy and then exploring around my anus until it too seemed to open for him and he slid the tip of one finger in and wiggled it. This was a new pleasure for me, never even thought of, and the shock of it sent me over the edge.

The orgasm seemed to soar from my toes, spiraling upward, gathering strength and power on its way, filling my pussy, my womb and flushing my whole body with the hugest climax of my life, one that went on and on because as soon as it began to roll back, his mouth sucked me again, his fingers slid inside me, stirred and kept the waves of joy crashing over me.

My fingers clamped around my breast, pressing into my nipple as I came and came, and still he fucked me with his mouth, sucking more pleasure from my clitoris, pushing more joy into my pussy until I was no more than a heaving, writhing mess of sexual pleasure, pushing into his hand, his mouth, knowing nothing outside what he was doing to me and caring for nothing else.

Slowly, he began to release me, withdrawing his fingers and his mouth, wiping his sopping face on my leg. I felt a growl begin deep in my throat, one that managed to

combine extreme sexual satisfaction with equally extreme sexual desire—I could not get enough of this evil...

Reaching down, I caught his beautiful, degenerate face between my hands.

“Fuck me,” I whispered. “Please, fuck me.”

He smiled. “Next time,” he whispered back. “Next time, a different taste...”

He stood up, actually turned away from me toward the closed window—how had he got in? A minor mystery. The greater matter was that he could not leave me yet.

“Come back here!” I said furiously, trying to sit up. “Come back!” And landed with a thump back on my pillow, my eyes open and staring with bewildered disorientation at the closed curtains, my heart thundering like a drum.

Apart from me, the room was empty, the house quiet save for my own ragged breathing, my own wildly beating heart. The after-tingle of massive orgasm filled my body and weighed down my limbs. Hot dampness slicked my thighs. My t-shirt had got scrunched up above my breasts, my trousers pooled around my knees, which splayed with abandon.

I had been dreaming. A sexual dream with the sort of power I had never felt before. And masturbating.

At least I hoped that was what happened.

Terrified, I tugged my trousers back up and pulled myself into a sitting position, dragging my knees up under my chin and hugging them convulsively. *Had* he been here? Or, more likely, had I been dreaming, living out in the safety—ha!—of my unconscious mind the sexual desire he had aroused in me with his kiss this afternoon?

In the next room, my mother snored. But I couldn’t rest until I tiptoed in to look at her, to make sure there were no puncture wounds in her neck. There weren’t. Softly, I closed her door and slid my back down it to sit there in her room and wait for the dawn.

* * * * *

“So this is Glasgow,” sniffed Hilda, looking vaguely surprised as I slid into the seat between her and Frank. She was an older woman, around fifty, probably, very thin with severe, dyed-black hair tied up on her head. She always wore smart, neutral-colored skirt suits that made her look like a stick. Frank was young, good-looking and considered himself charming. To give him his due, many young women found him charming too. I wasn’t one of them. I found him slimy.

I had arranged to meet them in this café located in a pedestrian area off Buchanan Street, largely because it was close to their hotel and open on a Sunday. And since the sun had chosen this morning to shine hazily on my fair city, we sat at one of the outside tables, near the ornate Victorian stone arch that led into the square beyond. A scattering of better-off shoppers milled around us in leather coats and expensive perfume, their bags of designer goodies hanging carelessly from their manicured fingers. And that was only the men. The women were something else. Here and there among them roamed the inevitable bands of kids, looking for amusement arcades or shop windows to gawp in.

After a curt nod of greeting to my colleagues, I watched the most recent shower of rain drying on the pavement.

This was as close as you got to Paris.

“And this is Jenny, in her Sunday best,” said Frank, eyeing my comfortable old cotton skirt with that air of superior amusement that always made me want to smack him one. For the first time I wondered why I never had.

“With observational skills like those,” I remarked dryly, “you’ll have that vampire sniffed out in no time.” They exchanged glances while I ordered coffee from the pretty, young and possibly under-age waitress.

“New skirt?” Frank asked me sarcastically, showing off to her.

“No,” I said. “But if you like it, you can have it when I’m finished with it.”

The waitress, already tuned into his accent, grinned openly at me. It was nice to have the boot on the other foot for a change. In fact, I could finally put the subconscious

idea into proper form, that Frank was an asshole in anybody's country and anybody's accent. But at least he had picked up on something, for his face flushed slightly as the girl went off to get my coffee.

Leaning back in his chair, he said, "Glad to be on your own turf, Jennifer?"

"Always."

He smiled, like a cat ready to pounce. "Excellent. So have you narrowed *our friend's* location down to one side of the river?"

"South."

"Really? Well done, Jenny! So, Hilda, we'll only have half the city to scour."

"What are you planning on scouring it with?" I asked, interrupting him without compunction. He looked more surprised than annoyed.

"We have instruments," Hilda replied, "that can, sometimes, pick the unusual out of the everyday, shall we say..."

"Round here it'll go off like a smoke alarm in a chip shop. I thought you two were meant to be psychic?"

It's true, I was enjoying this.

"Your point being?" Frank said, for the first time with an edge to his voice. Usually I was too far beneath his contempt to merit any edges.

"Can't you just track him by *feeling* his presence?" I said innocently.

"Can't you?" mocked Frank.

I smiled, lifting one hand to take my coffee tray from the waitress. Thank you, God. Thank you, Karoly, you beautiful, beautiful bastard.

"Of course," I said.

They both stared at me. But it was Hilda who caught my eye with the genuine hope suddenly growing in hers.

"Jenny...?" she breathed.

"She's kidding you," Frank explained, while I dealt with the caffetiere and began to pour out my coffee. "Ask her if she's found *our friend*. Ask her if she knows where he is to within a quarter of this bloody city...!"

"Why don't *you* ask me, Frank?" I interrupted, laying the jug down on the table. "But then again, no, why don't I save everyone time and trouble by saying at the outset that I know exactly where he is, down to the very building. Or at least," I added honestly, "I know where he was yesterday."

Frank grinned. "Nice cop out, Jenny."

I picked up my cup and drank. The coffee was still hot, but not scalding, so I drank it in one, like a pint of heavy on a Saturday night, and stood up.

"Bring your instruments and your pointy sticks," I advised. "We can walk."

The walk did me good. My anger still boiled below the surface, but at least it began to feel manageable again and I knew I *had* to manage it. Karoly had inspired my rage yesterday afternoon, the vivid dream and my own desires had finished it off and I was aware I took it out now on my colleagues. Of course, as I did so, things became suddenly much clearer.

I had first gone to the Centre with a chip on my shoulder and a song in my heart because I thought I had finally landed the cushiest job on Earth and escaped the awfulness and the boredom of the school library. I had despised many of my new colleagues while acknowledging their right to superiority over me in all matters psychic.

But something had changed with my recognition of Karoly. For one thing, I was less a fake and a fraud than Frank, or even Nigel. For another, they had no business to hold me in contempt for anything and I had no business to let them. So I answered Frank back as I should have done months ago and I tried to do my job with what powers I had.

I reached out with all my senses, searching for the smallest trace of him. And as we crossed the footbridge over the River Clyde, I felt again that familiar tingle. I knew he'd

been there last night. His essence seemed to hang in the increasingly heavy air. I wondered what the local lager louts had made of his costume. Nothing, if they'd had any sense.

But of course, he didn't care for the flavor of drunks. I wondered who he had fed from last night, if they had struggled, if they remembered... If he had killed.

"You're looking well, Jenny," Hilda said awkwardly, taking me by surprise.

"I don't see how," I muttered. "I've been on a bender for two nights and had damn-all sleep for three."

"Being home, I suspect." She hesitated, then, "I've been talking to Nigel and apparently the Board are quite keen for us to...diversify."

I looked at her. "In what way?"

"In a decentralizing way. Too much is concentrated in the Centre, with nothing anywhere else in the country. In a crisis, like this, it takes us a day to get here. Which is silly. So, they're thinking about locating other centers around the country, smaller places, more attuned locally. You should talk to Nigel about the Scottish one."

Ridiculously, I was touched. I actually smiled at her. "Thanks, Hilda. But I doubt I'll be around that long."

Lowering her voice, she said, "You are a strong psychic, you know, strong enough in the tests to make others jealous. You just have to learn to channel it, as you did here. What was the trigger?"

A pair of corrupt, golden-green eyes gleaming at me over the prone body of the man I was desperate to bed.

"Luck," I said hastily. "He gatecrashed the wedding I was at. I just knew what he was. And the next day, I was able to follow his tracks."

But Hilda was still on the previous point. "He gatecrashed a wedding? That is very unusual behavior!"

Hysterical laughter bubbled up now. I didn't think I'd be able to stop it. "He does it all the time. He has a kilt you see, so he imagines he blends in...he just hangs around wedding parties, biting the guests when they're too drunk to notice or care."

"And you find that funny?" Hilda exclaimed, inclined to be more outraged than amused. "My dear, it's not your abilities but your levity that lets you down."

"Sorry," I gasped, swallowing down the laughter that was scarily close to tears.

By this time we were on the south side of the river and I led them west, past the hotel and round the corner to the church.

"In the basement," I said. "You can get in through a trapdoor in the ground, down there."

Naturally, Frank took charge. "Jenny, you wait here, make sure no one follows us in."

Hilda, in reality more senior, regarded him with raised eyebrows. She opened her mouth to object to this plan, so I said hastily, "OK. He knows the smell of me anyway, you have more chance of surprising him."

Frank laughed unkindly. "Jenny, a herd of mad elephants has more chance of surprising him! If he's there at all, which I don't for a moment believe."

Hilda said more gently, "Have you got your mobile phone?" And when I nodded, she went on, "If we flush him out, follow. Just keep us informed and we'll catch you up. He'll stick to shadows and undergrowth, but the light's very poor and if it gets any darker I suspect he's strong enough to withstand what daylight there is."

She was right. In typical west Scotland fashion, the sun had quickly faded behind a patchwork blanket of scudding gray and black clouds, which were just about to open on to us. The whole sky was darkening fast. In fact, the air, close and oppressive, seemed to crackle. I had been too absorbed in my conversation and senses to realize before but I thought we were in for a thunderstorm.

Great. I hate thunder.

Hilda said, "If he's not here, you'll have to try to pick up his trail again. If there's nothing, we'll wait 'til dark. You keep watch, phone me if you see him returning."

Even better. Standing on a street corner for hours. At least there were no people around. We were between church services. Frank and I hoisted Hilda over the fence without anyone watching, or at least watching obviously.

As Frank skidded down the slope toward the bushes covering the trapdoor, I called, "Hilda? He doesn't sleep, so be prepared. And Hilda," I added, when she just nodded and started after Frank, "if he attacks you... he moves so fast you can't see it. I think he kills easily, but if you back off, he might let you go. He can't be bothered dealing with dead bodies and the inevitable fuss that follows."

I don't know if she heard even half of that. Part of me didn't want her to. It revealed far too much of my own observations. But I didn't want the vampire to kill her. Frank, I thought unkindly, he could have, if his fastidious tastes could stomach the jerk. At heart I didn't really believe they would either capture or kill Karoly, although it was possible I would have to track him through the storm.

I leaned against the railing, my heart hammering with fear for Hilda, with anticipation and just general, unspecific dread. The rain began, at first in just a few spots, quickly turning to a good, solid downpour.

His hands had touched the fence recently. I could feel them, those hands that had touched me so intimately in my dream. Dear God, I hoped it was a dream. If I had really let him do those things to me, if I had actually begged him to fuck me, Jesus, how could I live with myself? I couldn't ever justify the desire he aroused in me, I could only squash it. And explain it a little, perhaps. Some of it was hypnosis—those green and gold spiraling eyes. Some of it was his sheer beauty. And my own loneliness. My record of relationships with men was abysmal. I'd never kept one for longer than two months. And never met one I'd really wanted to hang around for longer. None of them measured up to my male friends like Nick and Tam. And none of them had been trustworthy enough to hang around me any longer than my father had.

But this was no time for getting into self-analysis. For the first time, I was doing something right at work, I had discovered that Hilda, at least, believed in me and that there was a possibility of the Centre decentralizing and my coming back here. Not to Glasgow, perhaps, which was fine with me. I really *had* wanted a change when I had left the school, a chance to meet new people in new places. But I'd discovered that I missed my friends and if anything happened to my infuriating mother...

Wrenching away from this, I turned my back on the church and through the gloom, gazed between the buildings opposite to the visible band of river. I knew I was doing something not only right, but just. I was doing my job and helping find a killer, a monster no one in their right minds could believe in, let alone deal with.

So why did I feel like a traitor?

"I have no intention of killing you today."

Well, I had no intention of killing him either. How can you kill someone you've got drunk with, laughed with, kissed...? I couldn't. But I could stand back and let someone else do it.

I wouldn't even cry. I'd be churned up a bit, I'd have to wrestle occasionally with the guilt, even the sense of loss, God help me, but I'd know I'd done the right thing and I would not cry. It was rain running down my face and into my mouth, just rain.

I don't know what made me look up. But I did, quite suddenly, and through the misty wires falling from an opaque, nearly black sky, I saw the darker figure of a man on the roof opposite, silhouetted for just a moment.

I knew it was him. It was only a glimpse and then the figure disappeared, but it was *him*. It didn't just look like him in his plaid, it *felt* like him.

Chapter Five

Once again the incoherent anger rose, blotting out my hard-won rationality. He was a threat to my mother, to everybody, he had kissed me like that, made me *dream* like that... And God help me, as I remembered the images and the sensations of the dream, I grew hot. I began to run across the road, feeling my legs sliding on the wetness between.

Hilda and Frank were still in the church, looking for him, but I didn't think he'd been there at all today. When I finally pushed aside the jumbled mixture of anger and guilt and desire, I could realize that everything I had sensed about him had been yesterday's tracks. He must have feared me after all... He'd moved his lair, even if not so very far away, because I'd threatened him.

So did that mean last night had *definitely* been a dream? That he hadn't come after all? Among all my confusion I was conscious of something perilously close to disappointment.

I caught sight of him again in the street that backed on to the church, vaulting the ridge of a warehouse roof, his damp kilt bunching heavily around his legs. I ran on, wondering about his sudden carelessness. The thickness of the clouds had obliterated the sun like an eclipse, but that wouldn't last forever. Within the half hour, less probably, the sky would lighten to dingy gray and he would have to take cover again. But if he didn't care about being seen leaping the rooftops now, in daylight, then he was probably preparing to move on. Which made him doubly dangerous. To Frank and Hilda and the whole population. To me. Today could be the day he killed me. Or I killed him.

Was that not what everything in the last two days had been leading up to? Some necessary act of contrition, of reparation for my sin of lust? To kill the only being who had ever seemed likely to fulfill my sexual desires, every secret, sensual dream...?

Lust is not so terrible a sin, said the devil on my left shoulder.

It is when it's focused on an evil undead killer, said the angel on my right.

"Bugger off," I said aloud to both of them, and paused before the warehouse, gazing up at the roof, trying to sense his presence. It was hard. I think he meant it to be, keeping high and away from anything I could touch or come into close contact with. Walking around the building, I wondered if I had lost him. For all I knew he could turn into a bat and fly to the airport.

Something drew me on to the next building, if only to try to sense more or less than before. More, I thought suddenly. My heart began to beat faster. The electric tingle in my body made all my nerve ends shiver. Though this was once another warehouse, it was a prettier building and had been converted into flats, some with little balconies more useful for flowerpots than sunbathing.

When I gazed up at the roof, I saw no one, but I felt him. I stood there for several moments, letting the rain run off my hair into my eyes, just feeling him. Feeling my own destiny.

Then I saw him, on one of the little third floor balconies, a shadowy figure in a wet, swirling kilt, pushing open the door into somebody's home.

Aye, right, destiny. Sheer fury sent me prowling round the building, looking for a way in. I don't know why his entering that house made me so angry. He must have done such things literally countless times before. It was the *invasion*, a crime I still half suspected him of committing at my mother's house last night.

A rickety fire escape ran up the side of the building. Without further thought, I ran up it, two steps at a time until I arrived, panting, on the third floor landing. From there, it was easy to step over onto the first balcony, where I finally paused to draw breath and made the mistake of looking down on to the road. Immediately the old vertigo

kicked in, the sudden dizzying sickness causing me to step hastily back toward the glass door into the flat.

A sudden flash of lightning turned my eyes away from the angry sky to the still figure who stood, suddenly illuminated, on the next balcony. In sodden red and blue tartan and a white, full sleeved shirt, his eyes gleamed yellow from shadowed pits in his thin, white face.

My heart jolted. I was conscious of a weird sort of tense triumph, as well as the inevitable fear, but it was only for an instant. By the time I blinked, the flash was over and he had already jumped onto the balcony beside me. Thunder crashed, for once not even making me jump. Water ran down his face, dripped from his broad shoulders and his kilt, forming a puddle at his feet. Why had I never noticed his feet before? He wore sneakers.

For another instant, we both stood quite still, staring at each other. The only sound, outside the furious drumming of my heart, was the lighter pattering of rain on the balcony roof. For once, he looked serious. There was no mockery in the beautiful, dissolute face, no laughter in those amazing green and gold eyes. Then, slowly, the faintest smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

He said softly, "You came," and reached for me, trapping my loosely hanging arms between us. I shook one sleeve, feeling the stick drop downward into my palm.

And yet his words, his nearness, made me think of last night's dream. Maybe they were meant to. *You came.*

I said sardonically, "Oh yes, I came. And now I've come to kill you."

Mostly, I didn't expect him to let me. Mostly, I expected to be flung off the balcony. A flashing, sickening vision of the road I had just glimpsed from the balcony flitted through my mind and was ruthlessly suppressed. Or to be torn apart by his sharp, sexy teeth while he drank my blood dry. Or even to be stabbed with my own stake. But I had to try.

As I spoke the words, I yanked my right arm upward, pulled back my shoulder and struck him full in the chest with my sharpened stick. I put all my strength behind it and the force of the blow jarred me from the wrist to the shoulder. I didn't feel the crunch of bone or tearing flesh, I didn't know if I was supposed to, since I had never stabbed anybody before. And now that I did, it had to be him.

He didn't reel back. He didn't move at all for several seconds. My eyes were fixed on his face, desperately waiting for the reaction, for his anger or pain before he fell into a pile of dust or whatever it is vampires are supposed to do when you kill them. He did nothing. Only the expression in his light eyes changed to something I couldn't quite read at first. Then, struggling with a thousand contradictory emotions of my own, I realized it was compassion. I felt my eyes widen with incomprehension.

He said, "You're meant to use the sharp end."

My eyes closed fast. Involuntarily, my head fell back against his arm. "Oh Jesus," I whispered. I let the useless stick fall to the ground, well aware I had wasted my only chance.

The vampire smiled. "Just kidding," he said and my eyes flew open again. Now, over the compassion, he was definitely laughing at me. Looking for the truth, my eyes fell to his chest—and widened once more with a horror I couldn't prevent. Dark blood oozed over his shirt, staining it crimson even in the poor half light of the storm.

"I did it," I whispered, slowly lifting my gaze back to his. "I really did it?"

"You really stabbed me, but I am not so easy to kill."

"You won't die?" Despite everything, relief flooded my voice, drowning the desolation and the pity for him and for me. "But you feel pain, I've hurt you!" Helplessly, my fingers hovered over the wound—which, incredibly, seemed to be closing already—afraid to touch him, not knowing what to do. Stupidly, it never entered my head to flee. Of course, his arms were still around me, so any fleeing would have required his cooperation. My whole body heated inside my sodden clothes and

the ache shooting downward from my abdomen had very little to do with fear or remorse.

He said, "My body heals." He was right. Through the ragged tear in his shirt, the wound looked no more than a pinprick. The blood had disappeared, the bruising almost all gone.

He lifted one hand from my back to touch my cheek, astoundingly gently. "And now you've got that over with..."

But my attention was caught by his hand. A long, ugly scar ran up its back, a scar that had certainly not been there in the church undercroft yesterday.

"Your hand!" I exclaimed, catching at it. He let me take it in mine, let me look, though he said nothing. "It's burned," I said, frowning with the glimmerings of understanding.

"A small contretemps with the powers of daylight."

"That's how Dog got out yesterday. You lifted him out and burned your hands in the sunlight. I could smell your singed skin still on him."

Still he said nothing, just bent his head closer to mine until my stomach filled with panic, with wildly fluttering butterflies. Where, for God's sake, was the terror I knew I should be suffering? And now I thought of it I could feel what was definitely not his sporran growing hard against my stomach. Instantly, my own nether regions responded with a flood of moisture.

"Why did you do that for Dog? Why aren't you killing me?"

"Because I want you," he whispered, his lips so close to mine that I could feel their every movement. "I want to taste you, all of your sweet body... Ask me again to fuck you."

Again. He said ask me again...!

"Jesus, you *were* there."

“No. I just made you dream.” His lips touched mine, so lightly I barely felt them and yet something leapt inside me as if it had been the deepest kisses, with tongues.

Struggling against my own weakness as much as my own inability to understand, I said faintly, “How?”

“With the kiss...” Softly still, his mouth closed on mine, as cool and silky smooth as I remembered it and even more unbearably sensual, deliberately parting my lips and then leaving them so that I looked as if I was begging, open-mouthed, for more. And dear God, I was. “It allowed me the connection, so that I could pleasure you in your dream. And I did...” His hand cupped my breast, releasing a new flood of moisture between my legs. Casually, his thumb flickered across my straining nipple. “I felt all of your long, sweet orgasm as if it were my own, every twinge of arousal, every blissful convulsion, every after pang of pleasure. And I want to give you more. I want to sink my cock in your wetness and slake my own thirst. So ask me again...”

I couldn't speak. I couldn't do anything at all, so heavy with desire had my body suddenly become. I saw two buttons pop off my shirt as his hand delved inside and brought out my naked breast. His touch was killing me. Every tweak and pull of his long, clever fingers on my nipple shot arrows of desire straight downward. And he knew it. His eyes moved between my face and what he was doing to my breast. He must have felt my ragged breathing, the trembling of my whole body, the moan of mingled pleasure and desire that I was trying desperately to suppress. Deliberately, he brought out my other breast and as he palmed it, caressingly, cupped it in his hand, I swallowed convulsively. My eyes closed with the pleasure, my head fell back against the glass of the balcony door. I didn't even think of anybody being in the flat on the other side of it. I had long ago forgotten why I had followed him here. My body, not my head, was in charge now.

His hands left my breasts and slid around to grip my waist instead. I gasped as he lifted me easily off my feet, bringing my breasts closer to his mouth so that he could lick my nipple. Slowly, he twirled his tongue around it then sucked it into his mouth and

rolled it sweetly between his lips while his tongue continued to torture it. The moan escaped at last and, hearing it, he smiled around my nipple. He let me go so that I slid down the glass door back onto my feet. At the same time, he stepped forward and pressed his lower body into me. Through his kilt and my skirt, I felt his erection huge and hard as rock.

“Take my cock in your hands,” he whispered, “and ask me again to fuck you.”

My lips moved soundlessly, with what purpose even I didn't know, and in any case words were no use to me. Instead, I reached up with my mouth and latched on to his, pushing my tongue inside to explore the inner silkiness, running it over his teeth, feeling the sharpness of those wicked, pointed incisors. Fear shot through me, along with a desire so sharp that my body thrust itself into his, grinding into his crotch. My hands fought their way inside his soaking wet shirt, feverishly caressing the cool, damp skin of his back and the hard muscle beneath.

He tugged up my skirt and swept his hands over my bare thighs and my cotton-covered ass. He took the elastic of my knickers between both hands and tore. They split down the seam and fell in a puddle at my feet. A sound like a sob escaped from my mouth into his. He wore no underwear. Beneath his coarse, wet kilt, I could feel only smooth, hard skin, his tight, shapely buttocks.

I gasped again as his fingers found my pussy. Dear God, I remembered them, wanted them...

“Hot and wet,” he whispered, sliding them around my slick inner thighs, collecting the moisture running down them and taking it back to the flooding pool in my pussy. “Soaking wet and ready... So ask me again.”

Bringing my own hands around his thighs, my trembling fingers forced their way between our bodies to find the shaft of his cock. I moaned aloud at the feel of it, huger and thicker than any I had ever encountered and at my touch, I heard some sort of growl come out of his throat. For the first time, I was fully aware of my effect on him and I loved it.

I closed both my hands around his cock, drawing back the skin with one, caressing the slippery head with the other, squeezing until his growl deepened. I slid my hand all the way down his shaft, over the thick root and cupped his taut, heavy balls, rolling them in my fingers. The vampire hissed between his teeth.

Breathlessly I said, "Why should I ask you? Can't you enter without invitation?"

And he smiled, deliberately pushing his finger inside me. I gasped. "Oh I have all the invitation I need right here." Bringing his finger out, he showed it to me, glistening and running with my moisture. "I just want to hear you say the words."

"Bastard," I whispered, as he began to rub his creamed finger over my nipple, driving me almost insane. He bent his head and slowly licked my pussy moisture off my nipple. Abruptly, I seized his ponytail in one hand, tugging.

"Fuck me," I gasped. "Fuck me now or I'll die."

Raising his head, he smiled wolfishly. His green eyes were so dark they looked black. Grasping my leg, he pulled it up over his hip. "I like to hear you say please..."

I had never begged in my life before, certainly not for sex, but here the words, the situation were all so strange that that the idea of saying them just aroused me even more. Letting go of his cock, I took his face between my hands and looked into his amazing eyes.

"Please," I said clearly. "Please fuck me, you beautiful, beautiful bastard. Please fuck me right here, right now..."

I had to break off as he pushed himself straight inside me with one smooth stroke. It was incredible. Showers of sensation flew outward from my pussy. He was so big within me, so huge, so...

"Cold!" I gasped. "Your cock is cold!"

"What do you expect?" he asked, pulling back until he almost left me, then pushing back in, long and slow. "I've been dead for five hundred years. It will warm inside you. But I'm told the cold can be pleasurable too. You might find you like it."

And God help me, I did. He fucked me with big, powerful strokes, slow at first and interspersed with a sensual grinding that drove me wild. I could feel his cock rubbing delightfully against all my internal muscles. Every movement inside me brought a weird, icy pleasure that built impossibly.

“How many men have you had, vampire hunter?” he asked unsteadily.

“Too many,” I gasped.

“Did any of them please you like this?”

“None,” I said with total honesty. If I’d got *any* true pleasure from it at all, I’d been doing well, but even the best of them had been nothing like this. This was wild and overpowering and I couldn’t get enough of him. I wanted my orgasm so badly I thought I would explode and yet I didn’t want ever to stop feeling just what I was now.

He laughed softly. “That’s good. And I’ve barely begun...”

I moaned as he thrust full into me. His mouth claimed mine, sucking my tongue and playing with it. His hands moved all over my body, stroking my breasts, my hips, my clitoris, sweeping back up to breast and throat. His mouth left mine trailing fiery kisses down my jaw to my throat, closing on my neck.

“Dear God,” I whispered as lips moved, sucking the sensitive skin there. His tongue licked me, his lips caressed, shaking my body with yet more sensation. I wasn’t even surprised when I felt him bite me. It was all part of the astounding pleasure when his teeth broke the skin of my neck and his mouth kissed me strongly, pulling. I felt my blood drawn out into his mouth, each agonizing, wonderful suck in rhythm with the beating of my heart, and all the time he fucked me.

“Use the pain,” he whispered into my wound and I, careless now of the hurt, cried out only with pleasure as his mouth pulled once more. I felt his tongue gently lapping at the wound, his lips softly kissing it, before they returned to mine in a kiss so deep and intense I was completely lost. I could taste my own blood, was so lost in him, in the feel of his cock ramming into me that I didn’t care.

I thrust my hips upward and into him, taking him farther inside me than anyone had ever been and fucked with him, rocking and sliding on his cock, squeezing him, determined to make him come as he had made me last night. If vampires could come.

He smiled, groaning deep in his throat. "I can and I will, any minute now." He pressed me back into the door, slid both hands under my buttocks and began to increase the speed of his thrusts. Each stroke brought almost unbearable pleasure and as they grew faster and faster I could hardly deal with it. Certainly I gave up trying to match him. I could only hang in his hands, pressed back against the door while he pounded into me.

His cock was no longer cold—the friction alone should have set us both on fire—but somehow I hung onto the strange, icy pleasure it had invoked earlier, letting it swirl and mingle with the heat of the present. My orgasm mounted with unstoppable pace, rolling in with a sharpness I had never known before, growing to an intensity I had never imagined, even after last night. Crying out with the impossible joy, my hands fell helplessly to my sides, my fingers opening and closing against the glass and metal of the door behind me. Even more exciting, I actually felt his cock throb fiercely inside me while a weird noise began to emanate from him, half howl, half groan, building in volume with his orgasm and mine until he sounded more like a wolf than anything else.

For some reason, his howl drove my desire and my pleasure to greater heights, setting it all off again, making me writhe on his cock to get the feel of him on my clitoris again, stroking him with the walls of my pussy, dragging myself up and down his shaft to force the pleasure on and on.

It was astounding, unbelievable, a total abandonment of self to wild sensation. I thought I would lose consciousness when it eventually stopped—already I felt as if I were falling.

Abruptly, my eyes snapped open. I *was* falling.

We both were. The door behind me had flown open—it can't have been locked and my flailing fingers must have somehow opened the catch. Now we both tumbled helplessly through the opening door and down the few steps into the room. Twisting around, the vampire yanked me so that he fell on his back with me on top of him.

We were on a carpeted floor in an empty, half-darkened room. Beside me, a maze of wooden legs stretched upward into a dining table and chairs. Karoly had stopped howling, but I was still very aware of him inside me, the afterglow of my curtailed climax filling my pussy, my stomach, my whole body.

For a moment, we were silent, listening. "Is there anybody in?" I whispered.

"I don't care. Little vampire hunter, you fuck like a demon, too, and I want more. Fuck me again."

A sound that was half laughter, half excitement bubbled up in my throat. Without a second invitation, I straddled his beautiful, tartan-clad body and gasped as his cock reached even further up inside me. More than that, it grazed the rare, special spot that produced such blinding pleasure. Previous lovers had stumbled upon it only very occasionally and that by accident. And yet on the balcony, he had found it unerringly with the first stroke of his big, cold cock. Now, I couldn't resist pausing to wriggle, and enjoy as much as I could get of this intense thrill. He didn't mind. In fact he circled his hips under me, so that his cock rubbed it over and over and I had to close my eyes with ecstasy.

I became aware of his hands on my skirt, bundling it upward to my waist.

"Look," he commanded, and I opened my eyes again to gaze down at the junction of our bodies. My triangle of black pubic hair mingled with his golden thatch. I moaned at the sheer sexiness of the sight, then again as he pulled slowly back, allowing me a glimpse of his thickly veined shaft before he thrust upward into me.

"Oh Jesus," I whispered in bliss. I moved with him, slowly, aching. On impulse, I took his hands from my hips and placed them palm down on my exposed breasts. He smiled wickedly as he began to caress and knead, catching my nipples between his

fingers. Gasping, I rose up on his shaft and rode him hard and furiously until I caught again the waves of pleasure, for him as well as me.

Then, while the thunder crashed around us, drowning his howl and my inarticulate cries, I slowed, just squeezing him with the pulsing walls of my pussy. I moved once more in slow, sensual, circles, my eyes closed, to extract and feel every ounce of the orgasm. It went on a long time. He held onto my breasts, kneading, while I moaned out my pleasure and his howl began to fade.

I came back to Earth slowly. I had never known any bodily pleasure like it, such intensity of desire or satisfaction. It was natural to feel happy after sex like that and I did. I grinned down at him and he smiled back. His arms reached behind me, drawing me down to lie with him.

Only then, face to face with him, did I begin to think rationally about what we had just done.

I must have looked as stricken as I felt, because I saw his face change. I whispered, "You drank from me!"

After which I'd let him carry on fucking me. In fact, I'd just fucked him back. Losing all sense, all safety in blind, menacing lust. Had I really imagined he wouldn't feed from me, just because we were having sex? Why did it feel like betrayal now? When at the time...

His fingers touched my neck. I could feel sensitivity there but no pain. The notes had talked about healing as well as hypnotizing.

He said, "You taste delicious. Strong and sweet, with traces of spice..."

"Have you no shame?" I demanded, sitting up. Which, considering my own state, with my boobs hanging out of my shirt and my skirt round my waist after the best screw – the best two screws – of my life, was perhaps a little cheeky.

He only smiled. "No."

I pulled myself out of his arms, trying to ignore the sharp pang of pleasure as his cock sprang out of my body. I scuttled away from his too-dangerous presence to sit against the wall while I tried to fasten my shirt with too few buttons. After a moment, I gave up and just put my head in my hands to think.

I didn't see him move, but I felt his touch, butterfly light on my shoulder. I jerked as though he'd burned me, staring up at him fearfully.

"Jenny," he said. It was the first time he had said my name. I didn't even know he knew it. "Jenny, stay with me."

My mouth fell open.

Then, unmistakably, the doorbell rang.

Chapter Six

The mundane clang cut through my confusion like a knife. My reality was that I had just had sex in a complete stranger's house, a house I had for all intents and purposes broken into, with a vampire I should have been trying to kill. But the rest of the world didn't stop for my orgasms.

"Frank and Hilda," I said aloud, and when he did no more than twitch one sculpted eyebrow at me, I repeated, "Frank and Hilda, my colleagues. It's probably them at the door. If they don't get an answer, they'll come in anyway. They'll know we're here."

"So?" the vampire inquired.

"So they've come to kill you! And they're not blunderers like me!"

He smiled at me and, ridiculously, my heart turned over. "You're not a blunderer. For what it's worth, that blow would have killed most vampires. It was your bad luck that I'm old enough to have skin as hard as leather." It didn't feel like leather to me, I thought irrelevantly, remembering its smooth silkiness under my palms.

The vampire said, "You're a very powerful psychic who hasn't learned yet either to appreciate or to control her gift."

"You can't possibly know that," I said as the doorbell rang again. It seemed no one was at home. If they were they must have been stone deaf not to hear the sound of our wild sexual encounter with its accompanying screams and howls coming from their dining room.

"Of course I know that. You've tracked me twice without difficulty and now you're projecting some of your thoughts. If you concentrate, you can probably receive them too."

"What are you talking about?"

"I heard you wondering if vampires come." And while I felt myself color in embarrassment, he crouched down beside me and took my hand. It jumped at his touch and then, held by his eyes, I let it lie in his. It was curiously soothing. "Now you know I do, without releasing semen, since I have none. And you made me come very hard. Try this," he said, changing subjects with bewildering speed. "Listen to what I'm thinking..."

I shrugged. And even though the bell rang for a third time, I closed my eyes and thought about Karoly and his deep, green eyes and how hard I had made him come.

At first there was only silence, in the house as in my head. Then I heard a peculiar soft roar, like many voices in the distance. It faded quickly, 'til I heard only one, his.

I thought he said, *I love you*. Then, amused, *What do you mean 'crap'?*

Taken aback, I tried to send to him, *You know nothing about me*.

I know you love me.

My eyes flew open. "I do not love you!" I exclaimed aloud. For some reason, the very thought agitated me.

"Well you love sex with me. It's the same thing."

"It is *not* the same thing!"

"It will be, if you stay with me."

I snatched my hand free, "What *is* this about staying with you? Stay with you where? How? You're a bored, lazy, amoral Magyar vampire in an antique kilt! I like daylight! Apart from that, although I may set fire to my hair and bring houses down on top of myself, I do have standards, namely that I prefer to live my life away from the taint of murder and bloodshed. What the hell was that?"

That was, in fact, the sound of the front door being broken in. I knew as soon as I asked the silly question.

"It's them," I said with total despair, and I didn't even know over what.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked quietly. From the hall, I could hear Frank’s voice, the sound of a door being pushed open farther down the hall from us. I lifted my eyes to his face once more. God he was beautiful. You could drown in those eyes, in his mouth, die there without regret...

“I want you to go away,” I whispered, “and stop torturing me.”

His eyebrows twitched once. His full lips parted. An expression crossed his face that was neither anger nor lust nor hurt, but might have been all three, or none. Then he turned away and walked toward the balcony door.

My throat felt tight. Some sharp yet unspecific pain grasped me, filled me. But I had no time to dwell on it, for the door of the room swung open and Frank walked in.

“Jenny!” he said with surprising relief. “Are you all right? Where is he?”

“Gone,” I said dully, and looked toward the balcony from where, typically enough, a watery sunshine now tried to fight its way through the clouds. My bewildered brain was slow to pick up the implications of that, though, even when I saw Karoly himself backing out of the room on to the balcony, with my stake through his heart.

Without meaning to be, I was on my feet. Instinct propelled me to the door after him, for this was his second exit. The first had been to retrieve the stake. This, presumably, was his farewell. His beautiful, dramatically gleaming green eyes were full of genuine pain and in his voice was unspeakable sadness as he said, “There was never any peace but this.”

Hilda ran into the room. I had never seen her move so fast. “He’ll burn up!” she cried. “The sun’s coming back out!”

The vampire didn’t care. With one dive, he catapulted himself backward over the balcony railings. I couldn’t help it. I let out a cry of pain and rage and an unbearable grief I had no right to. Pointlessly, I ran out on to the balcony after him, but Frank caught me at the door, saying grimly, “Wait here, Jen, you’ve done enough.” And for once, it was not sarcastic.

He really thought I had killed the vampire.

* * * * *

Flanked by Hilda and Frank, I crouched down on the road under the balcony where the pointed stick lay, smeared with blood. Apart from that, there was nothing except a damp rag that Frank gingerly picked up with tweezers.

“Completely vaporized,” Hilda said with some awe. “Incredible.”

She was damned right it was incredible. A vampire who had assiduously dodged death for five hundred years suddenly commits suicide? Twice? Why the hell would he stab himself with my stake and then throw himself into the sun? One or the other would have done and I didn’t believe in either for one moment.

Frank said, “Any ideas, Jenny?”

I looked at the wet rag he held up before my eyes. Pale, indeterminate colored cotton. Beneath the muddy stains, it looked like something that had been carelessly washed too often with dark colors. It had. It was my torn knickers.

My breath caught. *Bastard!* I shouted out in my head. *Complete and utter bastard!* But there was no reply, not even the faintest chuckle.

* * * * *

The next day, I flew south with Frank and Hilda. Frank still managed to get up my nose. Though his attitude to me had certainly changed since my supposed single-handed slaying of the vampire, this new and admittedly reluctant respect set me even further on edge, since I was very well aware I didn’t deserve it. Not for those reasons anyway.

Besides, he was still slimy.

On the other hand, I did have a talk with Hilda that came close to a heart to heart. I confessed to her that I hadn’t truly been trying in the last four months, that in the beginning I hadn’t believed in any of their psychic nonsense and even when I did I was sure I had no abilities of my own, whatever their tests had thrown up. I told her about the unmistakable recognition of the vampire and how I had given and received

telepathic thoughts from him. I didn't tell her what those thoughts were and she didn't ask. In fact, she was oddly comforting. She appeared to take it for granted that some sort of emotional link had existed between me and the vampire and what was more, she didn't find it unusual. For the first time it struck me that Hilda had her own stories to tell and that they were stories worth hearing. In the meantime however, I humbly accepted her denunciation of my laziness over the last four months and agreed without a quibble to her intense program of catch-up.

That night, as I lay in my cool, single bed, I realized that somewhere I actually looked forward to Hilda's tutoring. I wasn't just compensating for taking their money under false pretenses. For some reason, I did actually want to do this now and I believed I could even be good at it. So long as there weren't too many vampires involved.

Restlessly, by the light of my bedside lamp, I looked around the bare walls of my room. There was no need to live at the Centre. I could have got my own flat in one of the nearby towns, but I had never really believed I would be staying long. For that reason too, I supposed, I had never made my room home. There were some of my books on the shelves, some favorite CDs lying loose on the desk. A rare photograph of my mother actually smiling—although she was trying hard to frown—sat on my bedside table, another on the dressing table of Maggie, Catherine, Nick and me crowded round the table of a Spanish café, grinning inanely at the camera. But there were no pictures on the wall, no knick-knacks or flowers that would have made the room mine. No wonder I had been unhappy here. For the first time it even entered my head that the people here—psychics, let's face it—had picked up on all my negative emotions and had had no reason to like or even tolerate me.

Well, maybe I could change that some, make a little effort. And I *would* work with Hilda, give it my best try, or I would end up old, never knowing if I had made the most of my life and always suspecting I hadn't.

Yes, it was time to take stock, more than time. If for nothing else, I should be grateful to the vampire for forcing me to this moment, for he alone was neither rooted in my past nor the inspiration of negative emotion. I had wanted change, yet in my heart had refused to move an inch from my old family and friends, had rejected everyone and everything else. Except the vampire. For some reason, I had made him my friend, my lover and if I imagined that was all down to his hypnotic powers I was deluding myself. *I found him hypnotic, I found him fun and beautiful and sexy as hell.* I had made love to him at least as much as he to me and then I had sent him away.

It was difficult to know what else I could have done. I couldn't kill him, couldn't let Frank or Hilda kill him either. Nor could I let him hurt them. So I told him to go and I didn't give away his playact.

Though neither I nor Frank's instruments could sense his presence anywhere around that flat where he'd jumped, I knew he wasn't dead. I had spent that night sleepless with anticipation, in case he came to me in my mother's house. But he didn't come. There were no more dreams. And if my body ached with lust, it went unsatisfied.

It still went unsatisfied. My own fingers just weren't the same as his.

Chapter Seven

A month later, I stopped a poltergeist in its tracks.

On a nasty London housing estate—or scheme, as we’d call it back home—lived a troubled adolescent called Victor who had inadvertently created this being. Ungrateful, it was now terrifying him and his entire family by trashing their flat on a regular basis. The Centre was called in urgently when his mother finally realized it really wasn’t Victor doing the trashing. Let in by a tiny, wide-eyed girl, we followed the crashing sounds to a bedroom where two terrified ten-year-old girls and Victor himself sat huddled with their mother on a corner of the bed while books and toys and shoes and computer disks flew round the room, crashing into walls and furniture.

I hate poltergeists. In fact, I still blame one for making me set fire to my hair. The violence of this one made my heart sink. If it hadn’t been for my new resolution to always try, I’d have stepped back and let Hilda manage it with the other two probationers while I cowered in the hall. As it was, I had to force myself to stand still and observe as I’d been taught, to gain what knowledge I could.

After a moment of staring at the random violence, I could actually make out its energy, like steam blasting from a funnel. And I felt its malevolence. It really didn’t like us interfering in its terror campaign. Hell, I didn’t like it either, so when it actually lifted the computer monitor high in the air and aimed at the screaming family in the corner, I acted purely from instinct.

Enough! I roared at it in my head and from somewhere managed a bolt of my own energy to stop it in its tracks.

The monitor fell with a thud back onto the desk—damaged but no longer lethal—and the stream of malevolent energy turned on me. There was a whooshing sound that chilled me to the core. Somewhere, I was aware of Hilda’s warning, “Jenny, back off!”

I couldn't. There was nowhere to back off to, except behind my colleagues, so I projected a mouthful of vicious Glaswegian and when it pulled up again in surprise, I probed into its intelligence.

In fact, it didn't have much. It was formed from Victor's hate and anger and churning hormones, all his negative emotions and God knows they were powerful. But it was the personification of mindless violence. It had no aim except to carry on.

It felt my probing, my understanding. With new fear, I realized a link was forming between us. For an instant, all that hate and fury slammed against my mind. I forced down the shutters, shoving it away.

Go away. Lie down and be good and leave these people alone.

Almost, it was like being back in the school library. If you spoke with enough conviction, the kids behaved. And almost to my surprise, the poltergeist backed down too. The stream of energy seemed to dissolve. The air no longer crackled.

"Has it gone?" Victor's mother whispered.

Hilda nodded. "Yes, it's gone."

But Victor still looked desperate. Pity for him, for all of them filled me. All I could do was start clearing up the mess.

"How do you *really* get rid of it?" I asked Hilda as we finally emerged from the haunted building into the dark, bleak street.

"Intimidate it, deprive it of what it wants and eventually it just disintegrates."

"How long will that take?"

"You seemed to have it pretty intimidated," said Zack, one of my fellow probationers. "That *was* you, wasn't it?"

"I don't know. But I do know it'll be back..."

Something caught the corner of my eye and I glanced up. Among the dark shadows of the houses and tower blocks, I could see none that posed a threat. No young muggers with knives. Not even a fast-moving blur in an antique kilt. And yet something made

me shiver. My spine prickled with awareness. A vampire? Or some residual effect from my encounter with the poltergeist?

Watchful, conscious that my heart beat too fast, I climbed into Hilda's car with the others and we drove out of London, back toward the Centre.

"You did well back there," Hilda paused to say to me as we all got out of the car again.

I knew I hadn't. "There was something I should have been able to do. I had it. But I couldn't let it in..."

"Christ, no," said Hilda with feeling. "Keep your shields up at all costs. It may come back, but trust me, Jenny, it's the beginning of the end for that poltergeist."

I hoped she was right. But as I began to undress for bed, the anguished face I saw in my mind was Victor's. He knew it wasn't over. And in my heart, so did I.

I hurled my knickers across the room. "What else could I do?" I wondered aloud.

Blast it to pieces.

My whole body vibrated with shock. Karoly's voice spoke in my head, as clearly as if he'd been in the room. I could *feel* him, his unique, powerful, presence that seemed to project equal measures of menace and sex. And my body remembered, flushing all over.

I glared wildly around, looking for him.

That's what you wanted to do, isn't it?

Covering myself, I sprinted into bed and under the covers to hide my nakedness. My heart was drumming. Worse, it seemed to have migrated to my stomach.

"Where are you?" I demanded. He wasn't here, not physically. That would be impossible... Wouldn't it?

His lazy amusement seeped into my mind. I could almost see the mocking smile on those sexy lips. I wanted to die, I wanted to throw things at him. I wanted him here, palming my nipples, which had already hardened like pebbles just at the thought of his

smile. How could he churn me up like this again just when I'd begun to get myself together?

Oh, around.

For some reason his evasive answer calmed me. I could think again, analyze what I was picking up from him. Only telepathic messages, however imbued with his overwhelming personality. I had no need to hide my treacherous body, just my thoughts, which were in total turmoil.

"Get out of my head," I commanded.

Then how would we talk?

"We wouldn't! You killed yourself and you're dead, remember?"

I've always been dead, he pointed out with some truth, which I ignored.

"Nice stunt," I sneered. "But did you have to plant my underwear next to your 'ashes'?"

It seemed so fitting. Thanks for not giving me away.

"You're welcome. Now fuck off."

That's no way to talk to someone who's trying to help.

Even when he was nowhere near, he took my breath away. My skin, my whole spine, prickled with warning. Not just because I was communicating with a vampire, with *him*, strengthening whatever psychic bond we already shared, but because I wanted to believe him. Was I really so desperate that I needed to believe I'd mattered to him in Glasgow?

I said furiously, "I don't need your help!"

Then why ask for it?

"I didn't!"

You asked what else you could have done. I told you, blast it to pieces.

"I wasn't talking to you."

Actually, you were.

Shite, was I? Scared all over again, not to say humiliated, I said firmly, “Bollocks. But I suppose you’re going to tell me how to blast it anyway?”

If you want to know.

“I don’t! Go away, Charlie—I don’t want anything to do with you.”

Didn’t I? Churning with memory, furious and ultra-aware, did I not feel more... *alive* than I had since he “killed” himself in Glasgow? Was there not already a damp patch on the sheet where my willful pussy had leaked its juices? Angrily, I pushed that aside. And realized he’d gone.

I searched warily around my mind. I was alone.

I closed my eyes. Why was he back? Looking for more amusement in his boring life? Another blood drink, a little more frantic sex with the vampire hunter who couldn’t bring herself to kill him? Who melted into a glob of liquid lust just at the sound of his telepathic voice. He must be wetting himself laughing.

Did vampires pee?

Oh bloody, *bloody* hell!

Throwing off the quilt, I scrambled into my pajamas and went to brush my teeth with unnecessary aggression. That done, I slid my back down the door until I sat on the bathroom floor with my knees under my chin.

“Charlie—were you there this evening? On that roof?”

What roof?

I hadn’t really expected an answer. I didn’t even know if I wanted one. It had only been an experiment to see if I could reach him, but his reply came back so fast, I knew he’d been listening for me.

I pushed my forehead into my hand, trying to focus. “Were you there? Did you see—feel?—that poltergeist?”

I know of it.

“You’re not giving much away, are you?” Of course he wasn’t. I was in the Centre now, surrounded by psychics far more powerful than I would ever be. I could bring them all down on him if I knew where he was.

No really, I could.

“Did I scare it off, or did Hilda?”

You did.

“But it hasn’t really gone, has it? It’s just sleeping.”

Don’t be so afraid of it. It has a tiny fraction of the power I do.

That didn’t help. I shivered. “I’m afraid of it,” I confessed. I didn’t mean to. The words just slid out of my head. “It tried to get into my mind.”

Of course it did. It’s the only way it can communicate or expand its power. That’s how you defeat it.

“By letting it into my mind? Are you nuts?”

Again, his laughter brushed against me and I began to ache. I couldn’t think about this now, nor ever. I had to focus on poltergeists.

Opinions vary. As for the poltergeist, you can shield your mind now. You’re much stronger.

Resisting the urge to preen, I asked, “How can I do both at once? Shield my mind and let it in?”

There are layers upon layers to your mind. The core you must protect at all costs. The outer layers, the ones you use to project and receive – those you may open. Then you can either blast it apart or compel it to blast itself.

I sat up straighter. “That’s not what Hilda said.”

Hilda is limited.

“Aren’t I?”

Not with me.

I stared at my hands. What did he mean by that? What the hell did I want him to mean? Focus! “What exactly are you offering, Charlie?”

He shrugged. I'm sure he did. *I'll – er – blast it for you. Or if you prefer, I'll teach you to blast it yourself.*

I didn't doubt that he could do either. What bothered me was why. In a small, hard voice, I demanded, "In return for what?"

There was a pause. If I hadn't felt him in my mind like some low-level, constant electrical charge, I'd have thought he'd buggered off again.

Nothing, he said at last. *Yet.*

I bit my finger, trying to squash the jolting of my stomach, the inevitable, heated tingling below. *Yet.* Shamefully, I wanted to believe it had a sexual implication, but what did he really want from me? My blood? My silence, my cover so he could continue his depredations? My betrayal of my colleagues?

Christ, there were so many reasons for not doing this that I couldn't even count them. Against which I had the terrified faces of Victor and his family. And a creeping, galloping excitement because he was with me again, if only in spirit. Although that should probably count as against too.

I bit harder, so that when I took the finger out of my mouth, I could see my own teeth marks. I was so going to regret this.

"All right, Charlie," I said. "Show me."

* * * * *

Early morning remedial classes with Hilda. Late night extra-curricular studies with Karoly. On top of which, as our efficiency and confidence grew, Zack, Sam and I were sent out increasingly often, usually with Hilda or Frank or one of the other more experienced operatives. It was a busy time for me and I should have been exhausted. Instead of which it came to me one afternoon as I walked down a sunny street with my fellow probationers, that I was almost happy.

But I didn't want to think about that, or the inevitable mess I was getting myself into by this increasing debt to the vampire. Because I found he was right. I could

separate the layers of my mind—leave some open and close others down. Under Karoly's very different tuition, I learned to strengthen my own shields and better understand the power of my mind.

Not that I trusted him, of course. Not for one moment. How could I?

"Why are you doing this?" I asked him one night after he'd condescended to be pleased with my progress.

Because I can.

I supposed boredom was the curse of a long life. It certainly can't have escaped his notice that the stronger I grew, the more able I would be to deal with him and his like. It was one of my desperately repeated justifications for what I was doing.

I lay back in bed. It was weird talking to him every night from there. Intimate. Almost like the pillow talk of lovers. Apart from the subject matter and the inconvenience of him being a vampire, of course. It was so tempting to touch myself to the arousing sound of his telepathic voice, to enjoy physical pleasure with the secret parts of my mind he'd taught me to hide.

Without him knowing, I could slide my hand inside my pajamas to hold my damp, aching pussy, slide my finger inside and move to the rhythm of his beautiful voice. I needed the comfort, the release and I wanted the pleasure so badly it amounted to desperation. But I wouldn't let myself do it.

Not until after he'd gone. Then I'd be able to give in, as I always did, soothe my burning body with own hands, bring myself to orgasm and alleviate the unendurable need. Increasingly, I looked forward to that secret delight, indulging myself to the memory of his voice and my mind's vivid visions of what we'd already done together in Glasgow. Though I didn't forget the emptiness that always followed those dates with my own fingers, I couldn't do without them either.

I could have his spiritual company, or I could have a little physical happiness. It was my unique torture not to be able to enjoy both at once, but of the two I was well aware which was the more dangerous.

I said firmly, "Good night, Charlie."

Good night.

The electric tingle of his presence faded to nothing.

I gazed up at the ceiling, refusing to miss him, practicing what he'd taught me, wondering what lay in store for tomorrow. He never bothered me during the day, never distracted me from my work or studies. But stupidly, I found myself saving up little events from my day to tell him about, because only he would find them funny. Almost as if I was going home to a friend or a lover, instead of a shadowy and evil teacher.

I slid my hand inside my pajama trousers, reaching between my legs for a little secret bliss. I remembered his voice, imagined his presence. Clutching my breast with my free hand, I kneaded it desperately, rubbed faster at my clitoris to alleviate the hunger that never really left.

I couldn't trust him. But I'd let him into my mind and inevitably, there were consequences.

* * * * *

The woods were quiet. I could sense the threat that lurked there, something huge and malevolent that I couldn't fight on my own. Though I ran with increasing speed, I couldn't escape it. My legs just wouldn't move any quicker. My heart hammered with fear and then, just as I sensed its roar of triumph, I saw Karoly.

He stood under a tree in his antique kilt, his fair hair tied behind his head, glinting under the sun, which peeped between the heavy leaves. I stopped and stared at him, confused, trapped between the devil and the deep blue sea. He smiled at me, melting my bones even through the fear and I realized the threat had gone. It was afraid of Karoly.

He walked across the path of mud and fallen leaves, tall and lean, graceful as some predatory cat. His kilt swung around his thighs, fascinating me. He stood in front of me

I saw that he no longer smiled. His green eyes were dark with lust, flecked with dancing gold as I'd seen them before.

Beyond all fear, I ached for him. I yearned for his ravishing mouth on my taut nipples, his sensitive hands all over me. Against everything I knew to be right or even sensible, I wanted his muscular arms around me and his body heavy on mine, inside me, giving me more of the astounding sex I'd tasted in Glasgow. My mouth was dry with longing, my pussy soaked and pulsing.

And he knew it. I could tell from his smug expression.

He took hold of my shirt and ripped. Two more tears and all my clothes fell about me in tatters.

I stood before him completely naked. His gaze burned me, seemed to tug on my anxious, distended nipples. Moisture flooded from my pussy, trickled down my trembling legs. Though I tried to cover myself, he paid that no attention. Instead, he unpinned his plaid and wound it around my naked body so that we stood wrapped in it together. Then he lowered his head and kissed my wondering mouth and I wanted him so badly that I let him. I tried not to kiss him back, but it didn't matter. His lips and tongue and teeth were all-consuming.

His fingers worked between our bodies, loosening the kilt at his waist and pulling until I felt his naked skin on mine, his rigid cock against my stomach. With awe I realized we had never made love naked, that I'd never seen the full glory of his beautiful body.

Giving in to the new desire, I drew my mouth free and swayed back from him to look. God, he was amazing, his skin a warm gold, his body lean and muscled. I gazed from his broad shoulders down his powerful chest with its light scattering of blond hairs to his toned, flat stomach and the fine upstanding cock that I wanted inside me so badly I'd have sold my soul.

Perhaps I already had. Whatever, there was no going back now. I couldn't have borne it. I had to touch him. With fresh wonder, I ran my hands over the lean, hard

bones of his hips and around to his taut buttocks. I lifted my gaze back to his and he smiled, showing his sharp, pointed incisors. They should have warned me to back off, to run while I still could. Instead, they aroused me further. I wanted to feel them on my skin, all over my body.

I swayed closer 'til my breasts touched his naked chest and reached up for his mouth. When he gave it, I sucked on those wicked teeth, used my hands on his buttocks to press his cock hard against me. Parting my legs, I stood on tiptoe, trying to work it between my thighs. There couldn't have been a clearer invitation.

He drew me to the ground with him, still kissing. The weight of his body ground against me, hard and thrilling. His hand caressed the length of my thigh, pushing my legs further apart. Then he slid his cock straight into my pussy. I felt every cold, hard, silken inch of him slipping over my muscles. He stroked back and forth in slow, melting thrusts until he reached the place I liked best. I was so aroused I began to come at once and at my first moan, he took his mouth from me and gazed avidly into my face instead.

I didn't hide it from him. I let him see it all, every stage of the massive pleasure. He smiled, lustful, predatory, kneading my breast, rubbing his thumb sensuously across my hard, ultra-sensitive nipple, still slowly, sensuously pushing in and out of me. I thought the orgasm would go on forever. I wanted it to. Away from the world, from everyone but him and me wrapped in his warm plaid...

At last, he drew back so that only the very tip of his cock remained inside me. I could feel it pulsing at my entrance and knew he was on the verge of his own climax. If he chose to take it. Lost in my own helpless pleasure, yet desperate to feel his, I whispered, "Don't stop. Keep fucking me... Please..."

He rammed home hard and I cried out.

I lay in my bed at the Centre, staring at the ceiling in the pale light of dawn. My heart thundered. Between my wet thighs I could still feel the hot tingles of sexual pleasure, tingles which echoed all through my body.

"Shit," I whispered. He'd done it again. Sent me a dream when I was vulnerable. Well, this time I knew what was going on and this time I would not stand for it.

It was my own fault, of course. I should never have let him in, never have begun this...whatever it was. Well, it wasn't too late to end it.

"Charlie!"

He didn't "speak", just let me know he was there, which for some reason infuriated me further.

"Get out of my head and stay out!" I raged. "I don't want your help anymore and I sure as hell don't want your filthy, erotic dreams! Stay away from..."

What erotic dreams?

Halted in full flood, I floundered.

He might have been lying. But there was that degree of salacious interest in his response that spoke of bloody inconvenient sincerity.

Shite.

He hadn't sent it. The dream was my own subconscious, my own pathetic fantasy of a world where he protected me and we lived in some sort of safe cocoon, screwing our lives away. Why could I not just have ignored it? Worse, was I was actually disappointed he hadn't troubled to send it?

"Nothing," I muttered. "It doesn't matter."

It does to me. As you know, I take a personal interest in your erotic dreams. The bastard was laughing at me. No wonder. I was bloody funny.

"You've no right to," I said fiercely.

Well you brought the subject up, he pointed out. I had no answer to that. After a pause, he added, *And you do feel deliciously flustered. What was I doing to you?*

"Making love to me as if you'd never stop. I didn't want you to stop." I didn't want to speak, or even think these words, not where he could "hear" them.

It was as if he was right there with me, his deep, sexy voice melting me like butter all over again. *Did I make you come?*

Worse, I felt his soft caress on my cheek as if it were real, sliding down to my throat.

My throat, which he'd once bitten in the throes of sexual passion. That had been real. I could still feel it although the puncture wounds had long gone.

Was it good?

I closed my eyes, letting the fresh flood of moisture trickle down my thighs. "No. Nothing. It wasn't even you. Go away. I'm going for a bath."

Make it a cold one.

"Bastard."

In the end, I didn't get any bath at all. I was summoned urgently by Hilda. Victor's poltergeist was back.

* * * * *

The poltergeist slammed Victor's bedroom door in our faces. It took all our combined energy to make it loosen its hold, but eventually we burst into the room to a very similar scene to the one we'd witnessed before—all flying, crashing objects and understandably screaming children. The poltergeist banged the door shut again, numbing my shoulder by catching it on the way past. Then, before I could get out of the way, it hurled the door open again, crashing it into the back of my head.

Bastard.

I was not in the best condition to deal with this. I had to force to the back of my mind everything to do with Karoly, including this morning's humiliation and my body's treacherous memory. Otherwise, all I'd learned with him would be for nothing. I wondered if he was here, keeping watch over me, critically appraising my approach. I couldn't feel him, but then I suspected he had found his own ways to hide from me, at least telepathically.

It didn't matter. This was Centre business. Squaring my shoulders, I stared at the violent stream of energy and slowly let down my shield.

"Come on, then," I invited. "Talk to me. Tell me what you want."

Perhaps it remembered my fear of its previous attempt. Perhaps it was just plain stupid. But it came at me with a force that drove me backward.

Zack caught me. I heard Hilda's warning cry, but I ignored them both. For an instant, I was paralyzed by the terrible angry being freezing my mind. But I managed to hold the inner doors closed. And I managed to speak to it.

"You don't know what you want. You just want to hurt and terrorize. You don't really exist, you know. You're only that child's rejected emotions. Disperse and be at peace."

For an instant, it was still. I could feel it thinking—or what passed for thinking. I felt its own fear and exhaustion and the attraction of peace. A very brief attraction. It swirled in my brain. I felt it take my hand, raise it. I punched my own face, heard Zack's roar of rage.

"Suicide or murder?" I offered, taking back control and showing it two raised fingers.

It battered furiously in my mind, trying to retrieve the hand it had lost. I remember thinking *Stuff it* and then I threw everything I had at it.

It exploded out of me with a force that drove me to my knees. I never even felt it die.

Well, in any meaningful sense, it had never been alive.

As Zack hugged me and Hilda convulsively pressed my hand, I sent a quick, impulsive message to Karoly.

Thank you.

He didn't answer.

Chapter Eight

We came home in a mood of rollicking triumph, my two fellow probationers and me, planning celebrations of my first major success at the Centre, even stopping off to buy provisions. Hilda remained sternly proud in the background, letting us rollick without her.

But as we entered the hallowed, ultra-modern portals of the Centre, Zack turned to her saying, "Hey, Hilda, we're having dinner tonight at Jenny's—are you coming? Ellie and Jess will be there too. We've got wine and we're hoping to get special dispensation from the boss to drink it. Jenny's cooking, of course, but don't let that put you off!"

"Go on, Hilda," I urged, genuinely, for in our catch-up sessions I had grown to like the older woman as well as respect her.

She actually blushed slightly, so I knew she was pleased to be asked, though she said only, "Thanks, I've got things I have to do. Have fun though. Just remember, Jennifer, eight o'clock tomorrow morning."

"Eight o'clock?" Sam repeated, as Hilda walked off toward her office. "What the hell happens at eight o'clock? Especially when we have the day off!"

"Jenny's remedial classes," grinned Zack.

"Fuck off," I said amiably. Once, it would not have been amiable. And once, he would have gone. Now he just laughed and threw an arm around my shoulders.

"Rather you than me," he observed. "Crack of dawn's bad enough without the Dragon breathing down your neck as well!"

"Actually she's quite fun," I said, pushing him off as Nigel came striding through the hall toward us. Tall and distinguished, with his hair just graying at the temples, he was a suave and, I supposed, attractive man, though recently he tended to look merely flustered.

“Ah!” he said as he caught sight of us. “Well done, everyone! Looking forward to your reports of this case. Very well handled, Hilda informed me. Jenny, I’d like to see you in my office.”

“Now?” I asked. What I really wanted was a cup of coffee and five minutes’ peace before I started cooking for tonight.

“Unless something is more urgent?” Nigel asked with heavy sarcasm.

Lifting one significant eyebrow to Zack and Sam, I followed Nigel into his office. Waving me impatiently into a chair, he sat down on the opposite side of his desk and began twiddling a pencil between his fingers. I shifted in my seat and looked around the orderly room, filing cabinets, certificates and degrees on the wall. On his desk one neat In tray and one empty Out, a flat panel computer monitor and the obligatory photograph of his wife and children.

“Are your family psychic too?” I asked curiously, because it had never struck me before.

“What?” he said, staring at me. “No! I don’t... That is, my family is not your concern. We are here to discuss you. Hilda tells me there has been a marked improvement in your abilities as well as your work.”

“She’s been very helpful, supportive...”

“Can you function without her?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Could you have dealt with the poltergeist in the manner you did? *Would* you have dealt with it as you did if Hilda had not been present?”

I frowned, doing him the courtesy of actually thinking about it before I answered. Then, “Yes.”

Now it was his turn to shift uncomfortably. “That’s what Hilda said. All right, Jenny, I’ll get to the point. I understand Hilda mentioned to you already about the Centre diversifying its resources? Well, we’d like you in Scotland. You’ll have a

temporary manager and both of you will still report to me, but you will have your own team.”

Minutes later, I emerged from Nigel’s office and made my way to the living quarters in something of a daze. In just over one month, it seemed, I had progressed from useless, bumbling fake to a psychic operative with a team! Or at least I would have by the time the Scottish centre opened in a few months. Life, it seemed was looking up.

I had every right to feel the sneaking pride I did. And I was glad. Since drawing back my prickles and actually trying to join in, I had the beginnings of friendship with some of these people. My life was certainly more fun, I realized, almost with surprise as I walked along the corridor toward my own room.

It was more interesting too. Frowning and reaching for the door handle of my room, I wondered if I was actually *happy*? No, too much was missing that I wasn’t prepared to think about yet, but I was almost contented.

My fingers crackled with electricity, causing me to snatch back my hand with a startled gasp. My thoughts snapped together, my senses shrieked...*vampire*.

Slowly, I lifted my hand again. My fingers trembled. Forcing myself, I spread them wide, touched their tips to the door and closed my eyes.

Oh yes. Vampire. And not just any old undead. My vampire.

* * * * *

My mind raced with speculation as to how he had got in, how he would avoid capture or death in a building full of powerful psychics and equally powerful instruments that could detect anomalies like him... Jesus, I was beginning to think like them – *anomalies*, for Christ’s sake...!

Drawing in my breath, I took hold of the door handle once more, absorbing the feel of him like a cold-turkey addict unexpectedly coming upon a fix. I wanted to believe he was no threat, that I needed no weapons against him. But I couldn’t. I had to decide just how to deal with him.

I had to remember the evil I'd sensed when I first encountered him in Glasgow. Reflect on the possible reasons for his telepathic help over the last week. You couldn't, you really couldn't trust a being like that, even if it talked about love. *Especially* when it talked about love.

Turning the handle, I remembered what Hilda and Karoly himself had taught me about shielding my thoughts, but I doubted my success. I felt as if my brain shook as much as my body.

I pushed the door wide, switched on the light and waited. I could see my unmade bed, the darkened window. I could hear nothing. But I could feel him. His presence filled the room like smoke from a fire.

Drawing in my breath, I stepped inside.

The room was empty. I looked under the bed and behind the short curtains, although there was no way he could have hidden there. I checked inside the wardrobe and finally walked toward the bathroom. I pushed that door open wide too.

My pajamas were on the floor. There were toothpaste splodges on the sink and lime scale scum all over the bath—bloody English water—but no vampire.

Slowly, I sank down 'til I was sitting on the side of the bath. I couldn't cope with this. I was so relieved not to have to see him. I was so desperately disappointed not to have him physically here with me right now.

Just for a moment, I let memory flood me. The feel of his silky hands, his sweet, sensual lips and their devastating kiss. His big, cold cock inside me, thrusting its ice and fire through my whole body while he—he drank my blood.

With a snap I closed down my mind. He drank from me. That alone was unforgivable, that was betrayal. And I could cope. I had coped with the mess I'd made here. I had turned that around and made it better. I had coped almost single-handedly with a particularly nasty poltergeist when my colleagues struggled. I could sure as hell cope with one lazy, eccentric, treacherous vampire.

* * * * *

All very well. But could I cope with cooking spaghetti Bolognese for six people in the tiny kitchen at the end of the hall? I could have, if I'd got it done before the six people arrived and just had it simmering on the stove ready for their consumption. That was my plan. But Karoly's presence bothered me too much. Speculation as to why he'd come and where he was now held me back so that I changed ridiculously slowly into my favorite loose, flowing skirt and a sexy new top with front lacing. After which I spent a long time staring at my reflection in the mirror without actually seeing it.

As a result, I'd barely chopped the garlic and onions before Sam and Ellie appeared in the kitchen with a bottle of sparkly white and I remembered I hadn't even opened the expensive red to let it breathe in time for the meal. For a moment I stared at them in indecision.

Sam was a short, likeable man, a sensitive, with freckles, open and amiable. Ellie, on the other hand, was an astonishingly beautiful blonde and probably the sexiest woman I had ever met. I had seen her move objects just with her mind. She was also a voracious man eater, entirely uninhibited about her sexual appetites and until recently I had hated her guts. Then it came to me watching her hunting action one evening, that she just had the looks, charm and confidence to do well what I had been doing with very few standards all my adult life. And when I looked closer, I saw some traces of a rather touching vulnerability in her restless quest for mates. Just like me, she was looking for the love that never materialized. On either side.

"What?" she said, now in some amusement. Taking a chance, I switched on the gas, splattered some olive oil in a frying pan and threw in my chopped onions. That done, I hurried a tolerant Sam and Ellie back down the hall to my room where Zack, Don and Jess already waited for us. Falling back into old student ways, everyone sat around the floor, where we would also eat, picnic style.

While they joked, I pointed them at the glasses and the nibbles I'd haphazardly prepared earlier and rummaged for the corkscrew.

Opening the expensive red, I put it on the top bookshelf out of the way for later – this was not a gulping wine – and gratefully accepted a glass of Sam’s bubbles. I would have then run straight back to the kitchen, only Jess’ question about the poltergeist fed me a great opportunity for a funny line and I couldn’t resist telling the comic version of the day’s events. Only then, with the laughter of friends ringing in my ears did I bolt down the hall back to the kitchen.

I knew from the smell that it was much too late. I knew too that the smoke alarm was about to blare. If it hadn’t been placed dangerously high up above the drafty window, it would have gone off already.

Seizing the burning onions off the gas, I reached for the stepstool and climbed up to grab the alarm off the wall. Then, holding it high into the draft and away from the smoke, I picked off its back and spanged out the battery, which flew out of my hand to land with a clunk in the frying pan.

“Bugger!” I said with feeling, pausing to follow the battery with my eyes. That was when I saw him sitting on the worktop, one leg idly swinging under his kilt.

In his hand he held the spatula with which he’d obviously been poking my burned onions, but his eyes were on my legs, slowly rising up over my hips and waist to my breast. Stunned as I was, I could still feel my body burning under his gaze as if he was touching me.

When he finally came to my dropped jaw, he smiled and I remembered to shut my mouth with a snap. His eyes met mine.

“Hello.”

Still clutching the smoke alarm, I let my arms fall to my sides and almost overbalanced.

He did the blur thing to drop the spatula and catch me, but since I didn’t actually fall, I was able to fend him off with both hands held out warningly in front of me.

“How the hell did you get in here?” I demanded.

“Come down and I’ll tell you,” he invited, holding up his arms.

He was still beautiful with his deep-set, green, gleaming eyes and his fine, strong-boned face, his full, sensual lips that could kiss like...

“Get away from me,” I said coldly.

His hands fell back to his sides. A wary look came over his face, but he did step back and let me clamber down unmolested. As I turned to face him, I was shaking again, which I hoped he didn’t notice.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I came to see you, of course.”

“Why?”

His eyebrow lifted. “I had this idea you might be pleased. Especially after our recent – talks.”

I spun away from him and began to fish the smoke alarm battery out of the frying pan with the spatula. “I can’t imagine where you got such a profoundly stupid notion.”

“From you, of course. We had fun together in Glasgow.”

“No. *You* had fun.” I threw the battery and the spatula into the bin together. “And then you betrayed me.”

He frowned. “I gave you the chance to be a hero to your friends. And you took it. Twice.”

“You drank from me!”

For the space of several heartbeats, neither of us moved or spoke. The only sound was my own quickened breathing. My shields were down, but I didn’t care. I wanted him to feel all my fury, all my hurt. The gold flecks in his eyes narrowed, almost vanished as his gaze moved around my face, searching for answers. A faint frown lingered on his brow.

At last, his tempting lips parted. “So? You liked it.”

A moment longer, I stared at him. Rage such as I'd never known flooded my being with heat, as if the blood in my veins boiled with fury, because he couldn't see what he'd done, what it meant to me.

And because he was right. That too.

My voice tight and unsteady, I uttered, "Are you completely amoral?"

"Of course I am. I'm a vampire."

Well, it was a stupid question, but that didn't stop my fist clenching or my arm drawing back purposefully. I meant to hit him full in his handsome, impossible face. Then, just as I was about to let fly, I saw in his eyes that he would let me, as he had let me stab him, and abruptly the anger drained away. My fist unclenched and he smiled, understanding this if nothing else.

He took a step nearer me. "Jenny..."

The kitchen door burst open.

"Jenny, where do you keep your glasses, because Ellie just broke one and... Hello!" It was Zack, bounding in to be brought up short by the splendid vision of Karoly. He grinned. "You've just *got* to be a relative of Jenny's! Fresh doon from bonnie Scotland! Ock aye!"

In spite of everything, I cringed, though it was automatic now and I had long ago learned to annoy him just as much by imitating him.

"The noo," I said dryly. "You forgot 'the noo'. The glasses are in that cupboard under the window."

"Thanks. Zack Conway," he added, sticking out his hand to the vampire. "And any relative of Jenny's is welcome!" Which, considering it was my room and my kitchen was extremely generous of him.

Then, to my horror, I realized that Karoly was going to take his hand. A strangled protest choked in my throat. Their hands clasped briefly.

Zack said, "Cold night?" and, annoyingly, I wanted to laugh.

It was hysteria, of course, and it wasn't helped by the thought that it was not above the vampire to reply, "No, It's just I've been dead for five hundred years."

As their hands parted again, I realized with fresh horror that Zack was waiting to learn my relative's identity. And that Karoly's mouth was opening to speak.

"Oh shit," I said before I could prevent it, and when they both glanced at me in surprise, I added hastily, "This is Charlie, my cousin. He doesn't speak or hear. But he lip reads."

"Pleased to meet you," said Zack, a little more clearly than necessary. "Staying for dinner, Charlie?"

"No!" I said in horror as the vampire nodded.

I glared at him and Zack laughed. "Never piss off a woman in the kitchen. Come on back and meet the others, get a glass of wine."

At this, I opened my mouth to forbid it absolutely. But before I could speak, a sudden heavy weight pressed on my foot and I looked down to see Karoly's tatty trainer firmly standing on it. Before I could express my outrage or even push him off, it lifted again. I felt his hand on my shoulder, igniting the spark of awareness as his cool touch always did.

The shock of it kept me quiet for long enough to see him do the same to Zack, then firmly push us both toward the door. When we looked back at him in surprise—open-mouthed in my case—he let me go to grab the frying pan, making stirring motions over my charred onions, now clustered unhappily around the empty space once occupied by the smoke alarm battery.

"Burned them, Jen?" Zack grinned.

"Caramelized," I corrected with dignity. My mind was not on Zack or the onions. It was on Karoly, who undoubtedly meant us to leave the kitchen with the understanding that he would do the cooking.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I said feebly. He met my eyes, smiling into them with devastating effect while he shook his head. I was flooded with the memory of sex with him on that balcony, the unique feel of his cold shaft pumping its extraordinary pleasures of fire and ice inside me. I wanted it again, very badly. It didn’t matter that he’d betrayed me, that he was, moreover, evil and undead. I wanted him now with a need so sharp my legs nearly buckled. Between them, I was soaked, hot and tingly, with an ache that spread like fire through my entire body.

Something in his eyes changed. Something about the curve of his lips grew more sensual, more—hungry. I realized that he could feel my desire, that it was feeding his.

Abruptly, I tugged my eyes free.

“You can make spaghetti Bolognese?” I demanded, coughing to disguise the unsteadiness of my voice. For answer, he simply placed his hand in the small of my back and pushed.

Zack laughed, grabbing my hand and leading me through the door. “Don’t turn down an offer like that,” he advised, grinning over my head at Karoly.

I refused to look at him again, but as we walked out I let my hand remain in Zack’s, in the rather useless hope that it would annoy the vampire.

Vaguely, I was aware of Zack’s questions about my “cousin”, but I answered them on autopilot with no clear recollection afterward of what I’d said. It was almost a relief to push open the door of my room. The place was still full of his presence despite the number of people now diluting it with their noise and laughter. The wine had clearly been flowing.

“How’s dinner, Jen?” Ellie asked. “Want a hand?”

“She doesn’t need any more hands,” Zack answered for me. I was beginning to be irritated by that. “She’s brought her cousin down from the frozen north to do her dirty work and now she’s off the hook!”

“Cousin, eh?” said Ellie, handing me a glass and splashing wine into it. “Male or female?”

“Male,” said Zack. “And the most gorgeous of that gender you’re ever likely to see in a skirt. Or trousers, come to that. Makes me wish I were gay.”

“Bring him on!” Ellie commanded with enthusiasm.

“Also he’s mute,” Zack informed her, “so he’s unlikely to answer you back.”

That was when the unlikely thought crossed my mind that Zack was trying to sic her on to my “cousin” out of jealousy, because he sensed something between us. Zack was an empath, after all. It was the jealousy that surprised me, so much so that a moment later, I was sure I’d imagined it.

I sank on to the floor, my back against the bed, trying to pull my brain out of its debilitating numbness. Was he really going to walk in here, to a room full of trained psychics, any one of whom might possibly recognize him and all of whom knew precisely how to kill him? Did he plan to amuse himself by drinking from some or all of them? Killing them? Killing *me*?

Of course, I should give him up to them, right now. I knew that. He was just too unpredictable, too dangerous.

But I had chosen my path in Glasgow and I could not change it. Despite everything I held against him, there was *something*...

And he *had* helped me immeasurably with the poltergeist.

To my horror, the bedroom door was opening. I knew who it was before I saw him. And when I *did* see him...well, he was a gorgeous creature, Zack was right. Somehow too his outlandish costume didn’t make anyone laugh, just admire. He was a strong, handsome man in a kilt, the plaid pinned across his chest only emphasizing his magnificence. As for his face, he looked like a corrupt angel, a beautiful, sensual being...bearing a tray of hors d’oeuvres which he had, presumably, flung together from my haphazard food cupboard.

After the initial stunned silence, he was welcomed with noisy enthusiasm. Smiling slightly, he moved forward, picking his way through those sprawling on the floor, to lay his tray down in the middle of them. I scanned their faces anxiously for signs of

disquiet, of any kind of recognition, but all I saw was Ellie, leaning back to get a better view up his kilt as he bent down. Sniggering, Jess jerked her upright.

A sharp bolt of jealousy hit me squarely in the chest. Ellie would take him. Ellie could take anyone away from me any day of the week and even though I refused to have him I couldn't prevent the flood of misery at her getting him instead... Oh God, what was I thinking of? He was a *vampire*, whose prime interest was blood. He could *kill* Ellie!

Karoly straightened, spreading his hands to indicate we should eat. Thank God he was sticking to my inspired lie and keeping his aristocratic Magyar mouth shut.

"Join us for a bit," Ellie invited, making space for him on the side away from Jess. No point in unnecessary competition. I had often arranged matters that way myself in pursuit of some unsatisfactory man.

The vampire only smiled, shrugging, indicating he had to return to the kitchen. As he turned, his eyes met mine for one gleaming instant and I knew how amused he was at serving his elegantly presented food to a room full of young psychic operatives who had sworn to eliminate him and all his kind.

Abruptly, I managed to force my inert body to move, staggering to my feet and realizing as I did so that I hadn't actually breathed for some time. Muttering some incoherent explanation to my guests, I leapt after the vampire and hastily closed the door behind us. I had to warn him — and warn him off.

I meant to confront him in the relative safety of the kitchen, from where tantalizing, herby smells already emanated, but he was waiting for me in the hall. Without a word, he reached for me, pulling me 'til my back was against the wall next to the door. Panicked, I tried to speak, tried to force myself to push him away, but he just took my face between his hands and bent his head, capturing my lips.

I was lost. The vampire could still kiss and I was only human. My arms lifted of their own volition. My hands slid around his hard waist 'til they lay flat against his

back. Then, as he deepened the kiss, ravishing my mouth with his tongue and teeth, my fingers clenched, grasping at his shirt for support.

I had dreamed of this, secretly, most of my waking hours for more than a month. How could I not kiss him back, wind my tongue around his, draw his silken mouth deeper into mine?

He tasted of sweet earth and subtle spice and something purely, powerfully Karoly. Something already familiar and yet thrillingly, wickedly new. It overwhelmed me, left me helpless in the grip of my own desires and his. His mouth turned mine over and over, plundered it ruthlessly. When he began to thrust rhythmically with his tongue in deliberate simulation of fucking, my knees buckled. Only his hands on my face and his body pinning me to the wall held me upright.

I came up for air, gasping. I glimpsed his smile, those dangerous, sexy fangs and then he took my mouth back. It felt as if I'd come home. I welcomed his conquering, sensual lips, sank farther into the heat.

I don't know how long that kiss went on, long enough, certainly, for me to be crying out for his touch on other parts of my hot, trembling body. But he only held my face, kissing my mouth as if he'd never leave it and in the end it was my mews of frustrated desire that made him break off.

His eyes had darkened to black and gold, almost opaque with his own need. For some reason, that gave me back some semblance of sense. And grief, because we were back where we'd started.

"You have to stop kissing me," I whispered in anguish.

"But I love kissing you."

I pulled away from him, striding along the hall to the kitchen with his provocative voice following me like an accusation. "You are so passionate and you enjoy it so much."

“Shut up!” I hissed, though whether to prevent the others hearing him or just myself, I was far from sure. Slamming into the kitchen, I turned on him as soon as he closed the door behind us.

“Look, you have to go! This entire building is *stuffed* with psychics, every one of whom is a threat to you! You’re lucky to have got this...”

“No I’m not,” he interrupted, making me blink and lose my thread.

“What?”

“It’s not luck. None of these psychics threaten me. *You* are the only vampire hunter in the building. Don’t you think I would feel it?” I must have been staring at him with dumb incomprehension, because he stepped forward and, with one finger under my chin, pushed my lower jaw up ‘til it connected with its partner. “It’s a rare gift,” he explained.

I jerked away from him. “Why are you really here, Karoly? What is it you want? Why did you contact me, help me?”

Desperate for distraction, I looked at what he’d put in a large pan on the stove. Delicious aromas wafted up into my nostrils, making my mouth water despite everything else going on.

He said, “I came to see how you were, if those who made you unhappy were treating you better.”

“*You* made me unhappy!” I burst out, twirling round from the pot to hit him in the chest with both fists. “*You!*”

He took the opportunity to kiss me again, so thoroughly that I couldn’t help wishing the kitchen was big enough to hold a table we could have fallen on to. Especially when he folded me into his muscular arms and held me close against him. Through his kilt and my skirt, the hardness of his cock pressed into my abdomen, promising wicked delight and all the sensual pleasures I’d been craving for so long.

Against my lips, he said, "You were unhappy—lost—before you met me. It was I who helped you find your way back."

At that I pushed him violently and he stepped away. "Oh yes? How exactly did you do that?"

He smiled. "By loving you."

Heat flooded me. Moisture soaked my knickers. Part of me gave up on the table fantasy and seriously considered the crumb strewn floor. Fighting it, I said, "Contrary to general masculine belief, sex is not the cure for all women's ills."

"Love," he corrected me and when I stared at him, he explained. "I said 'loving you', not 'having sex with you'. Or 'fucking you', as you so bluntly call it."

It was on the tip of my tongue to remind him that he had used the word plenty himself at our last encounter, but since I really couldn't afford to go there, I swallowed it back down.

"And you do love me," he added softly. "In your heart you do. You don't want anyone else now, even that good-looking boy in there who's so hot for you."

"That's just sex," I said tightly. "I'll get over it. So will Zack."

"No you won't."

Warily, I watched his hand come up again, but it only touched my hair, which was a little longer and less spiky now, running it between his slender fingers.

"Give me one night," he whispered.

"What?" I had to stop saying that every time he surprised me. He surprised me lots, after all.

"Give me a night to convince you."

"That I love you?" I yelled. "How conceited is that?"

He smiled. His hand left my hair, reaching behind me to stir the stew. "To show you the fun we could have."

"If I leave my life behind and live with you in a dark cellar?" Secretly, you see, I had thought about it.

He shook his head, still watching the stew. "No. If you share your life with me."

For some reason, my breath caught. Deliberately now, he lifted his eyes to mine. My voice shook. "How do you imagine I could do that?"

"Just live your life as you want to. There are times when we will have to be apart and times when we can be together. It's not so unusual. And I can even help you in your work, as I already have. I can get rid of the most troublesome vampires too."

I blinked. "Kill your own kind?" I said with awe. "You would do that?"

"Oh yes."

"For me?" I whispered, wondering wildly whether I should be flattered or appalled.

"No," he admitted, depriving me of a reason for either. "Too many vampires impede the food supply."

Against everything I knew and believed in, laughter bubbled up and was ruthlessly squashed. "Completely amoral!" I pronounced shakily. "Is this stuff ready yet?"

"Of course. So you will give me tonight?" he asked, lifting his hand to my cheek, cupping it briefly before trailing his smooth fingers down my jaw and throat, falling to my breast with one sweeping, brushing caress that made all my nerves leap and my nipples stand out and beg for more.

I stepped back.

"No."

Chapter Nine

My guests “oohed” over the delicious smell of my vampire’s stew, demanding to know what it was.

“Goulash,” I said wildly, and Karoly cast me a look of reproof. “Or something! Wine, Charlie.” I reached for the nearest bottle.

But the vampire stepped over Don and Sam to reach unerringly for my forgotten bottle of good red.

“Trust you,” I said, curling my lip.

With his glass, he came back and sat beside me on the floor next to the bed, while I, kneeling, ladled out the stew and stretched across to give a bowl to each of my slightly tipsy guests. When I sat back down after the last, my bottom landed on something hard and knobbly, which I realized with shock was the vampire’s hand.

I stared at him in surprise. I think I forgot to be outraged. In any case, he only smiled, without removing his hand. Moisture pooled between my lower lips, making me wonder how the hell I was going to concentrate on eating stew, let alone conversation.

“So, Charlie,” said Ellie who had, naturally, maneuvered herself around to sit on his other side. “Are you off to a fancy dress party after this?”

Politely, Charlie shook his head. His hand explored under me, making my breath catch. I reached for my fork.

“He’s Scotch, Ellie!” Zack mocked.

“So he is, smart ass, but I’ve been to Scotland and they don’t normally run around dressed like *that*, do they, Jen?”

“Only for high days and holidays,” I agreed, squirming as the vampire’s hand finally made it under my skirt to the damp, heated cotton of my knickers. “And weddings. I’m sure he came south straight from a wedding, didn’t you, Charlie?”

Charlie smiled beatifically while I lifted a forkful of stew to my mouth. He waited until my lips closed around it before he slid his hand inside my knickers to caress the curve of my ass. I nearly choked. As it was, my involuntary gasp must have shown anyone looking a fine view of my stew-filled mouth. Closing it hastily, I coughed to cover my lapse.

Jesus, I really had to find some unobtrusive way to get away from his questing, teasing hand and yet...I couldn’t quite bring myself to. It was almost as if this way I had no guilt in enjoying the caress of his wicked fingers.

I swallowed my half chewed food. My face felt as flushed as if I’d just drunk an entire bottle on my own. Hastily, with a not quite steady hand, I reached for my glass and took a sizeable gulp.

My eyes fell on Ellie on his other side, animatedly talking to him while her hand touched his bare knee. Everyone else was eating and chatting, periodically telling Charlie how good the food was. With our backs to the bed, it was unlikely that anyone would be able to see my so-called cousin’s hand up my skirt.

I lost track of the conversation. I barely ate. All I cared about was the crazy pleasures of my body and how the hell I could cover it up.

I didn’t know what to do, where to look, so I gazed desperately at Ellie. She was very obviously giving Charlie the eye, smiling at him from under her beautiful, long lashes. That would have been bad enough but he had the gall to be smiling back at her.

Indignantly, if somewhat belatedly, I changed position to try to escape his hand, but it followed me, suddenly gripping my upper thigh so that I couldn’t move.

Hush...came his voice in my furious, befuddled head. Stay still... She wants me. I want you. All my attention is with you. And Jenny, shield your thoughts. Zack is sensing your excitement.

Blindly, I took another drink, using the moment to shield as Hilda had taught me.

In the meantime, Ellie, cow that she was, flirted too blatantly for the others to remain entirely unaware of her antics for very long.

“Ellie, put the poor man down,” Sam commanded. “He’s not used to your pushy, lecherous ways.”

Reluctantly, Ellie took her hand off his knee. She said to him, “I have a flat five minutes’ drive from here.”

Somehow I managed to say, “You don’t want him in your home, Ellie, believe me. He’s an animal.”

The vampire pinched my bum cheek and I laid down my glass before I broke it.

“Oh keep talking, Jenny!” sighed Ellie.

I laughed shakily. The vampire’s hand continued to stroke under my skirt.

Inside my head, his voice said, *One night, Jenny. Give me tonight.*

Bastard...

You see how it is for you. For me. I could make you come just with my mind, but I can’t keep my hands off you and even here, in company, you love it. Imagine how it could be when they’re gone.

I was having trouble thinking of anything else. Unless it was how I could come right now and hide it from everyone, including him. Impossible...

Tonight, yes or no?

Complete and utter bastard.

Yes or no?

Yes...!

As if from a great distance, I heard Zack saying anxiously, “Is Jenny all right?”

“She’s knackered, aren’t you, Jen?” said Jess. “Poor thing, you’ve had a hell of a day. Come on, guys, we’d better shove off.”

The vampire slid his fingers out from under my skirt.

I said shakily, "Sorry everyone. I seem to be falling asleep here."

"Great day for you, Jen. Well done," Jess said generously. "Oh and great dinner!"

"Great cousin, Jen," grinned Ellie. "Can I borrow him?"

The vampire shook his head, softening his rejection by rising fluidly to his feet to take her hand in his clean one and gallantly kiss it. Jealousy warred with a surprised pride in him.

Ellie sighed. "There's something about you."

If only she knew what! Over her head, Karoly cast me a quick, eyebrow twitching glance. I wanted to laugh. My aroused, frustrated body screamed silently for his attentions and his blazing, gold-flecked eyes told me he was well aware of both desires.

I dragged my gaze free and waved my guests off, glad somewhere of their sincere-sounding compliments on the pleasantness of the evening. I had got away with it. *God, what I had got away with!*

Shutting the door behind them, I closed my eyes, struggling with conflicting emotions of excitement and shame and anticipation. And the fact that my whole body pulsed with unsatisfied lust. Behind that, there was a kind of wonder and a complete loss as to how to deal with him now.

Taking a deep breath, I turned to face the music.

My jaw dropped.

He stood at the side of the bed, facing me, totally naked. And God, he was beautiful. Almost exactly like my dream, pale, almost translucent skin stretched taut over his lean, hard body. His shoulders and chest were broad and muscular, his dark nipples gloriously tempting. A scattering of coarse, gold hair lit the way down across his flat, tight stomach to the more clustered halo surrounding his huge penis. Thick and erect, it stood rigidly to attention, adding sheer sex to his splendor and a fresh gush of moisture to my already drenched knickers.

Why me? I thought numbly. How me?

Because you're everything I want.

"You've had five hundred years," I whispered. "Five hundred years of beautiful, intelligent, cultured, witty women. You can't expect me to believe I matter. I'm just your quick, amusing fuck with the randy little vampire hunter..."

"You matter," he interrupted. "I don't know why, or how. Accept it."

I swallowed, mutely shaking my head. I had no resources for this. This wasn't a short, frantic screw that my body talked me into during a moment of madness on a balcony. This was to be a whole night in the arms of a god, a hedonistic, evil god who said I was everything he wanted. What did that say about *me*? Nothing good, surely. And yet...and yet I had never been anything anyone wanted terribly much before.

He said softly, "Come here."

"Why?" I countered at once, because I panicked.

He only smiled. "Because I want to undress you."

Oh well, get the disappointment over with quickly. Go, girl.

Inevitably, when I wanted to have most grace, the old clumsy gene kicked in, probably because I was trembling so much, causing me to trip over the shoe I'd cast aside earlier in the evening. I swore loudly. Ignoring both decidedly unromantic events, the vampire reached for me.

He didn't trouble with fastenings. One tug opened my shirt, spitting buttons across the floor. He pushed it back over my shoulders and down my arms to the elbows, then paused to look at me. It was an effort to hold his gaze but I managed it, searching with dread for the first signs of disappointment. His eyes darkened. The gold flecks seemed to leap with lust. And, it seemed, with a different kind of need. For the first time, I let myself consider that it might be as great as mine. That against all the odds, this beautiful, alien creature could be my long sought and never found soul mate.

Slowly, his hands moved from my elbows to my breasts, cupping them over my bra, tenderly rubbing his thumbs over my pebbled nipples to feel their hardness. Apparently satisfied, his fingers drew in around them 'til I gasped, then moved to the

bare skin above my bra, slipping in and down my cleavage. There he took one side of my bra's central seam in either hand and, in one forceful jerk, tore it apart.

"Please!" I got out, half laughing, half weeping. "I'll have no clothes left!"

"Good," he growled. His gaze devoured me with such obvious appreciation that the last of my embarrassment vanished. Instead I felt proud and deliciously cherished. The vampire bent to take my left nipple into his mouth, tenderly pulling, tasting it with his tongue while his hand palmed my other breast, kneading, stroking. With his other hand in my back he pressed my lower body into his naked, rigid cock, then fumbled for the zip of my skirt. There was the sound of more ripping fabric and the skirt fell around my feet.

Hastily, I pushed down my own knickers. As I did, my hand came in contact with his erect cock. Inexplicably shocked, I paused. Ignoring my own underwear, I wrapped my shaking hand around the long, thick shaft, glancing up at his face to see, I think, if he objected.

He didn't appear to. His head lifted from my breast with closed eyes and an expression close to blissful. Encouraged, I moved my hand on him, working the skin slowly up and down, using my other hand to caress the angry head 'til it bled clear juice. I squeezed and he growled low and deep in his throat.

His eyes opened, watching not my arousing hand, but my face. For some reason that tugged at my heart, melting something deep inside me, way beyond what mere sex, even with him, could reach. My throat constricted. I wanted to drown in him, weep and laugh all at the same time.

Behind the naked lust, his eyes softened. They were scarily profound and I wanted to know all of him, every complicated layer. More immediately and more intensely than I'd ever wanted anything, I wanted to give him pleasure.

So, avid, I knelt and flicked my tongue around the head of his cock, lapping up the droplets of salty moisture. He tasted amazing—strong earth, exotic spice, as powerful and exciting as the man himself. So I licked my way down the delicious spiral of veins

to the root, then with a moan I didn't even try to hide, I wrapped my lips around his cock and sucked, hard. I lashed it with my tongue and pumped with my hand. With my other hand, I cupped one of his balls, rolling its strange, velvety hardness in my palm, drumming it with my fingertips.

Hearing a strange, choked sound, I glanced up from his cock and found his eyes blazing at me with such force, that I was suddenly shy again. I loosened my mouth. My hands dropped. I spun away from him, collecting my torn and fallen clothes with unprecedented tidiness. If I couldn't please him...

"Oh you please me," he said huskily. "And you can suck my cock any time except now. Now I want *this*."

I felt his cool hands on my naked hips, shooting delicious waves of desire through me. Swiftly, they caressed around my curves and then gripped, drawing me back into him. There was an instant when I felt his cock nudge my bottom, my pussy, when I tried to straighten, to prepare myself for the moment and then in one hard movement he pulled me onto its entire length.

He whispered, "It's been long, too long, since I fucked you."

I was so wet already that there was no pain, but I still cried out with the shock as well as the sheer coldness of him. His cock filled me with hard flesh and exciting sensation.

His hands moved on my hips, pushing me forward, dragging me back. I moaned with pleasure, straightening, the clothes still clutched in my oblivious hands. He brushed them away as he ran his hands from my hips to my breasts, cupping and kneading. I reached up and behind my head, searching for his, to bring his mouth to mine.

Finding it at last, I latched on to his lips, desperately sucking him into me, licking his teeth, biting his tongue. The vampire growled, his mouth pressing back, fighting mine for dominance. I made him work for it, sneakily squeezing his cock between the walls of my pussy to force a gasp that would loosen his lips. It didn't. He groaned into

my mouth, devouring it, ravaging it, lifting me so that his shaft went all the way inside me, right up to his hard, heavy balls.

I cried out again, surrendering gladly now to his mouth's strength. He spun us around, breaking the astounding kiss at last and pushed me on to the bed so that I was kneeling. With the force of it, I fell forward onto my hands. He gripped my hips once more and thrust into me hard. I gasped. He pulled back, making me moan and pushed in again. With every stroke he grazed my G-spot and involuntary little animal noises spilled out of my mouth. My pussy convulsed around his cock.

"You don't know what it was like," he ground out, "wanting you so much while keeping my face straight for your psychic friends, smiling at some other woman while you wriggled, all hot and moaning inside. How I kept from throwing you on the floor and taking you there and then in front of them all I will never know."

His words sent my reeling senses into overdrive, gathering the waves of climax for the earth-shattering explosion surely only seconds away. They also made me crow with triumph that I had not been the only one of us so wildly aroused during dinner and that seemed to drive him even wilder. The power of his thrusts gathered furious pace, heating his cock and mixing the fire and ice inside me once more. I moaned continuously, writhing on him, pushing back into him, squeezing his cock and twisting on it with ecstasy, my hands clawing the quilt as the orgasm finally crashed over me.

My pussy pulsed, grasping his cock, drenching it. Hearing it begin deep in his chest, I managed to gasp out through my own pleasure, "Don't...howl!"

For answer, his arms slid under mine, drawing me upright and he buried his face in my neck. His suppressed howl vibrated through my throat, intensifying my climax. His sensual lips pulled strongly on my skin, his sharp teeth grazed it. I knew he would bite me. I was terrified. I longed for it.

His growl became a groan of pain. His open mouth dragged up my neck and jaw and fastened on my lips. While his cock shuddered inside my pussy, he buried the wild noise of his violent pleasure inside my mouth. I sucked it in, swallowing it, swallowing

him with my own sudden tears, acknowledging in that moment the blinding truth that no matter who or what he was, what he had done or would do, I loved him.

I wrenched my mouth free to stare up at him. Massive satisfaction warred with a new, terrible need in me. How could I not trust him now? When he hadn't bitten me? His green eyes were still opaque with his own bliss. He was all I wanted.

I gasped, "Oh Jesus Christ, Charlie, bite me!" And offered my neck again.

Intelligence glimmered briefly in his lust filled face, a flash of disbelief and triumph. Then he fell on my oversensitized neck, sucking, licking, teasing and I lost myself all over again. His still-hard cock began to move inside me once more, relighting the fading sparks of delight. One of his big, sensitive hands gripped my pussy, making me throb, and I moved with him, twisting my head in ecstasy. His razor-sharp teeth punctured my skin. I cried out at the intense mingling of pain and pleasure, felt him pull the blood through my veins and into his mouth. Through this weird yet undeniable bliss his fingers moved among my labia, on my clitoris, his cock fucked me in perfect rhythm with his sucking mouth and orgasm tore me apart like a hurricane.

To complete my joy, he came again too in huge, shuddering jolts that kept me there long beyond what should have been possible. The sucking on my neck lessened and stopped. His trembling tongue licked my wounds and the pain faded, much faster than the pleasure.

We came slowly back to Earth, slipping down in each other's arms to lie on the bed, pressed together like spoons.

At last, I whispered, "If I hadn't asked, you wouldn't have drunk from me, would you?"

"No."

I turned in his arms, absorbing the sight of him lying there in my narrow, single bed, his fair hair falling loose around his face and shoulders. I touched it, running my fingers through it and smiling at its silky smoothness.

"Does that mean you'll stop killing too, if I ask you?"

“No,” he said regretfully. “I’m a vampire. But I will promise to think twice about it before I do it.”

Was that good enough? I wondered doubtfully. Just what was I prepared to live with? Or without?

“And I will never touch your family or friends,” he added, with just a shade of anxiety. He paused, clearly remembering Maggie and Davie and God knew who else at the wedding. “Again.”

Laughter caught in my throat. He was quick to catch it, stroking my face, smiling into my eyes. “Does this mean you accept my offer? To be together? Mostly...”

To be together, mostly, was as good as it got for me. I was won. We both knew it. But I’m not stupid.

I said reproachfully, “You said I had all night to decide.”

Growling deep in his throat, he rolled me on to my back and proceeded to a little more delicious persuasion.

About the Author

Marie Treanor was born and brought up in Scotland, but for some years moved around the UK working and studying. Now she is back home and happily married with three young children. Having grown bored with city life, she lives these days in a picturesque village by the sea where she is lucky enough to enjoy herself avoiding housework and writing stories of romance and fantasy.

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