

DARK DESIRE

By

Stephanie Bedwell-Grime

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PART ONE

Europe, 1795

Empty champagne glasses were all that remained of the wedding celebration. The guests had long ago faded into the mist that rose up around the castle walls. Ghosts of drunken best wishes echoed through the great hall, blending with the thunder that rumbled through

the mountains outside. A gust of wind spiraled down the chimney, causing even the roaring fire in the mammoth hearth to pause and take heed. Wind and rain battered the tiny bedroom upstairs, howling between the turrets, and hammering at the stone exterior. Lightning sizzled the skies, far overpowering the solitary candle.

"Of all the nights to have a storm," Kirsten muttered grimly, setting aside the beaded gown of ivory silk, and searching for her cloak, "why did it have to be my wedding night?"

Inga, her governess, told her wedding rain promised good luck. But it seemed instead that the skies cried with her, as she made preparations to leave her father's home forever.

"Kirsten!" Her father's fist shook the door. "Valdemar is waiting."

"I'm coming," she shouted over the storm. She'd dawdled as long as possible. Checking her reflection in the mirror, she saw only pale hair and gray haunted eyes. She didn't look like a woman, more like a frightened child.

Her father hustled her down the sweeping staircase. And, with a perfunctory kiss, she was bundled into the waiting carriage.

Traded like a horse, from one man to another.

The carriage leapt into motion, throwing her against the dark figure beside her. With strong arms, he caught her and settled her back against the velvet cushions. A bolt of lightning cast him in silhouette against the brilliant sky.

Swallowing nervously, she studied the stranger beside her. They'd met only once before the wedding. With her father standing guard, he'd presented her with an intricately carved gold cross with a flaming ruby at its center to mark their betrothal. Eyes black as onyx had lingered on her every move, making her feel both desirable and vulnerable. At twenty nine, he seemed terribly serious, and impossibly ancient.

Rumors clung to the young aristocrat. Servants whispered he was cursed. Local folklore spoke of a string of fiancées who perished under mysterious circumstances. The kitchen staff lay wagers she'd be dead within a week like his last wife.

Her father dismissed her fears as superstitious nonsense. He was anxious to marry off the last of his seven daughters. With her mother long dead, Kirsten had no choice but to obey his wishes.

Through the carriage's black curtains she could see only drifting columns of mist. The teaming rain absorbed all sound except for the

rattle of the carriage's wheels. Now and then, shrubby trees thrust their glistening, leafless branches through the fog like questing hands.

A meager few feet beyond the narrow wheels of the carriage, the ground fell sharply away. Mercifully, the view was obscured by mist and rain. Kirsten crossed herself, praying the driver was sure of his grip on the reins.

After what seemed an eternity of bouncing and jostling, they rounded a corner and she gazed at last upon the crumbling battlements of Castle Berthold. Fog clung to the upper storeys like ghosts of past occupants. The stone was gray, rough from the wear of countless years. Yet, the stately oak door was richly lacquered and its brass hinges polished to a dull gleam.

The carriage clattered to a halt before the stone steps. Kirsten swallowed hard and uttered another prayer as Valdemar stepped down and offered her his hand. She was now mistress of that crumbling castle.

It was only six days since her seventeenth birthday.

Valdemar slipped a proprietary arm about her waist to guide her up the slick, stone stairs, past gargoyles whose vacant eyes seemed to follow her every move.

The pressure of Valdemar's palm against her back urged her forward. As they approached, the door swung open, dwarfing the thin figure whose lantern cast swaying shadows out over the steps. The gaunt, gray haired man bowed deeply as she passed, then hurried off to oversee the unloading of her luggage.

Above the grand entranceway an iron chandelier blazed with a multitude of candles. The sheer size of the hall made her feel insignificant. Yet, Valdemar strode across the cavernous room with the confidence of a man well accustomed to wealth and vast rooms. He was at home, she realized of a sudden.

And so, God help me, am I.

"Let me show to your rooms," Valdemar said, ushering her forward. "I trust everything will be to your satisfaction."

"I'm certain it will be, My Lord," she whispered, with another glance at the high, vaulted ceiling that disappeared into shadow above the chandelier. His hand touched her shoulder, turning her back to him.

"Now that we are wed, Kirsten, you must call me by my given name."

"As you wish, Valdemar," she said, trying it out. It felt odd to address a virtual stranger with familiarity.

Valdemar smiled, and she caught a glimpse of the handsomeness which attracted so many women. He stroked her cheek lightly. "My name has never sounded so sweet as it does upon your lips."

His compliment embarrassed her, and she looked away. This was the first of many rites of courtship to come.

Merciful God, guide me through this night.

Seeming to sense her discomfort, Valdemar motioned to the sweeping, stone staircase leading to the balconies of the upper floors. "You will no doubt want a few moments to settle in and refresh yourself after your journey."

* * * *

Kirsten twisted the gold band on her finger and stared out the narrow window at the teeming rain. Wrenched away from those who cared for her, the tall towers of Castle Berthold seemed like the walls of a prison. She had nowhere to run to, no way to escape down the craggy mountain path. Inga's account of the ways of men and women had been confusing and frightening, most of it having to do with pain and blood.

She was Valdemar's possession, and he could do with her as he

pleased.

There was a quiet tread on the stone floor behind her. Kirsten whirled and looked up into eyes dark as night and even blacker curls that framed his forehead. His unruly, long hair was still tied back with a crimson ribbon. But he'd discarded the rest of his wedding finery, except for the wool pants and the white, silk shirt. The shirt, she noted with a sinking heart was open to the waist. Beneath the fragile fabric, muscle rippled like those on a lion at rest.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you," he said, and smiled. When he smiled, he was very handsome. His dark frown, however, was another matter.

"I didn't hear you come in," Kirsten said, trying to imagine those strong hands upon her. Up close he seethed with restrained strength. In spite of his approachable smile, she was terrified.

"I'm not surprised. It's thundering loud enough to wake the devil." Valdemar looked past her at the storm that raged beyond the narrow window. "Come away from the window, Kirsten, before you catch your death."

He was leading her toward the bed, she realized with a thundering heart. She thrust her heels firmly into the thick carpet that covered the cold, stone floor, but he pulled her along easily. The gold

embroidered coverlet yielded under her, as they fell together into its softness.

Valdemar ran a hand over the golden fountain of her hair. His touch was feather soft and it brought every nerve in her body to life. His chest felt hard against the softness of her breasts, and the arms that gripped her might just as well have been made from iron.

Warm lips coaxed hers apart, and she shuddered in passion and fear.

"You're trembling," he said suddenly, looking intently into her gray eyes that swam with repressed tears. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing...sir." Dismayed, she felt the wetness of tears on her cheeks.

"Valdemar," he reminded her gently. "What are you afraid of Kirsten?" he asked, realizing suddenly. "Me?"

"I've heard..." she stopped abruptly.

Valdemar sucked in a long breath. "Oh, I know what is said behind my back." He regarded her shrewdly. "Do you believe what they say?"

"I hope," she said carefully, "that I shall not be dead within a week like your last wife."

She expected him to be angry, but instead he smiled. "Contrary to rumor," he said gently. "Greta died in a terrible accident. It was heart breaking. We had only begun our life together."

"I'm sorry," she whispered, staring at him wide eyed.

"No need to be. It has nothing to do with you."

"Doesn't it bother you to know such awful things are said about you?"

"I pay no attention to the babble of fools." His hand traced the gentle swell of her breast. "I won't hurt you, Kirsten. I promise."

She watched his shirt fall into a heap of silk on the floor, followed by his pants. Then his dark eyes commanded her gaze once again.

"It's all right," Valdemar whispered. "Don't be afraid. This is a wonderful experience."

"It is?"

"Of course," he said, laughing. "If it wasn't, human beings would become extinct."

Horrified, she felt the warmth of his hand on her thigh beneath her nightgown. Caresses continued upward in spirals of delightful

sensation. Dimly, she felt his warm fingers at the laces of her nightgown, the sheer fabric being pulled away from her. His hands mapped the contours of her body. She gasped as his fingers located the secret place between her thighs. His touch sent tingles of purest pleasure shooting up her spine. She moaned and writhed softly against him, wanting him to touch her there again and again.

All at once he entered her. The sudden invasion made her cry out in pain. But then his feather soft lips covered hers and he began to move gently against her.

Within her a storm was brewing, buffeting her about on winds of unfamiliar sensation. It grew in intensity until it thundered within her, culminating in wave after wave of supreme pleasure.

Her eyes flew open, and she found herself staring into the black depths of eyes that seethed with desire. His jaw was clamped rigidly shut, his breathing harsh and erratic. Frightened, she shied away from him, but arms like steel held her in place. Finally he strained against her. His head fell to her shoulder and he lay there panting.

For several moments, he seemed to struggle with himself. Then he sighed heavily and kissed her on the forehead.

"Get some sleep," he said softly. "It's been a long day."

Bewildered, she watched as he collected his clothes, blew out the candle and disappeared into the dark hallway. Still aching for more, she snuggled into the warm spot he'd left beside her, and slept.

* * * *

"So?" asked the well dressed young man whose feet rested nonchalantly against Valdemar's writing table.

"Lord Cornelius, don't you have a home to go to?"

"You were up there a long time." Cornelius said, examining the lace on his cuffs. He plucked a peach from a bowl on the sideboard and bit deeply into it, grinning at Valdemar. The imprint of his teeth left two long ridges in the fruit. "I take it the lovely Frau Berthold is now with her Maker."

"She is...sleeping," Valdemar corrected.

Cornelius let out a great guffaw and slapped his knee. "I knew it! I saw the way you were eyeing her. You were in love before you even said your I do's. I wagered Adrian a pound of gold you wouldn't go through with it." He stopped suddenly. "What are you going to do? Have it annulled?" He grinned with delightful suspicion. "Or have you consummated it already?"

Valdemar's face gave him the answer.

"Ah," Cornelius said, "The proverbial starving man cast away from the banquet table. It must have been a delightful experience claiming her maidenhead without a drop of her blood to drink."

"Cornelius please," Valdemar said crossly. "This is my wife you're talking about."

"So you're going to keep her then?"

"Don't tell me you wagered on that as well."

Cornelius sighed wistfully. "I wish I had."

"I want to keep her," Valdemar admitted reluctantly. "She is sweet and lovely."

"And human. As much as I enjoy a good scandal, Valdemar, this is not wise."

"I have been lonely since Rowena left."

"For God's sake, that was more than two hundred years ago. Surely you've recovered."

"I'm trying to."

"Well this isn't the way. Once you had that gold band on her finger and her dowry in your keeping, you were supposed to slice open her jugular vein and have her for dessert."

"Do you mind, Cornelius. I am hungry. And if it makes you happy to hear it, I nearly did. I just couldn't."

Cornelius dropped his feet from the table and stood to leave. "Well, I have a pound of gold to collect." He helped himself to another peach and waved cheerfully from the doorway. "G'night Val."

* * * *

The most notable feature of Adrian's rambling estate were the rows of mullioned windows gaping open against the night. Long past the hour when most shuttered themselves in the seclusion of their homes, the windows stood dark and vacant. Now and then a candle flickered, as servants scurried about on their errands.

Darkness, it seemed, suited Adrian just fine.

Cornelius entered without knocking. Adrian was in his customary corner of the empty grand hall, a single, yet huge, chair pulled up before the roaring fire.

"Is that the jingle of gold coins I hear?" Adrian said as his guest leaned casually against the mantle piece.

"Alas not."

Adrian shook his head, hair bright as flame falling across his face. "I do hate it when you're right, Cornelius."

"Don't pout, Adrian. I was a most gracious loser to our last wager."

Adrian studied the fire through golden lashes. "Val has the strangest ways of entertaining himself."

Cornelius shrugged. "Valdemar's problem, not ours."

"Valdemar has a way of making his problems ours."

"Not this one," Cornelius said. "I for one, intend to stay far away."

Adrian laughed. "You'll be back there tomorrow night. I'd wager on it."

"Thanks, but I'm quitting while I'm ahead." Cornelius looked around the cavernous room. "Where's Moira?"

"Sulking, as usual. Perhaps I'll wait until tomorrow to break the news

to her."

"Break what news to me?" purred a sultry voice from the shadows behind Adrian.

Cornelius bowed. "My Lady, Moira."

The voluptuous redhead gave him only the smallest nod of acknowledgement. "Good evening, Neil."

"Evening," Adrian remarked. "It's nearly dawn."

"Did you enjoy yourself at the wedding?" Cornelius asked with an evil wink at Adrian.

Moira yawned. "I presume Valdemar is well on his way to becoming a widower, yet again?"

"Not exactly," Cornelius said. He glanced at the lightening sky.

"Goodness, it's late. I really must be going."

He marched past them, leaving Adrian to deal with Moira's questions.

"What did he mean, 'not exactly'?"

Adrian scowled as Cornelius disappeared through the arched doorway of the hall. "It would seemed Valdemar's decided to keep her."

Moira's scream of rage echoed through the estate and most of the surrounding countryside. Cornelius chuckled to himself. Adrian wouldn't be getting much sleep that day.

* * * *

Kirsten awoke groggy and disoriented. The bed's gold stitched canopy and curtains were closed against the chill air. The darkness within made it hard to tell if it was night or day. Slowly, she became aware of the soft curls that brushed her face and the heavy weight of an arm about her waist.

Valdemar.

She stepped from the bed, embarrassed to find herself completely naked. The windows were covered in tapestries as thick as the curtains on the bed. Grasping a corner of the drapery, she peered outside. Sunlight clove the room, casting a blade of light into the shadows. The events of the previous night crashed back into memory.

Behind her, the huge four poster bed with its golden curtains beckoned. She hesitated, wondering if she pulled back the drapery, would he disappear the way he had last night after they'd made love?

Frowning, she opened the drapes. A sliver of light splashed across his

face.

He came awake with a hiss and curse, shielding his eyes from the sunlight that blazed through the open window.

Kirsten jumped backward, upending a chair and falling over it.

Swearing, Valdemar leapt from the bed and yanked the drapery back into place, plunging the room back into darkness. He turned toward her, eyes black as the shadows.

She edged away from him along the side of the bed. He caught her easily. His grip was impossible to break. She realized suddenly that his nails were very long and sharp, something she hadn't noticed last night.

"I'm sorry," she said, trembling. "I didn't mean to wake you."

Valdemar jolted to his senses and loosened his grip. "You startled me," he said, pulling her against him.

"But it's afternoon," she said, confused.

Valdemar glanced fearfully at the shrouded windows. "We were up very late last night." He smiled down into her face and stroked her hair. "After you fell asleep, I worked until early in the morning."

"On the night of our wedding?"

"The world doesn't stop because of my affairs."

"Are you getting up?" she asked hopefully, both afraid to be alone and afraid to be alone with him.

"No, I think I'll sleep a bit longer. I have much business to attend to this evening."

Eyes downcast, she examined the carpet. "Don't you like me?"

He held her tenderly by the shoulders, forcing her to look up at him.

"I like you very much, Kirsten. I just need some sleep right now."

"What should I do?"

"Get dressed," he said with a kiss and a gentle push in the direction of the dressing room. "Hilliard, my steward, will see that you get something to eat. Then you can explore your new home. And I will see you later."

* * * *

Kirsten spent the fading afternoon wandering the deserted hallways. Berthold Castle had an otherworldly silence that kept her looking over

her shoulder. Chambermaids glided noiselessly along the uniformly gray, stone corridors. Threadbare tapestries and peeling portraits decorated the grand halls in memory of past splendor. Everything within the castle walls bore the look of decade upon decade of constant use.

Hilliard Greif, Valdemar's steward, proved to be as featureless as the dull masonry. From his graying hair to his impeccably pressed charcoal suit, breeches and boots, Kirsten was certain that, if she squinted, he might fade right into the stonework.

He had acknowledged her presence with a stiff nod, making it clear he was as uncomfortable in her presence as she was in his.

After becoming lost in the labyrinthine hallways several times, she returned to the relative familiarity of her dressing room and began to unpack her trousseau.

* * * *

"Let me introduce you to my friend, Cornelius," Valdemar said gesturing to the smartly dressed young man who stood before the fireplace in Valdemar's first floor study. He didn't have Valdemar's brooding sensuality, nor was he handsome, but he had a kind and friendly face.

Cornelius smiled warmly. "Madam Kirsten." He bent to kiss her hand. The touch of his fingers sent little tingles up her arm.

"We met at the wedding?" she stammered. "Didn't we?"

It was taxing to keep Valdemar's many callers straight. His evenings were filled with visits by friends and business acquaintances, his days empty and silent. Things seemed to happen at random in Valdemar's household, and mostly after dark.

"We did," Cornelius agreed, still holding on to her hand. The warmth of his fingers sent little tingles up her arm. "I'm flattered you remember."

Where Valdemar was overwhelmingly sensuous, Cornelius was gently encouraging. His engaging smile set her immediately at ease. Kirsten found she couldn't look away from his hazel eyes that seemed to change color with every flicker of the candle.

"Would you ask Hilliard to fetch us some wine?" Valdemar said, stepping between them and forcing Cornelius to drop her hand.

She rushed off to obey him, then turned back and peered into the study. Cornelius was taking a flask from a velvet bag. The crystal vessel was full of a thick, ruby colored liquid.

"I wouldn't do this for anyone but you."

"I do appreciate your kindness, Cornelius," Valdemar said. He poured himself a generous glass and raised it in a toast. "Cheers."

He downed the contents in one gulp and set the glass back on the sideboard. Thick, reddish brown liquid clung to the sides of the goblet.

"Better?" Cornelius asked, raising an eyebrow.

Valdemar sighed deeply and nodded. "I just can't leave her right now. She's terrified," he waved his arm in a sweeping gesture, "of this place, of Hilliard, of me."

"Really, Valdemar..." Cornelius began. He let the sentence trail off, then shrugged. "Who knows? I probably wouldn't have been able to do it either. She is lovely."

Afraid to linger, Kirsten hurried off to find Hilliard. By the time she returned Valdemar was on his second glass of the mysterious liquid. She sipped the wine Hilliard poured, noting that Valdemar continued to drink from the bottle Cornelius had brought. She maneuvered herself closer to the sideboard, making small talk with Cornelius. But Valdemar held his glass as if the contents were gold.

Finally, engaged in an animated conversation, he set the glass down. Kirsten set hers beside it. She waited until their backs were turned, then raised his glass to her lips.

Thick, lukewarm liquid seeped down her throat. Its coppery taste reminded her vaguely of something she'd once tasted...

When she'd cut her finger.

The glass fell from her hands, shattering in a spray of ruby and crystal shards. Crimson spattered her ivory gown. She shrieked and backed up, colliding with Cornelius.

Valdemar whirled, snatching her from Cornelius' grasp. His face was dark as the night sky. For a moment they were frozen, staring at the shattered goblet in disbelief.

"Blood!" she whispered in horror. "You were drinking blood!"

Valdemar's eyes were as hard as onyx. He looked down at the stained, white dress. "Kirsten," he said quietly. "Go upstairs and get changed."

Entirely terrified, she obeyed him.

* * * *

Cornelius watched her disappear up the sweeping staircase. "So," he said, turning back to his friend. "What now?"

Dismally, Valdemar regarded Hilliard's attempts to sweep up the shattered glass and sponge the blood from the carpet, and sighed. "I really don't know."

"It would have been much kinder to "

"Don't lecture, Neil," he snapped. "It is much too late to talk about what I ought to have done."

"This leaves you only two options," Cornelius continued, undaunted.

"Oh, enlighten me, Cornelius," Valdemar growled, "since you think I'm so dense."

"Kill her," Neil said, levelly. "Or make her one of us."

"I care for neither of those options. I rather like her the way she is."

"That's the problem with falling in love with a mortal, isn't it. It always results in a certain loss of innocence."

Valdemar eyed the staircase up which Kirsten had fled. "I'd better see how she fares."

"And I have other business to attend to," Cornelius said. He stopped on his way out of the parlor. "Did you know that Moira flew into a fit of rage upon hearing the news of your continuing matrimony? Adrian is meeting with the carpenter this evening."

"Just like Moira to stage a fit in his house."

"You shouldn't have encouraged her."

"Moira never needed any encouragement," Valdemar said, disdainfully. "Besides, she has Adrian now."

"This interest in Adrian is an attempt to make you jealous," Cornelius pointed out. Then, when he realized the sentiment was lost on Valdemar, he shook his head. "I don't know why he puts up with her."

"He's in love with her," Valdemar said. "Isn't that what drives us all to foolish acts?"

"Speak for yourself. I, for one, am committed to a policy of bachelorhood."

PART TWO

The bloodstained white gown lay in a discarded heap on the floor, and

its former occupant lay in a quivering heap on the bed.

Valdemar looked from one to the other and sighed. He sat on the bed beside her, intending to take her in his arms and whisper reassuring words. But the moment he touched her, she shrieked and bolted for the door.

In an instant, he crossed the room and stood before the door, blocking her exit. So sudden was his movement, she couldn't stop in time and crashed into him. Realizing his swiftness was well beyond human capability, she screamed again. A vice like hand covered her mouth.

"Let's not share our personal troubles with the entire province," Valdemar said, leading her firmly back to the bed.

"Monster!" she hissed when he tentatively removed his hand.

He flinched, his eyes hardened, but he said calmly, "I am not a monster, Kirsten."

She looked at him, gray eyes heavy with tears. "I want to go home."

"You are home, my love."

"Send me back to my father," she begged. "I promise I'll tell him nothing."

"No."

"I'll demand an annulment," she threatened.

"It's a little late for that. You are my wife. Our guests listened as you promised yourself to me, until death do us part."

Tears sprang from the corners of her eyes, dribbled down her cheek, hesitating on the edge of her chin before falling to the covers. "Are you going to kill me?"

Valdemar swore. "No, of course not." He wiped another tear from her face. She shuddered. "Does my touch offend you so?"

"No," she admitted in a voice barely above a whisper.

"You've been listening to gossip again."

"You were drinking blood."

He looked at her for a long moment.

"Yes," he said, finally.

Kirsten swallowed. "Why?"

"Because I must."

"Why must you?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Is that what you told Greta?" she asked, eyes round with terror.

"That is quite enough," Valdemar said, rising. In a second, he was through the door, leaving her questions unanswered and her fears unallayed. From the other side of the heavy door, she heard the jingle of keys.

* * * *

Kirsten stared at the tiny aperture that stood between her and freedom. The castle's narrow windows had been designed to accommodate no more than a bow and arrow, not a grown woman. Even if she could squeeze her body through the narrow opening, it was a three storey fall down the shear face of the castle to the crags below.

A jangle of keys marked Hilliard's arrival. She watched dumbly as he entered and set the tray on the bed before her. "Good Evening, Frau Berthold."

"Hilliard," she said, staring breathlessly up at him. "Please let me out."

To his credit, he appeared genuinely regretful. "I'm afraid I can't do that, Madam," he said, then disappeared through the door, locking it behind him.

Evening turned to night without a sound from the world outside her door. She had almost fallen asleep when she heard a nearly silent tread on the stone stairs. She groped for the candle, getting it lit just as Valdemar strode through the door.

"This isn't fair!" she said with as much indignity as she could muster. "Keeping me locked up here like an animal."

"Your imprisonment is your own choice," Valdemar said. "All you need do to secure your release, is to calm yourself and be reasonable."

He cocked an eyebrow and held up the keys.

"I promise."

"Fine," he said. "Get dressed and come downstairs."

By four a.m., Kirsten's eyelids were heavy with exhaustion, but she fought the urge to sleep. As soon as the sun was visible in the sky, she was sure Valdemar would take to his bed. Once he was sound asleep she would have her chance.

But the opportunity she was waiting for took much longer than she expected. It was close to noon before Valdemar chose to sleep. He insisted she go with him, and she meekly obeyed.

It was another hour before the head on her shoulder grew heavy and his breathing became deep and even. She rolled a little away from him. No change in his breathing, nothing to suggest he was aware of her movement. Silently, she slipped from the bed.

Hilliard was presumably off on some errand; there was no sign of him in the stone hallways. Whatever Hilliard was up to, he hadn't taken the carriage.

A visit to her father's house seemed like a reasonable enough request to the driver, and he accommodated her without question. Only when they had descended from the winding mountain path and Valdemar's castle was a landmark in the distance, did she relax.

By the time he discovered her gone, she'd be in her father's keeping and he would protect her. Kirsten was nearly sick with relief when the Werner gates came into view.

The sound of the carriage on the cobblestone driveway brought her father to the door. At the sight of the Berthold crest on the carriage, he frowned and walked into the lane to meet them.

"Papa!" she cried, rushing from the carriage and falling into his arms. But instead of the protective hug she was expecting, his arm pushed her away.

"Kirsten, stop it!" He straightened his clothes in embarrassment. "This is no way for a grown woman to behave."

Chastised, Kirsten stepped back and rearranged her cloak. "I'm sorry, I was just glad to see you."

Her father glanced at the empty carriage. "Where is Valdemar?"

"He is at home," she said, feeling suddenly abandoned. "He sleeps until late in the day."

Her father's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "He doesn't know you're here then?"

Kirsten traced the outline of a cobblestone with the toe of her boot.

"No."

"Then you must return at once."

"No, Papa," she begged, grabbing his arm.

He shook her off roughly.

"Please don't make me go back."

He eyed her warily. "Explain yourself, Kirsten."

"He's never up before sundown," she stammered. "We never share a meal. I've never seen him eat..." Kirsten hesitated, fearing his wrath.

"A man is entitled to arrange his life to suit himself." Hopelessly, she watched her father's expression change from mild annoyance to thundering outrage. "You shame me! Get back in the carriage!"

"Don't send me back," she implored him. "I fear for my life."

"Get in," he ordered, and she obeyed.

He spoke a few words to the driver, then climbed in beside her. The carriage lurched into motion, carrying her away from salvation.

* * * *

The sun was just setting as they pulled up in front of the imposing door to Valdemar's castle. Clutching her as if she might still try to escape, her father stepped down and dragged her after him.

As they approached the stone steps, the massive door flew open and Valdemar came running down the stairs, looking every bit the

concerned husband. "Kirsten," he said, looking questioningly from father to daughter. "Where have you been? I was worried."

"Go inside," her father ordered. "I want to talk to Herr Berthold alone."

In the doorway, she could see Hilliard's stern outline.

"It's all right, Hilliard," Valdemar called, never taking his eyes from Kirsten. "I've found her." He pushed her gently in Hilliard's direction. "Would you see that Frau Berthold has some tea to calm her and something to eat. I'll be along shortly."

He watched as Kirsten followed Hilliard into the hall, then turned to his father in law. "Please come in." He waved him to a seat before the fire in the first floor drawing room. "Brandy?"

"I'm sorry to have disturbed your supper," Herr Werner said, taking the crystal snifter.

"Not at all," Valdemar said. "I've already eaten."

"Kirsten was very young when her mother died. There was no one to help her prepare for her new life." He spread his hands in an empty gesture. "I'm afraid I wasn't much use."

"It's been a difficult adjustment for her," Valdemar said, forcing a smile. "But I'm sure it will all work out."

"My daughter is impressionable, easily influenced by what she hears," he said, intimating much, saying little.

Valdemar glanced at the ceiling, as if he could see through it. "No cause for worry. As I said, I'm sure everything will be fine."

* * * *

She barely heard his footsteps over her stifled sobs. Abandoned by all who loved her, she was even more certain of impending doom.

"I don't understand, Kirsten," Valdemar said, kneeling by the side of the bed. He put a hand behind her head and turned her tear streaked face toward him. "I haven't harmed you, have I?"

"No," she whispered, eyes downcast.

"And have I not seen that your rooms are pleasingly decorated, and that you want for nothing?"

"You have," she admitted.

"Then why did you run away?"

Her lips trembled. "I was afraid."

"Afraid of what? That I'm still plotting your untimely demise?"

She nodded mutely.

"Now why would I want to murder you?"

Having no coherent answer to that, she said boldly. "I'm sure your next wife will find my rooms just as pleasing."

"I don't want another wife," Valdemar said. "I want you, Kirsten. I love you."

"You don't even know me," she blurted.

"I know you well enough, Kirsten," he said. "You are kind, gentle, and very beautiful." He searched her face. "I thought by the way we touched each other, that you felt something for me as well."

She couldn't deny it. Since their wedding night, she had ached for his touch. When he slept during the days, she counted the hours until sunset. Yet once he awoke and they were alone together, she was terrified.

Admittedly, she was naive in the ways of men. Her father had been a stern and distant figure. But Valdemar was different in ways she

couldn't imagine.

"Your lady wife, your late fiancées...did you kill them?" she asked with utmost folly.

His fury, she expected, but he merely turned his fathomless eyes upon her and regarded her with a long, measuring stare.

"I did."

Kirsten shrank away from him. And this time, he let her go.

"Why?" In spite of her fear, she had to know. "For their money? Their dowries?"

"For their blood."

"Is that what you want from me? My blood?"

Valdemar sighed. "I long to taste of you, my love. The very sight of you makes me thirsty."

"Why haven't you?"

"Because it would kill you, darling. And, as I have told you on many occasions, I prefer you alive. It would seem," he added with a sad smile, "that I've fallen in love with you."

"I don't understand," she stammered, looking hopefully at the door. But Valdemar reached out and tethered her by the wrist.

"Of course you don't," he said, kindly. "And I doubt I could explain it to you."

"I do wish you would try," she whispered. She had to learn as much as she could about Valdemar. Her life might depend on it. "Why must you drink blood? Why must you kill?"

Valdemar looked at her for a very long moment, as though pondering whether to tell her. "The act of taking blood kills," he told her, finally. "Unless...never mind."

"But why must you drink blood in the first place?"

"It is our food," he said, simply. "Our only sustenance."

"Our?"

"Those of my race."

Kirsten stared at him dumbly. "Your race?"

"I believe the word you're looking for," Valdemar said, "is vampir."

She shrank back against the headboard, her hand fastening on the slender gold cross Valdemar had given her. With movement faster than her eyes could track, he reached out, seizing the fragile chain, and with an effortless tug, yanked it from around her neck. She watched in horror as the delicate gold cross fell into his hand.

"See," he snarled, forcing her to look at his palm. "The symbol of Christ does not set me aflame."

Kirsten crossed herself furiously. In a shaking voice, she began to pray. Valdemar regarded her grimly, but when she began to recite the prayer for the dead, he lost his patience and snapped, "Surely this is not necessary, Kirsten. I am not the walking dead, nor the spawn of Satan. We were, after all, married in the house of God."

"I'll tell the pastor," she threatened. "Murder is grounds for an annulment."

"If they could prove any of it," Valdemar said reasonably. "I would already be in custody. That is, if they could find a jail to hold me."

He handed the necklace back to her and straightened. "If you want to leave, Kirsten," he said wearily. "There is the door." And when she only looked warily back at him in reply, he said, "No, I'll not stop you. But it is dark outside, and blowing for a storm."

Kirsten inched away from him.

"So," he asked, arms crossed over his chest. "What will it be my love?"

In answer, she gathered up her skirts and fled.

* * * *

Branches clutched at her skirts and snagged her hose. Within minutes her fancy clothes were torn in a myriad places and her hair was a tangled mess.

He must have heard her careening through the bush or the clatter of her heels on the cobblestone, for as she approached, the huge wooden door opened and Kirsten fell inside.

"Kirsten?" Cornelius asked, picking her up off the floor. He looked in amazement at the bedraggled form before him. "Good Lord, child, what happened to you?"

"I am in most desperate need of your help, Cornelius," she blurted, seizing him by the lapels of his brocade vest. "I fear for my very life!"

Cornelius looked past her at the silent night beyond the threshold.

"Hush," he said, closing the door on the darkness. "You're safe now."

He put a reassuring arm around her shoulders. "Come inside and tell me what troubles you."

No fire burned in Cornelius' hearth, but the room was aglow with a multitude of candles. They burned in bright rows on the low tables, and flowed in brilliant flame across the mantle. Still eyeing her in bewilderment, he poured her an ample snifter of brandy and pressed it into her hand.

"I've never drunk liquor, only wine," she said, uncertainly. The smell of the spirits was overpowering.

But Cornelius fastened her fingers about the crystal vessel. "Drink," he ordered softly. "It will calm you."

Gently, he guided the snifter to her trembling lips. She took a tentative sip of the strong smelling liquid.

"That's better," he said, stroking her arm. The tender touch sent shivers down her spine.

Comforted by the warmth of his hands, her earlier terror dissipated. She suppressed the urge to throw her arms around his neck and crawl into the safety of his arms.

Seeming to sense her thoughts, Cornelius drew away from her. He sat

in the chair opposite and crossed his well muscled legs. "Where is Valdemar?" he asked casually.

Kirsten choked. Liquor burned her throat, making her face go red and bringing tears to her eyes. "That's what I wanted to tell you," she rasped. "I'm afraid he's going to kill me."

Cornelius leaned forward, hazel eyes watching her warily. "Why would Valdemar want to do that?" he asked quietly.

She hesitated, trying to stop the tears that were just a blink away, afraid he would think her completely mad. Then, risking her credibility, she said, "He is vampir."

Cornelius became very still. So still, Kirsten wasn't sure he was still breathing. "The vampir are no more than superstition and old wives' tales."

"He confessed as much to me."

Cornelius regarded her with the stillness of the sphinx. "Perhaps I'm not the best choice of a confidant," he said, watching the hope fade from her eyes. "Because, I too, am vampir."

Kirsten stared at him, his words echoing over and over in her mind. In the pit of her stomach, a cyclone of terror was brewing. Sensing her

desperate mood, Cornelius leaned forward to take her hands in his. "You have nothing to fear, Kirsten," he said gently, "from Valdemar or me."

But Kirsten wasn't listening to his kind words of reassurance. Her eyes fastened on the sharp points of his teeth that reflected the candlelight as he spoke.

She bolted across the parlor, catching the hem of her gown with the heel of her boot. Cornelius leapt after her, preventing her fall. But the moment his hands closed on her forearms, she shrieked in terror. Surprised, he let her go, and watched in bewilderment as she ran from his home into the darkness beyond.

With no haven in sight, the woods were more foreboding. She plunged blindly into the brush, heedless of the tiny twigs that tore at her face and grazed the skin on her hands and forearms. Blinded by the darkness and her tears, she blundered onward. Wind howled through the trees; its passage made the rustling leaves sound like the hollow rattling of bones. Minutes dragged into hours as her panic grew. Her face was bleeding from a multitude of tiny scratches and her hands were raw from brushing the branches aside. Breath came in ragged gasps, wrenched from a throat hoarse from screaming. Finally, chilled and exhausted, she sank down among her tangled skirts and

put her back against the broad trunk of a tree and sobbed.

Nearby, a twig snapped. A black shape moved between the trees. Strong arms seized her. Then there was warmth, a cloak wrapped snugly around her. She looked up into eyes that glinted blackly in the moonlight. Too weak to struggle, she collapsed against him gratefully.

Valdemar's lips brushed her forehead, then continued downward, tasting the blood that mingled with her tears. His breath warmed her frozen fingers as she yielded her hands to his caress.

"Do you know that you break my heart each time you run away?" he asked quietly.

She opened her mouth for a reply, but all that escaped was a pitiful whimper that the wind tore swiftly away.

"Come," he said gently, and hugged her closer. "Let's go home."

They were moving. She realized with a start he'd been carrying her for some time.

There was a fire raging in her room as he laid her on the bed and poured a bowl of water from the wash stand by the window. Tenderly, he wiped the blood and dirt from her face and hands.

Kirsten followed his movements with luminous gray eyes. She noted he'd manicured his nails to smooth rounded tips. His mouth was set in a firm line, so she couldn't see his teeth. In the firelight he looked human, handsome, and very sad.

"Does it hurt?" she asked suddenly.

Startled, he looked up. "To what are you referring, Liebchen?"

"Becoming vampir."

"The bite causes little pain," Valdemar said. "But most find it frightening. There is no comparable sensation."

"The first time?" she asked, blanching. "How many times do you have to do it?"

"Twice," he said, stroking her cheek.

Each time she surrendered to his affections she ran the risk of suffering the fate of the long line of women before her. The knowledge chilled her more thoroughly than the cold air outside. Resisting was impossible. One caress and her body was at his command. Her only defense was to become vampir.

"Make me like you," she begged, surprising them both. "I can't bear it

any longer, living half in your life and alone in mine."

Valdemar pulled her tangled hair from its pins, letting it cascade over his hands. "You can't possibly comprehend what you're asking."

She placed her palm against his chest. He covered her hand with his and pulled her closer. "Help me, Valdemar."

Valdemar stood to stare out the window. "Kirsten, I cannot condemn you to my fate."

"Then you abandon me, just like my father."

He was beside her again in an instant. "I will never abandon you."

"Is that so?" she asked bitterly. "Even when I'm gray and wrinkled like a hag?"

"Kirsten, that's hardly "

"I beg you, Valdemar. Do it now, before I change my mind."

He ran a hand over his eyes, hesitating. "You must be sure, Kirsten," he said earnestly, holding her head against his wildly beating heart. "This is forever."

"Please," she said, staring into his fathomless eyes.

Valdemar made a mound of pillows against the headboard and leaned back, holding out his arms for her to join him. She came hesitantly. He didn't force her, just waited patiently for her to lean against him and rest her head on his shoulder.

Gently, he brushed the long, blond hair from her neck. The touch of his fingers was warm and soothing.

"How long will I be in pain?"

"You will sleep for most of it," he said reassuringly. His lips moved against the satiny skin of her neck. "Don't be afraid."

Within the comforting warmth of his lips, she felt the sharpness of his teeth resting against her pulse point. She held her breath, afraid even the smallest movement might send those razor sharp points shooting through her skin.

"Relax," he said, and the movement of his lips against her throat sent little tingles down her spine. Every muscle in his body tensed, poised to taste of her. She opened her mouth to object, to tell him she'd changed her mind. But, in that instant, the pressure of his teeth intensified, and with a keen pain that made her cry out, he entered her veins.

Pain mingled with ecstasy. A deep shudder racked her body with every pull of his mouth. It was hard to be frightened in the deep lethargy that over came her. She collapsed into the strength of his arms, as he drank away her lifeblood.

Kirsten came to her senses a long time later. She was lying as before with her head on Valdemar's shoulder, his arms still protectively around her. His head rested against hers. His eyes were closed, and for once the expression on his face was peaceful.

When she stirred his eyes flickered open, and he smiled. She tried to raise herself up on her arms, but she was appallingly weak and strength failed her.

"Hush," Valdemar said, nestling her back in the crook of his neck.

"I'm dying, aren't I?" she asked, wanting only to know the awful truth.

"Not dying, I promise you. But you need to sleep."

She let him lay her down among the multitude of pillows, too weak even to panic. "Don't leave me," she protested weakly.

"I'll be close by," he said, standing to stretch his legs.

Of their own accord, her eyelids slid firmly shut.

* * * *

The moans of an animal in dire pain wrenched her from the cottony oblivion of sleep. Someone should see to the poor thing, she thought fuzzily. She ought to call Hilliard to take care of it. But, when she opened her eyes she found her own throat raw from screaming and the horrible sounds echoing loudly in her own ears.

Her body made a damp imprint in the sheets and her hair was a sodden mass against her forehead. Even the insignificant light of the candle seemed terribly bright. Tears swam across her eyes, blurring with the light and her suffering.

"Easy." Valdemar stroked her hair. She realized he'd been sitting there all along, whispering to her softly, pulling the blankets up around her when she'd thrown them off. "The pain will pass, once I drink from you again."

He leaned over and gathered her close, one arm beneath her neck, the other in the hollow of her waist. She barely felt his bite in the shower of pain. She lay, pressed against him, as her blood flowed into his body and darkness claimed her.

Kirsten awoke much later, days it seemed, to find her mouth filled with clotting blood. Needle like points of her growing teeth pierced

her tongue. The tips of her fingers burned as if they'd been dipped in acid. When she raised her hand she found her nails had splintered and thick claws grown in their place. Her other hand was wrist deep in warm water as Valdemar washed away the drying blood and cracked remnants of her nails. She opened her mouth to protest this new agony, but she choked on her own blood, and the question came out as a pitiful, wet gurgle.

Valdemar covered her parched lips with his own and gently sucked the blood from her mouth. "You cut yourself," he said, and probed the wound with the tip of his tongue.

Her entire mouth was swollen and bruised. It was difficult to talk around the elongated teeth. She pulled her wounded tongue safely behind the sharp points and eyed him warily.

"You'll get used to them," Valdemar promised. He sat her up against the headboard and poured a little wine across her cracked lips. She swallowed it gratefully.

Deep inside an unfamiliar hunger was growing. Far worse than the gnawing emptiness she was accustomed to, this was need that defied objection, a biological imperative that hijacked will and conscience.

"Ah," Valdemar said, watching her intently. "The bloodlust."

A terrible notion of what that actually meant dawned on her. She shied away from him, but he restrained her and rolled up his sleeve.

In horror, she looked at the tracks of blue veins that crisscrossed his wrist. "No!" she insisted, but her body lusted for a taste of the nectar that flowed in those veins.

Valdemar pressed his wrist against her mouth. His pulse beat against her lips. "Drink," he urged her.

Despite her revulsion, her lips parted. She felt the taunt resistance of his skin, then only the heat of his blood running across her tongue.

Valdemar groaned in pain and clutched her against him. She swallowed, then gulped his blood convulsively.

"Slowly, Kirsten," he warned, "There is enough."

Somehow she found the will to take him more tenderly.

"That's better," he sighed and stroked her cheek. An eternity later, he said, "Now, Kirsten, you must stop."

She desperately wanted to stop, but it was painfully hard to abandon that overwhelming pleasure. She hung on with savage need as he

grasped her by the scruff of the neck and disengaged his wrist from her mouth.

In the looking glass above her dressing table, she caught a glimpse of herself, wild eyed, disheveled, Valdemar's blood still dripping from her chin. The full reality of what she'd done hit her like a sharp blow to the stomach.

She fell on her knees beside the bed to pray, ignoring the loving arms that tried to comfort her. His arms held no solace. Where she had always felt God's presence, now there was only cold nothingness, and she knew she was damned.

Eternally.

* * * *

"And where is your lady wife this evening?" Cornelius asked cheerfully. In truth the strained expression on Valdemar's face worried him.

"She is in her rooms," Valdemar said dismally, "where she has been for the last week. She spends half her time in prayer and the rest beating her breast and insisting she is damned."

He whispered the words for Cornelius' hearing alone, but the redhead

in the corner overheard and laughed merrily.

"So true love does not conquer all, Valdemar," she said, setting down the goblet of ruby blood from which she was sipping daintily. "When will you ever learn?"

And when Valdemar turned venomous eyes upon her, she said sweetly, "Surely you can coax her from her hiding for a few moments. We did so want to meet your latest progeny."

"You met at the wedding," Valdemar snapped. "And if there's one person from whom I ought to protect my progeny, Moira, it's you."

"Nonsense," Moira insisted with a disarming smile. "Perhaps if the new Frau Berthold knows she has friends, it might help lift her mood."

"She can't stay locked in her room forever," Adrian interjected.

"Sooner or later she's going to have to hunt."

"Thank you for reminding me of that," Valdemar growled.

"We are your friends," Cornelius said. "She could not be more safe than with us."

"It's not as if any of us would hammer a stake through her heart, "

Adrian remarked.

"Don't be vulgar, Adrian," Moira said sternly, but as she turned away Valdemar noticed she was laughing.

"Convince her to join us," Cornelius said. In truth a glimpse of Kirsten had been the motivation behind his visit. With a guilty conscience, he added, "It might take her mind off her troubles."

* * * *

Kirsten did indeed remember the voluptuous redhead who'd spent most of their wedding reception pressed suggestively against Valdemar. She remembered especially that she liked her not at all. And Moira's stunningly handsome consort, Adrian, unnerved her completely. But Cornelius' smile was a beacon in the otherwise unfriendly room.

"Madam Kirsten, I was so hoping you would join us."

Relieved she was not going to throw another fit of hysterics, Valdemar relaxed and chatted with Moira and Adrian.

Cornelius regarded the woman before him. The transformation had given her an ethereal quality. Before she had been as wary as a frightened kitten. Now she exuded a profound sadness. He longed to

take her in his arms and make it all go away.

But she was the wife of an old and very dear friend.

As vampir you are even more beautiful," he told her instead. "I would not have thought it possible."

Kirsten blushed. Her hand went instinctively to the cross on its golden chain. "They also say the Devil is handsome," she whispered.

Cornelius looked deeply into her eyes. "I too, was schooled in the teachings of the church," he told her, then added quietly, "And I grew up during The Inquisition."

"I'm damned," Kirsten told him miserably. "I belong to Satan now. God is lost to me."

"And was not Satan originally one of God's angels?" Cornelius reasoned.

She nodded, trying to follow his train of thought.

"And if that is true, he prompted, "are you not still one of God's creatures?"

Kirsten nodded warily. It was an interesting way to reconcile his faith. That Valdemar's light hearted friend might have a spiritual depth to

his character was something she hadn't considered. He was pleasant to be with, completely unlike Valdemar. Perhaps that was what drew them to each other as friends. His wit and charm were infectious. The way his eyes crinkled at the corners when he smile charmed her. He seemed to put the sum of his soul into his deep warm laugh.

She realized suddenly that since she'd left her father's home, the only moments she'd felt truly safe were those spent in Cornelius' company.

"Now that you are one of us," Cornelius was saying, "You have nothing to fear."

"Nothing," Kirsten said, "except myself."

PART THREE

Cornelius surveyed the disheveled creature in his entrance hall.

"It is customary, Kirsten," he said lightly, "to dress nicely to visit the house of a friend."

His attempt at levity did little more than cause another cascade of tears down her already grimy face. She looked waif like in her tattered gown, blood drying on her face.

"Your first hunt," he said, understanding suddenly.

"Tell me, Cornelius," Kirsten said in a shaking voice. "What am I to do with my soul now?"

"The Lord judges your soul, Kirsten, not I."

"Then the Lord will surely judge me damned." She walked a few paces away, then threw up her hands. "I thought if I was one of you, I'd finally be safe. And now I'm safe everywhere but within myself."

Before he had a chance to think that this was the wife of another man, his best friend no less, he had wrapped his arms around her and was earnestly trying to calm her. "Valdemar loves you. That I know for certain." Feeling the sudden pangs of a guilty conscience, he looked down into her tear-streaked face, and asked, "Where is Valdemar?"

"At home, I presume. He didn't ask me where I was going. I'm sure he knows I'm here. He always seems to know where I am."

Stepping back, Cornelius motioned her up the wide staircase to his dressing room. "I'm afraid I don't have another dress to offer you, but there is a pitcher of water on the wash stand," he gestured to the silver comb on the dressing table. "You may borrow my comb, but I'm afraid that's the best I can do. This house has never known a woman's

touch."

"You've never been married, then?"

"No," he said, then nothing more.

* * * *

A much composed Kirsten greeted him a few minutes later. She'd washed the blood from her face and fastened her hair back up in its pins. As she moved toward him he could see wet patches where she'd done her best to sponge the blood from her skirts.

"I've sent a messenger to Castle Berthold," he said, rising from his writing table, "to inform Valdemar that you are here and safe."

"Thank you, Cornelius. You are very kind."

He smiled and held out his hand to guide her to a chair. "Why did you come here, Kirsten?"

"I needed to talk to you. Tell me what I can do to save my soul."

"I don't profess to know anything about souls." He watched the hope die in her eyes and spread his hands helplessly. "I have been as I am for several hundred years."

"This was a mistake," she said miserably.

"That may well be," Cornelius said as gently as he could. "It is also forever."

He expected tears, hysterics, but hers was a quiet sorrow. She seemed so utterly disheartened, he couldn't stop himself from taking her again in his arms. "Don't fret about it, Kirsten. You will adjust. We all did."

She looked up hopefully into his face, and in doing so her face brushed his lips. She was still warm from feeding, the smell of fresh blood taunted him from every pore. Hunger surged through him, and he felt his self control rapidly disintegrating.

"I shall prepare a carriage for you," he said abruptly.

But Kirsten clung to him, preventing him from standing up. "Please don't send me home. Valdemar has no words to comfort me."

"What makes you think I do?" he asked, his voice suddenly hoarse. If anyone's soul is tarnished, he thought grimly, It's mine.

"You understand."

"No," he said firmly, trying to dissuade her. "I desire you."

She took in his words without so much as a blink. "And I desire you."

She walked a few paces away from him. "No one has ever asked me what I wanted. All my life I've been ordered around...married off. And though Valdemar is kind, I did not choose him."

Cornelius gripped her by the shoulders and turned her gently to face him. "If you were given that choice," he asked carefully, "would it be me?"

Kirsten looked up into his face. "It would be you."

He bent his head; his mouth tenderly searched out her lips. A woman, no longer a frightened child, she returned his caress. They moved from the parlor to the stairs, to the bedroom door and finally to the huge bed that dominated Cornelius' bedroom.

His deft, questing fingers disposed of the many layers of her clothing. Likewise, she worked on the buttons of his pants and shirt. With hands and lips, they explored each other. He pulled her down on the bed on top of him. Her hips fit snugly against his as she took him deep inside her.

Fingers teased her nipples; she rocked against him. He moaned her name. Poised on the brink, she felt him rise against her, his lips fastened on her throat. Instinctively her teeth found his jugular vein.

Then there was only blood, and the hot shuddering of their bodies in release.

* * * *

"You brought her home an hour after dawn." Valdemar slammed the decanter of brandy down on the mantle. The crystal shattered in a rain of shards of glass and amber liquid. "What are you up to, Cornelius?"

Cornelius braced himself for another onslaught of Valdemar's wrath. "I was only trying to be helpful. Madam Kirsten was in such a state."

"And to what exactly have you helped yourself?" Valdemar asked venomously. Cornelius, who had never been good at hiding what was in his heart, merely looked back at him, undeniably guilty. Valdemar took in the look with a single, sweeping glance. "It is as I feared then."

"I'm afraid so," his friend replied bleakly. He watched as Valdemar's expression turned from calm acceptance to outright rage.

"I take it you've finished entertaining yourself at my expense. I hope the pound of gold and few night's merriment were worth the price of our friendship."

"Valdemar," Cornelius said, as calmly as he could. "I love her."

"So do I," Valdemar whispered. "And given a little time, she might have come to love me." His voice rose, echoing through the stone corridors. "Now, thanks to you, that will never happen. Did you not think I was entitled to a little happiness after so many years?"

"What about Madam Kirsten?" Cornelius demanded, equally angry. The timbre of his voice rattled the glass door on one of the bookcases. "What about her happiness?"

"Happiness?" Valdemar asked acidly. "You would expose her to the scandal of adultery. For God's sake Cornelius, she is only seventeen!"

"I am thinking of leaving town," he admitted, "With or without Kirsten."

"And where will you go this time? Back to Italy?"

"I am considering the colonies, British North America, perhaps."

Talons clenched at his sides, Valdemar turned away from him. "Get out of my house Cornelius. Go where you may, but Kirsten is my wife, and she stays here with me."

Cornelius left, slamming the door hard enough to send a thick crack shooting down the woodwork.

* * * *

The shouted exchange echoed through Kirsten's suite two floors above as clearly as if they'd been in the same room. And the silence that followed was even more horrible. When she heard Valdemar's tread on the stone steps below, Kirsten was terrified.

"Do you love him?" he asked, leaning against the doorframe. He delivered the question in a neutral tone, but his entire countenance spoke of barely restrained fury.

Kirsten forced herself to meet the boiling rage in his eyes.

"Answer me, Kirsten. Do you love him?"

She drew in a breath as if it might be her last. "God help me, I do."

He closed his eyes, shutting in his pain, and for several long moments the silence was broken only by her ragged sobs. At last, he enfolded her in his arms and kissed the top of her head. "It breaks my heart to see you so unhappy," he whispered. Then, as if he'd come to a sudden decision, he grasped her by the wrist, and gathering up her cloak, he propelled her from the room.

"You realize your sudden disappearance will only start another

rumor," he said dismally. "Perhaps I should have Moira think up something colorful. If there's going to be a rumor, perhaps I ought to start it myself."

"Where are we going?" she dared to ask, as Valdemar hollered for Hilliard to fetch the carriage.

"We are going to straighten out this affair once and for all," he said, looking quietly back at her.

The sun was high when they pulled up before the gates of Romulus House. With heavy cloaks shielding their faces from the blinding light, Valdemar hustled her from the coach and into the shadows of the hall. A disgruntled butler finally agreed to rouse Cornelius.

Yawning, his long hair tousled from sleep and his dressing gown tied haphazardly, he rounded the corner and gaped openly at his guests.

"You wanted her," Valdemar said. "Here she is. I hereby release her from her vows to me." He swallowed hard, then continued. "I wish you much happiness together."

With that, he bolted through the door into the searing sunlight. A clatter of hooves and wheels signaled his departure. Then there was only silence.

* * * *

Twenty crates stood in the main hallway, packed and labeled for shipping to the new land. A much changed and matured Kirsten surveyed the travel preparations with a calmness she would not have believed she could possess. An unexpected knock at the front door sent her searching for the butler, but since he was already off on some other errand, she answered it herself. She'd half expected Valdemar might call to say goodbye, but she was entirely unprepared for the sight of the flame haired woman who stood on her doorstep.

"Moira," she greeted the guest with obvious displeasure. "Have you come to laugh at me again?"

"Of course not." Moira strolled inside without invitation. "I came to thank you."

"Thank me? Whatever for?"

Moira smiled like a hungry shark. "I'm delighted you're leaving for the colonies, and that you and Valdemar have stopped that ridiculous charade. Which of course leaves Valdemar free for me."

"What about Adrian?" In spite of herself, Kirsten was intrigued.

"What about him?" Moira dismissed the notion as easily as brushing away a fly.

"And if Valdemar isn't interested?"

"I intend to see to it that he is," Moira said.

They stared at each other in the uncomfortable silence that followed.

Kirsten was the first to recover. Motioning to the open doorway, she said politely, "If you'll excuse me, Moira, I still have a great deal of packing to see to."

"Of course," Moira grinned wickedly. I do hope you'll be happy so far from civilization." She blew a kiss in Kirsten's direction. "Give my love to Cornelius."

As she closed the door, Kirsten had the sinking feeling that far from being over, her worries were just beginning.

THE END