Sherry Hall The Darkest Hour

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#### Dedication:

With all my love and dedicated to my wonderful sisters, Missy, Tracy, Laura, Janelle, and Emily! You guys are the best.

Dear Reader,

I'm very thrilled to introduce my newest novella for eXtasyBooks, *The Darkest Hour*, which is my first vampire novella in this series. When I was accepted to write this paranormal romance, I was thrilled with the prospect of putting out an ebook for my readers to enjoy.

I knew immediately what I wanted to write! A tale about a beautiful young woman torn between two lovers: one human and one a creature of the night, weaving into the narrative mystery, gothic, and romance. I've always loved to read romance novels from the classics to contemporary. Some of my readers will immediately notice the significant, creative tie-in to my previous works.

I hope you enjoy *The Darkest Hour* as much as I enjoyed writing it. I love to hear from my readers. You can reach me at: <a href="Matthewsengers.html"><u>AuthorSAHM@aol.com</u></a>
Sincerely,

Sherry Hall Mauro

# Author Foreword

Nosferatu: meaning vampire is a mythical/folkloric creature of the night that is said to survive on human blood; usually the vampire is the corpse of a recently dead person, reanimated or made undead by one means or another. Vampires are often described as having a wide variety of additional supernatural powers and romantic character traits, extremely inconsistent in different traditions, and are the frequent subject of folklore, cinema, and contemporary fiction. The old English spelling is "Vampyre."

In popular western culture, vampires are mostly depicted as unaging, romantic, intelligent, and mystically endowed in many ways. The vampire typically has a variety of abilities at its disposal; these include great strength and immunity to any lasting effect of any injury by mundane means, with specific exceptions. Such as, the sunlight can kill them. They can also change into a mist, wolf, or a bat, and some can control the minds of others. Often thought of as the most gothic and romantic creature to grace cinema and/or literature





## Prologue

In the evenings, when the shadows grow long, I sit quietly in the family cemetery near the tombstones and I can hear the roses whispering to me of the dead, the marble headstones murmuring of lost loves, and the wind sighing with regret. In the dim light of the moon, I think about him. *Armand*. My immortal beloved, my vampire lover.

I cry as I tend to the graves of my loved ones. Sometimes when the moon is very high, flickering ghostly shapes onto the headstones it feels as though Armand's dark eyes are watching me, commanding me to be strong, and to let go of Caleb. But how can I, when to do so would break his heart?

Was it really only one year ago that the earthquake, which shook our ancestral home down to the very foundation and damaged the cellar, led to the discovery that followed? Yes, I told myself, only one year ago....

And it was that same day my family realized that my lover was indeed *different*, and our secret was revealed at last. He was not flesh and blood, not human, not alive, and certainly not dead. But *all* male.

However, all they would see was a monster, a monster that must be dealt with and destroyed.

I was twenty-four years old at the time; and in the years to come I often wonder at what followed and speculate on how different everything might have been, if it hadn't been for the earthquake...or my father requesting one of his many lawyers come to our mansion to revise his Last Will and Testament.

Our home, Vaughn Hall, was a mansion full of interesting oddities and beautiful fixtures and furnishings, which my twin-brother and I had taken for granted over the years, having lived our whole lives in it, and it is an peculiar place; for there is one very dark, curious corner in the cellar where the structure is rather unusual. It is at the far end of the huge room and seems to come to an abrupt halt—almost as if the builder had decided that he was tired of working on it and wanted to be done with it.

The magnitude of the earthquake loosened the foundation and the support beams within the hundred-year-old mansion and had to be repaired. A local contractor had come over to the mansion with his crew to do the restoration. The contractor said the corner would have to be rebuilt.

Then a few days later Kenneth called me and told me to come to the mansion, *immediately*. I was curious as to why he wanted me to come home in the middle of the day, and he had sounded so scared and strange on the phone that I made a special trip over from the other side of town. And I was curious about that eerie corner, and I decided to be there the morning they started the repairs on the wall.

My brother Kenneth and I had grown up in Vaughn Hall, presided over by my father during our childhood. I had assumed I knew every inch of it, that I had explored every room and every dark corner, but there were secret rooms within its walls, within our very own cellar.

Neither of us could believe our eyes...but there it was, amongst the dust and plaster; appearing through the debris...a huge, furnished room.

I loudly gasped when I saw it and grabbed Kenneth's hand. "Oh, my God! I can't believe it!" It looked so familiar, and then it hit me.

It contained an enormous four-poster bed with black satin sheets pulled down as if expecting someone to return at any given moment. There was a bookshelf swollen with books that nearly reached the ceiling, covering one entire wall. The floor and walls were made of stone, and there were no windows. There was a massive antique dresser, chairs, a table, and a marble fireplace. The room gave the strong impression that someone was living in this dark hidden room. It was a man's room, that much was obvious by the dark furniture and the clothes. There were suits, jackets, and slacks hanging in the wardrobe closet...but there was also one very, very disturbing thing sitting in the far corner of the room that made me stare and stare...a coffin.

I had been here before. I knew this secret room, for it was *his* lair.

### The Present

Soon after, I was summoned to the mansion, this time to see my stepmother Lena, who had been out of town during the incident, and I assumed she knew all about the peculiar discovery. I wasn't sure what I was going to say or do. I only knew I had to protect myself and my lover.

My green sports car maneuvered through the open gates and drove down the private tree-lined road. The sun shining down through the clouds upon the gothic mansion and grounds was bright enough to get a clear view of the estate. It was a magnificent home with beautiful, intricate landscaped gardens, trees, statues, fountains, and a dense wooded area surrounding it. I parked in the circular driveway in front of the porch steps. I saw the door to the mansion open as I got out of the car.

I caught my stepmother Lena's wicked smile as she stood tall, regal, and menacing in the doorway of my family's great mansion, Vaughn Hall, my ancestral home.

She tried to tell me what she and my brother had now come to suspect. But I

only stared at her in sudden anger and my voice came out low and sarcastic, "A vampire? *Really*, Lena, you couldn't come up with something better than that?"

"It's true. I'm not making this up...why do I have the feeling that you know all about this? That you were the one who wants him to make his home...ours?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," I said strongly, staring her straight in the eyes.

"Sure, you don't..." she sighed heavily. "Oh, Brooke. Why do you delight in causing such turmoil for us? To upset your father and me? Hummm? This is just madness, pure madness. It's totally ludicrous. Your poor father's health is declining and you act as though you want to push him over the edge!" her cool, calm exterior was shattered, she shook with anger. "Take off those damn sunglasses when I'm speaking to you!"

She stood on the portico, hands on hips, looking down at me while I stood rigid near the bottom stair. She stared at me in a harassed way, as if Armand was a bug that needed to be squashed...and squashed quickly. Obviously, she wasn't going to invite me in.

I had dressed with deliberate care that morning, not wanting to be outdone by her and to show my authority. I had put on one of my best designer outfits, carrying my matching Gucci handbag, and put my long blonde hair up in a French-twist with diamond studs in my ears. But I could tell she wasn't impressed by my expensive tailored clothing...why had I bothered? And why did I still consider her

competition?

"That's not true, Lena-I swear it!" I reluctantly removed my dark glasses, squinting into the light, which hurt my eyes. I lifted a hand to shield them but I could still feel the afternoon sun burning my eyes, my skin. "I'm not trying to upset anyone...this isn't about you or Father," I said, imploring her with my eyes, my hands. "In fact just last night we discussed it, and at first I didn't want to live in the mansion, but it seems very important to him, and he seems to think by living here it will help you and Father to accept him and mend this...this broken family of ours somehow. He has good intentions, honorable intentions, can't you see that?" I hesitated, waited for her to respond and when she didn't, I spoke, "Lena, listen to me, please. Just hear me out, I'm going to marry him whether you and Father agree or not."

I sighed, my blue eyes clashing like silent swords with her brown ones. I had to find a way to convince her I was serious; and that this was no idle threat.

"And by the way, we want to live in my suite of rooms...Oh, don't look at me like that, the mansion is big enough for all of us..." I said, exasperation seeping into my voice, "I don't understand the big deal,"

"The big deal? Ha! The big deal is that you are like a constant thorn in our side, trying to draw blood every chance you get. I know you! You are just doing all this out of defiance.

"And just to remind you, I am the head of this mansion now, Brooke. Hence, any decisions

regarding the mansion are mine at present." Anger blazed her eyes as she glared at me. "And I'm not quite sure I want you and your so-called lover under our roof. I just don't trust him. Besides, your father doesn't need the drama...he is a very sick man. I really would prefer not to have you living together! I'm not sure I want that strange man living permanently in *my* mansion!" she stormed at me and then added, "You're being extremely selfish, as usual, Brooke. You never help out around here or stay long enough to be a real comfort to your father. I'm the one who cares for him now. You and your brother have been no help to me since his stroke!"

"Don't be a drama queen, Lena. I help out plenty! Who do you think has been managing my father's corporation since his stroke? Hum?" I glared up at her. "ME! That's who."

Her voice grew softer now, quieter, "I know that, Brooke, and your father and I are very appreciative. But it's *I* who brings him his meals, bathes him, dresses him, and cares for his every need."

"I offered to hire a nurse."

"A nurse? I don't think so, and your father would hate having a stranger touch him." She prowled back and forth near the top stair, her green silk dress swishing back and forth, revealing a shapely leg from time to time, and her matching three-inch high heels. She looked very attractive. Her brown shoulderlength layered locks were stylishly flipped up with a fringe of bangs gracing her forehead. Her makeup was perfect. Diamonds hung from her ears and

several diamond and gold bracelets dangled from one arm. Those jewels sparkled and glowed, throwing bright rays of light onto my face and into my eyes, blinding me. I squinted and watched her full red mouth twist into an ugly frown.

"I don't think you understand, Lena...we *need* the mansion. I have already promised him that we would live in it together after we're married, and I can't go back on my word!" I said, putting steel into my words, but she wasn't listening. I could tell by the way she kept shaking her head at me and wringing the handkerchief in her hands. "I'm *going* to marry Armand..."

"You're so naive! You're just trying to destroy your father!" she screamed at me, looking as if she was on the verge of becoming hysterical, but then her eyes blazed with fury. "You hardly know him. You're trying to put your father in an early grave by marrying this man, Brooke. He's your father's attorney; he doesn't even come from a *proper* family!

"Look, I know you were very sad and lonely after your mother died and that she was very fond of Armand, but I don't think it's respectable to date *the help*, young lady. Where does he come from? Nowhere! Who are his parents? Nobody! Does he have a drop of blue blood in him? No! We don't know anything about him. All we do know, is that he is...he is rather strange and spooky. I don't like him, there is something sinister about that man. I told your father to let him go as soon as he's done here.

"So, you can't marry Armand now, you just can't!

I've already told Kenneth and your father what you're planning, and they think you're rushing into this. It's too fast, too soon. Why? Why the hurry? Kenneth doesn't trust him either and...and he thinks you might be in serious danger! And I have to say, I feel the same way...there is just something different about him...your brother almost has me convinced the man really is a vampire. He says that he casts no shadow, and the he locks the door to his room during the day, claiming he has insomnia, and needs to sleep. But when Kenneth unlocked the door and went in, he wasn't there! And the bed was still made...then he mysteriously shows up after sundown...and refusing to eat meals with us. It's all so strange!" she looked worried suddenly, which seemed odd for her. Lena's voice trembled, "Haven't you ever had any suspicions about him? There is something just not right about him, dear. Anyway, you cannot marry him; you're going to have to break it off with him. Especially after what we found...what we found in the cellar...a coffin!"

"Why? So, I can marry someone I don't love from a more prestigious family? To keep up appearances? I know you've been hoping all these years that I'd marry Jonathan Michaels, Father's best friend's son," I smiled wickedly, "But I'll never marry someone I don't love just to appease my father or to further the business! This isn't the dark ages; you can't arrange a marriage for me!"

"Fine, you don't have to marry him, or anybody, right now. But Brooke, please, think about what

you're doing!" she sighed heavily. "Maybe he's just using you, Miss Brooke Vaughn. Even I can admit that you are young, beautiful, and you have a young firm body that many men find desirable and alluring. And you will come into quite a bit of money soon, and you will own quite a bit of the stock in your father's multimillion dollar corporation when he passes on...what man wouldn't find all that appealing and attractive?

"However, if it's the mansion you're after, and you're just trying to take it from me, then you can forget it!" Lena laughed viciously, cruelly, "Your own brother thinks he's evil, that he is indeed a vampire, or he's totally crazy, and I'm starting to believe it, too." Her voice grew low and sarcastic. "Really, Brooke...I guess it could be worse...you could be in love with that nobody Caleb Taylor..."

"Caleb is a good man and I would be proud to be his wife, but we're only friends..." Were we? Or were we much, much more than that? "If you and Father won't accept Armand as my husband, then we shall just elope!"

"You will break your father's heart," she said sharply, "I believe you create these foolish scenarios out of spite for me, don't you? Why, Brooke? Why are you doing this?"

"Because I love him..."

I was suddenly aware that several of the servants were watching and listening from the upstairs windows. They backed away when they caught my hard glare, but I was sure that they were still huddling close by, eavesdropping on our

conversation.

She looked me over with disdain and spat, these words: "You don't know what love is! Besides, you barely know him! I won't let you do this to your father!" Those cold brown eyes fell on me. They held no love—no warmth. "Your father will cut you off without a cent!" she sneered, taking a step forward.

I squared my shoulders and stood taller, ready to do battle for the man I loved. No matter what she or my father said or did, it hadn't stopped the great passion between us.

She shook her head at me. "Soon your father will be dead and I will rule here. I allow your twin-brother to live here, as along as he obeys my wishes and keeps to his rooms. But if you defy me, you and Kenneth will never, *never* see a cent of the Vaughn money! Furthermore, I'll make sure that your offspring never gets a cent of it, either. Now get off my property!"

"You don't have to worry, Stepmother, we would never lay claim to your share of the money...but it isn't the money I'm after...just the mansion." I laughed then—hard, brittle, ugly laughter—duplicating her way of laughing. "Why can't you and Father respect my wishes? You don't know him as I do, Stepmother...and you're wrong about him—Armand loves me and we are going to be married!" My heart was hammering as we glared at each other for a long, long moment.

"He's just a manipulator who used his many charms and good looks to seduce you...and you fell so easily into his lap. You little fool! I know his kind...Armand's only after your money, the family fortune! But this is *my* mansion now! So, if you want to waste your life with that...that *lunatic*, be my guest, but don't bring your trash here!"

Oh, I was livid! How dare she say unkind words about the man I loved! She was always putting me down and now she was attacking Armand...her words hurt and cut into my heart, shredding it, but I wouldn't let her see how her mocking hurt me, so I dug my nails into my palm to keep from railing back at her.

"Believe what you want, and you don't have to worry, *Aunt Lena*," I began, "I would never lay claim to the mansion, if it is truly my father's wish that it goes to you after he passes on. I will respect and honor that...but *don't* mess with me!" I hissed, "I am still CEO of my father's corporation!" My cruel, nasty smile transformed into a sadistic, forced laugh that made her wince. "Farewell, Lena, and you're wrong—Armand is not crazy! He does love me, and we will be together!

"I feel sorry for you, Lena...to have never known a love like this. The power it gives me, the joy it brings, the pleasure it bestows...how can you or anyone ask me to give that up?" my voice was hoarse and I fought back tears. "You will be all alone someday, because *you* will put my father in an early grave, not me! I love my father, but it's my life and I choose to live it with Armand at my side...with or without your blessing."

My heart was pounding as we glowered at each other for a long, long moment. And then to my surprise, she whipped around, still shaking her head at me, and disappeared back inside Vaughn Hall.

I felt a surprising sense of triumph, for I had not backed down—for once, I had not backed down! I stood there for a few minutes, then left, driving over to the condominium outside of town where I lived during the week, before making the long drive back to Vaughn Hall on the weekends. I couldn't stay there tonight, though, I was too angry and defensive.

Sadly, I mused, our conversation had not gone well. She didn't trust me or the man I loved...no one did, not even my own brother, Kenneth. And she was right, he had told me he was worried about me, and frightened too. But why should *she* worry? Was it just for the disgrace this would cause? Because she thought Armand was insane?

I sighed and pondered the strange situation I now found myself in. I had gone after Armand and made him my lover...or had he made me his? And it had caused the rift between Lena, my father, and I.

Lena was my aunt, my mother's younger sister, and three months after my mother had died of cancer, she had moved in. They had been married for five years before my father, fifteen years her senior, had a stroke, leaving him partially disabled. Now it was up to her to manage the day-to-day operations of our mansion, and left up to me to oversee my father's vast empire.

At this moment I loathed her. I wondered what my

father saw in my stepmother, why did he defend her so?

I still cannot understand why my sweet, amiable father had married such a cold woman...for she was a beautiful ice queen, who I believed that behind closed doors was malicious and conniving, turning my father against me. She hated Armand and wanted to destroy him.

I locked the door behind me and heaved a heavy sigh. I wasn't sure why I felt I had had to confront Lena, but something deep within me had compelled me to. And it was what Armand had wanted, but why?

I sighed wearily again. Maybe it was just time that the truth was exposed.

My condominium was spacious and cozy. It had three bedrooms, two baths, a kitchen, a laundry room, a large living room, and a two-car garage. I loved my simple home, filled with white wicker furniture and the tall bookcases holding my books and knick-knacks. Several ceramic angels—some I had bought, some that had been gifts over the years—decorated the mantel. A huge area rug dominated the floor and blended well with the light blue painted walls. Bright and cheery, unlike our 'family mansion', what we gloomily called Vaughn Hall. My big-screen TV was the only thing that seemed out of place in this serene, cozy setting. I had never been one to flaunt my wealth...well, except for the my Jaguar parked in the garage.

I went into the kitchen to make myself a cup of tea

when there was a loud rapping at my front door, startling me.

#### Caleb

"Prooke! Open up!" I heard someone shout through the closed door.

I crossed the room, looked through the peephole, then flung open the door.

"Caleb Taylor? What are you doing here? It's so late."

"Where have you been all day? I've been trying to reach you for hours," said Caleb, tearing his eyes from my face to make sure we were alone.

"I've been sleeping, mostly," and I loudly yawned for emphases. "Then this afternoon I got dressed, and went by the Hall to see Lena. She's knows about the secret room. Why?" I slipped off my shoes and tossed them aside. I just wanted to take off my jeans and blouse and slip into a hot bath.

"I've come to fetch you. I have some rather bad news...we have to go back to Centerville immediately! It's your brother Kenneth. Something horrible has happened!"

"I just left there. Everything is fine...well, sort of. I had it out with my stepmother, or should I say my *step-monster*. Why? What's wrong?" I said, watching

him pace back and forth in my living room.

"I can't explain it here, you must come with me now—"

"You're scaring me. But Caleb, darling, I cannot come with you. I'm leaving...remember? For Europe with Armand..."

He just stared at me, and then he said brokenly, "Are you serious? Now? What about your brother?"

"Kenneth is a grown man," I said irritably, "What kind of trouble has he gotten himself into now?"

I looked over at Caleb, who seemed so anxious, it gave me sudden pause. When had I ever seen him looking so upset or so troubled?

Caleb Taylor had been my best friend since grade school and he lived in an apartment close by and called or came over every day or so. He was a starving, freelance photographer. I thought he was brilliant and quite talented. His own family had gone bankrupt shortly after we graduated from high school, his father squandering the family fortune on women, gambling, and drinking, leaving him a pauper. However, he had never felt sorry for himself, rather he was quite optimistic despite his misfortune. I tried to help him out when I could, but his pride kept him from accepting what I would generously give to my longtime friend and confidant. I admired his dignity and determination to make it on his own.

But he should have guessed and understood why I felt I had to defiantly confront her. Yet, I felt humbled looking into his strikingly handsome face.

He stood near me, as if afraid to touch me. He was tall, with silky fine blond hair, rather curly, and had cerulean eyes that seem to absorb the colors around him, that sometimes made them look green, gray, or violet. He had a firm upper body and long, sturdy legs. Why hadn't I ever noticed how handsome he was before? It felt like seeing him for the first time, in a new light, and I liked what I saw immensely.

Caleb shook his blond head at me. He had a short, charming nose, and a generous mouth, but it looked crooked and twisted now.

Staring at him as if I was gazing at a stranger, I drank in his height, wide shoulders, and the way his short hair was swept back off his face with a side part. The rest of his body matched his face, adequately proportioned, with a narrow waist, trim legs, and muscular thighs emphasized by the tight jeans he wore. His blue polo button-down shirt was open at the throat. He moved closer to me, breaking the spell he had unknowingly cast upon me. What was the matter with me? He was my best friend, not a piece of meat, but I still felt a stirring between my legs as I got a whiff of his aftershave, masculine, musky, pungent...nice. I shook my head to clear my mind of these sexy thoughts.

He stared at me oddly. "Kenneth's not in any kind of trouble, Brooke...not now, anyway." He came over to me, put his hands gently around my upper arms, and gazed deeply into my eyes. "Oh, Brooke...my darling," he said so softly, so sadly. He brushed a strand of my long blonde hair out of my eyes. "You

don't even know how beautiful you are, do you? And the strong affect you have on men? Armand is as enchanted with you, as I have always been...but don't break your father's heart because of this affair." His eyes seem to glaze over as he looked at me. As if he was caught in a fuzzy dream state.

Oh, God, those blue eyes! My heart ached at his sad, beseeching expression, his long gaze as soft as a caress.

"Caleb, tell me, what's happened to Kenneth?" I looked at him fearfully.

"He was murdered last night..." his voice died away. Then his blue eyes raked over my face suspiciously. "You didn't know?"

My bottom lip quivered. My heart felt torn in two, as if grief and despair was a sharp knife slicing through it. *Kenneth? Dead?* 

"How would I know? You look at me as if I had something to do with this!"

"Didn't you?"

"NO! Of course not! I loved my brother!"

He watched my face twist in alarm before saying, "I'm sorry, Brooke, I just assumed you knew. Anyway, as soon as I read about it in the papers, I came as quickly as I could," he said, and then as if an afterthought asked, "What the hell's happened to you?"

I didn't know how to respond or what to say. How could I tell him that I had finally accepted my fate and that my destiny lay with Armand now?

"Remember...remember what I told you about

Armand? And how you didn't believe me at first? Well, Kenneth did...especially after he discovered his lair under the mansion—"

"And you told Kenneth that you are still planning on marrying him?" he interrupted and I nodded, then he asked, "Did you tell your stepmother, too? Is that why you went to see her today?"

I swallowed hard, lifted my chin, and boldly met his steady blue gaze. "Yes...I told them both what I'm planning. But I will tell no one else and you mustn't either, I realize now that it isn't safe. She just told me about the...the room they discovered, and that she thought and Kenneth that Armand dangerous...and I told her I didn't care what she thought, and that Armand and I are still planning to marry," I said coldly, as though I didn't care what he must have been thinking of me, even though I did. My voice grew small, "She didn't take it very well...she thinks he's evil. She doesn't know what she's talking about."

"Oh...I see."

My heart pounded with icy fear, but I had to know. "How did Kenneth die? I mean, what happened to him? Who would want to murder him?"

I had loved my brother, he was a good man, and I would miss him terribly. Still, I had a hard time believing he was really gone. My tortured, conflicting emotions were tearing me apart at the seams.

"Come on, Brooke," he replied cynically, "He was found dead in the cellar...completely drained of blood..."

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I gasped, my hands flying up to cover my mouth in horror. Why? Why? I screamed inward. "Drained of blood? Are you sure?"

He didn't answer, but his eyes dropped to the floor.

However, I knew why...because *he* would let no one stand between him and what he wanted...no one. And my brother was the only thing I loved and had needed in this world, besides my friendship with Caleb.

*Nooooooo!* I screamed, but no sound escaped my lips. I felt weak. Caleb noticed me swaying off balance; he suddenly reached out for me, and let me lean against him.

"Are you all right, Brooke? You don't look well."

"Yes, I think so...oh, Caleb. Why Kenneth?"

I clung to him and buried my face in his neck. I could hear the blood flowing through his body, raging through his veins. I could hear the *thump*, *thump*, *thump* of his heart. It made me feel strange. I didn't feel like me anymore and tonight...well, tonight I would change, change forever. There was nothing left to keep me here now...with my brother gone.

I suddenly recalled my weird conversation with Kenneth the day before, and him begging me not to go through with this...to deny Armand, but most of all to deny what was in my heart. He had said he would find a way to stop me, to put a stop to Armand. He was the only one who had believed me, especially after finding his coffin, though I had a

feeling that Caleb was starting to believe me now too.

I felt ice spreading through my stomach, making my blood run cold. A glazed look of deep despair began to spread over my face, as I felt hot tears falling from my eyes, burning my face and dripping off my chin.

Suddenly he cried out, "I won't let you do this!" he gripped my upper-arms roughly. "I'm in love with you...I've always loved you, since we were children. The darkness is neither the light nor *the way*, my love, and there are lights and angels. And you are one of the angels, Brooke, that bright light for other who are lost to find there way home. Don't give into the darkness, to evil..."

He wrapped me in his arms and his generous mouth, his warm lips covered mine, devouring its softness. I kissed him back with just as much pent-up passion.

I had always known that Caleb loved me, but I had never allowed my feelings for him to develop further than mere friendship, but grief does strange things to people, and right now, I needed him, needed him to kiss away my sorrow, my pain. I wanted him, as if it were to be the last time we were alone together...and perhaps it was.

I gently lifted my head from his and looked into his eyes.

"You have to let me go, Caleb, or he may end up killing all whom I love...I never really thought he'd do it...and I dare not defy him. Tonight I must become," my voice sounded sad and distant to my

ears, "Oh, God, I saw his lair again today," I laughed bitterly. "Ironically, I guess it has finally hit home for me too. What I'm about to do—"

"No! We'll think of something, I promise! I will not lose you to the night!"

Our eyes met and clung. I saw in his beautiful blue eyes all the love he had for me, shining in them.

I'm not sure what force compelled me to take him by the hand and lead him into my bedroom, but it was a force stronger than both of us. Maybe I wanted to say goodbye in my own special way, maybe I wanted him, and maybe it was...love. I only know that my own lustful desires for him overrode everything else.

He watched me as I lit several candles that cast a soft romantic glow about the room and put the scent of vanilla in the air. Then I gently eased him down on my bed, and wildly kissed him on the lips.

Then he lay over me to gaze into my eyes. I stared back, trying to memorize every line, every angle, and every detail of his sweet, handsome face.

Oh Caleb, my love...why hadn't I found you sooner? Now, it's too late...too late...

Caleb kissed me back, rousing a melting sweetness within me. He slipped his hand up under my blouse softly touching me. Then removing it, he ran his fingertips along my skin, cupping my breasts over my bra. My heart fluttered beneath my breast. He kissed my neck and started to travel down to my exposed breasts. He slipped off his shirt and laid his bare, smooth chest against mine. My hands roamed over his back as he lay over me, and he kissed with such a

gentle yet urgent passion. Heat rippled below my skin as I recognized the flush of sexual desire, warming up my body and filling it with eager excitement. I could feel the heat of his body course down the entire length of mine. My thighs were aflame with anticipation.

He paused only long enough to look deeply into my blue eyes, as his own filled with wanting and love. "Brooke, oh, Brooke," he moaned in a voice filled with desire, "I want to make love to you."

My lips couldn't move, only quiver in unspoken passion.

He wrapped me in his arms, and in his blue eyes, I drowned, and things grew blurry as our passion swelled higher and higher like a great tidal wave of fiery sensations engulfing us both.

He kissed and caressed my thighs and my belly, slowly pulling off my jeans. Now I was only clad in my lacy pink panties and bra, and he softly touched me over them, sending electric tingles coursing through my body.

I caressed his broad chest, running my fingers over his skin, over his smooth soft belly and over the trail of light-colored hair that disappeared somewhere below his pants. Passion and yearning pounded the blood flowing through my heart, my chest, and my head. He wiggled free of his pants and I felt him grow aroused as he parted my thighs, but he did not enter me. I grew wild with unbridled desire to have him take me and my eagerness grew to explosive proportions. I moaned aloud with an erotic pleasure.

I had never dreamed his hands would feel so good, so warm, or so gentle.

He kissed me, long and hard, whispering his worship for each part of my body. Then his hands moved magically over the smoothness of my buttocks, and dipped between my thighs, making my body quiver with excitement and arousal. I felt my pulse leap with pleasure and desire, and it was as if we both shared a loving physical awareness of each other's bodies. I cried out as wave after sensuous wave came over every pore of my body.

My body molded into his and his touch was surprisingly soft and tender, as he brought my body to great heights of pleasure. Caleb tenderly aroused my passion; his hands slowly moved downward, gliding over my hips to the center of my thighs until I moaned. His own desire for me growing stronger as a soft moan of ecstasy slipped through his lips. Finally, when I thought I could stand it no longer, he gently eased on top of me, and I eagerly welcomed him into my body. We began to make love then, with only the candlelight to see each other by.

I felt myself finally yielding to the searing need that had been invisibly building between us for years; like an unspoken prayer, like a soft, sweet promise of forever, and I had a glimpse of what our life would be like together if I were his.

His mouth found mine, warm and eager, as his tongue parted my willing lips. His eyes closed, with pure rapture taking over his handsome features.

I buried my face against his throat. The strong

musk of his body overwhelmed and excited me. I loved his smell, his touch, and being wrapped in his arms as he moved inside me.

Our bodies were in exquisite harmony with one another as we escalated to an awesome, shuddering climax.

Afterwards, I lay there softly smiling, as a sense of peace stole over me as we lay together.

Caleb pulled the covers over us. Our bodies were still moist from our lovemaking, and our hearts beat out the same tune. We didn't speak for a long while; we just lay side-by-side with his arms locked around me. He held me so lovingly; I felt tears in my eyes.

"I love you," he muttered in the throws of sleep. "I want to marry you!

"I want to grow old with you, have children, and be a family. We can be together forever and all our days will as sweet as this. I promise,"he cried, but I didn't reply.

I feel asleep, but sometime before dawn, I awoke to hushed voices. Two men talking outside my bedroom door. I turned over and snuggled into the warmth of my bed. I can hear the whispering sounds like elephants stomping their feet, it is so loud!

"Guard her well, Caleb. I suppose, I go to meet my doom. We have given the supernatural forces beyond all human experience and knowledge an enormous amount of power over our beloved Brooke and us. So guard her well, otherwise Brooke will become the wife of the devil, a child of darkness."

"Kenneth, have you gone mad? You're acting as crazy as both of them are!"

"Caleb, vampires do exist, and this mad man we fight,

this killer we face, has the strength of twenty men!" "NO!"

"Yes. You have to trust me now, for Brooke's sake or her soul may be eternally damned. You have to hear me out; Brooke is not a random victim or a pawn in some twisted scheme, don't you understand? This is real, I tell you! She is now the willing recruit, a devout follower, a lustful disciple, and now, the devil's devoted concubine. Yet we may still be able to save her lost soul...I know what to do. Just watch over her until nightfall...promise?"

"I promise...and Kenneth?"

"Yes?"

"Be careful."

Was I dreaming? I heard the heavy tread of footsteps leading away from the door. It is quiet now, but I cannot awake, for sleep pulls under into its deep depths. Caleb cuddles me close. I must have been dreaming...but why did I suddenly feel that Caleb might hold the key to my heart...and my salvation?

I had been drawn into the alluring, seductive world of the vampire, and I knew I must decide whether to accept Armand's dark kiss of eternity, or Caleb's sweet promise of forever.

But whom would I choose? And I knew I had to choose soon, because the darkest hour always comes before the dawn...

### Death and Desire

When I awoke, I put on a pair of faded jeans and a sleeveless white button-up blouse. I found Caleb in the kitchen making us dinner, the aroma of chicken, mashed potatoes, and green beans filled the mansion. He was bending over the oven, pulling out the roasted chicken. But I wasn't hungry; actually, the smell sickened me. I had the strangest craving for raw meat.

We ate in silence, I just picked at my food sullenly, but every few minutes our eyes would lock. I had to tell him.

"Caleb, we need to talk..." my voice died away as I looked out the kitchen window and saw that dusk had settled upon the earth. There wasn't much time.

"Yes, we do, but let me speak first."

"All right."

"Brooke, there is so much to say...I love you so much. You're like my other half, my better half. I need you, more than he does and if you go off with him, it will break my heart in two forever." He said then forced a smile before continuing, "You know, this whole situation reminds me of Bram Stoker's

Dracula...I'm Jonathan, your brother was Van Helsing, your Mina, Lena is Lucy, and Armand is...well, we know who he is!" he tried to laugh but it came out as a smile. "But first you have to tell me what happened at the Hall, okay?" He unveiled his pearly whites in a sweet smile full of promise.

I quivered because what he said hit too close to the truth...I did feel like Mina!

"I...I told Lena the truth is all. That we want to live in the mansion, but she refused," I said quietly, "Why?"

"Because I have a theory based on what you've told me...you see, if he believes he is a vampire," he paused when he saw my expression darken, "or let's say for arguments sake he *is* one, then he must protect himself and I sense, your family, and you, and now perhaps I am, too, well, I think we are all in danger—terrible danger—"

Suddenly, as if out of thin air, Armand Vitalis appeared in the kitchen doorway. He moved nearer to me, closing the gap between us in a matter of seconds, and he looked cross. I started to see him there, in my kitchen. I felt frightened for Caleb, though I wasn't sure why.

Armand was wearing all black, eternal black, from head to toe, like a sexy rogue in an old movie.

"Armand? What are you doing here?" I quickly got to my feet. So did Caleb. I watched Armand sniff the air like a wolf, then stare at me accusingly. I reddened and took a step away from him. I was trembling.

Caleb looked at me. "Are you still going through

with this? After last night?" he asked incredulously, glancing nervously at Armand then back at me.

"Yes..." I said miserably, "But you have to go now, Caleb. I need to talk to Armand alone. *Please*. Just go." Armand came closer to take me in his strong embrace and tenderly gaze down at me with...with love? Or was it something else? Possession?

"No. I'm not going anywhere," he said to me, but his blue gaze was fixed on Armand. The tension between the two men was thick enough to cut with a knife.

Armand's eyes narrowed on Caleb's face. He lifted one black brow, "Am I interrupting something?"

"No," I said quickly.

"Yes, as a matter of fact you are, Armand," Caleb said through gritted teeth, with his arms tucked behind him.

I felt Armand start to take a step in Caleb's direction and I reached out and grabbed his arm. He stopped and deeply sighed as if to control his temper. I didn't have the strength to hold Armand back if he decided to lunge at Caleb, and I could tell by his stance and the fiery look that blazed in his dark eyes that that's exactly want he wanted to do. *Hurt him!* 

"Brooke, please...don't do this!" Caleb pleaded, with his face, his eyes, his whole being, trying to reach me, trying to stop me, as if anything could.

It was too late for me, but not for Caleb, and I didn't want anyone else I cared about experiencing the deadly wrath of Armand.

I tore my eyes from the wounded look on Caleb's

face and nestled closer to Armand, ignoring the pounding of my heart, and the bitter hurt I had detected in his voice. I wondered if Armand had heard it too and would use his weakness, his love for me against him. I stood huddled in his strong embrace, feeling the sexual magnetism, radiating off him that made him so self-confident and so damn sexy. Our eyes locked and I could look nowhere else but into those compelling, magnetic dark eyes that drank me in. I felt dizzy, out of sorts, and the room was spinning. My legs were buckling, certain I would fall if he let me go.

What had Caleb just said?

"...You can't leave," Caleb said to me, but he was still staring coldly at Armand.

"I'm sorry, Caleb. I never meant to hurt you, but the passion between Armand and I is too strong, it's like a drug I crave...and I can't deny what's in my heart..." Our blue eyes met and held. "I have to go with Armand, please try to understand. Please. I just wanted to say my final goodbyes to the sun, to the day, to the blue sky, but most of all I wanted to say goodbye to you, my friend," my voice lowered, "my lover, before I embrace the night, the moon, the stars, and my destiny..."

Then I looked into Armand's rich black eyes and knew he understood what I couldn't explain, what Caleb would never understand...what I did not understand myself. I had said my farewells to my stepmother, to my father, and now to Caleb. I had said my farewell to everything....everything but my

dear brother, Kenneth. Oh, my poor, poor Kenneth...as the sun sinks below the horizon and embraces the night I say my final farewell to you.

"Brooke, he's enchanted you, you don't know what you're saying!" Caleb managed to capture my gaze and hold it. He looked so miserable and forlorn. "So, this is really goodbye?" Caleb repeated as if to confirm what his ears had heard, but his heart refused to believe. But it wasn't I who had the nerve to answer, it was Armand.

"Yes, Caleb. Brooke belongs to me now. And she had to finally tell her family the truth...that we have fallen deeply in love," said Armand in a deeptimbered voice, "and besides, they needed to hear the truth, and I was the one who told Brooke to tell Lena..." his voice died away as he looked down at me. I clung to him, wanting him, yearning for him to take me away and make love to me again.

"I don't understand any of this! Brooke, what's come over you?"

But it was Armand who answered: "It is very simple, you see, I have been looking for someone like Brooke for centuries. You wouldn't understand but," Armand said ever so quietly, "we were destined to be together, for she is my beloved...I assume you know...you know what I am. And that if you try to stop us, I will destroy you too. So please, don't be foolish and cause a scene. I don't want to hurt you..."

Our eyes met and held. I faintly smiled. Armand was truly my soul mate, my true-forever-love; we had been lovers in another life....at least that is what I

kept telling myself. "I tried to explain it to you, Caleb," I said, "but you just don't understand, and you never will. But it doesn't matter anyway because I'm still leaving tonight with Armand."

"What? Have you lost your mind? You can't, Brooke, I won't let you!" he yelled, his blue eyes watching my face, his look so galvanizing it sent a tremor through me.

Armand leaned to whisper in my ear, "Oh, let's be done with foolish talk! Bite him now. He will be your first kill. It is what you need to do to become *Nosferatu*. Then we shall be the same and together for all eternity."

I shuddered and then looked at him in horror. *Sink my teeth into Caleb?* 

Yes, my beloved...taste his blood, drink his essence. NOW!

I moved toward Caleb, who instinctively took a step back. I reached out for him. I felt my incisors grow long and sharp. I ran my tongue over them; they pricked the thick skin, and I tasted blood. Something strange came over me, something animalistic, and something primitive, like I was a predator, on the hunt for prey.

That's when Caleb pulled out a revolver. A huge, shiny black gun...aiming straight at Armand's heart.

Armand, quick as a flash, pounced upon Caleb and with his supernatural strength wrestled him to the ground, prying the gun from his fingers. I could hear the bones in Caleb's hand cracking, breaking as Armand ripped it from his grasp...but not before the gun went off.

It knocked me back off my feet, burning like hot coals. I unconsciously put my hands over the wound, just above my right shoulder. Blood flowed from the opening...the thick, dark red fluid was soaking through my white blouse and making a huge puddle on the floor beneath me. I felt the pain shooting through me like liquid fire, my mind was slipping down into semiconsciousness...darkness enveloped all around me, swirling to blur my vision...then everything went fuzzy and out of focus.

In my semiconscious state, my mind wandered to the fateful day that had changed my life forever. It was as if my life was truly passing before my eyes, my birth, my childhood, my teenage years, my first loves and heartbreaks, then came the most important chapter, possibly the *last* chapter of my life...meeting Armand.

I was flooded with memories of the first time I had seen Armand in the rose garden. He was staying at Vaughn Hall while my father made out his last will and testament, being too weak to go to his offices in the next town over.

I was completely taken in by him, for no one had told me *how* young and attractive he was...how alluring. I felt drawn to him like a magnet. It was as if the very air around him was electrified with sexual tension...sizzling with invisible currents that made my skin tingle with excitement, but also filled me with a strange inner sense of...*peril*.

# The Past

When one looks back over their life, they look back with a certain amount of regret, wonder, and deep reflection. The every day, simple choices we all make, seem to shape our lives and point us towards our destines. So many secrets haunted the shadows of my mind, hanging in the corners like old cobwebs, spinning my future into a world of nightmares and reminiscences.

At first, I thought I was only dreaming as the stream of moonlight filtering through the kitchen curtains bathed the walls in a pale slivery glow. But as my mind wandered aimlessly, I began to think about the choices I had made...

I recalled the fateful day I had come to visit my twin brother at Vaughn Hall, struggling to become a respected artist. But as luck would have it, I wandered into the garden and found *him* instead. And I knew who he was without having to ask anyone.

I watched my father's attorney, Armand Vitalis, while quietly hiding behind a large thorny rose bush. He fascinated me; he looked like a dark prince in a ballet...like one of the gorgeous surreal creatures

Kenneth had depicted. He had such sensual, firm features and a confident set to his broad shoulders. His snug black, V-neck shirt revealed a chest covered with crisp dark hair and brawny muscles rippling underneath, which quickened my pulse. His tight jeans clung to him like a second skin, with big black boots. He stood rigidly still with his face lifted up toward the setting sunset, his eyes closed. He looked powerful, sexy, dark, and dangerous, with his tall, muscular physique. The sun setting in the far distance glowed fiery red, orange and purple, the light glimmering over his gorgeous face and hair like beams of icy radiance. His hair was full and shiny blue-black, curling up at the nape of his collar, resting on his wide shoulders. He had a sexy, neatly trimmed moustache covering his upper lip. Beautiful, I thought, perfect.

As if sensing my presence, he looked over at me, but said not a word, though the double meaning of his bold gaze was obvious. He had such compelling, dark eyes...eyes that had a strange glint to them.

Danger. That single word flashed in my mind and I started to tremble. He stared at me as if one who is in a trance, with disbelieving eyes. Those remarkable dark eyes of his gazed longingly at me, hungrily at me. He appeared dazed, dazzled, as he boldly darted his eyes from my face to my heaving breasts, then to my long legs clad in shorts before scanning slowly upward. And again, he seemed hypnotized by my face, my long blonde hair. I took a step back, suddenly afraid, as if he were the big bad wolf about

to gulp me up and swallow me whole.

I was troubled and exhilarated at the same time.

"Wait!" he had cried out, but I dashed around the side of the great house, past the flowers as the sun sank down into the horizon and twilight appeared in its place, casting shadows all around me, changing the color of the roses to blood red, and I quickly disappeared inside the mansion to catch my breath and steady my pulse.

I caught my reflection in the ornate, gold-framed mirror across the room, hanging above the stone fireplace, and looked at myself as though gazing through his dark, dark eyes. I saw a twenty-four-year-old woman who was slim and busty with soft curves, long legs, and pale skin. Her mass of long blonde hair poured from her delicately carved face past her shoulders, unrestrained in shimmering waves, and she had a generous, pouty mouth, with big blue eyes that looked...frightened? Or excited? I wasn't sure which. I turned away from the mirror when I realized I was still shaking, and not sure why, only that he had affected me deeply, struck some chord deep within me. Oh, but he was gorgeous to look at.

But I should have left him alone and turned to Caleb, who had loved me since we were children, instead of wanting to chase after something I couldn't have. I should have forced myself stop thinking of him *only* as a friend and let myself fall for Caleb's optimistic, gentle nature, and his kind spirit, that was like a bright light burning within my heart...yet, it was the darkness I sought, the sense of excitement,

adventure, and danger that Armand represented--and it lured me seductively into its lair...

### Armand

The next time we met had been different...this time I was prepared.

I had driven over to Vaughn Hall to see Kenneth, but secretly hoping I would run into Armand. No one was home, but as I was getting back into my car to leave, I saw a sleek black sports car race down the private road leading up to the mansion. It swiftly came to a halt on the circular drive, kicking up dust and gravel.

It was twilight again, that enchanted time when romance is in the air, and passion rouses the senses. From the glow of the house lights, I watched a tall figure emerge from the car. He came around the Mercedes and casually leaned up against it. He folded his arms across his broad chest as he rested up against the superb automobile. With an arrogant, confident grin on his full red lips, he slowly looked me up and down.

I measured him as he measured me in the same cunning way, as if we were two predators on the prowl for fresh meat. And oh, how I wanted him, even though I should have known better and should have realized the grave danger I was putting myself in if I pursued this man, or this strange throbbing within my heart whenever he was near.

I just stood there nervously staring back at him and licking my dry lips. Armand wore an old-fashioned, expensive dark suit with a cloak lined in red. Oh, but he looked dashing in his ensemble with his full black hair, the waves combed back over the tips of his ears, curling up at the edge of his black collar. I couldn't stop myself from staring deeply into his eyes, which were dark and beautiful, fathomless, like the ocean on a moonlit night. Eyes that made me feel as though I had gazed into them before in a dream. I shifted my weight from foot to foot, ran a hand through my long hair, brushing it out of my face, as my underarms grew damp with nervous anticipation. Why was I so damn nervous around this gorgeous man?

My breath caught in my throat. I felt my heart take a perilous leap, then began to settle down to a more even beat. I was irresistibly drawn and attracted to Armand's darkness, even though I had heard about his atrocious, womanizing reputation about town, and I could tell he enjoyed the chase and a challenge as much as I did.

He looked dangerous, enticing, and sensual – *sexy* was the word that came to mind

"Hello, there. You must be Mr. Vaughn's daughter, Brooke. They told me you were beautiful, but their description didn't do you justice," Armand's voice was deep and sensuous, penetrating the short distance between us. He put forth his hand for me to

shake. Reluctantly, my heart pounded with reluctance as if by touching *him* my life would be forever changed, and I felt danger signals going off in my head: *Be careful, Brooke, this was no quiet, gentle man like Caleb!* But his hand was soft and warm, sending delicious shivers of wanting coursing through my body and heating up my breasts.

His extraordinary eyes still held mine and I found it impossible not to return his disarming smile. That smile alone sent my mind reeling and my pulse racing.

A wide grin lifted the corners of his beautifully shaped mouth, and I sighed as I looked him over, too. His face held a fine straight nose, a full generous mouth, and his shadowed face amplified the darkness of his compelling eyes.

His voice was low, seductive, enticing, "You're truly stunning, Miss Vaughn...there's complexity about you, you seem to glow with a pure, untouched rare beauty blended with brains, style, and grace, and I must admit, it's quite an impressive and exciting combination." He wore a crooked smile on his full lips as if he thought he was very amusing or very witty--or both.

His eyes fell upon the cleavage pouring from the short, slinky mauve dress I wore, then down to my long legs clad in high heels. His dark eyes were full of admiration as he took in my dress, my hair, smelled my flowery perfume. I felt myself blushing from head to toe feverishly. I unconsciously played with a long strand of my hair, loose about my shoulders, hanging

down to my waist.

"Hello, it's nice to meet you, too," I replied, tilting my head beguilingly and flirtatiously batting my eyelashes, lowering and then raising them demurely, looking through them at him. I pulled my hand free of his when it seemed he'd never let go.

"Beautiful night, huh? Did you come by to see me?"

"No," I said quickly, "my brother. Is he home?"

He moved away from the car and actually swaggered over to me, full of haughty confidence. Armand was very tall at six feet-two inches and he towered over my five-foot seven frame.

"No, but it's nice to finally meet you in person," he said, "I fear the last time I saw you, I scared you off like a timid doe," he smirked at me. "Actually, Kenneth is out for the evening...and lucky for me, your stepmother and your father had to go into town for his physical therapy and the servants are off today and won't return until tomorrow. But I'm still here, just doing a little extra drafting on your father's will. So, do you want to come in?" He smiled wickedly then, displaying perfect, straight white teeth...for a split second; I could swear that two of his front teeth looked long, sharp, and pointy. Strange. "Would you like to join me for a glass of wine?" he stepped closer, very close. He smelled musky, manly, and strong, like sweat, a man's smell, which tickled my nostrils and sent my senses spinning.

Did he think me immature or naive? I could effortlessly see right through his many charms, I

could see he was just a wolf in sheep's clothing, just a womanizer awaiting his next conquest. Ah, but he was naïve, for I was the one stalking him.

A glass of wine? Oh, yes, how perfect, I mused. Yet I hesitated...he wanted me, that was clear in the way he boldly gazed at me, but he'd only stalk me like a sleek black panther until he had satisfied his craving, fulfilled his lust...but what about me? But what would I be left with? A broken heart? No, I could control my emotions and resist falling in love with him...couldn't I?

I pulled my drifting thoughts together to say, "It's strange, Armand, I've got the strongest feeling that we have met before and that we were lovers in a past life," I blushed, bemused and surprised I had said that aloud. "Do you have that same weird feeling?"

The full moon shone high above us in a starry moonlit sky. Somewhere in the night, an owl hooted.

There was something overwhelmingly intriguing about Armand, something I couldn't explain, something that made my spine tingle with anticipation, apprehension...and a deep unsatisfied yearning.

"Yes, I do too, and it's not weird at all," he said breathlessly, "Why don't we go inside and get better acquainted."

He didn't wait for an answer, just strolled confidently into the house.

I smiled to myself at his arrogance and followed him into Vaughn Hall, stepping into one of the downstairs parlors. I watched him in silence as he put logs on the hearth to build a roaring fire that put a soft, dreamy glow about the room and on our faces. He poured me a glass of dark red wine and sat down next to me on the sofa, facing the fire. I had been irresistibly drawn to him, like a moth to the candle flame, *dangerous*, perhaps, yet I felt as though I had no will of my own, as though I was a slave to my own desires.

I cannot remember everything that was said, only how when he moved, his muscular thigh touched my bare leg, causing a tingling in the pit of my stomach. I knew such a strong attraction was perilous, but I did not heed the warning signals going off in my head, only the stirring between my legs making me ache for him to touch me, kiss me...make wild, passionate love to me.

What did say?

"Why did you come tonight?" he repeated, "Did you want to finally meet me?" It was if he could reach into my thoughts, and read the desires of my heart.

"I came to...to see my brother," I said lamely, then smiled widely at him, laughter in my voice, "No, the truth is I was hoping to see you."

His dark eyes never left my face. "How nice. I like honesty. Now, I'll be honest, too, I was hoping to see you again too," he said and then asked, "You've been studying my face, how do I rank?"

A rush of hot blood heated my face and neck. My head warned my impetuous heart that everything about Armand, his expensive, tailored clothes, his neatly styled hair, and the ruby ring on his pinkie finger, shouted that he would be as determined as I was at getting what he wanted, when he wanted it...and there would be no escape from his web of haunting lust.

I shook my head clear of such morbid thoughts.

"Your fine clothing and that sexy dangerous glint in your eyes tells me to run out the door and never look back."

He smiled wickedly at my outburst, seeming satisfied with my answer. "Ah, you find me sexy and dangerous. Um, how very nice. Better than being thought of as unattractive and boring. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I suppose. How long are you staying here? Will you be in town long?" my voice sounded small, betraying my feelings.

"A little while longer...I had planned on leaving in the next day or two....unless something more tempting presents itself," he smiled, his white teeth glowing.

"How did you end up practicing law, Mr. Vitalis? If I may ask."

"Please, call me Armand. Family business, like yours. You could say I'm an attorney by day...and a lover by night," he chuckled and leaned down to touch my hair. "Soft," he said more to himself than to me. "But I plan to retire soon, and do some traveling."

"On my family's money, no doubt. I'm sure they're paying you generously." I hadn't meant to say what I was thinking out loud, and I blushed miserably when he looked up sharply.

But he only smiled that devilish smile again," But, of course. There's no need to play games, we're both adults...so what kind of game are you playing, Brooke, by seducing your father's attorney? A dangerous one, huh?"

I sat up straighter, feigning shock and anger. "How dare you! I don't play games."

He laughed heartily at my outburst. "Sure, you don't...so, am I to assume that you're the spider and I'm the fly?"

"Ummm, somehow I think it's the other way around..." We both smiled this time and fell into easy chatter.

We talked for a while. He told me he grew up in Europe and had lived in the States for the last ten years, which had me guessing his age to be close to thirty-five; a man's most appealing age, when he starts to think about his immortally and fleeting days of youth. A man who would be easy to seduce...yet, I knew he would be the one to do the seducing. I thought about leaving and not going through with this. I liked him and was terribly attracted to him, but I didn't want to *fall* for him. And now I was afraid I would. I didn't want to get hurt. The temptation to strike back at my stepmother and my father had finally presented itself, but now I wavered, changed my mind.

Finally, I decided to leave; however, he must have anticipated my decision for he suddenly asked if I cared to play a game of chess. Chess! Ah, a challenge, and I would find it rewarding to beat him. He had

found my weakness, so I agreed.

"If you win, I shall admit defeat gracefully and let you leave, but," he said his voice lowering, "If I win...I will collect my reward *tonight*..."

His implication hung in the air between us.

"Reward, huh? All right, but I think it is only fair to warn you that I was taught by my father, who was a master at the game of chess. But what if I win? What is my reward?"

"Whatever you desire..."

It was well past midnight by the time I said, "Checkmate!"

To give him credit, he wasn't a sore loser.

He smiled and said, "Well done, you are a worthy opponent, Brooke. I should like a rematch...but now that you've won, what is your compensation?"

"Hum...you..."

He grinned, "I was hoping you'd say just that."

He seized a hold of my upper-arms and ruthlessly brought me to him. I struggled against him, but when I realized I couldn't free myself from his arms of steel he wound around my waist to mold my body into his, my hands crept up to cup his face and bring his lips to mine. That long kiss lasted and lasted until we were both left hot and panting—my, but he was a good kisser!

### Bittersweet Romance

After only a few hours I was his, completely surrendering to my own desires which overrode everything else, right or wrong, sinful or not. I had to have him, have him inside me, and fill me up with his hard maleness, his love.

His body was heavy and thick with muscles that swelled and convulsed under my touch. When he kissed me, it was with such great fervor and possession that it frightened me, yet left me aching all over for another kiss. He slipped out of his then relieved me of mine, save for my pink lace panties.

Outside the open French doors, a slight breeze moved through the room and the moon shone from above, shedding a soft radiance into the room. He laid me down on the bearskin rug in front of the fire and began to make love to me, gently at first then with a heated urgency, as our bodies molded together.

There was only Armand, all other thoughts and feelings fleeing my mind as his tongue explored my mouth, his hands roughly massaging my buttocks, making my body burn like a raging fire out of control...I was out of control...but there was only

#### Armand.

I was surrounded by his body, by his scent, by his taste. My heartbeat sped up. My blood soared. A rush of pink stained my cheeks as his roaming hands discovered my breasts over the silky fabric of my dress. He kissed me so long and hard that I found myself kissing him back with just as much enthusiasm and yearning. I felt my flesh grow warm at his velvety touch. He buried his face in my long hair and breathed a kiss onto my neck.

Armand's caresses were intense, skillful, and seductively teasing. His roaming mouth traveled around my lips, neck, shoulders, and my breasts, setting my body aflame, yet his skin felt slightly cool beneath my fingertips. His touch, his mouth was so intense and ravenous, leaving me gasping. His lovemaking was ferocious, fervent, like a giant inferno growing bigger and larger, consuming us both in its passion. I let him take me and do what he wanted with his mouth, with his tongue, with his fingers, until the embers growing between us both caught fire and I completely surrendered to him. The flames grew and swelled to dangerous heights, as colors exploded behind my closed eyes.

Oh, my beautiful beloved. You are mine now. We are one and tonight I shall brand you, give you your first dark kiss...because I have found you at last. At first, I wasn't sure it was you. I have searched the centuries and now I have finally found my destiny, my beloved. You shall never bore me and I shall never tire of looking at your great beauty, or of wanting to make love to you...never.

"What are you doing? How is it I can hear your

thoughts?"

He silenced me with a long deep kiss. My body was hot with need, with wanting. It frightened me to think that I could lose all control by his mere touch.

"You're very lovely, Brooke, so young and desirable. You have such a beautiful body...and such a sexy curve to your neck," he whispered. *I love how you taste, my beloved*.

He licked my neck, making me moan in sinful pleasure.

And deep within me, I reasoned that I did this for pleasure, for passion, for *him*; because despite everything we had this strange instant connection that I could not explain, only accept, as if we had truly been lovers in another life.

"I love you..." I moaned softly, "I need you."

Armand's mouth covered mine, burning with hungry desire as he put long leisurely kisses on my lips, neck, and face until I was swooning. The air seemed to spark around us; it seemed full of some kind of invisible electric current of excitement. Then I felt the heady sensation of his lips in my hair, against my neckline... lingering there, his mouth opening against the soft, tender flesh, teasing me with his tongue. Armand's kisses were filled with fire and passion, leaving me quite breathless. His mouth found mine, hot and hungry, as his tongue parted my eager lips. I couldn't breathe wanting him so badly.

There was a dominant nature to his lovemaking that made me afraid, but excited me too. Skin to skin we pressed, heart to heart. Finally, when I thought I could stand it no longer, he slipped off my panties with skillful fingers, slowly, worshipfully. Our eyes held and I felt my nipples grow hard as his fingers teased the peaks.

Armand's gaze slowly, seductively dropped from my eyes to my bare shoulders, to my full breasts, to the swell of my hips, and to my legs. He explored every inch of me with his hands, his mouth, and his eyes. He stirred something within me by his expert touch and forceful lovemaking. Then he took my hands, encouraging them to explore his most intimate parts. He moaned and his eyes closed when he finally entered me.

We are now one, my beloved.

"...Yes, we are one..." I whispered.

A shuddering passion pounded the blood through my heart, chest, and head, leaving me quite breathless, and the degree to which I was responding surprised me. I couldn't stop the moan that escaped through my lips.

I caressed the strong tendons on the back of his neck, moving his hair to place a kiss there as we moved together as one. He paused in our lovemaking to gaze down into my face, and as our eyes met, I found I could look nowhere else. He was a glowing image of fire, passion, and obsession melting together in a fiery hot inferno of desire. As one, we found the tempo that bound our bodies and hearts together—forever. After we were spent, I lay next to him on my back, staring into the glowing fire.

He leaned up on one elbow, so he could gaze down into my eyes. His shiny black hair framed his

gorgeous face. His cadence was velvety, cajoling, "I will love you, like no other before you. You are a woman of such rare beauty and power. From the first moment I saw you in the garden, I knew I had to have you, possess you, and make you mine."

I forced a smile and wrapped my arms around his neck, snuggling against his warm, hard body.

"Armand," I sighed. "You're so beautiful, too, so lovely—but why is it; I feel we have this overpowering connection? It is more then mere lust, isn't it? You feel it too, don't you?"

"Because I am a creature of the night like you."

"Like me? I don't understand..."

"All in good time...all in good time, my beloved."

He silenced me with another long deep kiss, his lips firm and warm, sending heat flowing through my body like a warm, liquid fire that threatened to consume me until only ashes remained. He was a skillful lover, who took his time exploring my body and giving me great pleasure. He waited until I was satisfied first, before himself. He was generous, dynamic, forceful...clutching my waist as he dove inside me again and again.

He made love to me for hours until I was so physically exhausted that I was left limp all over.

That is when he gave me my first dark, immortal kiss. It caught me by surprise; I was lying there sleepily beside him, drifting off into dreams, when his lips brushed against my neck. I could feel his lips part, his teeth slide along my flesh, then pierce my skin. It was a strange, dreamy heady sensation. It felt

like flying, floating out of one's body unto another plane of consciousness, it was erotica and sensuous, it was exhilarating, even though I didn't quite realize what was happening at the time...

Sometime before dawn, he rose and dressed. I watched him, though I pretended to be asleep. He disappeared into the other room, without looking back. Then I went home, but the memory of his ardent kisses left a burning imprint on my body.

# Gathering Darkness

few nights later, I heard from Armand again...actually it was close to a week. I had been counting the days, the hours. He sent me red roses every day that we were apart. I had started to think it was only to be that one magical night. That it had all been a strange, wonderful dream.

And then he returned one evening and spent the night with me, claiming me, branding me his forever. After that, he came to me only at night, and during the day, I tried to keep busy with my duties as heiress, and major shareholder of the vast empire my father had created, but my thoughts often went to him and his soft, drowning kisses. My family owned a large chain of hotels and casinos across the country. My twin-brother refused to be involved with the family business, and he profusely declined all charity work or personal appearances required by the family on occasion. But I was happy for the distraction.

I loved Armand, without meaning to let it happen, I had fallen head-over-heels in love with him.

I thought of him every day, every waking hour and thoughts of his face, his touch, his scent lingered in the back of my mind. I thought of him while I dressed, while I was at a board meeting, while I ate, while I counted the hours until sunset when I would see him again.

I loved him.

I told Caleb about my new lover and as usual he tried to make it seem little, unimportant, or trivial. Just another meaningless affair, for I had had a few in the past, but it was more than that, much more then even I knew at the time. I think he somehow realized that, too. He knew me well, but he didn't understand it.

Several times Caleb tried to talk me out of seeing Armand again, but I refused to listen. He told me that I'd never tame him...that he was a womanizer, fire and wind, the type of man that can never settle down, and that he would only break my heart. He made me wonder with growing jealously how Armand spent his days and why I never saw him before sundown. And my suspicions were darkening, as Armand's strange ways and mysterious past were starting to reveal themselves...and now my sixth sense was screaming that he possessed supernatural powers, and possible murderous intentions.

Where did he go during the day? Why could we only meet at night, and why did he leave before the sun came up? These dark thoughts plagued me during my waking hours, but fled by nightfall and the arrival of Armand.

Armand came to me one evening just as the sun was setting on the horizon. He startled me by

appearing as if out of thin air in my bedroom.

It would be an evening I'd never forget for as long as I lived...for it was the night that Armand's true colors were revealed.

"Were you thinking of me?"

"Yes..." I turned to face him.

He was gorgeous. He looked dashing in a black sweater that emphasized the great width of his board shoulders and a pair of snug black jeans that accented his long legs. God, but he was attractive, with his blue-black hair, sculpted features, and intense dark black eyes...like a museum sculpture come to life. He emanated a quality of quiet strength that I found both reassuring and intimidating. His dark eyes watched me move toward him, my slinky fuchsia-colored dress clung to me and my breasts visibly swaying beneath the thin fabric.

His strong scent invaded my nostrils, the scent of his hair, his aftershave, sweat, the passion radiating from his body, and something else...the smell of blood on his lips. I shook my head, feeling dizzy and surreal.

Come to me, my beloved.

He gathered me in his arms and leaned down to plant a kiss on my eager lips. His skin felt cold, his fingers strong, and his nails long. His masterful touch sent a shiver of delicious anticipation down my spine and created a yearning between my legs. I stepped out of his arms, feeling slightly drunk from his drugging, deep kisses.

"Why don't you ever call or come by during the day?"

"I told you, I'm a busy man. I have many investments to oversee...I have already made a small fortune this year. But I need something more."

"What?"

"...something." He smiled mysteriously, trying to take me in his arms again, but I wasn't going to be easily caught tonight. Caleb's suspicions were starting to get to me.

"Get over here," he said...no, he demanded. And against my will, I did. Oh, how could I resist such a compelling, sexy fellow? I felt out of control again, and I hated feeling out of control.

In his arms, he kissed me, and I closed my eyes. His lips parted and his tongue darted in and out of mouth as I whimpered, it was such a passionate kiss that seemed to last an eternity and end much, much too soon.

"We need to talk, Armand," I insisted, surprising us both with the determination and strength in my voice, "I need to know if this is just another conquest for you, or if it's something more...I need to know and I want the truth, Armand. *Please*....or you shall never again grace my bed, do I make myself clear?"

"Are you suggesting we marry?" he smiled sadistically, "Only if you promise to make me a very rich man..."

I grimaced.

"Only joking, my love..."

"Is it only for the money, Armand? Is that *all* you care about?"

"It was...at first, but since loving you, it has

changed things. But I do need Vaughn Hall."

Surprised, I asked, "Why, why do you need it?"

"I thought you would have guessed why by now. Because it's perfect for my needs. Centrally located, private, exclusive and most of all, a large stone basement without windows or doors."

I stared at him puzzled and asked, "Why in heaven's name do you need a cellar?"

Oh, that devilish smile again!

He took his time before answering as if weighing his answer carefully, thoughtfully. Then he spoke in a low, seductive voice, "For my lair...my previous home was condemned and the house above it destroyed to make a parking garage, of all things," he shook his head. "Brooke, look at me! Look closely at me," he said softly, hypnotically, "I am a creature of the night. I sleep during the day in my underground lair, and at night I live in the shadows."

For the first time I noticed the translucency of his skin, his long nails, and his eyes as sharp and cunning as a predator.

"Who are you? Are you...human?"

"Look at me, Brooke. Look into my eyes. Do not be afraid of me. You have nothing to fear from me," he took my hands in his, and looked deeply into my eyes. "I would never hurt you, my beloved one. I am a creature of the night... I am Nosferatu. I am Vamprye..." he said slowly, calmly, letting what he had said sink in. "Do you know what I am insinuating? What I am trying to tell you?"

My breath caught. My eyes grew wide and my

heart throbbed a mad tune of fright.

"Yes, of course, but you don't...you don't really think you're a..." I shook my head in disbelief and said as if I transfixed, reciting aloud; "Vamprye, derived from old Slavic language, Nosferatu means plague-carrier. The vampire's bite was at the time thought to be the cause of the spread of tuberculosis. The author Bram Stoker made the word known the world over in association with the vampire in Van Helsing's speech about Lucy, saying, "'The nosferatu do not die like the bee when he stings once. He is only stronger...'"

"Yes, a very poetic way to put it. I read *Dracula*; fascinating and most accurate. Do you suppose Bram Stoker knew a vampire? Or was one?" he smiled.

I recoiled when he took a step toward me. His eyes seem to glow with a life of their own.

"Now, you know the truth," he said, "there shall be no more secrets between us, my beloved. We shall be together for all eternity. I can offer you my dark gift, my immortal kiss of eternity, and we shall never be apart...it's what you want isn't it? For us to be together?"

"Yes, of course. But...but I don't want to be...well, what you claim to be."

"Don't you? You live for the night as I do; it is when you come alive. You've always been different, felt different, haven't you?"

I nodded, feeling strange. "Dear god, who are you? I know you..."

He reached out for me, yet hesitated. "I have

traversed over mountains of time to find you. To be with you."

I could see his vampire teeth elongate, and his resistance to bite.

He continued: "Join me, Brooke. You will never grow old, never be hungry or cold, and never want for anything. You'll stay young and beautiful...and you shall never die." He was very persuasive.

"How old are you?"

"Two hundred years old, and don't I look great?"

"This isn't a time to joke! This is crazy! You are *not* a vampire. Why are you doing this? Is this your sick way of breaking it off with me?"

"No, it's my way of convincing you to join me, Brooke," his dark, dark eyes searched mine. "Let me show you how beautiful it can be. We can be together, Brooke...for all eternity. Just you and me. You know me..."

"Yes, yes I do! It's your voice, perhaps. It's so familiar. It's like a...it's like a voice in a dream I've had since I was a child, and it strangely comforts me...How did this happen? I mean, how did you become like this?"

"When I was thirty years old, I met a man in Europe who hired me to help him draft a legal document, concerning his property and corporation. He was an eccentric billionaire who only contacted me at night. One evening, he invited me over to his villa. We drank wine and talked together about his business, and when I was very high, he took me and made me a vampire....He needed a companion, but I

left him after a short while. He was weak, for he did not like what he was, but I did! I loved it; I loved my newfound supernatural powers, my unnatural strength, and I especially loved the *hunt*. It seemed I was born to be a vampire; I am a natural born predator.

"I have traveled the world over, moved from place to place seeking out my kind. I have a few friends, had a few lovers, both vampire and human...but ah, now I have you, my beloved. You. I'm been searching for someone strong, vibrant, and cunning like you through the centuries to share my gift with. I want you by my side, to be my companion, my life partner," his voice was a soft murmur, cajoling, convincing, "There is something terribly erotic about the bite of a vampire, as you will see, it is a sensual and arousing thrill. I was determined that the lover I choose must be able to satisfy my strong sexual appetite as well. And now that I have finally chosen a companion, actually found you, I merely used my many charms and my sexuality to seduce you; for long ago I decided I would only give my dark gift, to the right woman, to the perfect woman. And only once. I've chosen you with great care, and when I finally bestow my last dark immortal kiss to you, you will belong to me completely. And you, dearest Brooke, suit my needs perfectly."

"I don't understand...Armand? Dark kiss?"

"Does it really matter, if I'm not human? If I don't have a soul? I am still flesh and blood, still breathing, walking, and talking, and still able to enjoy and partake in most of the pleasures in life. I am able to feel, to make love, and to take care of you beautifully. I love you and want to be with you, and that is all that really matters, don't you see?"

My knees were weak, my body flooding with hot need as he reached out for me. In the past I had always been the calm one, confident with my other lovers, but now I felt out of control, a flame burning with raw need, intense, and hungry...craving...craving him inside me again.

"Kiss me," I breathed.

He did, consuming me with his great passion as his lips covered mine hungrily. "I want to show you something...first."

He looked me over seductively, his gaze lingering on my breasts. He gathered me in his arms and within seconds it seemed were flying, floating high into the night and then suddenly we were outside in a vast overgrown garden. The crescent moon shone high above in an inky black sky.

This place looked very familiar, as if I had been here before in my dreams. He led me through a tangle of tree branches, rosebushes, and shrubs to a thick iron door with a huge brass handle.

"This is my lair, my beloved," he said, opening the door with an old-fashioned key.

The passageway was dark. When we entered the anti-chamber, I waited while he lit several candles to illuminate the stone-enclosed room. A giant four-poster bed with black satin sheets dominated the room. He beckoned me over to the bed. As if at his

will, the satin sheets turned down, and then he took off his clothes. He got in under the sheets, sitting up against the pillows, with his hands behind his head, waiting for me. Smiling.

I lustfully admired the width of his shoulders, his broad chest rippling with muscles, his well-portioned arms, the narrow of his waist, and the V of dark hair that disappeared somewhere beneath the covers resting in his lap. Oh, but he was sexy.

All night long we made love, I was as ravenous for him as he was for me. So feverish and frenzied was our lovemaking that he almost hurt me; yet I invited him to go on, my arms holding him tightly against me, and my body eagerly receiving him again and again. I thought I might scream from the sheer ecstasy of making love to him. Passion and pleasure hovered all around me, over me, and through me. His mouth and hands continued to explore every inch of my flesh, and then reclaiming my lips, he crushed me to him. It was flesh against flesh, vampire against woman, male against female.

I didn't want it to ever stop.

As one, our bodies exploded into a downpour of fiery sensations again and again. When we were exhausted and lying in each other's arms, he turned toward me. He stared down at me with his big dark vampire eyes, reaching into me it seemed. They glowed red in the light like a wolf.

I gasped and sat up, moving away from him in fright. "You're not alive! I didn't quite believe it before, but...it's true!" I cried softly, "What are you?

Who are you?"

"I told you, my love..."

I blinked back tears that threatened to spill forth. All of a sudden, I was scared. Really scared.

"Brooke, you belong to me now." Then dipping his head slightly, he said, "I want to be with you. I want to marry you in mortal fashion," he said softly, "And don't worry. The final kiss, becoming, well, it won't hurt...I swear it."

I smiled and put my arms around his neck to breathe a kiss there. "You promise?"

"Of course. I would never hurt you."

"But not just yet..." I said and saw his eyes shadow, grow deep and dark. "The last thing my family needs is a scandal. I will belong to you when I can...in a few weeks. Just be patient a while longer, my darling. I have some loose ends to take care of first...Okay?"

"Yes, as you wish. Then we can be together, my beautiful blue-eyed lover," he said, smiling, "In the meantime, I would not tell anyone about what I've told you, or there will be dire consequences and you don't want that on your conscience."

What else could I say but all right? In that instant something changed inside me, and in that same instant, without knowing why, I had made up my mind.

"You have to trust me now, Brooke."

"I do..."

I watched as all the expression left his handsome face. His eyes seemed to glow red and he opened his mouth. The lower lip contracted, and I saw his two sharp fangs. And as I watched his lips curl and the light reflect off his teeth, I knew that in my heart it was true. He wasn't human, and hadn't been for a very long, long time.

His arms surrounded me, I felt his maleness grow hard against my thigh, and a great warmth emanated from him. I felt my head turn to the side.

Close your eyes, Brooke...relax. I want to kiss you, taste you...Don't fight it! You don't want to make me angry, my beloved one...my rage, my wrath can be destructive...deadly. I never want you to see that side of me. I want only to give you pleasure, love, ecstasy...

I felt the heady sensation of his lips against my throat as he kissed the hollow behind my ear. My heart was beating madly. Then he sank his long teeth into my neck...

I was floating...floating in a sensuous ocean of passion, lust, hunger, desire. My skin felt warm, I could feel the blood flowing through my veins as it was pumped up and out and into his mouth. I closed my eyes and let the room rotate around me, the real world spun and careened on its axis. I was weightless, floating in that endless, fathomless ocean of passion, of blood, serenely going under, and drowning in the velvety darkness that rose all around me...

## Vampire Tyes

s the days passed, so did the dreams of perfection, of an ideal love without complications or single flaws, like yesteryears, and all other youthful fantasies I had to finally outgrow, while I wait for my vampire lover to come to me and finally claim me his. I had accepted him for what he was...a man, a man who was the undead. *Nosferatu. Vamprye.* A creature of the night that I loved beyond logic or reason, beyond comprehension or common sense.

Still, I had a difficult choice to make.

I tried several times to tell Caleb about my intense, overwhelming, all-consuming love for Armand, about my obsession with him. About our bizarre relationship, and the strange connection we had, but still he refused to understand or listen. But how could he? I couldn't understand it myself. And I was happy despite my suspicions and worries, for I loved him. I had fallen deeply, helplessly, madly in love with him.

Love...what a strange, overpowering, and wonderful feeling it was. So strong, so intense, so vibrant and alive. Love. It was my master.

Nevertheless, Caleb soon put an end to all my happiness by telling me again and again that Armand was just using me. That he never really loved me—just what I represented...money...and lots of it. He told me that Armand was crazy, too. Claiming to be a vampire?

I made the mistake of showing Caleb my neck. He was horrified.

"How could you let him do that? The man is insane! He thinks he's really a vampire! Don't you know how crazy that sounds, Brooke? I mean the guy goes around dressing like a Goth in dark clothing and claiming to be the undead...it's as if he thinks he's some sort of domineering cult leader obsessed with controlling you—no matter how benevolent and how much common sense you think you have, he has bewitched you! I believe that by pretending and acting like a friendly and romantic lover, it is allowing him to exert this submissive power over you in a controlled and very perilous way.

"I believe Armand is unpredictable and dangerous, because he is able to draw people into his world with his many charms, but I think underlying it all is a personal vendetta that will surface soon enough, you'll see. You told me that he goes off on strange tangents that don't seem to make sense, using threats to get what he wants from you. Correct?" I nodded in silence, trying to ignore the truth and only listen to my heart, but his voice was seeping in through my ear and lounging in my head, trying to convince me otherwise. "He thinks you are weak in some way and

he is so charismatic, that he is able to use whatever he learns about you to draw you in closer. I think he's the type of man who preys on women...rich women in particular." Then he said wearily, "When you are under pressure, Brooke, you tend to act without thinking. So, let me do the thinking and worrying for you.

"Everything you've told me leads me to believe that the man is unstable and very dangerous. Do you think he has hypnotized you in some way? Maybe you're being brainwashed...Are you sure you're not imagining all this?"

I tried to laugh and shrug off what he was saying. Ridiculous! I was in love, not being brainwashed! "Of course not! Caleb, why would I lie? You're my best friend and if can't tell you, who can I tell? Who would believe but you? Please, don't look at me like that....please. We've been friends forever and your friendship means a lot to me. And why can't be true? There is a lot of unexplained phenomenon the world...this is just a well-guarded secret. It's all so terribly romantic." I sighed. "And I have come to believe him...and I think deep down you believe it too. You've seen the way he moves, so quickly, so gracefully, and the ways his hair shimmers as if it were alive and the way his dark eyes are that of a hawk. The translucency of his skin, the whiteness of his teeth...he is different. And I love him because he is different...you're just feeling jealous, Caleb. Admit it!"

"Jealous? Jealous of what?"

"Jealous because I found a love larger than life, a

man who worships me, and wants to spend his life making me happy." Then I repeated what Armand had said to me: "Does it really matter, if he's not human, or if he doesn't have a soul? Does it matter that he claims to be something mysterious, gothic, and romantic? He is flesh and blood! Your rational mind is trying to comprehend and look for scientific or logical reasons for things you cannot explain. I found it all terribly fascinating. For I do believe that there are occurrences or events in life that don't have simple explanation or that cannot be made plausible. And, just think how boring life would be if everything was easily given a rationalization and there were no mysteries to solve, no wonders to be confounded by? Stop thinking sensibly and have an open mind. Try, please, for me?"

"So, I'm a skeptic. I admit it, but there is nothing that can't be scientifically explained," he said leaning forward and using a more serious tone of voice, "And there is no such thing as creatures or people who are undead, roaming the earth at night, living off the blood of others. I believe in the possibility of the paranormal, but quite frankly, I *don't* believe in vampires."

I sighed, "Well, I do!"

"Okay, I'll humor you," he paused to ponder the situation and stared off into space before coming back and saying, "If Armand is indeed a vampire, or *thinks* he's one, than he only wants to protect his new lair under Vaughn Hall by any means possible, even if that means seducing its female occupants..." his tone

held a hint of sympathy for me, but it only made me lash out at him in anger, perceiving his manner as patronizing.

"You're mistaken! He loves for who I am, and I love him for who he is! And you are so very wrong because you don't know him as I do. He loves me, truly loves me. And they are such things as the supernatural; there are things that go bump in the night, Caleb, and Armand is the one who bumps back!"

He stared at me in stunned silence. "Okay, let's say I believe you...now let me ask you this. Have *you* completely lost your mind?"

I smiled, "Perhaps..." I was glad to have won this round, but melancholy because we were quarrelling all the time now.

Then one day, Caleb showed up on my doorstep with a newspaper clipping. We went into the kitchen and I poured him a cup of coffee. He sat down at the table and said thank you. He looked grim and tired.

I still felt sleepy myself; I had a hard time staying awake during the day now. I yawned and was about to take a sip of my coffee when he shoved the paper in my face.

My eyes grew wide and my hands were trembling as I took the newspaper from him. My father had died, and nobody had bothered to inform me! The paper reported that his death had been deemed a possible homicide, and that the police were launching a full-scale investigation. The intruder took no jewelry or valuables, and left the scene without leaving a

single fingerprint behind. The police had no clues or leads at this time...my mind reeled. I bit down hard on my lip until it throbbed like my pulse. Tears spilled from my eyes and my deep anguish peaked to shatter the last shreds of my control. Was he murdered?

I sat down — hard.

Armand! Damn him to hell from hence he came!

I began to cry, not from self-pity, but frustration at having been so blind and so stupid as to have believed him and his pack of lies. I knew this was his doing...I just knew it!

My expression turned bleak and my eyes went blank as I felt my legs starting to go out from under me. I stood there in the middle of my kitchen, blank, amazed, and much shaken. I let the paper fall from my fingers to the floor. I felt sad, bereft, and desolate.

How could he do this to me? Was it only for the mansion? It felt as though I was caught in some sort of hazy dream, and when I spoke, my voice was thick and unsteady, "You win, Caleb. And you don't need to say 'I told you so.' "

"I wasn't going to...I'm so sorry, Brooke. I wish I had been wrong about him."

"Just go...I need to be alone for a while."

He left without another word and I cried myself to sleep that night.

Caleb came over the next morning, and I agreed to finally end it with Armand. He seemed relieved.

Caleb's eyes were like a clear, sunny summer sky. Caleb stood there, watching me, wanting me. His body was rigid with sexual tension. I quietly listened to his heartbeat. I could hear the wind outside pick up.

His face opened in a wide smile.

My voice sounded like a bell, "Oh, Caleb..."

Caleb's soft blue eyes floated over my face. The unspoken pain of loving me, loving something he couldn't have was alive and thriving in his eyes. It hurt to stare into those blue orbs too deeply, for too long.

I rose to my feet.

The wind was silent now, yet a cool breeze blew through the open window. I sighed.

Caleb started toward me. Then he visibly stiffened.

I could hear his blood start to pump in his veins. Hot. Alive. Racing.

He quivered as he stared at me with horror written on his face now. Was he scared of me?

I advanced, closing the short distance between us. But Caleb took a step back. He stopped dead in his tracks.

So, I said, "Caleb? What's wrong?"

He couldn't take his eyes off me, off my face...my hair.

Something shattered across Caleb's face as his eyes became wet, and he gritted his teeth. "Your...your hair looks as if it's alive! It's so beautiful, so thick and long...it's so damn *strange* looking, yet I've never seen it looking healthier..."

Then something came over him and coming forward like a rush of air, he gathered me tight in his arms. My hands stole up around his neck.

I showered his face with kisses, working my way over his neck, savoring the taste of his warm flesh. My tongue darted freely around his ear until he moaned. He kissed me back deeply. Excited, our breathing grew quicker. He sat up and tugged off his shirt. His lean torso was rippling with muscles that tapered to his perfect narrow hips.

He said wild, passionate things: "I want to be the one who makes you smile and makes you laugh. Makes your heart flutter with desire, love, and makes your pulse race with excitement. I want to be with you forever, I want to make love to you again, Brooke—slowly, passionately—every night for the rest of our lives." He pressed his forehead to mine then pulled away, his expression faraway and dreamy. "And when you wake up, I want to be the first face you see, because I need you, need you with me, beside me *forever*. You've invaded my heart—my very soul and I can't imagine my life without you...choose me, Brooke! Please! Choose me," he exclaimed and forced me to lift my bowed head.

I studied his handsome face, looked deeply into his blue eyes, and wondered what he saw in me that made his speak so passionately.

"I feel so awful. Make love to me, Caleb...please. I need to feel you inside me," I said quietly, "And I do love you, perhaps I always have..."

I put my hands on the sides of his face and brought it to mine. I kissed him again and again. We began to gently, passionately make love. I felt bold, aggressive, and I took charge of the lovemaking. I wanted to make love all night, as though it was to be our last time together, uncertain of what the future might hold.

I kissed him, long and deep, lingering, savoring every moment as if it would be our last. As he lay over me, my lips parted to receive his deep kiss. He ran his hands over my body. Then I sat up and yanked off my clothes, tossing them aside. I was completely naked now. My bare breasts rubbed against his chest as he lay over me, my hands probing every inch of his golden flesh. His supple lips kissed away all the hurt Armand had inflicted. We were harmonious in our lovemaking.

His jeans came off when I could stand it no longer and was wild to have him inside me. Tenderly he lay on top of me, taking my body to new heights. I exalted at his male strength, his nearness, and the sheer beauty of him. The mere touch of his hands on my body sent a warming shudder through me. My breasts heaved at the sweet intimacy of his hands lightly touching them, and then his tongue tracing over my nipples. Skin to skin we pressed, until we were again made one.

I cried out for release, moaning softly in rapture. I closed my eyes, hovering outside myself to a place of sweet ecstasy.

We soared higher and higher until the peak of satisfaction was reached and a strong feeling of contentment and peace flowed between us. When we were spent, we lay in the drowsy warmth of each

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other's arms. Caleb offered me the sweet promise of forever...

"I love you, darling. I just hope I've won your heart in time to stop you from falling prey to Armand's possessive power over you, and possibly lose you to the night forever! I'll fight for you, Brooke. Even if it means my own demise..."

I didn't answer, just snuggled closer into the warmth of his toned body. Caleb fell peacefully asleep with a small smile on his lips, snuggling me close. Sometime before dawn, I slept.

That was only two days before the massive earthquake, and three days before my own death was at hand...

## The Spider and The Fly

The following evening as soon as the sun set, I waited for Armand on one of the verandas at Vaughn Hall.

Brooke? I'm glad you're here.

Seconds later, he appeared by my side in the garden as if he could sense my presence and smiled.

Armand looked at me so intensely, with strange lights flickering in his dark eyes...such persuasive vampire eyes, I thought, that he touched me profoundly; touched some chord, which vibrated in my very soul and made the blood soar through my veins. But I tried to ignore it and the pounding of my heart.

He softly asked, "Would you like to take a walk in the rose garden, in the moonlight?"

"Sure," I said.

I followed Armand along the path to stroll through the gardens as I glanced up at the night, pulsating around us. My coat fell open to expose my short red dress, which made me suddenly feel it was revealing too much. My hands subconsciously fluttered upward to my daring décolletage to hide my cleavage as he stared, making me blush all over. Yet I basked in the knowledge that I still had an affect on him.

His dark vampire eyes seductively raked me over, taking in my face, my long blonde hair, my revealing bosom, my waist, hips, and long legs. When his dark eyes roamed back to my face, he smiled, and his eyes gazed deeply into mine. I could not move, I could not breathe, and I could only stand there frozen in time while my heart seemed to ache under my heaving breast.

"You look very beautiful tonight, Brooke," he said softly. "What did you want to see me about?" he asked. He looked different...then I realized he had shaven off his moustache.

He caught me staring and rubbed his smooth face. "I needed a change. Do you like it?"

"No."

He chuckled at my candor as I looked up into his eyes. Eyes as black as coal out here in the darkness. His strong features held a certain undeniable sensuality. He made my heart flutter beneath my breast.

Armand's dark hair was glossy in the pale moonlight. He was wearing tight black leather pants and a black shirt, with a necklace dangling from around his throat. His long black hair was down around his shoulders, and he looked very stylish and suave.

We strolled along and I found myself enjoying his closeness as he checked his long stride to match my own. The garden held me in thrall making me feel melancholy.

"Just tell me why...why Armand?"

"I already told you why...I need the mansion."

"There are other houses, other places to live."

"Not that suits my needs so perfectly. I've looked. What does it matter?"

"It was you who took my father's life, right?" We stared at each other.

"You hated your father...Brooke, please do not worry, nothing's changed. I made it look like he died in his sleep of natural causes...nothing to fret about, my beloved."

"Everything's changed! Oh Armand, I refuse to keep playing games with you. I know why you've been pursuing me. Why you've seduced me. You need the mansion and the money." He quirked his eyebrow questioningly with surprise at my frankness. "I did some checking into your background..." I paused for dramatic effect, "I know you are bankrupt and you need the mansion for its remoteness and seclusion. I suppose it is perfect for a vampire's needs, and located outside of a big city, so you can go unnoticed and you don't have to hunt close to home. Safer that way, I suspect. So, if you've been toying with me this whole time because of the mansion...then...then you won't have me in your bed—or as your lover!"

"Sooo," he drawled. "You came over here tonight to end it with me, huh?" he shook his head at me, like a parent does to a disobedient child. "Why would you want to do that?" he asked with amusement glittering in his dark eyes that met with mine. "We can still be together, and well, I won't kill again if that is your wish. Lena can live and be our servant...honestly, Brooke, why can't you trust me?"

"What about my brother?" I remember demanding, "Will you spare his life as well?"

Then he smiled, the most evil smile I ever saw, and I shivered. "Who has turned you against me? Caleb?"

We stopped walking to turn to each other. I laughed bitterly and met his dark look with my own confident smile. I felt hurt, mean, vindictive, and resentful.

"No! It wasn't him! It's me. Though, he did show me the newspaper article regarding my father's mysterious death, but I make up my own mind. He is trying to be my friend, which is a lot more than I can say for you!"

"You're shouting," he looked around. "Let's go inside. Follow me."

An owl hooted from a nearby tree. He led me down a path, around the side of the mansion through the tangle of trees, rosebushes, and shrubs to the thick iron door.

"This is where my lair is, my beloved. This is why I have to have the mansion," he said, opening the door.

I could not repress a gasp. No wonder it had seemed familiar to me before. His hideaway was under our mansion.

I followed him down the dark passageway into the anti-chamber. I stared at the bed. As if he had willed

it, several candles sparked with life and a fire roared warm and inviting in the fireplace.

I moved further into the room and closer to the fire that flickered with azure, crimson, and golden flames. The shimmering candles and the glowing fire gave the room a cozy and romantic ambiance. I sat down on the bed near the fire curling my legs to the side and distractedly staring into it.

Armand looked dashing as usual in his dark silk shirt, black leather pants, and his big black boots. He looked debonair, dapper, and stylish all at once. He poured me a glass of red wine and handed it to me. He sat down next to me on the bearskin rug as we gazed into the fireplace. The stretch of silence between us began to pulsate with sensuality. I saw him glancing at me as I kept gazing at him.

I sighed heavily. How could I end it with him? How could I deny this passion, this desire, this great love for him in my heart?

My whole being was filled with wanting...and haunting desire. His gaze dropped from my eyes to my shoulders and lingered on my cleavage. The implication of that long stare sent waves of excitement through me. It was too easy to get lost in the way he hungrily looked at me. My bosom heaved with desire under the intense heat of his smoldering gaze.

"Armand...please, don't make this any harder for me...please."

His hands slipped up my arms, bringing me closer until we were only inches apart. "I don't intend to,

because you are not getting rid of me that easily, my beloved..."

He moved his generous mouth over mine. That long passionate kiss sent the pit of my stomach into a wild swirl. He was kissing and nibbling on my ear lobe and softly moaning with pleasure. He surged a path down my neck, to my shoulders...and continued over the top of my breasts, making my rosy peaks grow firm. I softly moaned as he lifted me up effortlessly and then eased me down onto the bed.

I let him kiss me, hold me, and fondle me until I was breathing fast and heavy. His tried to take off my dress, his hands moved gently up and down the length of my back, finding the zipper. I shifted my weight, cupped his face in my hands, bringing his lips to mine and crushed him to me. His lips felt firm, his tongue probing, and his kisses much more demanding this time.

"My beloved, I want you so much," he muttered between those hot, demanding, wet kisses.

I tried to sit up and catch my breath but he sensed my uncertainty and placed his lips over mine to silence my protest. When we came up for air, I saw the desire like the fire blazing in his eyes.

I heard a sound from above us. Was someone moving around in the mansion above us? Then suddenly the whole room began to violently shake and shift. It lasted for a few long seconds. Plaster and dust floated down from the ceiling. I held onto the side of the bed as it shook back and forth. Then it stopped and all was quiet again.

"Jeez! It sounds as if they're moving furniture up there."

"It's nothing, relax." Armand tried to reclaim my lips, but I quickly sat up and straightened my dress.

"Armand...I came here to talk," I said, "Not be seduced by you again."

"We'll talk later...now let us continue," he purred.

"No. I came here to tell you something, not to fall prey to your many charms, Armand!"

"Fine. We shall talk...then make love," Armand sighed deeply, which seemed uncharacteristic of him, before continuing: "Try to understand, my beloved. I need Vaughn Hall for the time being, until it no longer suits my purposes. It will be prefect for us. We can live here and go on as before, no one need to be the wiser. And if we're very careful, you can go on overseeing your father's business. Don't you see, it's perfect?" then his eyes narrowed on mine. "Why can't you just trust me? Can't even you, with those inquisitive blue eyes, see that I'm telling the truth?"

"I don't know...I don't know what to think anymore. But, Caleb has opened my eyes to the truth, you're—just a womanizer looking for any unsuspecting female who crosses your path or suits your needs," I angrily bit out. "You don't really love me. You're just using me!"

We glared at each other, but his eyes quickly softened as he stared at me.

"I don't want to quarrel with you. Why do you want to argue when I want to make love? Tell me that you've forgiven me, that you love me as much as I

love you, and that you have accepted my dark, immortal kiss," he said so softly that I had to keen my ears to hear him. "I never meant to mislead you, Brooke, especially about who I am and what I want. I though I was perfectly clear."

He looked anxious as he watched my face. I tried not to show emotion, but I knew my eyes and my heart would give me away, so I looked at the floor.

"Your father was dying anyway," he said, pleadingly, "I looked inside him and saw that he only had days to live and he was suffering so. I did him a favor...I did it for us. As for Lena, well, I only used her, bent her will to my own to do my bidding, but I didn't want to do that to you. I want you to come to me of your own accord, of your own free will. I want to make you immortal. I am very much in love with you and I want us to build a new life together. So, my beloved, you can take me for what I am, a creature of the night, the eternal damned...and you can join me or not. It's that simple. So, I'm asking you to make a decision, now, here, tonight, and to still believe in me." His dark, sloe eyes looked me over. I saw the blazing attraction thriving deep within those eyes. He smiled then: that disarming smile that instantly melted my defenses.

A smile so alluring it was no wonder I had been instantly won over and had been taken in by his virile charms.

His next words were spoken like a soft caress, making me feel confused and unreal, "Why would you want to throw away eternity together?" Then he

softly chuckled, "maybe I was wrong to do it, to bring you across...maybe you've changed your mind about us. Maybe you don't believe I'm worth giving up your soul for. Has Caleb poisoned you against me at last?"

"No, of course not! He has only shown me your true colors. But I am confused...I need to talk to my brother."

"Why? He doesn't like me either. I see it in those cold eves of his. You need to trust Brooke...because I still want to make you a vampire," he paused to smile, as if to win me over. "You're a very intriguing blend Brooke, part sophistication, part intellectual, part seductress, but mostly all woman..." His vampire eyes seem to glaze over as he gazed at me so intently and so long that I felt my heart start to pound. "You've already started to change, I can tell. You sleep most of the day, avoid direct sunlight because it burns your eyes, you crave raw meat...and you crave sex with the intensity of an animal in heat. And your blonde hair is animate ...alive, it shimmers in the light, attracting all the colors of the rainbow. Beautiful...lovely." He seemed transfixed by my hair.

I smiled at him, feeling the sexual domination I still had over a man like him. *Correction, a vampire like him.* 

"Can't you forgive me?" he asked as a persuasive expression settled on his gorgeous face. "Are you just punishing me for taking what is rightfully ours? Yours?"

"Forgive you?" I repeated as if I didn't understand what he was asking, "You tell

untruths, use me, and deceive me, and now you want me to just instantly forgive and forget? You merely needed someone wealthy, but not bright...obviously, I don't fit the mold. But Lena sure does! So, you should go after her. Make her your life partner! And you never loved me. Let's be honest with each other, it was all lust and sex...but never love," I lied, trying to hurt him because I was deeply hurting inside. My heart was bleeding, torn in two, those fragile unresolved feelings, emotions were left raw, hurt, and aching. "So, now you have your mansion! Make Lena a vampire, make her your disciple, and so I guess you won't need me anymore, except to warm your bed."

"Calm down, Brooke, you're shaking. Where is all this animosity coming from? Can't you just tell me what you want? Him or me?"

The conflict between us was growing stronger and more vivid because of Armand's impatience with all my fears and doubts, and now he was asking, *no* he was demanding a bottom line...just like Caleb was. Both of them pressuring me for an answer. I felt anxious and threatened by Armand's aggression, causing me to withdraw. I shrugged to hide my uncertainty, crossing my arms and pointedly looking away from his burning stare.

Armand's voice was calming, hypnotizing, "Brooke, you're a loyal and trustworthy ally. I don't want a mindless disciple to do my bidding, I want a lover. I want you!

"We need each other. And I know you so well, I

can read your thoughts, the desires of your heart..." he said it slowly, softly, winning me over despite myself, and ebbing away my distrust and anger. "You like having the lines written for you, you like structure, and the feeling of belonging to someone. You're soft and caring, and you have a way of connecting to people; however, you thrive on provoking confrontations occasionally to prove your courage and your strength. Your only flaw is your own lack of faith in yourself. But you can be yourself with me, I love you just the way you are and I wouldn't change a thing. I like being with you, just sitting and talking or playing a game of chess. I like the way you let me win on occasion. I like the shrewd games you play, keeping me on my toes, never boring me. I love the way you move, so graceful and quiet. I like the way your face becomes elated after you climax and the way you smile peacefully up at me after we've made love

"Brooke, you are a strong, beautiful, independent, and vibrant young woman. I know you want to be strong to protect you father's legacy, yet you want to feel like a woman too; soft, flowery, and feminine. You don't have to worry; now you'll be able to look after your family for generations and your father's empire, my beloved...with me by your side. We can rule it all together..."

"You think you can see the desires of my heart?" I cried, shaking all over, because everything he had said was true, but too painful to admit or acknowledge. "Well, think again. I've always been a

fool when it comes to men. I used to be a pragmatist and naïve in the ways of love and men—but I don't need you, however, you need me—you need my mansion, my money. I was just plaything, a distraction for you, a rich heiress to seduce. You don't really need me...you don't," my voice grew softer and weaker losing its momentum like a train drudging up hill, "You'll never get one cent of my money. Not one nickel, Armand..."

"Oh, Brooke. You know as well as I do that what we have together is a greater passion than you've ever dreamed possible. I want the mansion...and you." It was his turn to smile. "Now stop this nonsense and get into bed *now!*"

"No. I only came by tonight to end it with you. You must go and live this house, Armand."

"You don't mean that! Brooke, oh, my beloved. I see now I have hurt you, but it was only to test you. To see if you really loved me. I had to be sure," his voice was so low and seductive that it pierced my heart, "I'm a part of you, Brooke, a part of your soul. You've already accepted my dark kiss and now we are one. You belong to me, Brooke. And for all eternity, it will be you and me. *Now*, *will you accept my offer of immortality?*" The underlying sensuality of his smooth words captivated me and made me waver, my body tremble.

I backed away from him, shaking my head, "No. No, I can't..."

But then softly and far away, I heard him calling my name, and with it came the sweet promises of forever. Why don't you come and save me, Caleb? Why call to me only in your thoughts, with only your heart?

"Brooke...oh, Brooke," he said, rising out of bed. I took in the naked splendor of him, his tempting, attractive male physique and his manhood swelled as I gazed upon him. I backed away. He took a step closer, and then another until he had me in his arms.

There was a long awkward hush between us. Our eyes met and my heart started a faster thumping. His gorgeous face was kindled with a passionate beauty, and his eyes were dark and unfathomable, shining brightly in the pale glow of the candles. I felt myself being drawn to him, pulled by the invisible electrical current always between us—ever since I had accepted his first dark kiss of immortality.

"Stop this foolishness now!"

He loomed over me. I tried to rip my gaze away from his, surveying the room surrounding us.

When he spoke again, his voice sounded more like a soft purr, "Please Brooke, let me give you the last kiss, take my dark gift and we can be together forever, I promise." He reached out for me, drawing me in his arms. He held me tightly against him, so close I could feel every muscle, every inch of him, and his maleness pressing hard, hard against my hip.

"Oh, Armand," I moaned softly.

My resolve weakened. I was in over my head, I couldn't think clearly. Love...love it was my master...desire, I was a slave to it...passion, it pounded in my veins and pumped its way into my

heart. I loved Armand; there was no denying it or trying to run away from it. Love. The greatest gift of all. Love.

Did I somehow still want Armand despite everything he had done to me? The answer was yes, somewhere deep within my heart, I already knew the answer. I was entranced by the silent misery of his face, and by his dark persuasive eyes.

My pulse skipped a beat at the way his nearness captivated me so that I cleared my throat, pretending not to be affected. With his eyes alone, he stroked a gently growing fire building between us. Our eyes held for a long moment. Armand held me tightly in his arms, breathing a kiss onto my neck, lifting my long hair to do so.

I love you so...oh, Armand.

I know, and I love you as much as a mortal man, perhaps more, because I can't wait to spend eternity with you.

He stood there so dark, enticing, and sexy, making me feel weak with desire. I leaned into him, molding my curves into his, impelled involuntarily by my own passion and infatuation. As in a dream, I found myself in his arms, my body responding to the kisses he lavished on my lips, face, neck, and breasts. His breathing came fast and hard. "Oh, how I love you...we will be together for all eternity, and you'll see how beautiful the world will become once you...once you *become*, my beloved one." I felt his soft lips on my cheek, in my hair, then lightly over my eyelids, and finally on my lips that parted beneath his prolonged kiss.

I twined my fingers into his thick, black hair and pulled his face closer to mine. My lips and body acting on their own, loving his touch, his soft lips, his smell, and his taste. His appetite was burning into my flesh, he was ravenous, pulling me down onto the bed. His scent filled my nostrils strong, musky, masculine, and distinctly predatory.

Oh my, but he was stunningly virile and such a wonderful lover. He lifted me up and carried me over to the bed. He laid me down gently then lay next to me. My mind was telling me to resist, but my heart and body refused. My breasts tingled against the silky fabric of my dress as he laid his chest over mine. Then he took off my dress, reaching under me to pull down the zipper, and his velvety skin rubbed against mine. He was hairy all over and his chest and arms rippled with muscles. I was barely conscious of where his bare, warm flesh was touching mine, making my body quiver from the intimate contact. He pulled my panties down as I moaned again and again with wicked pleasure.

I was hypnotized by his touch, my body singing under his fingertips that sought out my most intimate places. The flames of passion burned within us both. I was drifting...drifting and when I closed my eyes I saw only Armand all around me, shutting out the night, shutting out the whole world. Our hearts were beating simultaneously as one.

Outside I could faintly hear the wind began to blow and whipping through the trees, lifting the branches and making them sway back and forth...back and forth.

## Dark Kiss of Fternity

Softly his breath fanned my face and hair until his clips found mine. We parted as he gazed down at me with his eyes filled with desire. His mouth covered mine hungrily yet again and I returned each kiss with reckless abandon. I could feel his urgency swelling and growing larger against my thigh. And then I felt his fangs, his tongue lapping at my neck like a cat. My heart jolted and my pulse skittered alarmingly. He was going to try to give me his dark kiss of eternity again—here, now!

What was I doing letting Armand hold me and give me his immortal kiss again? This was crazy!

But I was swooning, drifting again, losing myself in the sweet ecstasy of his drugging kisses....my vision blurred, become unfocused as if caught in a dream and then I felt his incisors sink into my neck...and he began to drink.

The pain was fleeting. A numbness crept over my body and my mind, as my heart thundered in my ears, as he fed, pulling at my heart with every beat that slowed. Was I dying? I wanted to push him away, but I felt too weak. I was swaying and the room

was swirling, moving in a circle faster and faster, and faster.

I staggered trying to get to my feet.

"Stop this! Stop, Armand!" finally I put my hands up and thrust him backwards from me. He stared at me hurt.

I was gasping and my hand covered my bleeding wound. I held onto the edge of the bed, lest I fall to my knees. I didn't want to die. I wanted to live. When I pulled my hand away, I knew the wounds at my throat were gone. A terrible thirst plagued me. The beauty of his face and the darkness of his eyes entranced me.

But I wanted to get away from him, from whatever it was I was now becoming. I felt frightened.

With the swiftness of a cat, he too, got to his feet, and with his supernatural strength, he easily knocked me off-balance and pinned me down on the bed.

Warning signals flashed behind my eyes, *Get away!* Run! Refuse to give in! Twisting in his arms and arching my naked body, I sought to get free but he only took my struggling as a welcoming invitation and violently entered me, thrusting his manhood deep, deep inside me, his large frame crushing me beneath him.

"Armand, please," I floundered in despair, but he was cruel, evil, and brutal. His eyes darkened dangerously.

"NO, Armand! You're trying to trick me!"

I shoved him off me with a surge of strength that my protective instincts granted me. I got to my feet and tried to run for the door. Where was it? I couldn't see it! All the stone walls looked the same. I whirled around in a circle, my long hair fanning out around me.

I started frantically feeling the walls with my hands, trying to figure out where the door was. I felt him come up behind me—grabbing my arm and spinning me around. He pushed me back down onto the bed and began to make love to me, and his eyes held no sympathy. They glowed red…like an animal.

His tone was low and came from deep in his throat so it sounded more like a growl, "Where do you think you're going? You belong to me, Brooke! You are my most beloved and I will not lose you to that weakling Caleb. Surrender to the night, surrender to my dark kiss...surrender to me!"

It wasn't much of a struggle; his supernatural strength was invincible...and I was hopelessly trapped. Trapped by my own weak desires, my own passion, and my own cravings for him, for love...and now for blood.

He lunged into me brutally. I cried out, biting my lower lip to keep from screaming. I tried to wiggle free, but I was no match for his strength, or his determination. We wrestled, turning over and falling off the bed. Our two bodies entwined, rolling over the hard floor. The embers always between he and I caught fire, and I would surely burn in hell with him...if there was such a place.

I lay beneath him, but I was hovering above somewhere near the ceiling watching him make love to me. The colors in the paintings vibrated with living energy. I could hear the sigh of the wind rustling through the leaves outside, though there were no windows, and the movement of the servants above in the mansion. I knew that dawn was approaching.

His hands explored the peaks of my breasts, making my breath come in long, surrendering moans. Even as I struggled beneath him, something just as insatiable as had come over him betrayed me and made me respond to his demands. And again, we were made one, rising higher and higher until we both exploded in a downpour of fiery vibrations. After we were spent, he lay next to me with one hairy leg draped securely over me.

Then his teeth, his two long fangs penetrated my neck, sinking deeper as I struggled beneath him. His lips against my neck, he said softly, "The third dark kiss, now you are so, so close to being mine. Soon you will drink from me and then you will become mine for all eternity." The fangs lengthened and dove deep into my thin flesh.

I floated outside of myself again...sweet forbidden waves of pure ecstasy, and irresistible, haunting, delicious jolts of eager keening, ran through my veins pumping in and out of my heart.

I said, "Yes, my love. Drink..."

"My most precious love, my dear beloved," Armand said, his lips so soft against my neck.

"I've wanted this to happen. I know that now, and I desperately want to be with you always...oh god, tell me this is a dream," I whispered, closing my eyes...to everything.

"No..."

"But how is it that you live? That you breathe! You love! What are you? I must know the truth!"

"I am nothing, lifeless, soulless, unloved, and most of all feared," Armand said, "I am known as the undead to the entire world... I am a vampire cursed to walk the earth and to drink the blood of men."

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME?" I opened my eyes and pushed him away, beating my fists against his chest. "You murdered my father!" Then I collapsed in his arms, sobbing. "I love you. Oh, God forgive me, I do. I want to be what you are...I want to be with you, right or wrong. Sinful or not. Damn me to hell then...because I fear, I can't live without you...oh, my darling." I began to really wail. "You are my love and my life, always."

Armand said softly, "Then I give you my blood, and my everlasting love, and with that comes the power over the night and the thirst to drink the blood of our enemies..."

"I will. Yes, yes! Please, I don't care. Make me yours."

Armand said, "But you'll be cursed as I am to walk through the shadow of death for all eternity. Are you sure, my love?"

"Yes," I cried, "You forced your first dark kiss upon me, it should have been my choice, but you leave me with no choice now...and you've killed my father...now, I accept you as you are and my place beside you..."

"Yes, it is so much easier to be accepting about this, my beloved," he murmured, lifting his lips from my throat, "You're like me now...soon to be immortal. All you need to do is drink of my blood, then find a mortal, some innocent prey, and feed." There was a cold edge in his voice.

I loved him. What other choice did I have?

I could feel the blood oozing from the puncture wounds in my neck. He playfully slapped my face with the back of his hand to mock me. "Stop pouting and accept it! You'll love being a vampire, the entire world will be at your feet, humans will be your prey, the night will be yours to rule, and you'll have nothing left to fear...death will never touch you now."

Tears of frustration spilled from my eyes. I stared up at the ceiling refusing to turn my head. "You make it sound so enchanting, like a fairytale..."

He lay on his side, twirling a strand of my hair in his fingers. "It is, and it will be a beautiful dream, you'll never have to wake from. Please, don't cry, my best beloved one. Here, drink just a little, you're weak." He raised his wrist, slashed at with his long fingernail.

"Wha –?" I cried.

I watched in horror the red liquid running down his arm as Armand raised his wrist to my mouth. "Drink."

And I did.

I sucked up his blood nosily, my tongue lapping his wrist. It tasted so rich, so delicious...so sustaining.

Then he abruptly pulled his wrist away. I licked at my lips, feeling dizzy and hot.

"You look so bewitching...do you feel any different? Any better now?" he asked in a voice husky with desire, still playing with my hair. He tugged off the covers so that were both naked, bathed in soft light.

"Yes...but I feel strange," I said quietly, still feeling unreal and outside myself, "I guess deep down in spite of everything I wanted to become...what you are. To live forever. It was only my own fear and cowardice, keeping me from making the decision. Tomorrow...tomorrow I will be like you?"

He said nothing, only watched my face, my every moment as if it fascinated him, his expression grew soft and dreamy again

Armand placed his head on my shoulder and fondled my bare breasts.

He had seemed like such an exciting man with all his mysterious and seductive ways, and perhaps the fact that he was different...forbidden fruit is always sweeter, right?

"You will stay with me, sleep with me until dusk..." he said in a sleepy voice.

My chest was tight. I cast a quick glance over at him. His eyes were shut and his breathing slow and steady. Was he asleep, or just pretending to try to catch me off guard? I'd brought this on myself and I had no one else to blame this time—no one, but my own sinful, lustful nature. Yet, I also had to admit to myself that I was still very much attracted to him, but

his dark side also frightened me. I was anxious, my heart throbbing madly. I didn't want to wake him, but I shouldn't have worried for the sun was rising and he was tired now, having drunk so much of my blood.

Sleep was rapidly taking over my body too, I felt sluggish, drugged. I closed my eyes and listened to his even breathing, welcoming the darkness that enveloped around me and took me far, far away into dreams...

## His Blood

When I awoke some hours later, I felt weak and lightheaded. It was nightfall again, and I had slept the entire day away locked in the arms of my vampire lover. My mouth felt parched. I dully reached out a hand, my fingers searching the bed for my discarded dress. If I could just somehow get away from him before he fully recovered or woke up. Could vampires move during the daylight hours? I wasn't sure.

I pulled the dress slowly over the bed and slowly, quietly pulled it on over my head. My mind was racing. What could I do? How could I get away? I waited a minute, holding my breath and listening to his rhythmic breathing: his chest rising and falling.

In one swift fluid motion, I made a mad dash for the cellar door. However, I heard him jump to his feet in hot pursuit. I glanced over my shoulder as he rapidly advanced like an agile black panther stalking its prey.

"No, you don't!" he warned, and his words seem to echo in the darkness and bounce off the cold stone

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walls.

I could see the outline of his muscular body glistening in the flickering candlelight as he pressed forward. He grabbed me, forcing me to fall to the hard stone floor, knocking the wind out of me.

"I'll scream if you don't let me out of here!" I cried, gasping and struggling for breath.

"Now, now, Brooke," he snarled, roughly flipping me over as if I were light as a feather onto my back. "Scream all you want, these walls are thick, too thick for anyone to hear you." I kept my head to the side, trying to hide my face as tears fell silently from my eyes.

"Look at you, my beloved."

My chest was heavy and I lay there not answering, just moaning, and crying softly. I felt weak and trembly, as though I might faint. My knees were scraped up from the fall, and one of them was profusely bleeding. He stared at the blood as if fascinated.

"Shush, my beloved. You'll be fine in a matter of minutes...you'll see."

"I was...frightened, I'm still so confused," I said so softly that I didn't think he heard, but he did.

"That's all right," he smiled, "but you shouldn't wake a vampire while he slumbers, my beloved. I could have killed you in my sleep out of pure animal instinct to protect myself." Then he said, "See? You're all better."

"I don't understand...the pain is gone. My injuries are healed!" I felt a surge of confusion, so I turned my

head, scanning his face and trying to read his dark eyes.

I looked down in amazement; my bloody and scraped-up knees were completely healed. The pain was gone. The pulsating and stinging in my hands had faded away. I felt better, stronger, and more alive than I'd ever felt in my whole life. I felt my neck but the puncture wounds were gone too. I was completely healed. Bemused, I stared at Armand with raised brows.

His gaze was riveted on my face. "Because you are at the beginning stages of becoming, my love. Soon you will not be hurt by anything or anyone, or feel pain...except for sunlight. I'm sorry, Brooke, but that is the only thing that can hurt us..." His eyes gleamed like glassy volcanic rock and actually filled with tears, which didn't fall. He helped me to my feet. "You can leave if that's what you really want, though it is not my wish that you go, but stay...I didn't mean for it to be this way. I wanted so much to make you mine. I wanted to give you only pleasure and show you how much I love you. Oh, Brooke, can't you accept the fact that you are a part of me? We have been together in many lifetimes, not just this one. I can't bear to lose you again."

I was touched by his melancholy words of love and eternity.

My voice was husky. "I know, Armand. I know you didn't mean it. I do want to become a vampire...*I* am ready." I sighed and decided to embrace my fate and the night. Why fight it, why not just accept? "Let

me go home and gather my belongings, and tonight I will come to you and we shall finish it, together. I have accepted my fate and I know now that my destiny lies with you, my love...with you. But now you should rest, sleep, my love, and gather your strength." I whispered, convincing him and me. Again, I tried to reach him. "Please, Armand, if you really do love me like you say you do, then let me go. I will break it gently to Caleb and to my brother. There are things I must do before I cross over. You understand, don't you?"

His expression grew tense, then he smiled, "Yes," I followed him outside, into the night. It was still dark. "Come here first."

Armand lifted his hand to his mouth, and turning a glistening tan wrist to his lips, he sank his teeth into the skin.

I watched in morbid fascination as the red fluid ran down his arm as Armand raised his wrist to my lips. "Drink. And listen to the night."

Without thinking, shutting out his voice, I fastened his wrist to my parted lips.

The aroma was strong, filling my nostrils, giving me strength. The strength gave me great pleasure, and seizing me, like two arms, kidnapped my senses. I felt spellbound.

As my lips locked on the gaping wound on his wrist and his blood began to fill my veins, I clutched at his arm with both my hands. I closed my eyes. Drinking.

His own heartbeat found its way to my ears. All

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around me, I could hear the pounding rhythm of his heart: *Thump...thump...thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump.* 

Getting faster. Louder...weaker.

A kind of frenzy was passing behind my eyes.

The blood in my own veins was running hot. Stimulating. Stirring. Singing.

"I told you to listen to the night..." he said, no commanded, "Now listen, my beloved. Become one with the night."

I smashed his body into mine. Draining him. Furiously. Hungrily. The blood running like fire inside me, and washing over me in waves of heat. My head was reeling. My body spasming. I felt strange, different.

Thump, thump, thump...thump, thump, thump, thump, thump...thump. His heartbeat roaring in my ears sounded like the ocean. Both our hearts were now in syncopated rhythm like a beating drum. Growing louder and louder. It was deafening.

The sound was about to shatter my very being.

Thump...thump...thump...thump, thump, thump,

I could feel Armand beginning to pull back, but I yanked him back tighter, clutching at his wrist.

Drinking.

Sucking.

Drinking.

The ferocity almost rocking my body at the rabid intensity with which I fed.

I could feel Armand gently stroking my long blonde hair. Then he nudged me away, but I was locked on tight, draining him. Our hearts were pounding so loudly, that I looked up at him, and his eyes were glistening, watching my hungry face.

"Brooke, slow down. You could kill me if you drink too much," he said softly.

My mind was spinning.

The black night hung heavy above us in an ominous sky. I could tell without pause or looking up that he was summoning up the last of his strength, and then he ripped himself free.

I was breathing hard. I was panting and my mouth was dripping with the dark, red liquid. It was running down the sides of my lips, and dripping off my chin.

I was replenished.

I was restored.

I was reborn.

My face flushed and my eyes shone with a supernatural health and vitality. I felt the newfound unnatural strength swirling through my body. I reached out for Armand.

He pushed my hands away gently. Then he pressed the wound closed on his wrist. His eyes were soft and knowing as he watched me, experiencing everything with my newfound senses, with my vampire eyes.

I tried to pull myself together. My sense of control finally returning. All around us was a velvety cloak of blackness. Ahhh, the night! So beautiful! So enchanting!

"Look... at the night, my beloved, with your

vampire eyes," he said.

I blinked.

My eyes were bright. I felt different, but I was not sure of what to make of it. I squinted, looking around me. Never had the night looked as it did, I thought to myself, it is quite breathtaking. I stared, spellbound. A fine layer of lunar luminescence fell from the sky. The stars were shimmering as never before, the very electrical pulse of the night visible as it traveled through thin air.

I blinked rapidly. I could see owls flying high in the night many miles away, and I could hear wolfs on the run across the hillside in the distance.

I whirled around and around, giggling, and feeling slightly drunk. Then I was smiling at him and looking at him with my vampire eyes.

I was unable to help myself, because I was in love with the newness of the night.

But then I stopped and stared at Armand.

"Now hear it...listen, my beloved...listen," he said to me.

My head flicked back to the garden, to the trees, the roses, which seem to come alive, moving, throbbing, and thriving.

Suddenly, my ears were vibrating with sound. I could hear the car horns in town, the electricity traveling across the wires, the ticking of the streetlights, and the hissing of gas lines. I could even hear one of the servants snoring in their sleep. I could hear their steady, slow heartbeats as they slept.

I shut my eyes.

Listen, Brooke...listen to the night.

I listened intently, trying to focus, trying to concentrate. A symphony of night sounds swept over me again. It was the most beautiful music I had ever heard.

"Come with me."

"Yes," I breathed.

Armand started to run, no, he *flew*. And I followed, running after him deeper, further into the vast acres of gardens that surrounded the mansion. Running like never before, our limbs flying effortlessly, galloping like the wind, almost airborne, and we covered the distance in a matter of minutes.

Yet, I was still listening to the night. A rush of breezes and winds were whipping along the grass. We ran through a buzzing wall of insects in the air. The scuttling sounds of small animal feet on the dirt, picked by my keen ears. The brush of the tree branches swaying in the breeze. The howling of wolfs.

Then again, the loud howling. Howling. The creatures of the night were welcoming me!

Armand threw his head back, cracked a grin, and let out a yipping howl himself, joining them.

My face widened in a smile. "The night, Armand. I can't take my eyes off it. It's so beautiful, so surreal. Just...like a dream."

"You can drown in it."

"I am. I can taste it. It's... It's making me tremble."

"Be careful...stay close to me. You don't want to get lost in it..."

"No..."

We ran, we laughed, hugged, and kissed. He went to kiss me again and again, and I didn't stop him. We were like pale-faced mortal lovers kissing, embracing. We had two hours of the long night left together and we spent them playfully, playing hide and seek in the trees, finding each other and kissing and laughing some more.

Then I sensed and felt the sun even before it began to rise, spoiling our fun.

"I guess it is time that you go, the sun will be rising soon, and I need to go back to the safety of my lair. You will be fine, though. Until tonight? You promise, my dark angel?" he asked.

"I promise. I will be here tonight as planned and I will *become*."

"And don't worry about, Caleb. He will understand. Your brother might be harder to convince, though."

"I know, I just feel terrible..."

"You have a kind heart and a generous nature. But Caleb is a strong person and he will survive this heartbreak and find another."

"I'm sure, you're right. I must go now."

"As you wish," he said, taking me into his arms to plant a kiss onto my forehead.

A thin layer of sunlight filtered through the trees. The sun was waking up. He took a step back. He looked afraid. He never looked afraid.

I left without looking back, straight into the bright gleam of sunlight that was riser higher and higher in the sky. It looked like a great blaze of red and orange fire. It felt hot. *Too hot*. Suddenly I was afraid, too, but Armand had said I'd be all right...until I had killed my first prey. Then I would *become*. And we would be together for all eternity. I sighed. *Armand*.

I had to raise my hands to shield the light that burned my eyes. I stood there a moment, basking in the glory of the sunshine, wondering if it would really be the last time I would stand with the sun warming my skin and face. Wondering what would happen tonight when I told Caleb and my brother, Kenneth ...wondering what the future held for me. I wondered what his expression would be, and I wondered too, when I looked into his eyes what they would reveal to me—understanding? Shock? Heartbreak? Disbelief?

Little did I know that in less than a few hours I would be looking death in the face instead...

## Sweet Promise of Forever

blinked back tears, and the memories faded as quickly as they had come. How had I let things get so far out of control?

Oh, but I was in terrible pain! I couldn't catch my breath, and I couldn't change the past. Even in my delirium, I knew that.

I was breathing too fast and felt drowsy and sick to my stomach. I could feel the color drain from my cheeks. I just wanted to shut out the whole world and make the pain stop. My skin felt cold and moist, and my heart beat furiously. He checked my pulse, and exclaimed: "Brooke, you've been shot...lie still." Caleb said, quickly putting a towel over the gushing wound to try to stop the flow of blood.

Over and over again, I heard the gunshot...like a canon booming in my kitchen, ringing through my ears.

My eyelids fluttered open, then closed again. My head felt so heavy and fuzzy, as a horrible whimpering sound passed through my closed lips. I felt him touch my wrist.

"Brooke, open your eyes. You're going into shock. I

can barely feel a pulse and your breathing seems irregular. Stay with me, darling!" Caleb cried, anxiously, "Don't leave me in this cold world all alone. I love you. I love you so much...Brooke...can you hear me? Please don't die. Brooke!"

I felt so strange...calm, yet in terrible pain. I heard the wind blowing and I was softly moaning and sighing with the wind that whistled through the cracks in my old mansion, through the windows—yawning and waking up... murmuring my name over and over. *Brooke...Brooke...* or was it my twin-brother Kenneth calling out to me from the grave?

What was he saying?

"Don't die on me, Brooke! Stay awake!" Caleb cradled me in his arms and tenderly kissed my forehead. "Oh, God, what have we done? Oh, my beautiful darling, my love...Try not to move, okay?" I dully watched him stand up. He was back in a minute with the phone.

"Brooke, lie still." Caleb said, trying to hide the shock from his blue eyes. "We need to get you to the hospital. You've lost so much blood!" I couldn't even feel Caleb's hand that held mine as he brought it to his lips.

I saw Armand hovering near by, just watching...watching me die.

I whimpered like a small child. *Help me, Armand...Please!* I tried to speak, but my tongue felt too thick for my mouth, my lips wouldn't open.

I lacked the strength to move...my heart was slowing, slowing...growing fainter, fainter still. My

hands and feet felt cold, so very cold. My eyes blinked rapidly contending with the tempting arms of sleep. I tried to sit up, I felt like screaming, but pain ripped through my body in waves shooting down my body and silenced me. I was floating and when I looked down at my bloody injured body, I felt no pain...I felt nothing. I felt weightless.

Armand merely stared in fascination at all the blood.

Caleb hung up the phone. "The ambulance is on the way. Hang in there, kiddo. Just relax," his voice sounded far, far away, like in a hazy dream where you can't wake up no matter how hard you try. But I didn't want to try.

Armand...

No, my beloved...I didn't realize before how much he loved you...maybe he needs you more than me.

No!

Yes. Our time will come...we will be together, perhaps not in this life, but in another. I love you.

I had a hard time concentrating on what he was saying. My thoughts were a jumble, images came at me, assaulting me as I dreamed, drifting...dreaming.

Please, no! He cried. Fear flowed freely through Kenneth, making his heart pound. Armand's vampire eyes bore into his. The vampire licked his lips...there was fresh blood on his tongue, on his long, sharp teeth. He had just fed.

"I told you to stay away from your sister. She's mine! Stop filling her head with lies about me..." the vampire threatened. He took a step closer and Kenneth froze in terror. I could hear his heart throbbing in his chest; see the

blood running through his veins.

"Armand, please just leave before someone gets hurt. I don't want to kill you, but she's my twin sister..." He lifted the wooden stake high above his head in a threatening manner. "Get out of our lives or I'll kill you!"

"Then you shouldn't have invaded my lair and tried to kill me," the vampire laughed wickedly, "A stake through the heart? Really! You've seen too many horror movies, my boy."

Kenneth knew what was going to happen, in some unusual, extrasensory way he knew his own death was at hand, he sensed it.

Immediately the vampire had him in his supernaturally powerful embrace. They struggled, and Kenneth managed to plunge the stake into Armand's shoulder, making him cry out in pain. Blood oozed from the wound. Armand easily slipped the stake out and threw it onto the stone floor. Both men circled the other, their eyes clashing in silent combat.

Then Armand lunged forward with the agility and swiftness of a cat.

He held Kenneth tightly against him and put his cold lips against Kenneth's tender flesh and bit down into the bulging artery in his neck. The syrupy, thick blood, so warm, so refreshing hit the roof of the vampire's mouth. The fangs sank deeper into his warm flesh, tasting the salty blood, and listening to his heart beating, than slowing, slowing, slowing until it ceased to beat at all. Lifeless. Armand tossed the body to the floor and licked his crimson lips...

The blood had warmed him. I could feel it flowing through our veins.

My brother was dead.

But this was no dream! This had really happened!

With all my strength, I sat up and managed to yell, "Armand, you murdered my brother! It was you. Why, Armand? You fiend, you devil!" Dizziness came over me, so my next words came out incoherent. I tried to speak again, to rant and rave, but I slumped back down, lying in my own pool of blood.

It was either him or me, my beloved. I had no choice...please, believe me. He would have stood in our way. He tried to kill me!

I shook my head, Nooooooooo! Why?

Because I was afraid of losing you...I was only protecting myself and our love.

I wanted to scream, to scratch his eyes out, but I was so lethargic that I had a difficult time keeping my eyelids open. I felt peculiar as if I were floating on a cloud of air, but someone deep inside me shattering—and when I shut my eyes, I saw death, it was all around me. It was coming for me—I was inside the cellar, back in his lair...I could even smell Armand's scent on me. I welcomed death, embraced it. I wanted the pain to stop...yet, I wanted to be with Armand.

Even after everything, he had done to me, and to my Family. I craved him, I needed him, and I loved him. He was my secret obsession. How could I ever give him up?

I thought I was still dreaming until I saw Caleb's handsome face swim before me.

My mouth was dry but I forced myself to speak. I licked my lips. "Armand...help...me—"

"Try to lie still until the ambulance gets here. We're

taking you to the hospital."

"No...Caleb...wait...you don't...understand," my voice grew stronger, sounding shrill to my ears, "I can't go the hospital. Tell him, Armand. Tell him!" I cried, and tried to sit up again, but flopped back down.

But Armand just backed away from me, shaking his head. Then I closed my eyes, and when I opened them again, he was gone.

"Just relax, Brooke. Help is on the way. Now close your eyes and rest," said Caleb.

I lost consciousness.

Out of a dream of witches, I emerged to find Caleb sitting on a chair near my hospital bed, holding my hand...and those blue eyes, loving me still, those haunting blue eyes...

"Hi."

"Hi," I answered weakly. A blinding eruption of blazing sunlight poured into the room as a pair of unseen hands threw open the shutters.

I blinked, confused

"You lost a lot of blood and they had to give you a blood transfusion. They got the bullet out. They say you're lucky, it missed your heart. You'll be fine in a couple of weeks..."

The sun was so high in the sky splashing the entire room with light. Caleb stood by my bedside, anxiously watching me. The blood transfusion apparatus was next to the bed. There was a bandage on my arm.

Weakened and wearied, Caleb fingered a bandage

on his own arm. "I had to donate some blood..."

He walked over to me and lightly touched me. I could see the morning sun staring me in the face. I cried out, and grabbed onto Caleb's shirt and clung to him in desperation. Then I realized that I wasn't burning. My eyes jumped to his. Then Caleb gave me a wide smile, and hugged me to him.

My voice was a breathless whisper in his ear, "What happened, Caleb?"

"I'll show you." He took me by the hand.

I blinked with the attitude of a newborn infant, still not believing that I am still alive in the face of the sun. Getting off the bed, I walked with Caleb to the hospital window and stood there looking out.

There was a tear in me eye as I looked over at him. I started softly smiling. He opened the window and I felt the sun on my face, and the cool breeze tickled my hair. Looking around me, I smelled the fresh air, heard birds chirping, and saw all the daytime sights.

"The spell is broken...you're free."

"Free?"

Caleb put his arm around me. A Long and warm loving embrace. Our eyes met. And then our lips. But then I had to speak and break the spell, "Where's Armand?"

"He's gone, Brooke...gone from our lives. I told him not to come back...I told him that I desperately needed you, and your father's empire needed you. I told him to spare my life and yours...I begged him not to damn your soul for all eternity."

"But, Caleb, darling, you don't understand. I'm not

Brooke, anymore. I've changed. I want to be with him."

He spoke again as if he hadn't heard me, "I knew all you needed was a blood transfusion to change you back. I volunteered..." His words hung in the air between us.

Transfusion? Caleb's blood? Oh, God, no!

"Caleb, how could you?"

"Because I love you, Brooke...you've always been mine and I've waited so long...please, Brooke, don't be angry."

"I don't know what to think, Caleb. I'm confused...I still love him. I've loved him all my life and you'll never be more than a friend to me...do you hear me? Do you understand? You shouldn't have done it...." I started to cry, for him, for me.

"Why, Brooke? I don't understand...after everything he did to your family!"

Those blue eyes clung to mine with such a beseeching look that it made me falter and hug him close and lavish kisses all over his handsome face.

"Oh, my dearest. He only ended an old man's suffering, and it was him or my brother! He had no choice!" My voice softened, "I'm sorry, Caleb, forgive me...I do love you." I took a deep breath. "But I love him, too...in a different way. It is all-consuming—he is my life."

He nodded as tears filled his eyes and he pulled away.

He didn't look at me when he spoke next and I knew his heart was breaking along with mine. "If he

loves you so much, then why isn't he here?" he watched my face before saying, "Okay, Brooke...I'm willing to wait—forever if I have to. I love you that much. I still don't understand."

"Because he loves me...that's why he's released me," I grabbed Caleb's hand. "Because he wants me to be...to be..." my voice dried up along with my tears. Our eyes met and clung. "Oh, poor Caleb..."

\* \* \* \*

A few weeks later, after I had been home a while, he came to me. It was at dusk that I saw Armand again...he had been waiting for me. Somehow, I had known. He was sitting in my backyard on the stone bench under the oak tree. I felt his presence.

I went to him and he immediately got to his feet.

"Armand!"

We held onto one another as if for life's breath. We stared deeply into each other's eyes. My hand touched his. Then Armand pulled his cold arm back like he was stung, wrestling away from me. My heart lurched in my chest.

His black eyes were stabbing into my face. "Your skin, it's warm!" Armand cried.

He glanced down at his hands that withdrew from the touch of my warm flesh as if I had burned him.

Armand swallowed.

He took a step toward me. Then another. Yet it was my turn to back away, with my eyes blank, fixed on him.

But Armand remained near the edge of the porch,

watching me, searching my face.

The night was long and black all around us. I wanted to drown in it again.

"I guess, I belong here...for now, in this world with Caleb, but I do miss you..." I said. My blue eyes were misty with unshed tears.

"We can still be together if you want! What's it going to be, Brooke? Him or me? The day or the night?" he shouted.

I started to speak. Then I stopped.

"I guess you've made up your mind...this was the final test...how shall I live without you?" he whispered ever so softly into the trees, into the night.

The wind picked up with such force that I looked up into the heavens and then back at Armand.

He took one last look at me, and then he spun around on his heel, and moved off into the darkness, a ferocity carrying him out of sight.

I lifted my face to the sky, and opening my mouth, I screamed his name, "Armand!"

But to deaf ears.

My eyes strained in the dark. But he was gone...gone with the night, with the wind...with my heart.

"ARMAND!"

## **Epilogue**

We moved into Vaughn Hall, and Caleb is now running the marketing and advertising section of my father's corporation, *my* corporation now. Work keeps me busy, and taking care of this large mansion. My stepmother is quiet, a shell of her former self now that my father is gone, and she mostly stays in her suite of rooms. We try to stay out of each other's way. And we never talk about *him*.

Sometimes I go down to the hidden room in the cellar and lie on the bed. I smell the air, touch his clothes, the black satin sheets, and softly almost reverently whisper his name. But he is gone from our lives, from my mind...but not from my heart.

Often I look at Caleb and wonder why he loves me so. I wonder, too, if he still fears Armand, or that one day he may return. Pragmatic, happy, smiling, Caleb sings in the shower and greets me with kisses every morning. He is happy with the arrangement, though I don't think it's fair to him. Still...we're content. At least I try to make an effort to be happy and forget about my mysterious, immortal lover. I do love Caleb in my own way...I do!

We do not talk about what happened and we keep it a secret...for who would believe it? It binds us in a strange, permanent way and the experience has brought us closer than before, I guess a crisis will do that.

I sighed...one day, maybe years from now Armand and I would meet again. Maybe this time I would be free of Caleb and free to go to him. Then Caleb would find someone else to love. Maybe I would be fully ready for Armand to make me his immortal beloved. I thought I was ready...but I could wait for him. I loved Caleb, but I *needed* Armand. And someday our lives would intertwine...

So, I go apprehensively to bed and lie there awake; listening to the wind, listening to the night, listening for him, and trying to fight the thirst for blood that still plagues me at times. It seems as I turn over and nestle closer to Caleb's warm body, that I can hear him calling to me, wanting me, and needing me, for my blood still whispers his name.

*Armand.* It is like a prayer I say before going to bed each night.

Someday he would come for me....someday I knew he would.

Someday....

Look for *The Darkest Secret: Part Two* coming soon! And then the stunning conclusion of the Deadly Kisses series, "THE DARKEST DESIRE"!

## About The Author

**Sherry Hall Mauro** lives in San Francisco. With the publication of her first novel, she became one of the most beloved writers of romantic/suspense fiction.