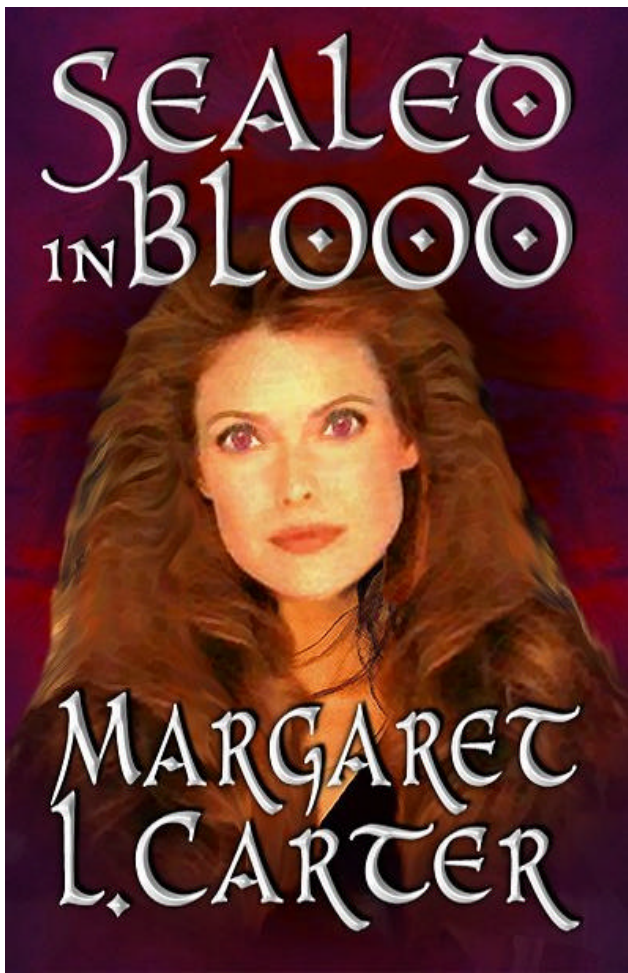


# SEALED IN BLOOD



## SEALED IN BLOOD

“All I want is those pictures. Stop playing games, bitch.”

What could Sherri say to convince this idiot she didn't have them?

At that instant, among the trees about fifty yards down, a man appeared out of nowhere.

Stress. She was hallucinating.

The next few seconds confirmed that hypothesis. The human shape melted. Wings spanning twice its height erupted from its back. As it launched itself in a glide so fast its outline blurred, she glimpsed a furred, feline head with pointed ears.

The mugger let out a gurgle and released her. She whirled around to see him stumble backward.

Impossible—how could he share her delusion?

The monster was flying straight at her. She threw herself sideways, landing on the leaf-strewn ground with a bruising thump to one hip. Instead of fleeing, the mugger brandished his knife underhand and rushed the winged creature. Maybe this thug had also decided the apparition didn't exist.

His defiant karate yell died in his throat when taloned hands grabbed his shoulders. He slashed the thing's chest. Its grip slackened. The man squirmed free and dashed into the woods.

With a loud moan, the creature sank to all fours. Sherri sat on the ground paralyzed, her head spinning, while she watched the wings shrivel up and disappear, the ebony fur melt away, the catlike ears shrink. The man levered himself into a crouch and stared back at her. His eyes gleamed crimson in the twilight...

## PRAISE FOR SEALED IN BLOOD

“With suspense, sensual encounters, and the paranormal, *Sealed In Blood* is a fast-paced read guaranteed to have the reader wishing vampires existed for real.”

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*Different Blood: The Vampire As Alien*

# SEALED IN BLOOD

BY

MARGARET L. CARTER

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

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SEALED IN BLOOD  
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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*Dedicated to Ruth Sacksteder,  
with special thanks  
for her help with the  
Berkeley scene.*

## PROLOGUE

“In the name of our Infernal Lord, I bid you welcome.” The black-clad, hooded Master of the coven spread his arms wide, the flared sleeves of his quasi-monastic robe flapping like wings. “As promised, this night Lucifer Himself has favored us by sending His own emissary to preside over our rites.”

Keith Brewster shifted his robe’s floppy sleeve and trained the ultraminiature camera disguised as a wristwatch upon the Master. As much as he’d practiced with the gadget, he couldn’t be certain of catching more than a blur. Nor could he be certain this “emissary” from Hell wouldn’t prove to be just another con game. Probably another affluent thrill-seeker dressed up in a kinky costume.

Brewster glanced around at his fellow acolytes. *Wonder if I see any of these people every day at work? And they keep needling me about science fiction being a stupid hobby for a grown man!* These robes weren’t bad, and the concealing hoods, reminiscent of the KKK, put everybody at ease. Only the Master, whose identity was known to those



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here at his invitation, left his face exposed. Opening down the front, the creamy beige habits of the worshipers, like the Master's black one, displayed on their backs a single crimson Eye.

*I'll bet he cribbed that from Tolkien*, Brewster thought. Nothing here was original. The tape deck behind the deep purple wall hangings played Wagner; the incense had come from a New Age shop in Berkeley; the androgynous goat crucified on the wall above the altar, with its pendulous breasts and a jutting phallus, had been copied from illustrations in occult tomes of the naughty nineties—eighteen-nineties; the ritual blended bad Latin with poorer Hebrew.

Still, the coven members got a kick out of these weekly services, which was the whole purpose of staging them. In return, the Master received generous monetary donations, and a hold over these outwardly respectable businessmen, as well as a few businesswomen.

Brewster had extracted a few publishable articles from his attendance here, but so far, nothing sensational enough to be worth losing his job, not to mention other reprisals that might fall on him if he got caught. If this new wrinkle in the service proved disappointing, he'd give up. The sixteen millimeter camera, bought by mail order from the Counter Spy Shop in Washington, had cost a bundle, but maybe he could resell the device.

Now the Master stepped aside, with a theatrical wave of one hand. The hangings on one side of the room rippled and split open. Brewster focused his wandering attention, as well as the camera.

A woman stepped out. A collective gasp rose from the coven as the single ceiling light cast a distorted halo on her titian hair. It streamed unbound down her back, framing an inhuman face that looked too lifelike to be a mask. Downy black fur covered her vaguely feline countenance and flaring, pointed ears. Stiletto-sharp nails at least two inches long tapered from the fingers of one outstretched hand. Her other hand was tucked in the bosom of a black robe identical to the Master's.

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Brewster's fingers shook so much he could hardly squeeze the button to snap a picture.

"Behold the Maiden!" intoned the black-hooded man.

Framed by a pair of seven-branched candelabra whose undulating flames enhanced her lurid appearance, the Maiden drew a furry bundle out of her robe. It didn't move as she raised it high in her cupped hands—drugged? Getting a closer look when she extended the animal toward the audience, Brewster guessed it was a ferret. A step up from the flapping, squawking roosters they usually slaughtered on the altar.

Instead of laying the creature on the stained linen and picking up the athame lying beside the chalice, the Maiden lifted the ferret to her mouth. Her teeth sank into its belly. Blood spurted out.

Suppressing a queasy roiling in his stomach, Brewster thought, *Man, that's one hell of a special effect!* He snapped two more pictures. No point in being chintzy; he had close to thirty exposures left.

Dropping the limp corpse on the altar, the Maiden stretched forth her hands in invitation.

"Come forward," commanded the sonorous voice of the Master. He sounded a lot more impressive than he did during office hours; the guy's acting wasn't too shabby. "Come forward, all ye who have pledged your souls to the Lord of Darkness, and pay Him tribute. Seal your vows unto Him in the very elixir of life."

Brewster clenched his teeth, feeling slightly sick and dizzy with the smells of sweat, cloying incense, and fresh blood in the windowless below-ground room. But the photos and the article would be worth it, worth every minute of the heat, embarrassment and danger.

The first of the acolytes stepped upon the dais holding the altar. "Give her your arm," the Master said. The man reached toward the Maiden, and the sleeve fell away from his bare arm. The Maiden lifted his wrist to her mouth and bit. The man choked back a cry of startled pain and stared at the blood dripping from the gash. Gripping his forearm, she squeezed the flesh to make the blood flow into the chalice.

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Next she dipped her index finger in the blood and smeared it on the flesh exposed at the hollow of the man's throat. The Master recited a liturgy that struck Brewster as faintly familiar: "You are sealed in blood by Unholy Baptism and marked as Satan's own forever."

Each worshiper in turn offered his arm to the woman's teeth. When his turn came, Brewster let his sleeve droop over the watch-camera and stepped forward. He felt disgusted with himself at the way his arm quivered when she closed her cold fingers around it. Heck, hadn't he seen enough in the past couple of months to quash any squeamishness? Her bite shot liquid fire up his veins. His head spinning, he staggered back down to his original place before he'd quite realized she'd finished with him.

Had they put something in the wine this time? LSD or some crap like that?

After everyone except the Master had contributed to the cup, the Maiden tore her robe open down the front. In the breathless silence, Brewster could hear the rasp of the cloth unripping. The dark velvet on her cheeks spread downward to cover the white flesh of her lean, small-breasted body. Brewster almost—but not quite—forgot his camera. Fumbling with it, he tried to remain unobtrusive, but nobody took any notice of him. All eyes were fixed on the tall woman. He gaped at her, along with the others, as she cast off her single garment.

Her image wavered like a faulty hologram. From her back, smoky gray wings unfurled. They were translucent, shaped like a giant bat's, yet veined like moth wings. Candlelight caught her eyes, which flared red. The worshipers sank to their knees.

The buried residue of Brewster's long since repudiated Catholic childhood briefly rose up to haunt him. Half unhinged with panic, his mind gibbered, *Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, that's too perfect for special effects! That thing is real!*

The she-demon raised the chalice and drank.

# CHAPTER 1

In this group, a winged alien would hardly be noticed.

Standing in a corner of the hotel lobby, well away from the floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows, Nigel Jamison watched a vampire and a green-skinned Martian perform an “After you, Alphonse” dance at the main entrance. Finally the Martian came through first, and the vampire, following, caught the hem of his cloak in the door.

Nigel swirled his own crimson-lined black cape, reflecting that he’d chosen his costume well—striking enough to compel attention if he wanted to do so, but not distinctive enough to stand out. The general style could fit in with any literary milieu from high fantasy through pseudo-medieval to Gothic. Not that Nigel planned to enter the masquerade later that evening, of course; that would violate his low-profile strategy. Many of the attendees, however, wore costumes for the sheer fun of self-expression. Watching the rather fleshy vampire stride up the broad stairway to the second level, Nigel wondered what could induce such a man to envision himself as a cadaverous prowler of the

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night. Despite his doctorate in psychology, Nigel often found the human mind unfathomable.

He shrugged off the thought. This weekend, while not precisely a vacation, should at least be a break from his usual concerns. He shouldered his way between clots of loitering people, breathing shallowly to inhale as little as possible of their perfume, aftershave, and perspiration. The registration table stood at the far end of the lobby, beneath a banner proclaiming "Sequoiacon IV." A hand-lettered sign admonished: "We are sharing this hotel with mundanes. Please don't freak the mundanes." Behind the table sat a slender woman with glossy black hair, whose bronze skin and aquiline profile suggested Amerindian genes. When she reached out to shake Nigel's hand, silver bracelets inlaid with turquoise clinked on her arm. They matched a heavy pendant around her neck.

Nigel leaned over the table, not quite releasing her fingertips. He glanced at her name tag—Patricia Rainbow. "Tell me, Ms. Rainbow, how much is one membership at the door?"

Her brown eyes widened. "At almost six p.m. on Saturday evening? You sure you want to pay twenty-five dollars for less than half the con?"

"I didn't know about it until last night," he said. "Just happened to notice a small article about it in the paper, and this evening's program sounded entertaining."

The woman shrugged. "Your money. Welcome to Sequoiacon." Her eyes traveled up and down his black cape and lace-ruffled shirt. "You're too late to sign up for the costume contest."

"I would rather just watch." Money changed hands, and Ms. Rainbow gave Nigel a name tag to fill out.

"Art show open until nine, when the masquerade starts," she said. "Auction tomorrow at noon. The dealers' room closes at ten, and we have movies playing continuously all night in two different viewing rooms. Good place to sleep, for people who don't want to pay the hotel

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for a bed—but you don’t look like that type.”

“I was lucky,” said Nigel. “They still had a few vacant rooms.” While he didn’t plan to do any sleeping in his overpriced quarters, he needed somewhere to retreat when the crowd became insufferable.

“Oh, and before the costume show, the Mock Turtles will be playing,” she added.

“Mock Turtles?”

“You must not get to many SF cons,” she said. “Mock Turtle Soup—folk and filk band.” She handed him a program and a hotel floor map, waving her hand to indicate the stacks of promotional flyers covering the table.

Uninterested in fanzines or upcoming conventions, Nigel glanced around to make sure no one lingered near enough to take an interest in their conversation. He sat on the edge of the table—gingerly, to avoid toppling it—and captured Ms. Rainbow’s eyes with a steady gaze. “There’s one particular thing I wanted to ask about,” he said in a low voice. “The newspaper piece mentioned—well, it’s almost too ridiculous to repeat, but I was intrigued.” Reaching into his back pocket, he extracted and unfolded a clipping. The headline read “Sci-Fi Con Promises Out of This World Entertainment.”

“Sci-fi.” Ms. Rainbow snorted. “Sure, I saw that. Any publicity is better than none, or so they say.”

“What about the winged alien?” he asked, his fingers again brushing hers.

She looked still more disgusted. “Oh, that nut—what’s his name, Brewster. Gives the rest of us a bad reputation.”

“But he did actually claim to have authentic photographs of an alien?” Nigel persisted. “The newspaper wasn’t fabricating that part?”

“The man said it, all right.” One hand toyed with her pendant. She hardly seemed to notice Nigel’s light touch on her other hand. “Announced he’d hold a discussion group tomorrow in his room and show off the pictures.”

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Nigel's fingers crept up the woman's arm. "Exactly where and when?"

Ms. Rainbow shook her head as if trying to throw off drowsiness. "I don't know. Check the bulletin board." With her free hand she gestured toward the wide easel standing a few yards away.

"Did you see this man yourself?" asked Nigel. "What does he look like?"

"I did sell him a membership, but how the heck could I possibly remember what he looks like? One guy out of hundreds?"

"Of course you can remember." Nigel's near-caress traveled from her arm to her shoulder. "The powers of the human mind are practically limitless. You just need to relax and concentrate." Maintaining eye contact, he continued in the same low, crooning tone, "Think. He walked up to the table and checked in. You recognized the name from somewhere, didn't you? It wouldn't be the first time he's drawn attention to himself at a gathering like this. Describe him."

In a sleepy drawl, she said, "Around thirty, curly brown hair, balding in front, medium height, wears designer jeans and a denim jacket. And a crescent-shaped bronze pendant." She twitched her shoulders and added in a faintly surprised tone, "I did recall the name. He writes articles for a lot of little fanzines. Not very good ones—throws together whatever material he can scrape up and tries to come across as an instant expert."

Just the type, Nigel thought, who'd jump at the chance to publish something he thinks is real. "Anything else?"

"He came through the lobby a minute ago, now you mention it. You just missed him. He tacked up a note on the bulletin board." She rubbed her eyes like a drowsy little girl, her bracelets tinkling. "He walked off with some guy—the publicity rep from Lost Eon Books, I think."

*Damn! He's already spreading it around! Am I too late?* Nigel's hand involuntarily tightened on Ms. Rainbow's shoulder, making her wince. He hastened to moderate his touch, gentling her into dreamy

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abstraction.

Glancing up again and noticing a group in silver wizards' robes meandering their way, Nigel ran his fingers along the woman's jawline and whispered, "Excellent. You've been a great help. You can forget what I asked you; it wasn't important." As he stepped back from the table, Ms. Rainbow shook her head again, blinking.

Nigel grinned at her and, with a casual wave, tucked the clipping away and strolled over to the bulletin board, dodging a boy and girl of about ten who were dressed, respectively, as a hobbit and Maid Marian—though when had Robin Hood's consort wandered the greenwood with a wyvern on her wrist? Staring, unseeing, at the clutter of flyers and index cards on the easel, Nigel shrugged his cape out of the way to stuff his hands in his pockets in a far from swashbuckling manner. The brief contact with a healthy, responsive female had shaken him more than he'd expected.

*Keep your mind on the job*, he admonished himself. *You're not really interested, anyway; it's just blind instinct talking.*

Also, he was tired, but he could stand losing one day of sleep in a good cause. He forced his attention to the posted announcements. At the top left corner of the board, Keith Brewster's notice hung at a precarious slant. Block letters in red ink on an index card shouted "WINGED FEMALE ALIEN IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA—DISCUSSION AND PHOTO DISPLAY IN ROOM 318, ELEVEN A.M. SUNDAY." Brewster had scrawled his signature at the bottom, also in red. As Nigel committed the message to memory, a Wookiee stepped up beside him to scan the board. Not wanting conversation, Nigel walked away, leafing through his program.

He crossed the forest-green lobby carpet to a side lounge, where drapes were shut against the declining sun. In a fake leather armchair beside a potted avocado tree, he read the evening's schedule. He had no intention of waiting until eleven the next morning to carry out his task regarding the snapshots. By that hour he expected to have the whole



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unpleasant business behind him and, with luck, forgotten. As yet he had no clear plan, though, and he hoped for inspiration from the con schedule.

What he needed was an ally—or, to be honest, at least with himself, a tool. Someone to provide a diversion, so Nigel could avoid a direct confrontation with Brewster. The less likelihood of that meddling amateur photographer guessing how or why his pictures had vanished, the better. Nigel suspected the small group presentations would offer him the best chance of ensnaring an assistant. Three panel discussions were scheduled for seven: Writing and Selling High Fantasy, New Trends in Urban Horror, and The Search for Nonhuman Intelligence. Nigel immediately pounced on the third. If he couldn't find a sympathetic listener in that group, his technique needed polishing.

Meanwhile, he might as well get the feel of the gathering and, if luck was with him, get an unobtrusive look at Brewster. He strode across the lobby to the main auditorium, where a petite blonde sat on the edge of the stage, cradling a Celtic harp. Listeners filled the front three rows, with other people dotted at irregular intervals throughout the room. They read, munched candy bars, or whispered together. At least one, a bearded man in a T-shirt captioned "Miskatonic University Alumni Association—Ia, Team, Ia!" slept, his head lolling on the back of the wooden folding chair.

Nigel followed the harp's music to the front of the auditorium, taking the vacant seat nearest to the stage. The pain between his eyes, aftermath of the drive up from Berkeley, eased as the sound flowed over him. The relief didn't spring from the music alone, but from the concentrated attention of the audience. For the first time since entering the hotel, Nigel didn't feel bombarded by a crossfire of conflicting emotions, like a constant barrage of BB shot. With the thoughts of everyone around him focused on the singer, Nigel felt he could stretch and breathe. She switched tunes and began accompanying herself in Gaelic. Nigel listened for several minutes before reluctantly tiptoeing

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away. This self-indulgence wasn't accomplishing anything.

Next he followed the hotel map down a corridor to the dealers' room. Before entering, he drew a deep breath and mentally braced himself. From his slight acquaintance with similar conventions, he knew he could expect the sales room to be overcrowded and noisy. Just as he was about to pass the bearded con official guarding the door, Nigel heard a familiar voice call, "Hey, Professor Jamison!"

No use pretending not to hear that stridently cheerful greeting. With an inward groan, Nigel turned to face the lanky young man walking toward him. "Hello, Steve. Fancy meeting you here."

"So you decided to try the con after all! Incredible, isn't it?" Steve Klein possessed unruly russet hair, brown puppy-dog eyes behind tortoiseshell glasses, a T-shirt adorned with a star map, and the unquestioning belief that professors loved socializing with graduate students.

"I couldn't help but be intrigued by the newspaper item you showed me." Since he knew he might run into Steve at this affair, Nigel had registered under his real name, a decision for which he now congratulated himself.

"Going to get an article out of it, maybe? I could introduce you to some interesting people."

"Who knows?" Nigel said, wishing the young man elsewhere—preferably in an alternate space-time continuum. The last thing he needed was a self-appointed guide dogging his heels. Much as he'd enjoy putting a violent end to Steve's attentions, that wasn't an option in so public a setting.

"Say, I was just about to grab some dinner. Why don't we go together?"

"I had a late lunch," Nigel lied, "and I expect to be too busy for the rest of the evening." He edged toward the dealers' room, wondering if he'd have to resort to open rudeness. Not that Steve would recognize a brush-off if it hit him squarely in the jaw.

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To Nigel's relief, the young man said, "Okay, see you later, then."

"No doubt," said Nigel. As soon as Steve turned his back, Nigel slipped through the doorway.

The crowding fulfilled his gloomiest expectations. Tables were jammed together for maximum profit per square foot. Potential customers milled in the narrow aisles like ants deprived of their homing instinct. Nigel threaded his way among them, glancing from one display to the next, keeping an eye out for someone fitting Brewster's description. A dusty rack of Renaissance-style gowns and cloaks didn't attract him, nor did glass cases of jewelry comprised mostly of unicorn and dragon motifs.

He did pause at one of many tables of used paperbacks, half of them still boxed. Shuffling through the books, he reached across the chest of a weedy young man unconsciously blocking the center of the table as he read a Lensman novel.

A black woman in a scarlet dress and cape met Nigel's eyes from behind the display. "Lots of out of print stuff here," she said.

Nigel gave her tight bodice a leisurely once-over. She wore several lapel buttons, the two most prominent announcing "Blood Is Thicker Than Water—and Much Tastier" and "Vampire Victim, Be Nice To Me Today." Nigel pigeonholed her as what his friend Claude Darvell, star of what Claude himself cheerfully labeled second-rate horror films, called a vampire groupie. Unfortunately, this one smoked heavily; the suffocating odor of stale tobacco clung to her clothes and hair.

Nigel flashed her a smile. "May I take a look at that Stoker, please?" She passed him a fifteen-year-old paperback reprint of *Dracula's Guest*. Finding the copy in fair condition and priced under five dollars, he bought it and moved on.

Music emanated from a tape cassette display—a pleasant but undistinguished alto singing about a homosexual vampire stalking San Francisco. The singer's voice was overlaid in jarring counterpoint by that of a teenage boy dickering with a dealer over the price of a vintage

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*Eerie comic.*

Two tables down, Nigel came face to face with a button reading “To Hell with the Prime Directive—Let’s Kill Something.” Though he put little faith in psychological analysis by lapel pin, he didn’t find this sentiment encouraging. Alongside it on the denim jacket hung a name tag for Keith Brewster. Studying the jacket’s nondescript owner, who looked more like a salesman than an alien-invasion fanatic, Nigel wondered whether his search for Brewster might have been a waste of time. If the photos really were what Nigel suspected, how had someone like Brewster acquired them?

*Don’t jump to facile conclusions,* Nigel chided himself. *You’ve read enough case histories of psychotic killers to know that appearances mean nothing.*

Nigel filed the man’s face in his memory, then let his gaze slide without apparent pause to a row of computer games on the table before him.

When he looked up, Brewster had drifted to the other side of the room. In his place stood a young woman with honey-colored hair that struggled to escape from the red band holding it back from her face. She wore a low-cut peasant dress more suggestive of the sixties than the nineties. A costume, or simply her normal attire? Here, it was hard to tell. Trying to juggle three boxes at once, she let the third slip out of her hand. Before she could react, Nigel stooped to pick it up. He noted the title before handing it back—a fantasy role-playing game set in an enchanted forest.

“You wouldn’t want that one,” he said. “Badly written and maddeningly frustrating. The creatures you meet don’t understand most of your questions and give the same two or three replies to everything.”

She turned over the box to read a few lines of the blurb. “Never mind, it’s not compatible with my computer anyway,” she sighed. “And I haven’t seen one yet that’s compatible with my checkbook.”

“At those prices, it does pay to choose carefully,” said Nigel. The

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subject held minimal interest for him; he simply wanted to keep her attention for a few seconds longer. This woman, too, belonged to the button persuasion, and hers carried somewhat more encouraging messages. How could one mistrust a person who held that “Any Sufficiently Advanced Magic Is Indistinguishable from Technology”? He skimmed over the rest of her pins and returned to her face. When their eyes met, she blushed. Of course—she must have attributed his lingering at chest level to other than literary motives. She pointedly turned back to the game display.

Nigel circled the room to the exit. He had lost interest in the merchandise and wanted only to get out of these close quarters. After a quick survey of the hall to make sure Steve Klein wasn't around, he headed for the lobby again. How he wished he could forget the probably apocryphal photos and pursue a closer acquaintance with that girl, or someone like her. Her natural fragrance had reached him untainted by smoke or cologne, and he'd felt the heat rising to the surface of her skin—

*Building a full-blown fantasy out of a thirty second conversation? Jamison, what in blazes is the matter with you?*

Walking briskly upstairs, he reflected that he knew precisely what ailed him. He still missed Denise, couldn't have her, and wouldn't allow himself to look for a substitute. Granted, their separation had followed inevitably upon their respective career choices, and granted, the impossibility of frequent meetings was ultimately for the best. The less often Nigel flew back East to visit her, the more Denise sought out other companions—men who could give her the normal life Nigel never would. Last time he'd seen her, over four months ago, she had enjoyed their weekend together, yet had shown clear signs of being practically cured. Nigel wished he could say the same for himself. Drawing her back into the net of mutual dependence wouldn't be fair. If he couldn't stay with her, the only course, in friendship, was to let her go. Why couldn't he accept that truth emotionally as well as

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intellectually?

*Because addiction is irrational, you over-educated idiot*, he snarled at himself.

His headache was returning. He suppressed such futile thoughts and turned into the art room to kill the time remaining until seven. Aside from the Frazetta paintings, priced beyond even his comfortable financial status, he saw nothing he'd bother to bid on, even if he'd decided to stay for the auction. In the seminar room a couple of doors down, he took a seat at the back and watched the panelists gathering at the long table up front. When he scanned the rest of the audience, his jaw tightened with irritation. He recognized the back of Steve Klein's head in the front row, and Keith Brewster sat a few seats down from Steve. Luckily, neither had glanced around and noticed Nigel. He was glad he'd chosen an inconspicuous position.

Checking the program, he discovered that the subject of nonhuman intelligence was divided into several categories, including animal communication, Bigfoot and his relatives, artificial intelligence, and extraterrestrial intelligence. One of the guests of honor, a science fiction writer from Los Angeles, had the last topic. In spite of the hour, when many con attendees might be ducking out to snatch supper, the room filled quickly. Just as the chairman started introducing the panel members, a woman entered the room and slipped into the chair beside Nigel. The girl he'd run into at the computer game table.

He sneaked a look at her name tag. Sherri Hudson. In the past twenty minutes she'd acquired a new lapel pin, which read "Reality Is Just a Crutch for People Who Can't Handle Science Fiction." Good God, she was practically inviting a certain kind of seduction!

Nigel shifted his attention to the panel before she could catch him staring again. Introductions completed, the science fiction writer spoke first. Most of his material offered no surprises to people acquainted with OZMA and other attempts to coax a response out of the silent void. Someone provoked a livelier discussion by challenging the

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plausibility of the alien civilization in the author's latest novel. When the discussion degenerated into wrangling, the panel chairman tried to cut it short and pass on to the next speaker.

Brewster, breaking his silence for the first time, interrupted to fling a new question at the guest of honor. "What about real-life alien contact? If we could do it, should we? Is it even moral?"

The author gave him a puzzled frown. "Would you clarify that?"

"Look what's happened throughout history on Earth, every time two different cultures clash. The more advanced one makes a mess of the primitive one. Conquest, disease, missionaries, and all that crap."

Nigel noticed Sherri Hudson leaning forward to listen with new interest, her lips parted as if eager to throw in her own comments. This time she did feel Nigel's eyes on her, and she turned toward him to whisper, "How would the missionaries feel about that list?"

"Some of us believe," said the author with a touch of pomposity, his goatee twitching, "that by the time humanity reaches the planets encircling other stars, we will have outgrown our propensity for violence and exploitation."

"Tell that to the citizens of Hiroshima," Brewster retorted. "And what if we turned out to be the inferiors? I can just see us as slaves or cattle for some super-civilization."

"Good grief, he's stuck in *War of the Worlds!*" Sherri muttered. She sprang to her feet and waved for attention. "I think you're exaggerating, up there, but you do have a point. I see Bigfoot on the list of topics. Would the panel please address the question of what we should do about other intelligent species who may already be here."

The chairman stopped trying to confine the discussion to the printed program and left the panelists to answer questions hurled at them in a free-for-all. Nigel didn't speak, not wanting to draw attention to himself. Instead, he watched the girl beside him. Her impassioned defense of the problematic Sasquatch was no act. Her heartbeat and breathing quickened, and her body temperature rose. Her cheeks

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flushed with blood racing through dilated capillaries. Nigel decided he couldn't ask for a more pliable ally—or tool.



## CHAPTER 2

Sherri couldn't help admiring a man who could wear a full-length cape without tripping over it. Whom was he supposed to represent? A little young for Dracula, unless one thought of the Langella version. Zorro? Not with an unmasked face and a white ruffled shirt. No sword—the con committee didn't allow weapons—so he couldn't quite pass for D'Artagnan. Replace that wavy black hair with red, the gray eyes with blue, and he could be Rudolf Rassendyll, straight out of *The Prisoner of Zenda*.

*Good grief, have I really been watching him that closely? I can't remember the last time I bothered to notice a man's eyes.*

Struggling to focus on the discussion of Bigfoot's civil rights, Sherri still felt the man's eyes on her. At last she turned sideways to give him a challenging glare in return. A fleeting smile quirked his mouth. Sherri strove to keep her face expressionless as she examined every feature of his pale, lean face. Gray eyes, all right, with an exotic tinge of violet. She looked down at his name tag. Nigel Jamison. When

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she glanced upward again, his steady gaze waited for her. She tried to maintain her bold stare but couldn't help blushing for it.

*I refuse to be intimidated.* He was staring first; why should it be only the man's privilege to ogle?

Hadn't she seen him before that conversation in the hucksters' room? Oh, yes, he had to be the same man she'd noticed in the lobby, talking to Trish Rainbow at the check-in table. The way he'd been hovering over Trish, it looked as if he'd been flirting with her. If so, he must have struck out.

A rustling and stir of conversation snapped her out of the reverie. She hadn't even noticed the conclusion of the panel. When she stood, Nigel Jamison rose too, keeping his eyes locked on her face.

"No doubt the Bigfoots of the world—or is that Bigfeet?—will be grateful for your advocacy," he said.

Sherri gathered up her oversize canvas bag, packing the books and leaflets more snugly before slinging the strap over her shoulder. "I don't know that I put much faith in their existence, but the principle still stands. Intelligent beings have rights, no matter what they look like."

Nigel kept pace with her as she walked slowly out of the room. "A person's a person, no matter how small," he gravely quoted.

"You don't look like the type to quote from Dr. Seuss," said Sherri. What type did he fall into? Hard to tell in that rakish costume; however, the instant resort to literary allusion suggested a professor.

"What makes you so disinclined to believe in Bigfoot et al?"

She leaned against a wall to look up at him as she answered, "If they existed, wouldn't somebody have found solid proof by now? People have been looking hard enough."

"Suppose this hypothetical creature doesn't want to be found? It may be intelligent enough to recognize how badly the human species has treated the rest of its nonhuman neighbors."

Sherri tucked a loose curl under her headband and shifted the

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weight of her bag. "I'm more of an optimist than that guy in the front row. Sure, we've exploited other species in the past, but nowadays we have a greater sense of responsibility. If a Sasquatch colony were discovered, they'd probably be declared endangered and put under government protection."

"How do you think they'd feel about that?" said Nigel with a sardonic smile. "Ask the American Indian. Better, maybe, to stay a myth."

She started walking again, unsure whether to feel pleased or annoyed when he continued down the hall at her side. "What do you know of this band that's performing?" he asked. "Are they worth hearing?"

"I've watched them a couple of times before, and I'd say yes. I'm going down right now to catch a few minutes of the performance, then maybe take a break before the masquerade."

"May I come with you?" He offered his hand. "I'm Nigel Jamison."

"I noticed." His grip was firm and cool. "I don't mind. I'm Sherri."

He gave her a smile just short of caressing. "Yes, I noticed."

Getting settled in aisle seats halfway down the auditorium gave her an excuse to avoid talking. No man had so blatantly come on to her in a long time. What did he have in mind? While Sherri didn't consider herself an ugly duckling, neither did she cherish any illusions about possessing fatal beauty. A little taller than the feminine ideal, with thick and shining but unruly hair, healthy complexion, firm breasts, a too-broad waist, and slightly flabby thighs he hadn't seen yet summed up her physical assets. Nothing to cast an irresistible spell on a passing stranger. Well, she could enjoy his attention while it lasted. She was thirty-one, for heaven's sake, old enough to handle a pick-up!

The Fan Guest of Honor, disguised as the Phantom of the Opera, appeared onstage to announce Mock Turtle Soup. The group led off with "God Bless the Human Elbow" and moved on to less rowdy English folk songs. After the fourth number Sherri found herself unable

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to applaud, because Nigel had captured her right hand. She let it lie in his grasp, pretending to ignore the contact, like a high school girl on a first date.

When the band thundered out the spiritual “Babylon Has Fallen,” the audience joined in at the choruses. Sherri felt Nigel’s fingers tighten around hers. She turned to look at him, thinking that this song was a peculiar one to arouse erotic impulses. His pained frown disabused her of that idea.

“Why do people try to sing who can’t?” he whispered. His breath tickled her ear, distracting her.

Sherri found herself progressively less able to keep her mind on the music. Besides, her stomach felt shriveled with hunger; she’d have to take a break and get refueled for the rest of the evening. While she groped for a tactful way to broach the subject of food without appearing either to reject Nigel’s company or solicit a free meal, the Turtles launched into the parodic filksong “Woad,” whose martial tune always reminded Sherri of the film *Zulu*.

When the audience gleefully roared along with the band, Nigel muttered, “Enough is enough. The group is all right, but I can’t stand much more of this bloody racket. When did you eat last?”

*So he’s a mind reader, too?* Aloud she said, “Brunch, I think. Even getting a soft drink in the hotel is a hassle, let alone a meal.”

“Yes, impossibly crowded,” said Nigel. “And I understand this is a *small* convention. I noticed a hamburger stand in the next block. May I take you out for dinner—using the term loosely?”

They picked their way to the exit, stepping over the legs of people seated in the aisle for a better view. Sherri allowed Nigel to hang onto her hand, pulling him after her through the lobby.

Outside, darkness had fallen. Nigel’s grip relaxed, and he took a deep breath. “What a relief. God, I was suffocating in there.”

“A touch of claustrophobia?”

If she had hoped to embarrass him, she failed. He gave her a

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lopsided grin. “Not quite; I just don’t care for crowds. Come on, let’s track down those hamburgers before the rest of the guests get the same idea.”

Several lines waited at the fast food restaurant’s counter, with medieval costumes dotted among the shorts and T-shirts. The backlog wasn’t prohibitively large, though. Nigel’s cape didn’t earn a second glance from either customers or cashiers as he stood well back to scan the menu on the wall.

“What are you having?” Sherri asked, trying to follow the first-date rule of tailoring one’s appetite to the man’s wallet.

“Vanilla milkshake.”

“That’s it?”

Nigel shrugged. “Allergies. What about you?” When she reeled off her standard junk-food order, he said, “Diet cola? Are you another of those slimness fanatics, obsessed with a futile attempt to force your body into a shape it was never designed for?”

Sherri bristled. “What are you saying it was designed for, then?”

Nigel’s eyes roamed up and down her figure. “With your northern European heritage, I’d say the size you are now, or perhaps a few pounds heavier, would be perfect.”

Well, she’d asked for it. “I suppose that means you think I should have a milkshake, too.” She picked a line, and Nigel moved up with her.

“Why not? You only live once.”

“You’re a terrible influence. I don’t know why I’m letting you corrupt me this way. Get me a fudge sundae, please.”

After they’d collected their order, Nigel said, “Shall we sit outside? I don’t care much for the smell of overheated grease, either.”

A light breeze in the early summer night sent a shiver along Sherri’s arms and prickled her nose with the scent of the pine tree in the center of the restaurant’s playground. Nigel watched her across the small table as she chomped down on her double cheeseburger.

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"I have no qualms about the caloric content," he said, "but I shudder to think of what you're doing to your arteries."

"They're *my* arteries," Sherri said, "and so far they're doing fine."

"So far," said Nigel darkly.

His warning, however playfully meant, reminded Sherri of her father's early death from heart trouble less than two years ago. That loss still brought her moments of sadness, but never before a chill of fear. *Come on, I'm too young to worry about cardiovascular time bombs in my genes!* she thought, and defiantly wolfed down a greasy handful of fries. "What do you do when you're not hanging out at conventions harassing innocent victims with pop medical advice?" she asked.

"I teach psychology at Berkeley."

Sherri nodded in satisfaction. "I knew you looked like the academic type."

Nigel sipped his shake with little enthusiasm. "Are you so familiar with the type?"

"I'm a librarian at San Joaquin Junior College. Little college, little town about an hour from here. This weekend is the beginning of my vacation."

"You're not staying at the hotel, then?"

"Yes, I am—making that drive back and forth three times didn't seem worth the trouble."

"And what do you do," he mocked her, "when you're not hanging out at conventions or performing your archival duties?"

"I do some freelance copyediting," she said. "Partly for a regional interest publication and partly for some little science fiction magazines—those don't pay much."

"You aren't a writer? I thought all dedicated fans were aspiring Asimovs."

"Not me, I know my limitations." She gave him a wary look. "I hope you're not trying to analyze me."

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“A common reaction,” said Nigel. “Contrary to popular belief, people in my field aren’t mind readers, nor do we have any special interest in unearthing the dark secrets of social acquaintances. Anyway, I’m in teaching and research, not therapy.”

“What are you researching at the moment? Or is it secret?”

“Hardly.” Nigel laughed. “If only I could get into something important enough to be secret—and interesting to the deities of government research grants. Right now I’m compiling a statistical survey of college students’ attitudes toward sexuality, correlated with factors such as grade point average, family income, religious training, and so forth. The object is to determine whether concerns about diseases such as AIDS have affected attitudes and behavior, and how different types, if you will, are affected differently.”

Wadding up her empty wrappers, Sherri dug into the sundae. “Do you expect to find any change in behavior?”

“Not really,” Nigel said. “Human beings have an infinite capacity for ignoring unpleasant truths, and the notorious immortality complex of that age group is a fact.”

“It can’t happen to me.” *Like my attitude about Mom’s cancer and Dad’s heart disease.* She ordered the ghostly whisper in her head to shut up.

“Precisely.” He bestowed a gloomy stare upon his milkshake, pulled out the straw, and pushed the cup across the table to her. “Thought I could finish this, but I can’t. Too sweet. You’re welcome to it.”

Sherri sighed. “I don’t believe it—what are you trying to fatten me up for, the witch’s oven? After this I’ll have to starve for three days.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t do that if I were you. Enjoy your body as it was meant to be.”

“Don’t get personal. It’s a normal human characteristic to want to fit into cultural standards of beauty.”

He arched heavy black eyebrows at her. “I am well aware of human

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characteristics—I am frequently inundated by them.”

Recognizing the quotation, Sherri giggled. “You’ll never pass for a hyper-logical alien—not with that smile.” She blushed when she realized what she’d said. Now who was making personal remarks? “It’s a little cool out here. Why don’t we go back to the hotel? I really am stuffed, anyhow.”

On the way back, Sherri had to stretch to keep up with Nigel’s long strides. Standing five feet eight, though without the willowy shape that graced many tall women, she wasn’t used to being loomed over by men. Nigel’s height gave her a surprisingly erotic frisson. *Some feminist you are, getting turned on by a symbol of male dominance!* she scolded herself.

The hotel lobby was empty except for the desk clerk and a small group seated on the floor in a far corner, where a plump woman read poetry to the others. In the auditorium the listeners had persuaded the Turtles to render an encore of “Woad.” The audience’s cheerful bellow, as they tried to sing along, poured through the half-open door.

Nigel gripped Sherri’s hand again. Whether or not he admitted to claustrophobia, something about crowds and noise seemed to bother him enough that he needed support. “Let’s wait outside until they’ve stopped, if you don’t mind.”

As soon as the rumble of conversation indicated the end of the performance, Nigel and Sherri went inside to find seats for the costume contest. In front of the stage she noticed her friend Trish Rainbow, one of the con organizers, talking to the Phantom of the Opera. Trish returned Sherri’s wave, and after she’d finished her consultation with the Fan Guest of Honor, she stepped over to the third row where Nigel and Sherri were seated.

“How’s it going?” Sherri asked.

Trish’s silver bracelets jingled as she spread her hands and replied, “What can I say? No fights, no celebrity cancellations, and we’re running in the black. Something must be wrong.”



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“Don’t tempt fate; close your eyes and enjoy it. Trish, meet Professor Nigel Jamison. Nigel, Trish is one of the elite few crazy enough to work on a con committee.”

Trish leaned over to shake hands with Nigel. “You were crazy enough to help last year,” she said to Sherri.

“And once was enough!”

Trish, still clasping Nigel’s hand, collapsed into a chair in the row ahead and rubbed her forehead. “You could be right. I feel beat, and the night is still young.” When Nigel let go of her hand, she gave him a puzzled glance, shook her head, and stood up. “Back to the mad whirl. Enjoy the masquerade, guys.”

“Why did she give you that strange look?” Sherri asked Nigel. He hadn’t mentioned talking to Trish earlier, nor had the other woman seemed to remember him. Well, a convention worker ran into so many people in a day, no wonder she forgot a particular man—even a man with Nigel’s charm.

“I didn’t notice.”

“She didn’t start acting odd until I introduced her to you.”

“She said she was tired,” Nigel pointed out, “and no wonder, choreographing this pandemonium.”

When Sherri tried to speak again, he shushed her and nodded at the Phantom of the Opera, who was just asking, “How many Northern Californians does it take to change a light bulb?” The audience groaned in anticipation.

Nigel whispered, “Can’t he be any more original? I’ve known that for years—one to do the manual labor, nine to file the environmental impact statement.”

“How many psychologists?” Sherri whispered back.

“If you’re going to inflict psychologist jokes on me,” said Nigel, “stay away from the most obvious moldy oldies. Only one, if it really *wants* to change.”

After a few more one-liners, the Phantom spun a long, convoluted

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monologue about Count Dracula's first visit to England. Though Sherri hadn't heard this one before, the punch line was telegraphed, and she shouted it along with the rest of the audience: "Because the sun never sets on the British vampire!" The Phantom timed the end of the joke to coincide with Trish's signal that the contestants were ready to file on. The auditorium darkened, except for floodlights shining on the stage.

Cyrano de Bergerac, bearing a sword by special dispensation for the masquerade, fenced with shadows while reciting heroic couplets. There followed a Free Amazon with her shortsword-length blade, Prospero intoning the "cloud-capped towers" passage, the ghost of Jacob Marley, and Snow White with her Prince, dramatizing the episode of the poisoned apple and the resurrecting kiss.

As a succession of other characters marched, danced, or slouched across the stage, Sherri noticed Nigel's eyes wandering among the rows of spectators. At length he tapped her arm and nodded toward a denim-clad, brown-haired man across the aisle a few rows back. "Remember him?"

She lowered her voice to match Nigel's discreet tone. "The one who thinks aliens should be quarantined or something. What about him?"

"Tell you later."

Sherri gnashed her teeth in frustration and turned back to the costume parade, determined not to reinforce Nigel's irritating behavior by pursuing the question. A moment later a silver-haired Dracula with satanic brows and realistically understated fangs glided across the stage, then swooped down upon the audience before taking his seat in the front row with the previous contestants.

When he bared his plastic canines at Sherri, Nigel intoned in a Bela Lugosi accent, "Begone, demon of the night! This one belongs to me!" He draped a possessive arm around Sherri's shoulders and signed a cross in the air with his free hand. The costumed man made an exaggerated show of cringing from the holy symbol.

Nigel leered at Sherri. "Now, fair maiden, you are in my power.

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I've won you in combat." She giggled appreciatively. As a ploy to get her into an embrace, it topped most she'd seen.

Finally, with the awarding of prizes, the masquerade ended. While a female folk guitarist sat cross-legged up front, waiting for a group of listeners to assemble, most of the people in the room got up and drifted toward the exits. Nigel reclaimed Sherri's hand and pulled her to her feet. As they moved toward the back of the auditorium, she noticed him staring purposefully ahead. Following the direction of his gaze, she caught sight of the man from the alien intelligence seminar, whom Nigel had pointed out earlier.

"Are you following what's-his-name?" she whispered.

"His name is Keith Brewster," said Nigel. "Yes."

"For heaven's sake, if you want to talk to the man, why don't you just walk up to him and say hello?"

They emerged into the lobby. Nigel slowed to a pace that maintained a constant distance between him and Brewster. "The last thing I want is to talk to him. I simply want to see where he's going."

"What for?" She caught herself keeping pace with Nigel in spite of her confusion.

"To make sure he's going to stay put somewhere for a while."

"But why on earth—"

Nigel's hand closed on her arm. Involuntarily she looked into his eyes. A surge of dizziness swept over her. *What's the matter with me? I can't be that tired at this time of night.*

"Don't worry about it," said Nigel softly. "I'll explain later."

Sherri shook her head in half-disgusted bewilderment. What kind of nut had she fallen in with? Still, as long as his nuttiness didn't seem dangerous, she might as well string along.

Turning down a side corridor, Brewster detoured into the men's room. Nigel followed him. Sherri leaned against the wall, wondering whether she should worry about her own mental balance, for putting up with this. *So what? He's gorgeous, which makes up for a lot. And if he*

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*gets weirder, I can break away anytime.*

A minute after Nigel disappeared, a man who looked a few years younger than Sherri—perhaps twenty-five—darted around a pair of elfin damsels and said, “Hey, I’m glad I ran into you. I really liked your comments at the alien intelligence seminar. I’m Steve Klein.”

He thrust out a hand, which she automatically shook. “Thanks,” she murmured. Such a general compliment didn’t offer much of a conversational hook.

His chocolate-drop eyes contemplating her through tortoiseshell glasses, Steve said, “How about that guy who thinks we should barricade the planet behind a force field? He has a point, though—does super-intelligence necessarily mean good will?”

Sherri didn’t feel up to tackling philosophy in the middle of the corridor. “I have no idea.”

“In fact, I wrote a story that sort of addresses the question. It’s coming out next month in *Tome of Terror*. Say, I bet you’re a writer, too, being so articulate.”

*Two in one night*, Sherri thought, hovering between exasperation and amusement. “No, I’m a librarian at San Joaquin Junior College, and I do some copyediting on the side for little regional and SF magazines.”

Steve’s eyes shone with an all too familiar authorial gleam. “That’s great! Maybe you’d like to see a couple of stories I’ve been working on.”

“Wait a minute, I said copyeditor, not editor.” So her own charms weren’t the primary draw.

Undaunted, Steve said, “That’s okay, I’d really like to get your critique anyhow. Could we talk later? Maybe if I could have your address and phone number—”

At that moment Brewster emerged from the men’s room and brushed past them, followed closely by Nigel. Steve gave Nigel a surprised glance when Nigel stopped and took Sherri by the elbow.

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“Oh, you’ve met Dr. Jamison?”

It seemed to Sherri that Nigel was eyeing the young man in an unfriendly manner. “You know each other?”

“I’m in the Professor’s graduate seminar at Berkeley. Sir, I was just asking Sherri—”

“Later,” Nigel cut in. “We’re in a hurry.” He hustled Sherri down the hall after Brewster, just vanishing around a corner. Sherri threw a quick look over her shoulder at Steve, who stared after them with one arm frozen in a half-mast wave.

“Would you mind telling me what—”

“Quiet, you’ll attract attention,” Nigel said. She sputtered wordlessly, but her indignation didn’t manage to drown her curiosity. She scurried to keep pace with Nigel’s long strides. What could be making him so jumpy?

In the next hallway Brewster went into a conference room from whose open door guitar music emanated. At the entrance he paused to glance back at the thinning ranks of strollers that included Sherri and Nigel.

Instantly Nigel grabbed Sherri, backed her against the wall, and kissed her on the mouth. She bunched her arms between their chests, trying to push him away. She might as well have shoved the wall itself. He responded to her struggle to free her mouth by matching her every move, with firm but not grinding pressure. In spite of herself, her lips parted to admit his tongue. At that point she gave up the fight and switched to aggressive cooperation. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she teased his tongue with hers. In contrast to his hands, cool on the flesh exposed by the scoop neck of her dress, his mouth felt feverishly hot. She was just beginning to enjoy the duel when he released her so abruptly she staggered.

Sherri’s hands flew to her disheveled hair. “What was all that about?” Luckily anger—or so she chose to label it—choked her so that she couldn’t yell at him. “Don’t say uncontrollable passion, because I

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won't buy it."

"I didn't want him to get a good look at our faces."

Nigel stepped into the conference room and lounged by the door. Sherri peeked around him until he waved her back into the hall. The table had been moved to one side, leaving a circle of chairs occupied by ten or twelve people, Brewster among them, his back to the entrance. A filksing. The guitar player strummed a chord, and the group began a thumping chorus of "What do you do with a drunken hobbit?"

Nigel faded into the hall. Sherri saw him wince as the volume of the singing rose a few more decibels. "Sometimes having perfect pitch is a liability. How long would you expect that to go on?" he asked.

"At least a couple of hours. That's why I like to get a room in the hotel. Who wants to drive home after a post-midnight singing marathon?"

"Oh, do you call it singing?" Nigel offered a wry smile. "I'm glad you don't have to rush off, because I want to ask you a somewhat complicated favor. Will you join me for a drink in my room?"

Could all this rigmarole be an inventive plot to lure her into bed? Not likely—she didn't consider herself irresistible enough to be worth so much trouble. Besides, these days a professional man, acutely health-conscious, would be no more likely to make that move on a first meeting than a sensible woman would. Well, she could learn what he really wanted only by listening to him. And what could he do to her in a crowded hotel, anyway?

"All right, I'll accompany you to your lair."

"Just a temporary lair," said Nigel as he guided her to the elevator. "You should see the castle in the Carpathians, the one with the rat-infested dungeons and the hundred-foot tower."

"Which location do you keep the captive maidens in?"

"Depends on their behavior. The ones who please me get immured in the tower, with the door bricked up."

"And you visit them by magic," said Sherri.

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“Of course.”

Nigel’s room differed from any other on the same floor only by its stark neatness, as if he’d deposited his luggage without touching a single item of furniture. He marred that effect by shedding the cape and tossing it on the bed.

“That thing gets damned hot after the first hour or two,” he said. “Excuse me while I get some ice.” When he returned with a full bucket, he extracted two bottles from his suitcase. “I hope you like gin and tonic. Or would you prefer a brandy?”

Sherri sank into the armchair next to the coffee table. “G and T, please. You sure came prepared.”

“Inexperienced I may be, where these conventions are concerned, but I did anticipate the difficulty of getting to the bar.” He filled two glasses and handed her one, pulling up the desk chair to sit beside her.

“Well, you were right about that.” She sipped the chill drink, aware of how thirsty she was only when the liquid hit her throat. “What’s the big deal about Keith Brewster?”

Nigel took a folded clipping out of his back pocket. “Did you notice this article?”

“I didn’t have time to read the paper yesterday—too busy getting ready for the weekend.” Unfolding the page of newsprint, she found a light piece on Sequoiacon, by a feature writer who considered the con attendees almost as exotic as the extraterrestrial beasts they loved to read about. After skimming it, she said, “Typical. When I told one of the other librarians I’d be spending the weekend at a fantasy convention, she asked if I expected to get my fantasies fulfilled.”

Nigel flashed a smile at that. “Well, do you?” Before she could summon up a fiery retort, he continued, “I didn’t invite you here for a general discussion of semantics. This is the paragraph that interests me.” He indicated it with a fingertip.

Sherri read: “One attendee at this opening night of sci-fi festivities promises a special treat for his fellow fans. He’s posted a note on the

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bulletin board offering to show genuine photographs of a live alien. According to this gentleman, who asked that his name not be passed on to the general public, there's a winged female creature with fangs and claws right here in Northern California. What I wonder is, why hasn't she moved south and signed a contract to do special effects?" Sherri dropped the clipping on the table. "So? Sounds like a dumb publicity stunt, the kind of thing you read about at the supermarket checkout."

"You wouldn't be curious enough to go to Brewster's room tomorrow morning and look at the pictures?"

"Why would I want to encourage that stuff? It gives fandom a bad name."

"That's what your friend Ms. Rainbow said."

So he had spoken to Trish before Sherri had introduced them. Nigel's steady gaze seemed to demand a further response. Sherri said, "You don't believe this winged alien baloney could be for real, do you? If you're that interested, you go check out the photos tomorrow."

"If you mean, do I believe an extraterrestrial visitor is letting herself be photographed by a glory-hungry amateur, certainly not." He took a long drink of his gin and tonic—a cheap suspense-building trick, Sherri thought. "However, I have reason to believe the photos do exist, and I think the subject is a friend of mine who would never let such pictures be used this way. I'm certain they must have been taken without her knowledge and consent."

Sherri leaned forward in her chair. "What was she doing disguised as an alien in the first place?"

"I can't talk about that. Her secret, not mine."

"So what's this favor you mentioned?" She took a drink to still the multi-legged creatures awakening in her stomach.

Setting aside his glass, Nigel captured her unoccupied hand. "I intend to get those prints from Brewster, and I want your help."

"Why? Meet him face to face and offer him money. What help do you need for that?"



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"I already told you, I don't want him to know who I am. I intend to take the pictures. If Brewster doesn't come to his senses and leave the amateur musical session early, we have at least an hour. I want you for a lookout and decoy."

When it sank into Sherri's brain that Nigel wanted her for an accessory to theft, she shook her head and tried to pull her hand out of his grip. "Uh-uh, no way. Thanks for a fun evening, but this is the end." She gulped her drink and stood up. Nigel ignored her attempts to free her hand.

After she gave in and plopped back into the chair, he said, "Be reasonable. What I plan is theft only in a narrow, legalistic sense. Brewster got the snapshots by fraud, as it were. I have more right to them than he does."

"I can just see you trying to explain that to the hotel security force. Not to mention the police." She shook her head again and had to ride out a resultant surge of dizziness.

Nigel cupped her chin and stared into her eyes. She glared at him, recognizing the futility of physical resistance. "You'll be in absolutely no legal danger. If you perform as an effective decoy, Brewster will never know I was there. Nor will he have any reason to connect you with me. If any problem does come up, you can convincingly plead total ignorance of me and my dastardly crimes."

"You sound awfully sure of yourself. What exactly do you want me to do, anyhow?"

"Stand in the hall. Keep watch for Brewster. If he appears, delay him with conversation until I'm finished. That's all."

"You're crazy." Sherri felt her eyes growing heavy. How much gin had Nigel mixed into her tonic? Surely one drink couldn't drag her down so fast, even late at night. "Let me out of here. I don't see myself as a gun moll."

Nigel laughed softly, without taking his eyes from hers. For a second she thought she glimpsed a red gleam in their depths—

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ridiculous. She must be either drunk or catching the flu.

"I don't see you as that either, simply as what I need to distract Brewster—a beautiful woman," he said.

"Beautiful." She sniffed. "Now I know you're not firing on all cylinders."

"I won't argue that right now," said Nigel. "Let's say passably good-looking, then. Brewster doesn't strike me as the kind of man who attracts many of those." His thumb stroked the curve of her jaw. "It will take only a few minutes, and I'll be extremely grateful."

"Fat lot of good gratitude will do me in a prison cell." Sherri's head felt as if it were floating. Her hands and feet grew numb; her face, in contrast, tingled along the path of Nigel's touch. *Did he drug me?* Impossible—she'd seen him mix two drinks from the same two bottles, in full view.

His voice echoed in her ears. "Think of it as an adventure."

Shaping her tongue around words cost almost too much effort. "I agree with Bilbo. Adventures...nasty, uncomfortable things that make you late for lunch." *Right, and I don't go to strange men's hotel rooms, either. What's gotten into me? Besides alcohol?* She felt an evanescent prickle of alarm, which she brushed off like a gnat buzzing in her ear.

"You'll be safe in bed long before breakfast." Why did his voice sound so deep and far away? "You'll help me, won't you? It's so simple. Watch for Keith Brewster. Talk to him. Keep him busy. Just a few minutes of your time, hmm?"

Sherri wondered why she was making such a fuss. Playing secret agent for a few minutes could be fun. As Nigel had said, she couldn't possibly be implicated. What harm could it do? If he were a professional hotel burglar, he wouldn't need an amateur's help. No reason to believe he had designs on anything but the pictures. What did she have to lose? She felt her head nodding. The whole room lurched with the movement.

Nigel sat back, releasing her. "Wonderful! Shall we get started?"

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His voice sounded normal again.

When Sherri stood up, the grogginess flowed away. Instead, she felt a champagne-like elation bubbling up her veins into her brain. Adventure was exactly what she needed. A brief fling to remember like a half-embodied dream for months to come. “Lead on, Mr. Bond.” She glanced over his ruffled shirt and black boots and trousers. “Or is it Simon Templar? Or D’Artagnan? Let’s go get the Queen’s diamonds.”

## CHAPTER 3

Sherri glided down the hall to the elevator. She felt like a drifting balloon, guided by Nigel's gentle clasp. In her head the champagne sensations effervesced. An image popped into her mind—one of those bubble lamps popular some years ago, an endlessly recycled display of light and liquid. Though mildly puzzled when Nigel punched the lobby button instead of the third floor button, she said nothing.

In the lobby he steered her to a couch. "Sit here. Don't move." Sherri watched him walk to the desk and murmur something to the clerk, words too indistinct for her to make out. A moment later Nigel came back to her, dangling a key from one index finger. Pulling her to her feet, he led her to the elevator again.

Vague curiosity moved her to ask a question, though it seemed of small importance. "He gave you Brewster's spare key?"

"Sure."

"You were so anxious to be anonymous in all this; won't the clerk remember you talking to him?"

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“Trust me, he won’t.”

Sherri dropped the subject. The problem, if any, was Nigel’s; she was just along for the adventure. Shortly they alighted on the third floor. After a quick check revealed an empty corridor, they strolled around the corner to 318.

Taking Sherri into a loose embrace, Nigel gazed into her eyes. She found herself enjoying this routine more each time he did it. The depths of his eyes held tiny sparks of multicolored light, like the heart of an opal.

“Remember, you’re only a lookout,” he told her softly. “Watch in the direction of the elevator. Distract Brewster if he appears. Yes?”

“Yes,” she echoed. Nigel had released her and turned the key in the lock before she quite realized the space in front of her was vacant.

He closed the door after him, leaving Sherri alone in the hall. She adjusted the shoulder strap to relieve the dragging weight of her bag and let her mind drift. The gleams in Nigel’s dark pupils had left afterimages that darted across her retinæ. She had no idea how much time had passed when she heard footsteps, muffled by the carpet. She stirred herself to minimal alertness as two people rounded the corner.

She sagged against the wall with a little sigh. Not Brewster. A slim, bearded man and a woman cradling a baby nestled, marsupial-like, in a cloth sling passed Sherri with no more than a glance. The man carried a couple of role playing game manuals under one arm.

After they’d disappeared, Sherri decided her pose of waiting for someone in the hall would look more credible if she occupied herself instead of staring at the wallpaper. She dug a paperback out of her bag and tried to immerse herself in the ordeal of a writer whose dreams transported her to an alternate world. An immortal parasite stalked the heroine and fed on those dreams. Sherri’s mind refused to fasten on the tale but instead spun fantasies of what the primary reality she knew would be like if, behind the facade of humanity, nonhuman intelligences actually lurked. Not Bigfoot, hiding himself because he

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would be so easily recognized and singled out for persecution or misguided patronage, but creatures like the villain of the novel, visually indistinguishable from ordinary men and women. How many might stalk among us, protected by that mask of ordinariness? Anyone we met could be—

Sherri giggled at herself. Back to *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*! Any science fiction reader of the nineties should have grown beyond the paranoid mode.

Again she heard footsteps approaching from the elevator. This time they sounded like a single pair. She walked a few paces away from room 318.

Keith Brewster dragged his feet in her direction. About her age and not much taller than she, with brown hair already thin on top, he seemed to lack stamina for a late-night filksing. He gave Sherri an incurious glance out of bleary eyes.

Shoving her book into the canvas bag, she stepped in front of him before he could pass. “Hi! I saw you at the nonhuman intelligence panel, and I’ve been wanting to talk to you.”

“What for?”

“What you said about the ethics of alien contact was just fascinating. Have you ever done any writing on it?”

Brewster’s sagging shoulders straightened, and he looked directly at Sherri for the first time. Old saws to the contrary, there existed no surer way to a man’s heart than flattery. “Yeah, I’ve published a few articles. Maybe someday, if I can spare the time, I’ll put together a book.”

Sherri recalled numerous writer friends sneering at non-writers who imagined that the only commodity needed to produce a bestseller was time. “I sure hope I get to see it. What about fiction, though?”

“You know what they say—truth is stranger than fiction.”

“Is it really true you have photographs of an alien with you? Now that would make quite a book!”

Brewster said with a sly grin, “Would I lie? Yes, the pictures are

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real.”

Sherri drew closer, assuming the open-mouthed gaze men found so disarming. “I’m dying to see them.”

“The unveiling is tomorrow at eleven.”

She put on a teasing pout. “I don’t know if I can stand the suspense. At least tell me about it—how did you ever meet this alien? Where does she come from?”

“Lots of mysteries to that. I’ll tell all I know, tomorrow.” He started to walk by.

Out of the corner of her eye, at the far end of the corridor, Sherri glimpsed a hulking, shaggy figure lurching in their direction. A Wookie. She turned partly away from it, Brewster automatically shifting position with her. After the Wookie lumbered past and disappeared around the corner, Sherri caught Brewster’s sleeve. “Say, I’d love to read some of your articles. Do you happen to have any with you?”

“I did bring along a few photocopies.” Naturally he did—typical of the breed. “Why don’t you come into my room and have a look, maybe join me for a drink?”

That tactic had backfired. Good grief, what was keeping Nigel? And Sherri realized that her co-conspirator couldn’t sneak out unless she lured Brewster away from the door. “How about we go to the bar instead? It couldn’t be crowded, this late.”

“Nah, I’m pretty tired. Lots more comfortable up here.”

Sherri had been circling bit by bit, forcing Brewster to turn his back to the door of 318 in order to keep his eyes on her. Now she reached out to finger the bronze crescent pendant he wore. “That’s lovely.”

“Thanks. I got it at Aquaricon last fall.” His voice hinted at growing boredom with her stalling tactics. Would she have to make a pass at him just to pin him to the spot?

At that moment the door of 318 softly opened. Sherri saw Nigel freeze-framed in the opening. An instant later, the air around him

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rippling like a reflection on water, he stood behind Brewster. His right hand clutched the shorter man's neck. Brewster collapsed to the floor.

Sherri almost choked on her gurgle of astonishment. "What was that, the Vulcan neck pinch?"

Nigel knelt, his hands burrowing into Brewster's jacket. "As you pointed out, whatever I am, I'm no Vulcan. The lack of logic in my behavior would make any member of that species ill."

"Is he dead?" she whispered.

"Don't be silly." Nigel pulled an envelope out of Brewster's inner vest pocket and paused to cast an exasperated look at Sherri. "I cut off the oxygen to the brain—a simple pressure point anybody can learn, like the ones they teach in first aid to control bleeding. He'll come to in a couple of minutes, with no ill effects." He slung the unconscious man over his shoulder. Sherri watched him dump Brewster on the bed, toss the key on the dresser, and shut the door.

Her dreamy elation was fast evaporating. "Didn't you find...in the room...?"

Nigel grabbed her hand and drew her after him to the elevator. "Get moving—why take any more risk of being seen than we have to? I found the negatives in the bedroom—nothing else. Therefore the prints had to be on Brewster, and they were."

Sherri kept her mouth shut until the two of them were in Nigel's room with the door bolted. By then her head had cleared. "You—" She gulped a deep breath and struggled to speak without sputtering. "You hypnotized me, I don't know how! Psychologists must learn a lot of subtle techniques, but I hate to think what your colleagues would say!"

"What makes you think I used hypnosis?" said Nigel, leaning back in the armchair with the envelope in his lap.

"Don't give me that phony therapist tone!" She sat on the bed with an indignant bounce. "For a while I thought I was drunk, but alcohol doesn't wear off just like that. You did hypnotize me. And I thought you couldn't make a person do anything against her will."



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“Maybe your true will was to help me, then.”

Sherri clenched her fists so hard they cramped. Some shred of sense, supported by the memory of Brewster’s collapse, stopped her from attacking Nigel physically. “How dare you! I ought to report you to hotel security.”

“For what? I stole nothing of intrinsic value. If you doubt that, I’ll let you search me. And there’s no proof the photographs existed, since I also have the negatives. By making a fuss, you’d only cause trouble for yourself, too.”

“I should do it, just to annoy you. Messing up my mind—”

“But you won’t make a report.” He smiled. “You’re too sensible. As for what I did to you, I could wipe your memory of the episode. Do you believe that?”

She responded with a grudging nod.

“Well, I am paying you the compliment of not doing that. I’ll allow you to remember.”

“Gee, how big-hearted of you. I think I deserve more of a reward than that.”

He tensed. “Such as?”

“Show me the pictures.”

After a moment’s thought, he shrugged. “Why not? Can’t do any harm.” He sat on the bed beside her.

As soon as he removed the packet of snapshots from the envelope, his eyes widened in shock. “Good Lord, it’s Laura!”

“You claimed you knew who—”

“I lied,” Nigel said. “I knew the subject had to be one of a select group of people, but I had no way of guessing which. I certainly wasn’t expecting Laura.”

Annoyed by her irrational feeling of jealousy over Nigel’s concerned tone, Sherri said, “Who the heck is Laura?”

“My half-sister.” Nigel still gazed at the picture on top of the pile. “Fourteen years younger, and we haven’t had much contact lately, but I

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do feel a certain obligation. God, I'd have thought she had better judgment!" He handed the first photo to Sherri.

She saw a flame-haired woman in a loose black robe. On the wall behind the woman, on an upside-down cross, hung a goat with pendulous breasts and a serpentine phallus. "That looks like—"

"Yes. It's worse than I imagined. She's got herself mixed up in a Black Mass." He spread out the rest of the photos on the bed. Sherri picked them up, one by one, for a closer examination. The woman, Laura, stood naked behind the altar. Her face had changed; she now wore a feline mask in what looked like black velvet. Another snap showed her grasping a small, sinuous animal—a ferret?—by its neck. Next her teeth ripped into its belly. Yet again, those same teeth sank into a robed, cowed man's forearm. Several pictures showed Laura with satiny gray wings, the rest of her naked body turned dark. These prints were blurred and marred by patches of fogging on the lens. Sherri stared a long time at them, trying to make out the distorted blotch where Laura's face should be. In the last picture she'd removed the mask, revealing a red smear around her mouth.

Finally Sherri let out a long breath. "Man, those are some special effects!"

"Yes, aren't they," said Nigel. He gathered up the pictures and returned them to the envelope. "Say, what's this?" He removed a cardboard rectangle from the envelope, read it, and passed it to Sherri.

Printed on it, in Gothic script, was the name "Clive Herndon," with a telephone number preceded by a Los Angeles area code in the lower right corner. Someone had written in ballpoint, *Crepuscular Shadows*.

"Wonder why Brewster was carrying a card from Clive Herndon," said Nigel, "whoever that is."

"He edits a lot of fantasy and horror magazines, most of them pretty small," Sherri said. "*Crepuscular Shadows* is one. I've never seen a copy of it, though."

Nigel looked at her, faintly surprised. "Thanks. You do have your

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uses.” He reclaimed and pocketed the card.

Sherri pretended to ignore the patronizing remark. “What are you going to do with the photos?”

“Probably destroy them, along with the negatives.”

“Well, I can see why you wanted them. I can almost forgive what you did to me, if it’s a question of saving your sister from possible blackmail.”

“Almost?” Nigel repeated with that mock-innocent smile.

She glared at him. “Don’t push your luck.” She stood up, collecting her bag. “I’m getting out of here, before you drag me into any other nefarious plots. No telling what kind of trouble I could already be in.”

Nigel shook his head. “No, you aren’t. Brewster didn’t get a look at me, and he has no reason to think you were anything but an accidental bystander. An admirer of his brilliant imagination.”

“Oh, stuff it, Nigel!”

Just as she reached the exit, he said, “By the way, thank you.”

Sherri slammed the door as she left.

Back in her own room, she wearily dropped the bag of books and flung herself face down across the bed. Away from Nigel’s presence, new doubts crept into her mind. He’d assured her that Brewster would survive the assault with no lasting damage. Could she trust that promise? Nigel had shown himself capable of lying and manipulation. Maybe he’d only been trying to soothe her, keep her quiet. The more she squirmed from side to side, plucking at the tufts on the chenille bedspread, the more wakeful she became. Finally she drooped to the bathroom, splashed her face, and picked up the phone.

By the time she’d finished dialing Brewster’s room, she still hadn’t composed a speech to deliver to him. What reason could she give for calling? Worse, how could she explain vanishing when Brewster had collapsed before her eyes? He might not know he’d been attacked; maybe the event had happened suddenly enough to let him take it for some kind of seizure. Would he accept Sherri’s explanation that his

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“fit” had panicked her into running away, and only now had she collected the courage to face him? No matter—she had to check on the man. If he’d been seriously hurt, Sherri had to bear part of the blame.

After four rings, a voice answered, “Room 318.” Not the voice she’d expected, but an older, gruffer one.

“Keith Brewster, please,” she said, dismayed at her quavering tone.

“This is hotel security, ma’am. May I ask who’s calling?”

Good Lord, Nigel *had* killed him! Sherri slammed down the receiver and stood, feeling the floor tilt as she did so. Her heart pounded against her ribcage. Could that man in the Wookiee costume identify her as having talked to Brewster? Did she dare go back to the third floor and check the scene of the crime?

Crime? Then she, respectable to the point of dullness, was a suspect. Damn Nigel and his guarantees! Still, she had to find out whether Brewster was really dead. With a silent curse at her own sense of responsibility, she grabbed her key and hurried out.

As she headed away from the elevator toward 318, a murmur of voices reached her. Turning the corner, she saw a barricade—the kind that would normally bear a “Caution, Wet Floor” notice—halfway down the hall. Taped to it was a hand-lettered sign reading “No Thru Passage Beyond This Point.” A black man wearing a hotel security badge stood behind the barrier. Further on, in the open door of Brewster’s room, Sherri glimpsed a police uniform.

She wasn’t the only gawker. She found herself amid a cluster of six or seven yawning guests trying to peer past the official guardians. Most of the watchers displayed bare feet and flapping shirttails, except for a middle-aged woman in Elizabethan gown and wimple, and a Wookiee. Would the Wookiee recall Sherri’s face? Too late to worry about that. She felt her heart racing and wanted to hide behind the man in the shaggy costume, as if the security guard could read her guilt in the sheen of sweat on her forehead.

“What’s going on?” she whispered to the Elizabethan woman.

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“There’s been a robbery or something,” the woman whispered back. “Somebody tore up the room and killed a man.”

Sherri choked back a gasp. She felt dizzy again—an ear-ringing sensation not at all like the dreamy wooziness Nigel had induced. After a couple of deep breaths, the gray patches faded from her view, and she said, “How?”

“I don’t know.”

One of the scruffy young men nearby spoke up. “I heard it looked like an accident, like there might have been a scuffle, and this guy split his head open on the desk. Maybe that’s why the burglar didn’t take much of anything—he probably freaked out when the victim turned out to be dead.”

“How can they be sure nothing’s been taken?” the woman said. “Who knows how much money or valuables anybody staying at a hotel has?”

“Must have been some kind of amateur,” said the young man, “breaking in when the room wasn’t empty.”

He drifted away, as did several other spectators. The Wookie, Sherri noticed, had already left. She did the same, not wanting to be conspicuous, and having already learned all she could hope for.

Fear and anger burned away her fatigue. With no input from her roiling brain, her feet propelled her to Nigel’s room. She didn’t know anyone else to blame for Brewster’s death. Yet why would he go back and tear up the room, if he’d already got what he wanted? Well, she’d rip that out of him. She felt enraged enough to scratch his eyes out.

*Who are you kidding, anyway?* she admonished herself. *He handled Brewster like a rag doll.* Suddenly conscious of the noise her running feet made, she halted several doors from Nigel’s room and approached on tiptoe.

Leaning on the door, she struggled to tame her rapid breathing and listen to the sounds within. Nothing. Hadn’t he returned from his murderous foray? Maybe she could discover something in his absence.

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What, though? In real life villains didn't leave incriminating evidence in plain sight. Still, it couldn't hurt to try, and most likely the door would be locked anyhow. Come to think of it, hotel room doors locked automatically. Honor would be satisfied, and she could slink away.

She turned the knob. It opened. The latch hadn't engaged properly. Her stomach lurched, revealing how much she'd been hoping to be stymied by that lock.

Slipping inside, she closed the door as softly as possible. Only the feeble night light over the unrumpled bed was lit. She glimpsed a hardcover book open on the bedspread, a glass half full of amber liquid beside the envelope of photos on the nightstand. She took a shaky step toward the bed.

The bathroom door opened, and Nigel appeared. His eyes narrowed at the sight of her. "Sherri. To what do I owe this very great pleasure?"

"You slimy—" An ingrained habit of genteel speech paralyzed her tongue. Why hadn't she derived more of her vocabulary from sleazy paperbacks and R-rated movies? Then she'd be equal to this occasion.

In a single fluid movement, it seemed, he was at her side, reaching around her to bolt the door. "I had an idea that, if I left the trap open, you'd walk back into it. You're too conscientious for your own good." Teasing or threatening? Her chest tightened until her lungs felt squashed. "Do me a favor, and don't wake the entire hotel. I won't comment on how alluring you look when you're angry; you might not appreciate it."

She suppressed an urge to shriek. "I am not angry. I am furious," she hissed. "You liar—cold-blooded killer—" She raised both fists to flail at him.

Catching her wrists in a stony grip, Nigel said, "I admit to 'cold-blooded.' As for the rest, whatever happened to 'innocent until proven guilty?' Not to mention a man's right to hear the charges against him. Whom do you accuse me of killing?"

She glared at him, breathing raggedly. A chill trickled through her

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veins. She suspected this man of murder, knew he possessed strength and reflexes that reduced her to the level of a kitten squirming under a Great Dane's paw. She smothered her fear with renewed anger. "Don't give me that innocent look! Keith Brewster—"

His eyes widened. "Brewster is dead?"

"Don't pretend you don't know it."

Nigel steered her across the room and into a chair. "Sit still, breathe deeply, and tell me what in the name of sainted Papa Freud you're talking about. Would you care for a drink?"

"No! This isn't a social call. And stop looking at me that way." His silver-gray eyes wove their net of violet sparks, ready to entangle her. "I won't let you hypnotize me again."

"Very well, I'm not looking at you." He sat on the bed, half turned away from her. "Tell me exactly what happened."

"I went back to his room to check on him."

"Idiot!" Nigel groaned. "Asking for trouble!"

"Save your breath to insult me for some other mistake. I never got close." She told Nigel what she'd seen on the third floor and passed on the rumors she'd heard. "Do you really expect me to believe that a random thief just happened to pick on Brewster, less than an hour after you finished with him?"

"No, I don't believe that either," said Nigel.

"Then—"

In a low, intense tone, still not facing her directly, he said, "Sherri, you aren't thinking. I found what I was after and got away clean. Why would I go back and put myself in danger of discovery? For what? Be reasonable."

For the first time since hearing of Brewster's death, she slowed down long enough to analyze the event. "You have a point," she admitted. "I can't imagine you trashing the room. Or being careless enough to kill him."

"I appreciate the vote of confidence, if that's what it is. Now, will

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you accept a brandy? Obviously, you won't let me calm you down any other way."

"Oh, all right," she said. Emotional overload had set in, numbing her self-preservation responses. Whatever Nigel might decide to do to her, she couldn't stop him anyhow.

Nigel unwrapped a glass from the tray next to the ice bucket and sloshed a few inches of brandy into it. "So the attacker vandalized the room? Yes, that is careless. He must have been in a hurry." As he sat down on the bed again, Sherri noticed an unfamiliar grimness in his expression.

"If it wasn't you," she said, "who was it?"

"Exactly what I'd like to know. Perhaps your random thief, after all."

"You said you didn't believe that." She sipped the brandy, which burned her unsettled stomach.

"Nor do I. I don't like what this suggests."

When his silence stretched into reverie, she prompted, "Which is?"

He frowned at his glass. "Isn't it obvious? Those pictures are more important than I suspected. Somebody else is interested in them. What that suggests to me is that Laura may be in danger."

Sherri straightened in the chair. "Huh? Isn't that a pretty wide leap?"

"Not at all. Satanism, per se, isn't illegal—consider that fellow in San Francisco. So why is Mr. X, if you want to call him that, so anxious to get possession of the prints? Something more serious must be going on, and Laura is involved."

"How do you know her involvement isn't voluntary?"

"Oh, it must have been at first. That's not to say it still is. I have to find out, for my own peace of mind if nothing else." He emptied the glass and set it aside. "Why am I bothering you with this? It's not your worry. Your part is finished."

Sherri bristled. "Trying to get rid of me?"



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“Not necessarily. I’d be delighted to have you stay, as long as we change the subject. What would you like to talk about? Computer role-playing games? Books? Movies?”

“If you’re a night owl,” she said, “I’m surprised you aren’t downstairs watching one. I hear they have *Forbidden Planet* and the original silent *Nosferatu*.” Grimacing at the brandy, she put it down. She didn’t want to start her head spinning again.

“I’ve had enough of people for one night,” said Nigel. “Present company excepted. After all, I work with them constantly. This weekend is a change but hardly a rest.”

“I can imagine you making a new research project out of it. Speaking of research and computers, what about this program I’ve heard of that’s supposed to replace therapists?”

“Yes, I’ve test-run it. Don’t believe everything you read in magazine articles.”

“The transcripts of its conversations,” Sherri said, “sound almost human. Isn’t that supposed to be the criterion for machine ‘intelligence,’ if you can’t tell whether or not there’s a live person on the other end?”

Nigel laughed. “You can tell, all right. Human beings are predictable, but not that predictable. The program is written to respond to certain key words—or the absence of them. For instance, if a set amount of time goes by without the input of a certain word, the computer might say, ‘I notice you haven’t mentioned your father.’ Sounds very perceptive, but it’s all programming. Take the all-purpose question, ‘How do you feel about that?’ It can apply to almost anything. Push the program beyond what it’s designed for, though, and it degenerates into nonsense. The excitement over this stuff perfectly illustrates the human mind’s eagerness to believe certain things.”

Sherri tossed back an irritating lock of hair from her forehead. “You seem to have a low opinion of the species. What things?”

“You know—the whole class of dubious phenomena such as UFOs,

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the Loch Ness Monster, Bigfoot, talking dolphins, artistic chimps, for that matter. People hate to think they're the lone intelligence in the universe, or even on this planet. Why, look at that button you're wearing."

Sherri ran her fingertips over her assorted lapel pins. "This button?" she asked, pausing at the one stating "Reality Is Just a Crutch for People Who Can't Handle Science Fiction."

He nodded. "You wanted Brewster's winged alien to be genuine. Given any evidence for the affirmative, you'd have leaped for it like a cat after a mouse. It must become inconvenient, being too intelligent to lie to yourself about such things."

Sherri stood. "Why am I arguing with you at this crazy hour? I should be running miles in the other direction, which is exactly what I'm going to do."

"Must you leave? Isn't staying up all night a traditional part of these gatherings?"

"I'm not staying, period. I've had enough. I'm going home to my nice, mundane existence and forgetting you as fast as possible."

His eyes lingered on hers. "You may not find it so possible. What about tomorrow's program? You'll miss the auction."

With an effort, she broke eye contact and headed for the door. "I can't afford to bid anyway, and the rest of the program can take a flying leap. Goodbye, Nigel." She felt exasperated at her twinge of disappointment when he didn't try to make her stay.

A sour taste coated her mouth in spite of the brandy. She didn't make a habit of staying up past midnight, especially for such nerve-racking pastimes. The con had lost all its allure. She longed for her own house and her marmalade cat. Cocooning with the cat, a pint of ice cream, and a stack of books, that was the remedy for a blighted weekend.

Approaching her room, she was surprised to see the door ajar a few inches. Her heart tripped over itself as she thought of Keith Brewster.

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Stupid—most likely she hadn't fastened the latch securely when leaving. Nevertheless, she tiptoed to the door and gave it a tentative push.

A Hispanic girl in a maid's uniform popped out of the closet alcove, emitting a startled squeak. Clutching a heap of towels to her chest, the young woman mumbled, "Excuse me, Miss."

Clenched fists on her hips, Sherri stared down the maid. "What on earth are you doing here?"

The girl flushed. "Towels—this convention has put us behind in the work. I'm sorry." She ducked past Sherri and scurried into the hall.

Not for an instant did Sherri believe in replacement of linen at this time of night. Shooting the deadbolt, she muttered, "Now I'm getting robbed, yet—this is the absolute end."

On the other hand, that maid didn't behave like an expert thief. Why court disaster by invading at such an hour, instead of using her normal rounds as a cover?

Examining her luggage, Sherri found her suitcase unlatched, but everything packed more or less as she'd left it. Even her wallet, at the bottom of the canvas bag she'd left on the bed, hadn't lost any of its contents. She shook her head in weary bewilderment. *Who cares? I'm out of here.* Why bother reporting the confrontation to the management? Her word would stand against the maid's, with nothing missing. Sherri's eagerness to get home and forget the whole Keith Brewster mess overrode everything else.

Throwing brushes and toiletries into her case, she reflected that her attitude toward a man's death left much to be desired. No matter what kind of person he'd been, he deserved to be recalled as more than an incidental nuisance. Yet, in all honesty, she'd known him as just that. Suppose she'd gone back to check on him more promptly? Could she have averted his murder?

*You'd probably have gotten caught by the burglar and bashed on the head yourself, dummy. Squash the irrational guilt—that's what*

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*Nigel would say, I'll bet.* Typical shrink advice. Arrogant, manipulative...

After prodding the night clerk into sufficient alertness to fill out her credit card slip, she gratefully slipped into the driver's seat of her four-door compact and started the hour's trip home. All the way, she fought the urge to strain her ears for a pursuing siren.

\* \* \*

No light seeped through the locked shutters—the sole comfort of Laura's imprisonment. Nevertheless, she knew when day sank to dusk. When her part of the earth turned away from the sun, her heartbeat and respiration quickened, stirring the sluggish blood in her veins. Her frozen limbs thawed to mere chill, and she awoke.

Woke to stomach-wrenching hunger and burning thirst. She uncurled herself from the sheepskin rug and stumbled to the bathroom. Several times, she refilled and drained the plastic cup. The tepid water soothed her throat momentarily, with no promise of true quenching. She grimaced at her reflection in the mirror. Why hadn't Don removed that, if he no longer trusted her with glass? And what did he think she could do with broken glass that her own teeth and claws couldn't manage?

She raked fingers through her tangled red hair. Finding the comb and brush to groom herself seemed like too much trouble in her low-energy condition. Her mouth tasted like a slaughterhouse floor. She'd used up the tube of toothpaste several days ago, and she wouldn't stoop to ask Don for anything.

Dragging herself back into the bedroom, she huddled on the coffin lid. Her amusement at Don's bizarre notion of furniture had long since worn out; she thought of the thing as simply a convenient seat.

The idea of rooting in the closet for a book she hadn't read didn't inspire her. Hugging her cramp-racked stomach, she felt herself drifting into a half-doze. How could she be drowsy after a full day of sleep? She gave her tousled head an irritable shake. How long had she been

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locked in here, anyway, with no proper nourishment and no companion besides her jailer? She began counting on her fingers—

The scrape of the key snapped her awake. Damn, she'd fallen asleep again! She sprang to her feet, feeling the hair bristle at the back of her neck.

Don stepped through the door, leveling the revolver at her.

That gun again—as if his fear of her weren't obvious enough without it. Not only did he stink of fear, it shouted in the way he clutched the silver cross at his throat. She looked forward to disabusing him of that superstition by ripping the thing off his neck—but not as long as he had the .38 pointed at her breast.

“How'd you sleep today, Laura? Enjoying your reducing diet?” His voice quavered with anger as well as fear.

“Must you come bothering me like this every night? If you aren't going to let me out, just stay away.”

“That's no way to talk to your host—and I've got news you'll want to hear.”

“I doubt it.” Fixing her eyes on his, she strove to draw him in, seduce him with her gaze.

Well-practiced at this game, he stubbornly stared at her chest instead. “That sneaky little son of a bitch—” He sounded hoarse with the effort of stifling his anger. “The pictures—I was right about them.”

In spite of herself, Laura pricked up her ears at this remark. “Brewster?”

“You got it. I trusted him, the little snake!” Don's aura smoldered with resentment. Still, to Laura's disappointment, he didn't forget to avoid her eyes. “He had one of those miniature cameras, it looks like. Anyway, like the paper said, he claimed he had photos of a winged alien. Had to be you at the Sabbat—what else?”

Laura felt a twinge of alarm. “You aren't sure? Didn't you get the prints?”

“Hell, I tried,” Don said with an acid grin. “Somebody else got

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there before me.”

At that, her stomach churned with more than hunger. “Someone else has them? Who?”

“I think I know. I’ll get them back, don’t worry. Think I wouldn’t take good care of my prize monster?”

She gritted her teeth to hold back the retort that leaped to mind; she couldn’t let him goad her.

He went on. “I have to go easy, though. When I leaned on Brewster to find out where the pictures were, he put up a fight, and things got out of hand.”

It took a second for his meaning to penetrate Laura’s abused brain. “You killed him!”

He shrugged. “Don’t sweat it. It was an accident, and I heard the cops chalked it up to a burglary.”

Her heart racing, she said, “You can’t be sure they’ll stick to that.” Did this development necessarily threaten her? In a way it offered hope, for if Don were arrested, she’d be found and liberated. On the other hand, Don’s exposure might carry the risk of someone else learning her secret.

His right hand trembled; no doubt his fingers ached from gripping the hilt of the gun. “I didn’t really come down here to talk about that. You know what I’m here for. Have you changed your mind?”

“The answer is the same as last night and the night before,” she said. “It won’t change. What you’re asking for just isn’t possible.” Wouldn’t he ever believe that simple truth? Perhaps she should pretend to give in, go along with his delusion. Maybe that piece of trickery would win her freedom. She couldn’t shift position too abruptly, though. “Why not forget about it and start up the Black Masses again? Your friends must be wondering what’s happened.”

“I’m fed up with all that bull,” he said with an impatient twitch of the revolver. “I told you, I want the real thing.” After she’d faced him in silence for a minute, he said, “I’ve been thinking over what we

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talked about last night. I know you're holding out on me. There's got to be a reason why you won't let me have a taste of your blood."

"Because the very idea makes me sick!" she spat.

Bad move—she couldn't manipulate him if she lost her temper. Let him believe she might submit to his proposal. Not that she could ever go through with the act, for then her mind would lie bare to him; she would have no more secrets.

After a few deep breaths, she said in a low purr, "But you want me to taste yours, don't you? You miss it. Don't try to lie. Your emotions are so clear you might as well be screaming them."

He flushed dull red. His aura pulsed in time with the throb of his heart. "I don't know what you're talking about," he muttered.

To Laura's shame, she still wanted him, too. Her loathing for him didn't change that. Beneath the smell of fear-sweat and cologne, she scented healthy male. Saliva flooded her mouth.

*He feels it, too! Use it against him!*

"Give up, Don. You're making yourself miserable for no reason. Put down that silly gun and take off the cross and come over here." She pitched her voice low, sultry. "Then maybe we can talk over your...request, hmm? I don't take kindly to being threatened."

"Shut up," he growled. "You can't suck me in that way." Groping in his left pocket, he took out a knife and fumbled to unfold it one-handed. Laura couldn't help flinching. Her reaction made Don's mouth contort in a fleeting smile. "Right, if you won't give me that little drink, I'll just take it. Don't like the idea, do you?" He strode a couple of steps closer, pointing the gun at her head.

Her muscles tightened. Maybe she ought to be glad of this threat; it brought him within her reach for the first time in weeks. All she needed was a second of inattention, and then—

His harsh breathing and his heartbeat deafened her. Crouching, she waited for the moment when her arms could snake around his neck. Automatically her lips curled back from her teeth. She felt the heat

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emanating from his flesh, smelled his Scotch-flavored breath.

The pocket knife slashed upward to graze her forearm. At the same instant, she grabbed his right wrist. He squeezed the trigger, and she barely managed to shove the barrel aside. The bullet whizzed past her head. Her ears ringing from the shot, she bore down upon him. Again he gashed her unprotected arm.

The wound scorched her as if the blade had been red-hot. No time to concentrate on quelling the pain, no time to stop the bleeding. She felt dizzy. Blinded by pain and rage, she bit at random into the first exposed flesh her teeth found. Don's wrist.

Hot blood gushed into her mouth. A surge of terror from him rocked her. He hadn't believed she still had that much strength. Her probing tongue tasted adrenaline. Fueled by it, he broke her hold and threw her off.

Maddened by the abrupt cutoff—so close, so damn close!—she charged for the door he'd left ajar. The chill air of the outer room washed over her clammy skin. Her vision veiled by a red fog, she didn't see Don's arm raised before the pistol butt slammed into her jaw.

She fell to her knees. When he pinioned her arms and lifted her, she sank her teeth into him again. The mingled taste of his blood and her own shredded the last of her self-control. Shuddering, her limbs as far beyond her command as if her spine had been severed, she could think of nothing but the pain and the rich, salty tang in her mouth. She had no power to resist when he threw her onto the rug.

As the taste faded, it left the burning in her vitals worse than before. When her vision cleared, Don was gone, and she was locked in once more.



## CHAPTER 4

No homicide detective trailed Sherri home or disturbed her sleep Sunday morning. When she woke at noon, with her marmalade cat, Quark, nestled in the crook of her arm, she dismissed her fears with a lazy smile. With the sun filtering through pine boughs into her window, the previous night receded into a confused dream. Brewster's death had only grazed her in passing; she could forget it.

As Sherri sat up, Quark raised his head, meowed, and leaped to the floor. Easing from under the quilt, Sherri automatically pulled up the covers of the queen-size bed before padding across the braided rug to her bathroom. Quark rubbed her ankles, harassing her with plaintive cries, until she followed him downstairs, still wearing only her thigh-length nightshirt. The lower level of Sherri's cottage, with its slab floor, had been designed as a garage; however, the automobile entrance had been bricked up and a window installed. She used the area for storage, laundry, and the cat's quarters.

Wrinkling her nose at the ammonia smell of unchanged litter box,

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she opened the door beneath the redwood deck to let the scent of pine drift in. Through sun-speckled branches she caught a glimpse of the nearest neighbor's house, a gray-shingled cottage like her own. The family used the place only for summer weekends and vacations, and even then Sherri had little contact with them, aside from an occasional sighting of two half-grown boys crashing through the underbrush.

Sherri's only brother, a naval officer now stationed in Virginia, had expressed worry about her living so isolated, in the woods at the end of a hilly, gravel-surfaced lane. She'd laughed at him, and so far the crime-free serenity of her home had justified her confidence. Even the weather had presented few problems, for snow at this altitude didn't accumulate deeply enough to make her driveway impassible for long. In the event of the occasional heavy storm, she paid a seventeen-year-old boy a mile up the road to plow with his family's mini-tractor. At her age, she'd told her brother Tim, she ought to seek independence, not wait for a fairy-tale prince to make a life for her. Hence she'd used her share of their father's insurance as a down payment on this house, and she hadn't regretted the choice.

After pulling a few weeds from around her tomato plants, she went back inside to empty the litter box, replenish Quark's water and dry chow, and dress in shorts and tank top for her daily run. Having puffed up and down the steep, narrow roads of the neighborhood for twenty minutes, she bathed, then sat at the kitchen table for yogurt and grapefruit. She surveyed her large kitchen, paneled in blonde wood like the rest of the rooms, with satisfaction, wondering at finding herself in such a stock-taking mood. She considered her house just right, with its two bedrooms and two full baths, large enough to allow an occasional guest but not large enough to make demands on her. She enjoyed her job at the community college library and welcomed the chance to use her undergraduate English major working as a freelance copyeditor. Did her life lack any essential element?

Tim and his wife would say so. A woman of thirty-one, if not

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married, should at least be engaged or, as a dubious but acceptable third choice, living with a man. Yet Sherri hadn't seriously dated anyone since her one and only lover in graduate school, who'd accepted a job in Texas after finishing his M.B.A. Discovering that she didn't feel strongly enough to follow him there, she had let him go with only short-lived pangs. Did her failure to develop an attachment to anyone else indicate some deficiency in herself?

*Failure? Come on, girl, the word begs the question!* More truly a "failure" would be to latch onto the first man who showed interest, just to avoid living alone. If the right one ever appeared, she'd recognize him—or so the popular songs and drugstore paperback romances proclaimed.

Somebody like Nigel Jamison?

Now where had that thought popped up from? She'd never see the man again and good riddance. Not that the hours with him, up until the disaster with Keith Brewster, hadn't been fun, in a crazy way. But he brought to mind the epithet someone had attached to Lord Byron: "mad, bad, and dangerous to know." Shoving Nigel out of her thoughts, she deposited her dishes in the sink and marched to the desk in the living room, where a stack of galley proofs from *Shasta Lifestyle* waited.

Sherri's eyes strayed from the desk top to the window above it. Neither bed-and-breakfast inns of central California nor evaluations of medium-priced white wines galvanized her at the moment. During inventory week at the library, just completed Friday, she'd left garden and house at the mercy of rampant weeds and dust, respectively. Hadn't she resolved to use part of her vacation for domestic catch-up? There was no hurry on the proofs, not due until Wednesday. Strange, how paperwork lent an unfamiliar allure to digging and scrubbing!

She'd hardly filled the scrub bucket when the phone rang. Carla, from the library. "Hi, enjoying the life of leisure? Did you fulfill your fantasy?"

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“Ha, ha. I don’t want to talk about it,” Sherri said, remembering Nigel’s hypnotic eyes.

“I called to tell you some guy phoned a minute ago, asking for you. Never got around to giving his name, but he sounded like he knew you. Thought you’d want to hear about it.”

Sherri’s knees turned to jelly. *Some guy?* “Right,” she said, trying to keep the quiver out of her voice. “What did you tell him?”

“Don’t worry, I didn’t give out your number—what kind of dope do you think I am? What should I say if he calls back?”

“Tell him to get lost. Thanks.” Sherri got rid of her friend as quickly as politeness allowed and plunged into the mind-numbing routine of housework.

Her mind strayed to Carla’s phone call. Who would have called looking for her? Police? An officer of the law would identify himself. Nigel? The murderer? Sherri scoured harder at the kitchen tiles and sang “Blowin’ in the Wind,” loudly and off-key, to blot out her thoughts.

After several hours of manual labor, she abandoned the rest of the day to the novel she’d started reading at the con. That night, in front of the TV, she salved her professional conscience with a few minutes of blue-pencilling.

Even then, she found her mind and her pencil straying. She hadn’t answered Nigel and that student of his—Steve something—quite honestly when they’d asked her about writing. In secret, she yielded to a sporadic itch for poetry. Catching herself doodling on scratch paper, she discovered she’d scrawled the lines, “Your form has broken through the wall of dreams, To stand in breathing flesh upon the earth.”

Now who the heck did that refer to? *As if I didn’t know!* At that point she gave up and went to bed.

\* \* \*

Monday morning she woke at her usual weekday seven o’clock, nudged Quark out of the bedroom, and snuggled back to sleep. In her

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light doze she dreamed of revisiting Nigel's hotel room. Again she joined him on the bed, but this time he took the glass of brandy from her and drew her into his arms. One part of Sherri's brain told her that she was dreaming and could therefore enjoy the embrace without guilt. The glow in the depths of Nigel's eyes sucked her in; again she felt the delirious floating sensation.

In the background an alarm clock jangled. "Turn it off," she murmured as Nigel's hot breath ruffled the hair behind her left ear. "It can't be morning yet." His image faded, and the alarm clock metamorphosed into the intermittent ring of the telephone.

Sherri turned on her side, propped on one elbow. "Oh, damn, go away." Though tempted to cut off the call and leave the phone off the hook, her lifelong habit of responsibility wouldn't let her. Lifting the receiver, she mumbled a drowsy hello.

"Ms. Hudson?" said an unfamiliar male voice.

"Yes?" Why would a man she didn't know call at the ghastly hour of—she checked the digital clock on the nightstand—nine-ten in the morning? Phone salesmen usually struck at dinnertime, nor did this seem an optimum time for an obscene call.

"You attended Sequoiacon this weekend?"

She snapped alert, her heartbeat accelerating. *Good grief, they've found me!* Her far-fetched apprehensions about getting involved in Brewster's fate had come true. "Yes, what about it?"

The caller's next sentence took her by surprise. "I have reason to believe you're holding certain photographs that belong to me. I want them."

Sherri sat up. "Huh?"

"Don't waste my time playing innocent. The young man who had those pictures—you know who I mean—took them without my consent. They can't be of any use to you. I want to arrange a meeting so you can turn them over to me."

"Wasting time is right," she said. "I don't have them."

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“Do you expect me to believe that, Ms. Hudson?” Not waiting for an answer, he continued, “I’ll have a representative standing outside the main entrance of the admin building at San Joaquin Junior College at five this afternoon. You be there, with the pictures, and you’ll be free to forget this whole affair.”

“I’ve already forgotten,” she said, more exasperated than frightened. “It doesn’t concern me one bit—I tell you, I don’t have them.”

“If I don’t have them by tonight, you will regret it.”

Now the man sounded like a bad imitation of a movie gangster. Sherri couldn’t take such melodramatic threats seriously. “Sorry, you’ll have a long wait.” She hung up.

Dressing, she mentally replayed the conversation. What would the anonymous caller do when she failed to show at 5:00? Could he put his vague threats into action? Unlikely, she thought, that a man desperate to protect his reputation would resort to open violence. On the other hand, somebody had killed Keith Brewster. Maybe she was treating the call too lightly.

What could she do about it? The photos were Nigel’s problem.

Yes, and let him deal with it! He’d dragged her into this figurative swamp; he could pull her out. Getting in touch with a professor at Berkeley should be no trouble. Not that she had any clear idea what Nigel could do for her. Hand over the pictures and get the other man off her back? Rush to her rescue and slug it out with the villain? Anyhow, it couldn’t hurt to notify him. He deserved to be bothered.

A call to directory assistance got Sherri the number of U. C. Berkeley’s central switchboard, which put her through to the Psychology Department. When she asked to speak to Professor Jamison, the department secretary said, “I don’t think he’s in his office today, but I’ll buzz the extension for you.”

She was connected, not with Nigel, but with his answering machine. Fuming, Sherri left as vague a message as she could get away with,

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hurrying at the end to fit in the necessary information. She hung up wondering if he would bother to reply—assuming he returned in time to do any good, in the first place.

So her comfortable assumptions had been wrong. Her role in Nigel's tangled predicament wasn't finished—and she might very well see him again.

\* \* \*

By Monday morning Nigel was landing at L. A. International Airport. He'd detested every minute of the flight, and expected little better of the day ahead. He'd followed Sherri's lead and left the hotel before dawn. And what about her? Might she think better of her silence and report him after all? He shrugged off the worry as unproductive, along with the nagging thirst her image provoked.

About an hour's drive in the opposite direction had brought him home, too, for an unsettled half-day of sleep. He'd encountered difficulty in getting a flight out of Oakland to Los Angeles on short notice, hence the wasted night and the early-morning arrival. Now that airlines didn't allow smoking, air travel had become less uncomfortable than it used to be. Still, the inescapable proximity of so many people's anxiety, impatience, and anticipation had left Nigel tired and short-tempered.

The sooner he completed the investigation he'd come for, the sooner he could get some rest. With luck, he might even make it home tonight. Bolstering his determination with these thoughts, he braced himself for the ordeal of renting a car and driving it into downtown Los Angeles. What faced him in the parking lot was a sunny southern California day of tourist-brochure perfection. Naturally. In the car he extracted from his carry-on bag a tube of factor fifteen sunblock, which he massaged into the exposed skin of his face and hands. He then put on polarized sunglasses and an Irish tweed cap and gritted his teeth to confront the traffic.

From the airport he followed Interstate 10 into downtown. At one

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point, topping a rise in the highway, he saw the Gordian-knot interlace of freeways spread out for miles before him. By night, he recalled, the glittering pattern held a certain beauty. Right now the sun-induced headache throbbing between his eyes blinded him to aesthetics. He thanked the First Cause that he'd arrived too late for morning rush hour. Traffic flowed at its normal ten miles per hour above the posted speed, funneling him into a dingy inner city area not far from Exposition Park. Rolling up windows to shut out exhaust fumes and garbage smells, Nigel switched on the car's air conditioning.

Shortly he turned onto the grounds of the university where the man he'd come to see taught. The ivy-covered brick buildings presented a jarring contrast to the neighborhood outside the gates. Luckily here, as at Berkeley, regular classes had ended for the quarter, allowing Nigel to find a space in the visitors' lot without much trouble.

Inside the offices of the history department, Nigel removed hat, sunglasses, and lightweight jacket, enjoying the cool crispness of the indoor atmosphere. The main office was deserted except for the secretary, who glanced up from a telephone call as Nigel walked in.

"I'm here to see Dr. Valpa," he told her with a casual wave. "I'll find my own way." Apparently remembering Nigel from his previous visits, she nodded without interrupting her conversation.

Most of the doors along the corridor were closed. Valpa's stood ajar a few inches, and Nigel heard the professor's voice break off in mid-sentence as Nigel approached. He also heard the breathing of a second pair of lungs.

"Yes, who is it?" said Valpa.

Nigel pushed the door open far enough to peer around it. "Do you have a few minutes, sir? I'll wait until you're free—no hurry."

Valpa, an elderly man with a high forehead framed by a leonine mane of white hair, said from behind the desk, "Nigel—this is a surprise. I'll be free momentarily."

In the chair across from Valpa sat a slender brunette of about



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twenty-five, wearing a rose-colored three-piece suit. In her lap, along with a purse and three-ring binder, she clutched an envelope.

As Nigel retreated to the hall, Valpa said, "Shall we make it seven tonight, then? I'll pick you up at home—yes, certainly I know where you live. And allow me to congratulate you again."

Nigel heard chairs scrape on the floor, after which the girl emerged and disappeared down the hall.

Entering Valpa's office, Nigel closed the door behind him and said, "Dinner date, I presume? Does she know she's dessert?"

Though Nigel kept his voice too low for human ears to catch more than a few yards away, Valpa cast an uneasy look at the door. "Must you be so crude, my dear boy?"

Nigel sighed contentedly as he settled into the vacant chair. Valpa kept his office dim, the drapes drawn against the sun. "I never cease to be amazed that, at your age, you'd be reckless enough to use your students."

"As you know, my relationship with them is strictly professional until they are no longer my students. After all, I have to consider their academic reputation as well as my own. Doris has just received official notification of completing her Ph.D., which makes her a colleague rather than a pupil. I'm taking her out tonight to celebrate."

"That's another thing." Nigel chuckled. "How can you ethically encourage these poor graduate students to go for a doctorate in history? Good Lord, that's almost as bad as English—guaranteed unemployment."

Valpa gave him a pained frown. "If you came here to discuss my personal habits, you've wasted a trip. What's wrong?"

"What makes you think something's wrong?"

"You wouldn't make this visit in daylight for the sheer pleasure of it. Nor would you have dropped in without calling ahead. By the way, shouldn't you be in the middle of finals, too?"

"Finished," said Nigel, "except for take-home essays from my

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graduate seminar. Don't worry, I'm not neglecting my professional duties—and I do think this is important.” He extracted the envelope of photos from the inner pocket of the jacket in his lap.

Opening the envelope and catching sight of the first picture, Valpa straightened up and narrowed his eyes. Though Nigel couldn't probe beneath Valpa's psychic barrier, the darkening of the older man's aura revealed his concern. Valpa gave the packet's entire contents an unhurried examination before remarking, “I wouldn't have expected that of your sister.”

“Nor would I,” said Nigel. “Look, sir, you're her Advisor. Didn't you have the slightest idea this was going on?”

“Not this, specifically. However, these pictures do clarify the contents of her last quarterly report.”

“Which was when?” asked Nigel.

Squaring off the stack of photos, Valpa said, “About two and a half months ago. The letter arrived on schedule, through the regular channels. It was brief and uninformative, but that's typical of Laura.”

Nigel leaned forward. “What did she say?”

Valpa said with a patronizing smile, “Calm down, dear boy. I saw nothing in it to get excited about. She wrote, ‘Dr. Valpa: I've lucked into the ideal situation. Shelter, plenty of high-quality food, and the protection of a man I can trust—as long as I don't trust him too far. And don't worry, I know how far that is. I expect to be here for quite a while.’ That was all, except for the signature.”

“That's it?” Nigel resisted the urge to shout. “And you didn't follow it up in any way?” He didn't bother asking whether Valpa was sure he'd quoted the message verbatim; all their kind possessed eidetic memory.

Valpa thoughtfully swiveled his chair away from the desk, then back. “What do you think I should have done? Laura is twenty-eight—too old to need constant supervision. I wouldn't intrude upon her unless she asked for help.”

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"But she practically admitted revealing herself to an ephemeral!"

"Which is well within her rights, so long as she doesn't betray anyone else. You have done the same yourself at least once, have you not?"

Nigel shifted his eyes from Valpa's penetrating stare. "That's different. I never made the kind of deal those pictures indicate."

"Admittedly, this sort of thing is unwise," Valpa said. "But her letter gave no hint of it. And occasionally such bargains do work."

"I won't ask you for examples, because I'm sure in your lifetime you've come across several. Live long enough, and you'll see everything at least once." He pressed the palm of his hand to his aching forehead. "Don't you have any idea where she is?"

"She used no return address, of course. The envelope was postmarked Carmel."

"Not necessarily meaning her...patron...lives there. It could easily be anyplace within fifty miles."

Valpa said, "Are you so anxious to find her? Why?"

"You seem to take it for granted that she's not being forced to participate," said Nigel.

"Unlikely. While she isn't quite fully mature, she can certainly take care of herself. And the wording of her letter makes it clear that she was content with her situation."

"Was. A lot can happen in two and a half months." Nigel described what had occurred at the convention.

"I see." Valpa gazed at Nigel over steepled fingers. "What do you propose to do next?"

Nigel stood up to prowl around the small room as he talked. "I need to find out where Brewster took those photos, and the only clue I have is his connection with somebody named Clive Herndon, who seems to live in this area."

"Ah, yes, the magazine editor."

"You know him?"

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"I know of him," said Valpa. "Claude Darvell has mentioned the name. Herndon, I understand, collects science fiction and horror film memorabilia. He runs a sort of museum in his house, in fact. I believe Claude has made a few donations over the years."

Nigel leaned against Valpa's desk, his frustration receding as he absorbed this hopeful bit of information. "You're saying I should ask Claude for help?"

"Herndon has a reputation for being a recluse. Ordinarily he admits visitors only during his semiannual open house. If anyone can get you an introduction, Claude should be able to." He stared pointedly at Nigel, who got off the desk and sat down again. "My boy, is it possible that you're overreacting to this whole thing because your own condition is below par?"

Damn—trust Valpa to bring that up. "I'm perfectly all right, Sir."

Valpa made a tut-tut sound. "You are not 'all right' so long as you allow a fixation on an inaccessible donor to seduce you into neglecting your health. Prolonged abstinence must inevitably cloud your judgment. How long has it been?"

"Tonight will make it five days," said Nigel, though reluctant to invite further criticism by giving specifics. "Within the normal range."

"Just barely. You're approaching the limit. What would your mistress say? She realizes your situation, does she not?"

"Yes," Nigel admitted. "I can't even call her my mistress anymore." What a quaint term! "We're back to simple friendship, I think."

"Not 'simple,' if it still affects you so strongly."

Rehashing his relationship with Denise for Valpa gave Nigel no pleasure. "Drop it, sir. You're Laura's Advisor, not mine. And I really am too old to need that kind of direction."

"Your own Advisor might disagree."

"Uncle Ian's opinion doesn't count," Nigel said. "Having known me since childhood, he doesn't think I have brains enough to come in out of the sun at high noon in the Nevada desert. He trusts me to live on

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my own because he has to, just as you do Laura. That doesn't stop me from showing a little brotherly interest."

"And my quasi-avuncular interest in your situation is irrelevant?"

"Thanks—I guess—but I'd prefer to work this out on my own. Now, may I telephone Claude from here?"

"Certainly."

Drawing on memory for Claude Darvell's number, Nigel connected with the actor's answering machine. He hung up without leaving a message. "Blast! Claude's filming today."

"That would be at Twilight Productions," Valpa said. "One of those small, independent studios south of Hollywood Boulevard." He recited the address. "They produced his *Varney the Vampyre* adaptation, *Feast of Blood*." Valpa's lips curled in distaste. "Someday that joke is going to backfire on him. And a cheap joke, too."

"Come on, sir. Claude can certainly take care of himself. And from the aesthetic viewpoint, I saw *Varney*, and I don't think it's as bad as most in the genre, even if it was made on half a shoestring. Well, I guess I may as well get over there. Damn, I hate driving in the middle of the day."

"Be careful," said Valpa. "You may talk about danger to Laura, but you don't actually believe it. You have led a sheltered life, young man; the persecutions I witnessed firsthand are as unreal to you as—as one of Claude's films." As Nigel opened the door, Valpa added, "By the way, if you discover anything I should know about Laura, inform me. You may telephone direct."

So Valpa was more concerned about Laura's behavior than he admitted. With a nod, Nigel departed. He left both snapshots and negatives with Valpa, glad to get rid of them.

In the main office he took several drinks from the water cooler; the icy liquid refreshed him a little. He considered and dismissed the idea of begging aspirin from the secretary. A dosage high enough to affect his pain receptors would more likely nauseate or sedate him. Large

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quantities of alcohol worked sometimes, but he'd had enough of that during the flight from Oakland. On the way out of the building he stopped at the restroom to bathe his face and wrists in cold water, which also provided a modicum of relief. He then draped the jacket around his shoulders and donned hat and sunglasses before returning to the car.

Fortunately, he didn't face a long drive to the film studio. Now that Valpa had jogged his memory, Nigel recalled hearing that Claude had signed for a sequel to *Feast of Blood*. The "Varney" movies made a change from the endless "Baron Orlov" series that had established Claude as a minor star of cinematic horror. The supposed "authenticity" of his vampire portrayals, a term the genre critics actually used, offset the low-budget quality of the productions. Nigel remembered *Feast of Blood* as superior, though, largely due to the scriptwriting talents of Claude's wife Eloise, better known for her research on horror fiction and her own novels in that field. She'd written the sequel, too, he assumed; must ask Claude.

Nigel admired Claude's daring in not only bonding with his donor, but marrying her. How did the woman survive? Her own emotions, not to mention the physiological craving, would make her careless of her health, and Claude would need phenomenal willpower to resist her seduction.

Nigel tried to imagine himself living that intimately with Denise. Valpa, blast him, was right about Nigel's substandard condition. He recalled his latest donor, picked up at a bookstore in a mall just outside Berkeley. A conversation about a newly released Tolkien-clone trilogy had led to wine coolers in the cocktail lounge of an ersatz Victorian restaurant, followed by ten minutes in Nigel's car. Afterward, he had erased from the girl's memory everything after the drinks and made certain that his image would quickly blur in her mind. He had, of course, used an assumed name. He seldom indulged himself by feeding so close to home. More often he dined in San Francisco, among its

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hordes of anonymous tourists.

Wherever he foraged, the experience brought small satisfaction compared to what he'd shared with Denise. If he'd stayed in Virginia, could they have formed a deeper bond?

Nigel doubted that. Denise showed no willingness to sacrifice the rest of her life to his needs. Staying near her would only have subjected her to unnecessary inner conflict. Still, he envied Claude's freedom from this existence of random flitting from one nectar-rich blossom to the next, like a fickle butterfly. *More like a death's head moth*, Nigel corrected himself, with a smile at the trite imagery. Entangling Denise in a lifelong commitment, just to save himself the trouble of prowling the Bay area a couple of nights a week, would be a hell of a repayment for her friendship.

As he ruminated, he automatically pulled onto the freeway. Soon the forty-five foot "Hollywood" sign on a hillside near Griffith Park loomed ahead of him. He exited the freeway and crept along back streets, past a succession of barn-like buildings behind chain-link fences, until he came upon the headquarters of Twilight Productions. While the major studios had long since shifted most of their activity to on-location filming, leaving the famous backlots largely deserted, small outfits like Twilight adhered to the less expensive alternative.

Easing the car up to the gate, Nigel spoke to the guard who popped out of the phone booth-size shelter. The security man, whose uniform hung slightly loose on his aging body, granted Nigel an incurious nod and stepped back inside his booth to call Claude on the set.

Waiting, Nigel squinted against the glare that set his head throbbing despite the sunglasses. He missed his sky blue sports car with its tinted windows.

A moment later, the guard leaned down to him and said, "Okay, Mr. Darvell says you should go right in. You can park over there." He gestured toward a blacktopped area in the shadow of the building, which reminded Nigel more of a hangar for light aircraft than anything

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else.

Inside, over the door to the sound stage, a glowing sign announced a take in progress. Nigel slipped through the inner door, careful to move silently. Among the people in the vast, bare-beamed room, only one, a black woman in a pale green smock, glanced up at his entrance. She held a finger to her lips, and Nigel nodded his comprehension.

Floodlights illuminated Claude standing in front of an imitation stone staircase that terminated in mid-air halfway to the ceiling. Artificial cobwebs festooned the steps. Claude, draped in the conventional black opera cloak, embraced a blonde in a V-necked white gown. He bent to nuzzle her neck.

“Move it in closer,” said a voice off to one side.

Nigel caught sight of a thin, balding man in wire-rimmed glasses gesturing at one of the cameras. Nothing about the director suggested Cecil B. DeMille; he more closely resembled an overworked high school teacher.

“Never mind—cut,” the director said in a weary tone. “Claude, what is with you today? Can’t you look a little more bloodthirsty? And seductive, while you’re at it.”

Claude let go of the actress and said, “I’ll try, old thing, but I can’t quite visualize how to do both at once.”

Nigel wondered how Claude could work under that white glare for hours at a time. However, he admired Claude’s double-bluff, “hide in plain sight” lifestyle, which some of the Elders considered insane. Even if average citizens suspected the existence of nonhuman predators in their midst, the last person to be identified as such would be an actor renowned for his monster roles.

With a wave of greeting to Nigel, Claude stepped off the stage and introduced him to the director. Meanwhile, the black woman in the smock fiddled with the makeup on the leading lady’s neck. Up close, Nigel noticed the exaggerated pallor of Claude’s face, streaked with the scarlet of fake blood around the lips. The chemical fumes of the stuff



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must become irritating.

Claude said to the director, "Alex, I'd like a few minutes to visit with my friend. How about a break?"

"Oh, all right, take fifteen." He picked up a bound script and jotted notes in the margin as Claude led Nigel out a side door and down a hall to the dressing rooms.

As they entered Claude's, the black woman strode quickly down the hall to catch up with them. "Please, Sonia, no more!" said Claude, raising his hands in mock dismay. "I don't feel like playing an *objet d'art* right now. Let me alone, and I promise I won't smear the bloody makeup."

She greeted the remark with a skeptical sniff but reversed course anyway.

Closing the door, Claude said, "Now we'll be left alone for a little while. Sit down and tell me what's so urgent."

Nigel sat on a low divan wide and long enough to double as a bed and surveyed the dressing room. Far from luxurious, it had just room enough for the couch, a dresser with its chair, and a miniature refrigerator under the window. An open door led to an adjoining washroom. "I have to meet Clive Herndon as soon as possible," he said, "and Valpa suggested you could arrange that."

"What's going on, *mon vieux*? I can't imagine a sudden interest in horror fandom would bring you down from Berkeley on the spur of the moment."

"It would be complicated to explain," said Nigel. "It concerns my sister Laura. She may be in trouble."

"Then don't try, not here," said Claude in a low voice. "I can't lock that door; it would look peculiar. Maybe I can persuade Herndon to see you. He's not a well man, doesn't receive casual visitors the way he used to. But he owes me for past contributions to that pack-rat hoard of his."

"Thanks," said Nigel, relaxing slightly. "The sooner the better."

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"You look well and truly worn out," Claude said. "Care for a glass of iced tea? Sorry I can't offer anything alcoholic; Alex doesn't approve of drinking on the set." He got two glasses out of a wall cabinet and served the tea from the refrigerator.

The bitter taste surprised Nigel. "On the strong side, isn't it?"

Claude lounged in the chair, sipping his own tea. "It has to be, to contain enough caffeine to do any good. How do you think I stay awake for hours of that routine?"

"Don't scenes like that, well, present an awful temptation?"

Claude laughed. "My dear fellow, I'm about as likely to be 'tempted' as any of my colleagues doing a conventional love scene." He lowered his voice. "Do you suppose I can work up an appetite with lights glaring in my eyes and layers of makeup smothering me? Not to mention Alex constantly bellowing 'Cut' at the moment of truth."

"I see what you mean," said Nigel. "Not that it would affect you much, anyhow, I guess. You get all you need at home."

"Not right now," Claude sighed. "Eloise has been teaching at a writers' workshop in New Mexico for the past three days. She comes home tomorrow night, thank the First Cause." His eyes raked up and down Nigel. "Speaking of which, you look worse off in that respect than I feel. Still fixated on your lady in Virginia?"

"Don't you start, too. You sound like Valpa. What about Clive Herndon?"

"It'll probably take a long period of delicate persuasion to get his consent over the phone. I can't do it here. Tell you what, I'll call Herndon as soon as I get home this afternoon, around three. Alex promised us a short day, and I'll hold him to it."

"I'd hoped—" Nigel swallowed his impatience. After all, Claude was doing him a favor.

"You need the time to rest, anyway," Claude said. "Have you got a motel room?"

Nigel shook his head. "I hoped I wouldn't be in town that long."

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“In that case, spend the rest of the day at my flat.” Claude dug a pair of keys out of his pocket. “You remember where it is, I’m sure. This one unlocks the elevator to the penthouse level, and the other goes to our front door. You can use Eloise’s space in the parking garage. I’ll make a quick call to tell the attendant to expect you. What are you driving?”

Nigel described his rented car. “Thanks; I won’t deny that a few hours of sleep sound good.” Good, hell; his muscles ached for sleep.

“See that you get it. The tension you’re radiating at the moment makes my skin crawl. Go ahead and lock the apartment door; I have an extra set of keys. We’ll talk when I get home.” He added with a grin, “I wouldn’t extend this invitation if Eloise were around, with you in this condition.”

Nigel said irritably, “Come off it, Claude, I don’t trespass.”

“I’m thinking of Eloise, not you, old thing.”

“You don’t trust your wife?”

Claude set aside his glass and leaned back in the chair, hands clasped behind his head. “Not a matter of trust. Her bond with me has awakened whatever latent empathic powers she had—that often happens in the course of a long-standing intimacy, you know. She’d sense your discomfort, and she’d want to relieve it. At the same time, she’d hesitate to hurt me by making the offer. I wouldn’t subject her to that conflict.”

Nigel stood up, reluctantly bracing himself to confront the midday sun. “Good Lord, Claude, you make me sound like a basket case.”

“Not quite, but you’re getting there. Now let me get back to work,” he said amiably, “and you go take that nap.”

Inside Claude’s penthouse apartment near Wilshire Boulevard, Nigel relaxed and admitted to himself that he needed rest every bit as badly as his friend had insisted. With the air conditioning set at a comfortable sixty-five—Claude’s electric bills must be as steep as his own—Nigel took a brief shower and stretched out naked on the guest

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room bed. While he couldn't hope for the deeply restorative deathlike coma he needed, any sleep would be better than none. Secure behind locked doors, he dozed off at once.

And dreamed. His kind required little REM time, a need usually discharged in an hour or two of light slumber per week. Lately Nigel had dreamed more often and more vividly than normal. At the peak of emotional health, he would have recalled only vague images. Now he found himself plagued by detailed anxiety dreams whose miasma refused to clear after waking.

This time his sleep was haunted by Sherri Hudson. Her body heat, the healthy glow of her aura, her female fragrance, all tormented him in a montage of fleeting visions. He saw her in his hotel room at the convention, in his own bedroom at home, then framed against a Gothic backdrop from one of Claude's movies. Each time, reaching to embrace her, Nigel saw her fade into mist. In the last sequence he felt his lips actually touch her skin, heard the racing of her pulse.

He woke. His throat felt parched with thirst. Damn! The last thing he needed was a fresh obsession to complicate his life.

*I'll never see her again. And I don't really want her, anyway.* She just happened to be the image his unconscious mind picked to objectify his frustrations.

*Hypocrite, he accused himself. Of course you want her.*

## CHAPTER 5

After dressing in fresh slacks and sport shirt—though he'd hoped to get home within twenty-four hours, he had packed pessimistically—Nigel walked down the hall to the large kitchen where he'd heard Claude moving around. The room was decorated in autumnal colors, its earth-brown curtains still drawn against the summer afternoon sun.

"Sleep well?" Claude asked.

Nigel didn't bother to reply, aware that his attenuated aura spoke for him.

"Obviously not. This may help." Claude opened the microwave oven and produced a pair of sixteen-ounce mugs full of heated milk.

Together they sat at the circular redwood table. After the first swallow of milk, which tamed the nervous cramps in his stomach with its smooth warmth, Nigel said, "It's nearly six. Why didn't you wake me?"

Claude held up a conciliatory hand. "Calm down, there's no rush. I phoned Clive Herndon as soon as I got home, and he reluctantly agreed

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to let you drop by tomorrow at nine.”

“Nine in the *morning*?” Nigel yelped. “That’s a whole night wasted.”

“What were you planning to do with it, anyway? You ought to be able to catch a flight out sometime tomorrow. Be thankful he’s seeing you at all. The man has chronic emphysema and heart trouble.” Claude watched as Nigel sat back in his chair and deliberately released his tense grip on the edge of the table. “Now, how about telling me why you’re in such a frantic hurry to talk to Herndon?”

Once again Nigel narrated the weekend’s events, going into more anecdotal detail than he had with Valpa. When he wound down, Claude said with a thoughtful smile, “So our dear old professor thinks you lead a sheltered life? Sounds like him.”

Making no effort to veil his irritation, Nigel said, “I suppose you agree with him. You feel free to pontificate because you have a mere two centuries on me? Valpa still calls you ‘dear boy,’ too.”

“He addresses everybody less than five hundred years old that way,” said Claude. “Granted, aside from the French Revolution, my existence to date has been remarkably trouble-free. That doesn’t mean I count on modern skepticism to make me invulnerable. Even in the twentieth century, disaster can happen. My mother, for instance.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to bring that up.” In a French village in 1940, Claude’s mother had been lynched along with her human lover.

Claude waved away the apology. “Did our venerable mentor also give the lecture about how dangerous you are, in this condition, to yourself and whatever ephemeral is unlucky enough to be your next victim?”

Nigel laughed. “He didn’t bother; he probably knew I’d ignore him. Anyway, I’m a long way from ‘dangerous.’”

“*Vraiment?*” said Claude with a sardonic lift of his eyebrows. “So tell me more about that girl you met at Sequoiakon.”

Nigel didn’t attempt to fake incomprehension. “Sherri Hudson? I

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never expect to see her again.”

“Then you’re a fool. In your place, I’d go out of my way to track her down. After all, you’re uncommitted.”

Shifting uncomfortably in the chair, Nigel said, “Not exactly.”

“Stop lying to yourself. You’re not faithful to your lady back East, yet you can’t relax and enjoy the pleasures of promiscuity. Worst of both worlds!” He got up to rinse the empty mugs and stow them in the dishwasher.

“You have a point,” said Nigel, trailing Claude into the living room.

Claude leaned against the brickwork framing the clean fireplace. “Of course. You can’t deny that, in this area, my experience exceeds yours. Look, you didn’t care enough to turn down the Berkeley appointment for her, and she didn’t care enough to compromise her own career to follow you. Doesn’t that tell you something?”

“But we did have a strong...affection.” Nigel flung himself onto one of two matching Victorian love seats.

“Yet you aren’t bonded, are you?”

“I never worked up the nerve to suggest it. Denise doesn’t get a thrill out of...what I am, in and of itself. Not like Eloise.” He added hesitantly, “Claude, how does it feel?”

“The bond itself?” A wistful expression softened Claude’s lean, high-cheekboned face. “The constant communion, the openness to each other’s thoughts as well as emotions—I can’t describe it. It’s like nothing else. You’re bonded with your Advisor, of course, but that’s hardly more than a formality, not at all the same. When Eloise is out of range, the way she is now, it’s like there’s a gaping hole in the center of the universe. That’s worse than the physical deprivation.” He forced a smile. “However, I can *show* you how the act itself feels. Illustrate what you’re missing.”

Closing his eyes to concentrate, Claude radiated an almost palpable cloud of sensuality that made the hairs on Nigel’s arms prickle with tension. He knew Claude must be mentally recreating a moment of

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intimacy he'd shared with Eloise. Claude's aura deepened to a turgid red, and his heartbeat quickened. Nigel's pulse and respiration accelerated in sympathy. His throat burned with thirst.

"Damn you, stop that!" he growled. The mist gathering before his eyes cleared to reveal Claude, back in the present moment emotionally as well as physically, sitting across from him on the other love seat.

"I apologize; that was an outstandingly bad idea." Claude's voice shook.

"It certainly was. I hope you feel twice as rotten as I do." Consciously forcing his heart to slow down, Nigel said, "I can't imagine trusting anyone with my innermost thoughts that way—even Denise."

"Well, if you can't have perfection," said Claude, "that's no reason not to enjoy what you do have. I can visualize you ending up the way Roger used to be, abstaining so long that you'd get desperate and make stupid mistakes."

"There's no parallel. Your half-brother is burdened with a hypertrophied conscience; I don't have that problem. It's simply lack of interest."

"Is that why you practically drooled when you talked about that young woman at the con?" He cut off Nigel's indignant protest. "I just hope you'll do something about it tonight. I'm hungry, too, and you're making it worse."

Nigel stood up to pace in front of the fireplace. "That stunt you pulled didn't help. Look, Claude, I'm not up to the effort, and I wish you'd drop the subject. Tomorrow night, in my own territory—that'll be soon enough."

Any other argument Claude might have made was cut off when the telephone rang.

Claude stepped across the hall to the study to answer it. After the initial hello, Nigel heard his friend's voice take on a vibrant, caressing tone. "Eloise, *ma petite*, it's wonderful to hear your voice. Don't ask



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inane questions, *cherie*, of course I am..."

Nigel stalked down the hall to the bedroom and shut the door, an empty gesture, since walls presented no barrier to his hearing. Listening to Claude made him sick with envy. Illogical, for he had no one to blame but himself for passing up the chance at a relationship like that. He forced himself to focus on a professional journal he'd brought along, in an attempt to reduce Claude's conversation to meaningless noise. When his ears registered the click of the phone being hung up, Nigel rejoined his host in the living room.

"No reason to stay cooped up together in here all night," said Claude. "I feel like a drive into the mountains. Care to come along?"

Nigel agreed, cheered by the prospect of fresh air and exercise. Even on days that appeared smog-free to the naked eye, pollutants made breathing the city's atmosphere more of an ordeal than a pleasure. Berkeley wasn't free of that disadvantage, either. Soaring along the San Bernardino Freeway at seventy miles per hour in Claude's two-seater, Nigel commented on that problem. "Wouldn't it be delightful to lead a hermit's life a couple of hundred miles from so-called civilization?"

"An attractive fantasy," said Claude. "Unfortunately, if we want to live in the style to which we've become accustomed, we have to do it where the people and the jobs are. We're no freer of that limitation than the ephemerals are. The best I can do is spend several weeks every summer at Lake Geneva."

He meant Switzerland, not Wisconsin. Nigel hoped that by the time he reached Claude's age, he, too, would have not only the accumulated wealth but the spirit to enjoy life so lavishly. "You could live without working, though."

"I couldn't thrive without the psychic nourishment provided by contact with Homo saps. You know that; you get it from your students."

"I'm surprised you need it," Nigel said, "with Eloise always there

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for you.”

“I don’t want to drain her emotionally, any more than physically.”

Nigel asked the question he’d been wondering about earlier in the day. “How can you dare to live with her continuously? How does she survive?”

Claude cast an appraising look at him. “Thinking of trying it? First off, we aren’t together continuously. I recognize the importance of these frequent separations, even if I hate them. The main safeguard, though, is concentration on quality, not quantity.”

“Easy to say.” Recalling how difficult it had been to restrain himself with Denise, Nigel doubted he would ever embrace such a hazardous commitment. Maybe restraint came with age. Rolling down his window to savor the cool wind rushing toward him, he said, “Do you always drive this fast? Someday you’re bound to run into a highway patrolman with better than average powers of resistance, and there you’ll be—hailed into traffic court and all over the gossip columns for reckless driving.”

Claude laughed. “No fear; I’ve yet to meet the Homo sap whose resistance I can’t break.”

They enjoyed the rest of the ride in silence. By the time they completed the hour and a half drive into the San Bernardino Mountains, night had fallen. Claude skirted the perimeter of the Big Bear Lake resort area, thick with campgrounds and cabins. This early in the evening, the fumes of recently docked motorboats lingered in the air. Lights dotted the woods along the lakeshore.

“Wouldn’t you like to come back here in a few hours, after things have settled down?” Claude asked. “Imagine all those unsuspecting campers asleep under the stars. The ones who lie on the ground with nothing but a sleeping bag tend to be health fanatics, as I recall.” Claude himself, naturally, hadn’t foraged that way in years.

“Nice try, Claude,” Nigel said. His friend did have a valid point. The discourtesy of inflicting his discomfort on fellow empaths had

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been hammered into Nigel from early adolescence. He devoted about thirty seconds to trying to work up enthusiasm for Claude's suggestion. Despite several days' abstinence, the thought of playing erotic dream to an anonymous victim stirred no appetite. In his familiar Bay area hunting ground, he could at least manufacture some tenuous simulation of involvement with his chosen donor.

"For tonight, I'll stick to lower life forms, thank you."

Claude shrugged. "Your loss."

He drove the car down a one-lane track away from the inhabited sectors and parked it in the turn-off next to a cluster of picnic tables. Together he and Nigel walked away from the lake along the dirt road. The air carried the fragrance of pine, the earthy scent of decayed leaves, the musk of animals, and a hint of smoke from banked campfires in the distance. Insects hummed and chirped; an occasional bird or small animal rustled in the trees. No people within range. Nigel discovered that his headache had faded away.

About a mile from the car, Claude broke their silence. "We both need to hunt. Suppose we separate and meet back here in approximately two hours?"

Nigel agreed. After a pause to imprint the location on their internal "compasses"—probably a literal response to the Earth's magnetic field—they struck off in opposite directions. Nigel threaded a path between the trees, automatically dodging low branches, as noiselessly as the layer of leaves and pine needles underfoot allowed. Around him flickered ghostly blue-green pinpoints of life-energy from insects. Now and then he glimpsed the pale rose aura of a bird in a tree, the violet of a frog or lizard, or the deeper pink of a sleeping squirrel. What he sought was something larger and more fully sentient.

When a pair of fierce eyes glowed at him from a branch a few yards above his head, he paused to lock stares with the raccoon. After a few seconds of the game, he lost interest and moved on.

Animals provided only bulk nourishment, not true satisfaction.

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Only human prey supplied the missing ingredient, contact with a self-aware being's emotions. The more intelligent the beast, the closer to the real thing it felt. And feeding on subhuman creatures had compensations. Sometimes the clean simplicity of an animal's instinctive drives was restful after struggling with the complexity of human interaction.

Nigel hoped for a deer. Every few minutes he froze, sniffing the air and listening for the soft thud of hooves. In urban regions cats, dogs, and horses, because they'd been bred to respond to human beings, made the best prey, although they didn't offer the thrill of the chase that he savored at this moment. Chimpanzees and cetaceans, he suspected, would taste even better. He smiled at the vision of himself scaling a fence around Sea World in the dead of night to swim with a dolphin and press his mouth to its salty hide.

Soon he did catch the scent of deer on the breeze. Not far ahead, either; his infrared-sensitive eyes noted fading heat traces on the ground before him. Holding his breath, he heard the animal's footsteps and the champing of its teeth as it grazed. He sidled downwind and crept shadow-like toward the source of the sounds. Moments later he eased into the clearing where his quarry cropped leaves from a sapling. A doe. Her eyes flashed in the moonlight as her head snapped up in alarm.

Instead of trying to paralyze her with his gaze from several yards away, Nigel allowed her to run. For the sheer pleasure of running, he glided after her. He didn't have to stretch to his limit to keep her in sight; the white flag of her erect tail was as clear to him as it would be to human eyes at midday. He slipped between trees and leaped deadfalls as smoothly as the creature he chased. It didn't take much of this exercise to whip his appetite into ravenous hunger. With a final burst of speed, he leaped.

The doe fell to her forelegs under his weight. Hugging her around the neck, Nigel felt as well as heard the frantic pumping of her heart.

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He clamped her muzzle shut with one hand and wrenched her head around to force her eyes to meet his.

“Calm down, it’s all right, that’s a good girl,” he murmured. “You won’t feel a thing.”

Shackling her with his mesmeric stare, he stroked the coarse hair on her back until her shuddering stopped. When her eyelids drooped in trance, he lowered her to the ground on her side. Still running one hand along the ridge of her backbone, with the other he fondled the silky abdomen. The cilia in the palm of his hand tingled at the heat and pulsation of blood under the skin. No engorgement of the mammary glands, he noticed. Though glad he wouldn’t be orphaning a fawn, he regretted missing a “dessert” of fresh milk warm from the source. His jaws ached with the urge to bite.

Pillowing his head on the doe’s flank, he nipped the tender flesh of her belly. The initial rush of hot blood tripped him into a frenzy. Instead of gently licking, as he would with a human donor, he clamped his mouth around the tiny wound and sucked voraciously. The suction, along with the anticoagulant in his saliva, kept the blood flowing. Its richness quenched the burning in his stomach and flooded his entire body. He drew back only when he felt the heavy sensation of fullness without satisfaction that warned him he’d had enough.

From his professional studies and the few therapeutic sessions he’d participated in, Nigel had derived a metaphor for this tantalizing experience; he likened it to the ordeal of a human male or female suffering sexual dysfunction, trembling on the edge of orgasm but unable to climax.

However exciting the process, the goal remained out of reach. He knew from past trials that further persistence would only frustrate him. He let go of the drained body and headed back toward the road.

Most of his tension discharged in the chase and its culmination, he loped through the woods at a relaxed pace, his senses resonating with the sounds and smells around him. He reached the meeting place ahead

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of Claude and stood with his back to a tree, tranquilly waiting, watching, and listening.

When Claude appeared, the red glow of his aura showed that he, too, had killed. "Not as good as the real thing," he said cheerfully, "but a damn sight better than nothing, *n'est-ce pas*?" He scanned the gray ribbon of dirt road unwinding ahead of them. "We seem to have a clear field to the car. Shall we race?"

Exhilaration bubbled in Nigel's veins. "You're on!"

They surged forward simultaneously. They kept pace side by side and reached the car within a fraction of a second of each other.

Back at the penthouse apartment, Claude proposed a game of chess. They set up the board on the living room coffee table and played twice, each of them winning one game. Nigel congratulated himself on his improved technique, despite the handicap of having only ephemerals and computers to practice with.

As he packed away the ebony and ivory chessmen, Claude remarked, "I've just thought of something that might be useful to you in that little investigation. Let's go into the study."

Claude and Eloise's home office was dominated by the bookcases covering the greater part of all four walls. Books not only crammed the shelves, in some places two rows deep, they also filled several cardboard boxes and overflowed into tottering stacks on the carpet. The rest of the furniture consisted of two desks: one, in the center of the room, a roll-top with pigeonholes, the other a massive oaken object against one wall, its top holding a computer, two printers, a copying machine, and stacks of manuscripts. Above it hung a bulletin board layered with telephone numbers, lists, and clippings. One cartoon showed a rather nerdy Dracula sitting up in his coffin muttering, "How does one practice 'safe vampiring'?" Someone, probably Eloise, had added a handwritten note in ballpoint: "Monogamously—and don't you dare forget it!"

Nigel tapped the clipping with a fingernail. "Realities of the age of

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AIDS? Good Lord, don't you worry about what casual visitors will think of that?"

Claude chuckled. "My dear chap, it's all seen as part of my professional persona. Fans love it if I appear to live the roles I play." He knelt on the floor to wrench open one of the book cartons. "Ah, here they are. A few months ago, Herndon auctioned off some of the duplicate material in his collection. Eloise picked up dozens of back issues of his periodicals." He dug out an armful of magazines. "You might want to skim through the past couple of years of *Crepuscular Shadows* and some of Herndon's related zines. Seems a reasonable deduction that your photographer might have intended the pictures for one of them."

"Makes sense," Nigel said. "And since he had Herndon's card, it's reasonable he may have been published by Herndon previously."

"Exactly," said Claude, passing a stack of periodicals in assorted sizes and formats to Nigel. "You may as well take these away with you and return them next time you come south. Just be sure to guard them with your life, or Eloise will have my head on a platter."

Standing up, Nigel sneezed at the dust floating up from the magazines. "Would it be fair to describe her as an obsessive collector?"

Claude tucked in the top flaps of the box and shoved it under the desk. "It would be fair to say she has the acquisitive instincts of a dragon crouching on its hoard. And since I have tendencies that way myself—not a useful habit for one of our kind—I do little to restrain her." He indicated the bookshelves with a sweeping wave. "If you think this is extreme, you should see our library in Geneva."

At four-thirty in the morning, close enough to dawn to allow them to sleep, they retired. Nigel loathed the thought of getting up three and a half hours later for another drive in bright day, but at least after feasting on the deer, he did feel nourished enough to rest. Since by afternoon he would be ravenous again, he figured he'd better take advantage of his relative well-being while it lasted.

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Waking to the beep of his wristwatch alarm, he phoned the airport to arrange for a mid-afternoon flight to Oakland, said goodbye in passing to Claude, who was on his way out for another day at the studio, and drove to Herndon's Beverly Hills address.

His route didn't lead past the stars' mansions on the tour bus circuit; however, the Spanish colonial houses in Herndon's neighborhood proclaimed six- to seven-figure price tags in elegant whispers rather than vulgar shouts. The soft pink stucco of Herndon's house was sheltered behind a screening row of eucalyptus trees. Turning up the semicircular driveway, Nigel examined the ivy adorning the walls and the wrought iron grills covering windows. An iron scrollwork gate barred the arched entry to the front patio.

At the gate Nigel thumbed a buzzer, evoking a disembodied reply from a speaker set into the patio wall. "Who's there?"

"I'm Nigel Jamison. Claude Darvell spoke to you about me yesterday."

A pause, followed by a buzz and a gruff, "Come on in."

Pushing through the unlocked gate, Nigel crossed the patio and waited beside a potted dwarf orange tree for Herndon to appear. He heard the rattle of a chain and the click of a deadbolt before the door inched open. Nigel almost expected to hear it creak.

In the aperture stood a broad-shouldered man whose torso, in a loose sport shirt, looked wasted compared to the burliness nature had intended for him. His satanically pointed beard and the thin hair combed forward on his head were both gray streaked with white.

"I'm Clive Herndon." He offered a clammy hand. "Come in, don't stand there letting the cool air out."

When Herndon closed the door behind them, Nigel shivered with delight at the chill draft from the air conditioner that washed over him. The air circulation slightly mitigated the musty, closed-in smell of the house. Removing cap and sunglasses, Nigel examined the glass-fronted case against one wall of the foyer. It contained a werewolf mask, scale



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model spaceships, and a pair of pointed rubber objects labeled “Spock Ears.”

Herndon led the way into a pleasantly dim sitting room as overshadowed by bookshelves as Claude’s study, though the contents here were arranged more tidily. Movie posters papered the few exposed patches of wall.

Herndon waved Nigel to an overstuffed chair facing a gargantuan image of Bela Lugosi swooping down a cobwebbed staircase. “Would you like a drink?”

Even the short drive from Wilshire Boulevard in the June sun had made Nigel fiercely thirsty. “Perrier?”

“Coming up.”

While Herndon fetched drinks, Nigel surveyed the shelves. Those closest contained magazines arranged by category and date. A quick once-over turned up decades of *Analog*, *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, the old *Amazing*, and *Weird Tales* stretching back to the mid-thirties. Good God! The man kept a small fortune in plain sight!

Shortly Herndon reappeared with two glasses, the aroma of Scotch emanating from his. He coughed as he settled onto the couch. Nigel observed the murky hue of chronic illness in his aura, and the odor of stale smoke indicated that he disregarded the warnings his lungs gave him.

“Glad to help any friend of Claude Darvell’s,” Herndon said. “Can’t give you but a few minutes, though.” He took a sip of Scotch, his Adam’s apple quivering. “So what can I do for you?”

“At a convention this weekend I ran into a young man who might have done some work for you in the past. Keith Brewster.”

Herndon responded with a puzzled frown. Nigel described the photographer. “Oh, that loser,” said Herndon. “The real estate salesman.”

Nigel took a long drink of Perrier and then said, “Really? He didn’t look the type.”

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"He isn't too good at it, as far as I can see. Lives up near Monterey, I think, but he seems to spend half his time down here going to cons and trying to sell those articles and pictures of his."

"You have used some of his writing, though?"

"Sure, his style isn't that bad. Just has delusions of grandeur. Sees himself as the Charles Fort of the nineties."

"Saw, I'm afraid," said Nigel. "He was killed at the convention, apparently during an attempted robbery."

Herndon looked mildly shocked. "Too bad. I didn't care much for the guy, but I wouldn't wish that on him."

Nigel decided the time had come to zero in on the object of this visit. "Brewster had what he claimed were photos of a winged alien. Did he ever mention that to you?"

Herndon barked a laugh that changed into a cough. "He sure did. I figured he'd finally gone off the deep end. When he said his boss had invited him to join a diabolist coven, I swallowed that, but an honest-to-God demon running the ceremonies?"

"Boss?" Nigel said sharply. "His name?"

"How should I know? In fact, I specifically told Brewster not to use any names in his half-baked exposes. I'm not aching to get sued for libel."

"Then you did buy articles on the supposed coven?"

Herndon nodded. "I published a couple, before Brewster came up with this 'demon' bull. When I told him to get lost, he left in a huff, after promising to get one of those miniaturized cameras and bring me proof in living color. Guess he thought of himself as a freelance secret agent, too."

"Looks as if he wanted to try out his 'proof' on a neutral audience at the convention, before turning it over to you," said Nigel. "Are you sure you don't know anything about who this coven master is or where the rituals take place?"

"I already told you that. Look, I don't want to be rude, but I really

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can't help you anymore. Frankly, though I'm sorry about Brewster, I don't see him as any great loss." He got creakily to his feet. "Now you'll have to excuse me."

Nigel downed the rest of his mineral water and made a reluctant exit.

He returned to Claude's for a futile attempt at a nap, leaving the keys with the building superintendent when he departed for the airport. Late in the afternoon he landed at Oakland and retrieved his own car, welcoming the margin of relief afforded by its tinted windshield.

After leaving the airport, he followed Interstate 80 around the San Francisco Bay to Berkeley. As he drove toward the university, he scowled through his sunglasses at a blindingly clear blue sky. Where was the notorious Bay fog when one needed it? He felt a little better once he'd found a parking space—easier than usual, with summer classes not in session yet. As always, the familiar serenity of the white granite buildings and tree-shaded lanes smoothed away much of his irritation. Trailed by the music of a classical guitarist performing in Sproul Plaza, he strolled in no particular hurry to the building that housed the Psychology Department. If he occupied his conscious mind with the graduate students' essays waiting in his mailbox, perhaps his unconscious would concoct a way of using the sparse information he'd gleaned in Los Angeles.

In the psychology office he greeted the department secretary, a plump Hispanic woman with her glossy black hair coiled at the nape of her neck. "Afternoon, Juanita, what have you got to tell me that I don't want to hear?"

"You're popular today, Dr. Jamison." She tilted her head to smile up at him as he leaned on the desk. "A couple of dozen students have been crowding the bulletin board to check whether you've posted grades."

"I'll post the blasted grades tomorrow after I've turned them in, the way I always do. What else?" Her expectant manner told him she was

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holding back the punch line.

“Julie Kennard dropped in three times today. I think she wants you to advise her on majoring in psychology and what she should take next fall.”

Ms. Kennard, a sophomore, had a blatant crush on Nigel. “Good Lord, why doesn’t she harass her academic advisor with that? If she shows up again, tell her I’ll talk to her after the summer quarter starts. I get a break like everyone else.” If Nigel had shared Valpa’s casual attitude about seducing students, Julie would have been an obvious target. To tell the truth, he had occasionally been tempted, though not for more than five minutes at a time—the girl’s lack of subtlety repelled him.

He stopped at the mail room to empty his box, relieved to encounter no other faculty members. He’d about exhausted his capacity for polite chitchat for one day. Eight take-home exams, as expected. Three ads for newly published textbooks, a notice of a professional conference in Boston next month, and the latest copy of *Psychology and Literature*. Nigel looked forward to reading an article by Eloise in this issue, on Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*. Hard to imagine what new observations she could draw from that oft-discussed tale, but her unique perspective on vampiric behavior patterns should make the essay entertaining, if nothing else.

In his office he circular-filed the book ads, tucked the conference flyer under a geode he used for a paperweight, and stuffed the journal and the student essays into his briefcase with the fantasy magazines. He then switched on the answering machine, hoping no further demands lurked on its tape. The pleading voice of a male student from the freshman survey course emanated from the machine, explaining why he needed to make up the final. Tough luck; he should have made arrangements beforehand. A series of clicks, betokening machine-shy callers who hadn’t left messages. A female voice—

Nigel sat up straight and replayed the last message. “Nigel, this is

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Sherri Hudson. I've just had a call from a man who wants those pictures. He didn't leave his name, and he talks rough. He wouldn't believe I don't have them." She finished with her telephone number and address, gabbling so fast to fit everything in that Nigel had to listen a second time. She sounded more angry than afraid.

He smiled reminiscently at the image of Sherri storming into his hotel room to accuse him of murder, her cheeks flushed. Out of nowhere, a pang of desire constricted his chest.

*Shut up and leave me alone*, he ordered his treacherous body. *This sounds serious, damn it.*

He dialed the number Sherri had left and let it ring twenty times. No answer.

Damn it to hell. So much for his chances of getting any rest this evening. With a weary sigh he put on his sunglasses and cap, picked up his briefcase, and walked to the car. The Campanile chimed six as he drove off campus into the sloping streets. He thought yearningly of his townhouse only a couple of miles away, with its cool, heavily curtained bedroom. Frowning at the low-lying sun, he pulled into a nearby bookstore to buy an assortment of street map manuals covering the Bay, the Monterey peninsula, and Sherri Hudson's region of central California. Curiosity, not to mention the complex of emotions he used in lieu of a conscience, would give him no peace until he checked on her.

## CHAPTER 6

Darkness made solid walls around her.

Laura opened her throat to scream and gulped foul air. Gagging, she clamped her jaws tight. She slowed her breathing, long, shallow inhalations through the nose, and struggled to quell her galloping heartbeat.

Darkness? She had never seen it before. What the day people called dark was, to her, a landscape in muted pastels, punctuated by coruscations of life-energy. She had never encountered a blackness so thick her eyes couldn't pierce it.

Panic swelled in her throat again. She swallowed it; she couldn't afford to squander what little air filled this space.

What space? For the first time she calmed herself enough to consider the non-visual clues. The surface she lay on was not the dingy sheepskin rug where she'd fallen asleep. Under her bare arms she felt a mossy texture, but non-organic. Velvet? It smelled musty. Chancing a single deep breath to test the air, she inhaled dust and sneezed.

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A ghastly surmise crept out of the shadowy corners of her brain. Her hands groped for the sides of the enclosure. Not much wider than her own body. Her fingers brushed polished wood. Awkwardly bending elbows to feel behind her head, she traced the outline of a widening wedge. She stretched her legs and pressed her toes against the narrower end of the box.

In a spasm of rage she slammed her fists into the lid and jerked her legs up. Her knees cracked against the wood overhead. She bit off the beginning of a scream. For a few seconds she hugged herself, fighting nausea as the pain ebbed.

When her first mindless anger had faded along with the physical agony of her bruised knees, her mouth twisted in a sour smile at the triteness of the scenario. Don had seen too many B movies featuring vampires chained in caskets. She wondered what the next act of his playlet would be. That he might intend to leave her here permanently, she refused to consider.

How had he done it, though? Had she really fallen into a daylight coma so deep he could lift her without waking her? The thought chilled her to the core. On the other hand, Don must have endured a bad couple of minutes, his bowels churning with the fear that she might abruptly come to life in his arms. She smiled again at that.

The satisfaction lived only a second, though. She had, in fact, remained unconscious throughout the operation. How long did he intend the ordeal to last? As long as needed to break her to his will, obviously. He might perceive that as a day, a week, or several months. What he didn't know, she reflected, was that his plot would turn upon itself like a tail-biting snake, for within hours in this airtight box—a day, at most—Laura's body would retreat into suspended animation. While she could remain conscious longer with less oxygen than any ephemeral, suffocation would soon force that defensive withdrawal. Small consolation that was, when she imagined the hours of hunger, thirst, and immobility that would precede the coma.

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Already her throat felt seared. Without water, that cell-deep craving for blood became twice as harrowing. Her eyes, too, burned, straining for vision in total absence of light. No more than a cat's could her retina function with no photons at all. She closed her eyes, felt salty drops ooze between the lids. Corneal irritation, not grief. Her kind didn't cry, but if she could have wept, she would have.

So much for her independence and her fantastic good luck!

If only she'd told Dr. Valpa where Don lived. Or confided in Nigel—she'd had plenty of opportunities, with Berkeley so close. Why had she never bonded with her brother? Perhaps at this moment her mind could have reached into the void for his, summoning him to her rescue.

*Rescue? I'm thinking like a frail human.*

Too late for pride. Her overconfidence had brought this helplessness upon her, and her escape attempt had made matters worse. She visualized Dr. Valpa as she'd last seen him, his mane of white hair, his fog-gray eyes, the steady blue-green bands of his aura. Conjuring up his image, she could almost smell the traces of dust that always seemed to cling to his clothes. Eyes shut, she launched her mind like a hunting falcon into the dark.

She soared through the vast nothingness in search of a place to light, like Noah's raven gliding in vain over the face of the deep. Soon—if the word had meaning in a lightless, timeless waste—she felt as weary as if she'd been flying for hours on material wings through clouds torn by hurricane-force winds. In the gale that battered her she sensed no breath of Valpa's presence.

She sank back into her body to find her fists cramped with clenching, palms scored by her nails. Chest aching, she exhaled through her raw throat. No use; she was too weak. Too young? She'd heard rumors of a vampire girl about the same age who'd mentally cried for her Advisor, at the moment of death, across half a continent and the Atlantic Ocean. The man had heard, too, and come to his pupil's call,



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though of course he'd arrived too late. Laura knew she herself couldn't hope to duplicate that feat, for that instant of communication had been fueled by the terror of the girl's death-throes.

*I'm not in enough of a panic just yet. Give it time.*

By the time she reached that stage, she'd be driven mad. In that state, would she retain enough of her selfhood to seek Valpa? A fresh scream threatened to rise into her mouth. She pressed her wrist against her lips to stifle the cry. Her own pulse, normally a background noise she ignored, throbbed against her bared teeth and pounded in her ears. At that mocking invitation she did sob aloud. Her own blood would quench her thirst less effectively even than another vampire's, than the tiniest mammal's.

Still, the temptation remained.

It would be wet, at least, temporarily soothing. And she couldn't die of the loss. She would only grow weaker, weaker, until she faded into oblivion.

The image appealed to her. By prematurely bringing on the coma that way, she could cheat Don of the hours of suffering he intended for her. Dreamless, deathlike sleep. The beat of her own heart lulled her like waves on rock, inviting her to drown her consciousness. No more thirst, hunger, or suffocation. Her body systems would shut down, sparing her a less dangerous but more humiliating discomfort, which an ephemeral would already be feeling by now. Unlike a day person's, her kidneys didn't function during sleep, and anyway, she had drunk little water before retiring.

She mouthed the tender skin of her wrist like a baby sucking its thumb. Though she was immune to the anesthetic in her own saliva, she knew she would feel no pain when her teeth slit the flesh. Their razor edge was too keen for that. She prepared to draw blood.

And lay suspended on the edge of the act. Her jaws felt paralyzed. Her stomach twisting, she tried again to force herself. Bile rose in her mouth, and she had to swallow it. Was her self-protective instinct so

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strong that she couldn't inflict a minute bite on herself? Then why hadn't it flared up to warn her against Don in the first place? Racked with trembling, enraged at her weakness, she let her hand fall to her breast.

*Dr. Valpa—Nigel—help me!*

Again she flung her thoughts into the dark, like an arrow shot at no visible target. A whirlwind captured her, sucked her into the abyss, until awareness dissolved altogether.

She swam, drowned in blood, torrents of it. The scent and taste tortured her, but she couldn't open her mouth to swallow without choking. She flailed arms and legs, fighting for solid ground. Hands clutched her and dragged her from the flood. Opening her eyes, through a crimson haze she saw Valpa's cool stare.

"Calm yourself, child," he whispered. "Come and drink from me. Drink."

She nestled into his arms as she had often done in childhood, before the lust for human blood had come over her. The thirst was still there, though, urging her to rip into his exposed neck. As her teeth met in his flesh, his form melted. She found herself hugging Don, both of them naked, his skin flushed and damp. Again she tried to bite. The first spurt of blood filled her mouth.

"Not so fast, Laura," she heard him say, and he held her back with strength more than human.

Her eyes flew open. She closed them instantly, blinded by a sphere of light. Breathing slowly to steady her nerves, she inhaled comparatively fresh air and the smell of Don's stale cologne. Then she knew she was actually awake.

For a second she was almost disappointed. What remained for her, except to go through the same agony over and over, as many times as his whims dictated?

He said, "Don't move too fast, Laura. You do something to make me nervous, you never know what might happen."

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Without answering, she slit her eyes to watch him. He stood just outside arm's reach, training the gun on her as she lay in the open coffin.

"About time you woke up," he went on. "When I took off the lid and you didn't move for so long, at first I thought you really were dead." He croaked a laugh. "Stupid, huh? You can't starve to death. Or can you?" After a moment of silence, he said, "Bet you won't try any more tricks, will you? And sooner or later you'll give me what I want—might as well make it now instead of later."

Forcing her eyes fully open, inwardly cursing the fierce glare of the overhead light, she rasped, "Go to Hell, carrion-eater." She was too exhausted to scream her rage.

Don didn't show anger either, though his aura darkened with mild irritation. Clearly he thought he had her pinned down and only needed to wait. "Come on, Laura, make it easier on yourself," he said in a mock coaxing tone. His hand still clutched the gun with white-knuckled intensity. "You'll be fed, and we can work together again. Won't that be great?"

She answered him with a soundless snarl.

His false smile hardened. "Okay, so think it over some more. And think about this—next time I lock you in there, it'll be for good."

\* \* \*

*He's given up on me, Sherri told herself Tuesday evening. Knows I don't have the pictures, so he's decided to forget about me.* And so had Nigel, it seemed—no answer to her phone message. Well, the heck with him, too. Two days and a night of huddling in the house, either hiding in a novel or scrubbing floors and windows with frantic zeal because she couldn't concentrate on paperwork, had blown her fear circuits for the time being. *This whole mess is unreal, anyway. File thirteen it, my girl!*

*Didn't you say that on Sunday, too?* came the niggling reminder. She shrugged aside the thought and stir-fried a vegetarian supper. Her

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arteries ought to leap up and cheer. After loading the dishwasher, she pulled on a tank top, silky shorts, and running shoes. She didn't normally jog this late in the day. So what? Why shackle herself to superstitions about darkness? As her brother had repeated often enough, out in the woods she could just as easily get mugged at noon.

Exercise and oxygen drove the poisons out of her muscles and the cobwebs out of her brain. Finishing her run at twilight, she felt energy coursing through her veins under sweat-sheened skin. To cool down she spent fifteen minutes walking in circles under the pines, instead of approaching her house by the road.

Wiping her forehead under the terry cloth hairband, she walked around the backyard to the front deck. Quark sat at the top of the steps, waiting to be let in. Sherri waved at him. "Okay, okay, be right there."

A crunch of twigs alerted her to movement in the shadows under the porch. A man sprang out at her. She screeched. She had a second to register jeans, a gray sweatshirt, and kinky blond hair before he grabbed her waist and spun her around. One of his arms locked both of hers to her side. Against her back she felt his hard torso, the heaving of his chest. He pressed cool metal against her throat. The blunt edge of a pocketknife.

"Shut up," he rumbled. "I'm not here to hurt you." Sherri filled her lungs for another shriek. The knife pressed harder. "Don't mess with me."

She let out the breath in a long sigh. Who would hear her, anyway? The nearest neighbors were absent, this being a workday. If she could scream loud enough to reach more distant houses, the occupants would probably mistake the noise for a TV program.

"What do you want?" she squeaked. Her mind ticked over, rummaging for scraps of advice from articles about surviving attempted rape. "No money on me. In the house."

"All I want is those pictures."

She sagged against the man's arm. Not that again! "Like I said on

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the phone, I don't have them anymore."

"Stop playing games, bitch."

What could she say to convince this idiot? For a few seconds she considered giving him Nigel's name. No—exasperated as she was at the whole situation, she couldn't justify becoming a fink. Damn, why couldn't one of her neighbors be out jogging at this moment? She glanced over the deserted, tree-lined road.

At that instant, among the trees about fifty yards down, a man appeared out of nowhere.

Stress. She was hallucinating.

The next few seconds confirmed that hypothesis. The human shape melted. Wings spanning twice its height erupted from its back. As it launched itself in a glide so fast its outline blurred, she glimpsed a furred, feline head with pointed ears.

The mugger let out a gurgle and released her. She whirled around to see him stumble backward.

Impossible—how could he share her delusion?

The monster was flying straight at her. She threw herself sideways, landing on the leaf-strewn ground with a bruising thump to one hip. Instead of fleeing, the mugger brandished his knife underhand and rushed the winged creature. Maybe this thug had also decided the apparition didn't exist.

His defiant karate yell died in his throat when taloned hands grabbed his shoulders. He slashed the thing's chest. Its grip slackened. The man squirmed free and dashed into the woods.

With a loud moan, the creature sank to all fours. Sherri sat on the ground paralyzed, her head spinning, while she watched the wings shrivel up and disappear, the ebony fur melt away, the catlike ears shrink. The man levered himself into a crouch and stared back at her. His eyes gleamed crimson in the twilight.

"Nigel?" The ground lurched under her. *Earthquake? No, just my world-view turning upside down. No problem, folks.* He held out a

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hand. A chill swept over her. In the next instant it metamorphosed to a hot flush, as she realized his posture wasn't attack, but supplication. *Idiot, he probably saved your life! And you thought you were so open-minded!*

She scrambled to her feet and scurried over to Nigel. Squatting beside him, she took in the ripped shirt and the red patch spreading on it. "You're wounded."

"Excellent powers of observation." His voice slurred a bit, spoiling the sarcasm. When Sherri glanced nervously over her shoulder, he said, "Don't worry, he's long gone. Damn—didn't mean to scare him away. Wanted to question him. Clumsy."

"We'd better get you inside." When he grasped her outstretched hand, his weight almost overbalanced her. They both managed to stagger to their feet, though, and they trudged up to the house with his arm draped around her shoulders.

As they climbed the deck stairs, the cat hissed, then darted away to leap over the side. "Funny, Quark isn't usually shy of people," Sherri said.

"I make animals nervous," said Nigel as she opened the door. "Don't you lock it?"

"Just to go jogging? Don't be silly." She attempted a brisk tone to counteract her delayed reaction. Now that the crisis had passed, she felt the thudding of her heart and the cramps in her bowels.

"How do you trusting types survive?" He lowered himself onto the couch she steered him to. "Your cat's name is Quark?"

"Because he has strangeness and charm."

"Logical," he said. He closed his eyes.

"We have to get you cleaned up. Stay right there."

"I assure you, I'm not going anywhere."

Stumbling into the kitchen, Sherri realized her hands were shaking. She clutched the edge of the counter until they steadied. She drank a glass of ice water from the refrigerator dispenser, then refilled it for

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Nigel. After soaking a couple of washcloths in warm water, she carried them, with paper towels and the full glass, into the living room.

She glanced around at the newspapers on the floor and the galley proofs strewn on her desk. "I apologize for the mess."

Nigel opened his eyes and said with a sardonic quirk of his lips, "As well you should. Disgraceful—never saw such chaos. Don't know if I can bring myself to collapse in here."

"All right, it was a stupid remark," she snapped.

He leaned forward with a groan, resting his head on one hand. "Teach me to make inane jokes within minutes of getting knifed."

She perched on the arm of the couch. "Sit back and hold still." She unbuttoned his ripped shirt. "I'm afraid this is ruined." With his cooperation she drew it off. He winced at her touch and averted his eyes when she switched on the end table lamp. "Sorry, I have to see what I'm doing." He gulped down the glass of water as she swabbed sticky blood from his chest. After the second washcloth was stained red, she got a good look at the knife slash. The incision, closed to a thin red line, appeared hours old.

Mechanically patting his cold, white skin dry with paper towels, she said, "I do not see this."

"Sure you do," said Nigel, "just as you saw what happened outside. Don't lie to yourself; you're no good at it."

"Then those pictures of your sister weren't a special effect at all."

"No."

She withdrew her hand from his chest.

Something like sadness flickered in his eyes. "Relax, I won't bite. Not unless severely provoked."

Ashamed of fearing him, even for a second, after he'd rescued her, she finished cleaning the wound. "Doesn't even look like it needs a bandage. Nigel, how did you do that?"

"The change? A psychic skill we learn in adolescence. It's a purely superficial shifting of molecules, with more than a trace of illusion—

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how we look depends a lot on what the observer expects to see. That's why those last snapshots were foggy. The underlying body structures remain the same."

"Why did you do it?" she said. "The risk of being seen—"

"Error in judgment," Nigel sighed. "It seemed a good way to make sure he couldn't describe or identify me later. Besides, confound it, changing feels *good*." He touched the cut over his ribs. "I paid for it."

Reminded of how bad he must feel, Sherri jumped up with a guilty start. "What can I get for you? A drink?"

"Milk," he said. "Laced with the highest proof alcohol you have."

Since she seldom drank anything stronger than blush wine, she had to mull over her supplies for a minute. "Maybe Amaretto?"

Nigel grimaced.

"Oh, I just remembered the bottle of brandy I got for a present last Christmas—hardly been touched. Is that okay?" He nodded. Hurrying to the kitchen to pour the drink, she recalled first aid cautions against administering alcohol to an injured person. Nigel, however, ought to know better than she what his own metabolism could handle.

When she gave him the glass, he downed half of it without pausing for breath. "At least I should have taken off the blasted shirt first," he said. "Including clothes in the change takes a lot more concentration. It wasn't quite dark enough, either. I feel...drained. We're hypersensitive enough as it is when our molecules are in flux that way. That's why being stabbed hurt so much. In normal shape I'd have been able to suppress most of the pain."

"What else can you turn into?" she said. "Wolf, giant rat, glowing mist?" She sat beside him, forgetting all nervousness in her fascination.

He emitted a weak laugh. "Sorry, that's it. Aren't you satisfied with a six-foot bat-winged panther? And a singularly useless skill it is, most of the time."

"How can you be sure nobody saw you on the way here?"

He laughed harder, ending on a groan. "My dear girl, did you think



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I flew up from Berkeley? I am not Superman. My car's parked at the bottom of your lane."

"Oh," she said sheepishly. For a moment she silently watched him sip his drink. The superhero reference reminded her of other aliens in films and TV shows, and the planets they hailed from. She decided she had to ask. "Nigel, where are you from?"

"Nevada."

"What?"

"That 'alien' label was Brewster's guess," Nigel said, "and he was wrong. We're not interstellar invaders; we've shared your world for millennia. I'd be glad to give you the complete lecture and answer all your questions—later. We have more immediate problems. I've discovered a few things about Brewster. Pooling what little knowledge we have might enable us to end this harassment you're suffering."

"Have you considered giving my anonymous caller what he wants and washing our hands of it?" Sherri said.

"No longer an option," said Nigel. "I don't have the photos either. I turned them over to a friend in L.A., who will certainly destroy them. He's probably done so already."

An almost forgotten detail from the snapshots floated to the surface of Sherri's mind. "If your sister's shape-changing wasn't a special effect, then neither was anything else, was it? Including the blood-drinking."

Nigel turned his head to meet her eyes. "If you're suggesting that milk punch wouldn't be my first choice, you are right."

Her gasp held more delight than fear. How other fans would envy her if they knew what she'd stumbled into—not that she could tell anyone. "You're a vampire!"

"Close enough," he said. "We use the term for ourselves, though it's misleading in some ways. As you must have figured out, we aren't corpses animated by the Devil. We're a long-lived species with a few peculiar habits."

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*How long-lived?* she wondered. “How old are you?”

“No more than I claim—forty-two, still in my first youth. And Laura’s even younger. Good grief, can you imagine someone with centuries of experience getting into the trouble she’s in?”

“So you’re convinced she isn’t in the coven voluntarily?”

“She was at first,” he said. “I have a feeling things have gotten out of control.”

“I suppose you’re planning to play detective and rescue her?”

“What else?” He shifted position and winced again. “As soon as I’ve had a few hours to recover.”

“You can stay here tonight, of course. You don’t look in any shape to drive. You’re still hurting, aren’t you?” He averted his eyes from hers. Drawing a deep breath, she laid her head on the back of the couch, exposing the smooth arch of her neck. “Well, go ahead, I guess I owe you.”

“No, you don’t; I got you into this in the first place. My dear, you look like a martyr presenting herself for the headsman’s ax!”

She raised her head and glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. His head was bowed, one hand shading his own eyes. “Sherri, I can’t afford to turn down your offer. But it doesn’t have to be like that.”

“Why won’t you look at me?”

“Because I don’t want to be tempted to use hypnotic coercion on you.” He clasped her left hand and raised it to his lips. Again she noticed their feverish heat, in contrast to the overall coolness of his flesh. Still holding her hand, he put his free arm around her shoulders. To her surprise, she felt him trembling. “Relax for me, Sherri. I won’t force you to; I want you alert.”

“I want to stay alert, too. I don’t want to miss a single detail.”

He responded with a shaky chuckle and began licking the inside of her wrist. A shiver coursed up her arm. “What’s that for?”

Giving her palm a light kiss, he paused to answer, “Our secretions contain a mild anesthetic, to which we ourselves are immune, of

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course. The last thing I want is to cause you pain.” His tongue resumed its tantalizing strokes. The delicate skin of her wrist tingled with a warmth that slowly seeped up her arm and settled between her breasts. She noticed the nip of his teeth only as a painless prickling like a mild electric shock. He didn’t suck the wound like a film vampire, but continued to lick. In the midst of the lassitude creeping over her, she managed to remember her scientific curiosity about the process and fixed her gaze on the cuckoo clock on the opposite wall. No more than three minutes passed before Nigel released her and sat back, closing his eyes with a long sigh.

She sat frozen, gaping at the minute, painless incision from which blood still trickled. After a moment he opened his eyes and said, “Are you sure you want to bleed all over the couch?” Digging a handkerchief out of his side pocket, he pressed it to the wound.

“Thanks.” She closed the fingers of her right hand around the makeshift dressing. “I didn’t see any fangs.”

“What do you think I am, a rattlesnake? An object needn’t be pointed to be sharp. Like a razor cut, that will be scarcely visible by tomorrow.”

“Convenient. No punctures to hide.” She studied his face. Still pale—naturally pale, no doubt, but the blue tinge had faded from his lips. “You do feel better, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes. God, yes.” He squeezed her hand. “It’s just that I’m worn out. All this—the change, the instant healing—is a hell of an energy drain.”

“Then you’d better lie down.” She got up from the couch. “The guest room is down the hall next to the main bathroom, and the bed’s already made up. I’ll get you a towel.”

From the linen closet she produced the largest beach towel she owned, and with it she laid out a terry cloth wraparound whose size was adjustable, the only unisex garment in the place. Emerging from the bathroom, she almost ran into Nigel, leaning against the wall.

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“Don’t sneak up on me!”

“You’re quite sure you don’t mind my staying?”

“Of course not, I’m glad. You can protect me in case the villain comes back.”

“Don’t know how much protection I’ll be, out cold,” he said, “but I do appreciate your trust.” He reached up to smooth her hair, then quickly dropped his hand to his side. “I won’t lock you out of the bedroom, provided you secure all the exterior doors and windows. If anything happens, you should be able to wake me. Don’t be alarmed at the way I look—restful sleep, for us, is more like what you’d call suspended animation.” He slipped past her into the bathroom.

Sherri settled at her desk, trying to concentrate on the neglected copyediting job. She heard the shower running for about five minutes; then the bedroom door closed. Quiet wrapped itself around the house. Too quiet. She inserted a cassette of one of Judy Collins’ early albums into the stereo and turned up the volume as loud as she dared. Would the noise disturb Nigel at all, or did his “suspended animation” block all exterior stimuli? After calling Quark in, she locked and chained all the doors and checked every window. For her own comfort she made sure all the curtains were closed, too; she wouldn’t risk being glimpsed by a prowler she couldn’t see in the dark.

Quark trailed her through the house and back to the living room. After a suspicious sniff at the couch, he slunk under the desk and curled up. Sherri spent an hour slogging through the magazine articles. Certain she had missed several errors on each page, she finally gave up for the night. Putting on another tape to mask random noises that might aggravate her jumpiness, she retreated to the bathroom attached to her bedroom. She zipped through a shower and pulled on a thin, sleeveless nightgown. With the windows locked, the bedroom wouldn’t get cold. While dressing, she examined the tiny cut on her left wrist. Hard to believe Nigel had really drunk from her veins.

She surrendered to her curiosity. Feeling like Bluebeard’s last wife,

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she turned on the hall light and inched open the door to the spare room. Light spilling onto the twin bed revealed Nigel asleep on his back. He didn't stir as she peered at him. He had folded the covers back, except for the sheet, which was pulled up to his waist. As far as she could tell, he was naked. Watching for a couple of minutes, she couldn't discern any rise and fall of his chest. She eased the door shut.

Confirming that she could indeed get to him if she needed help calmed her nerves. In the living room she ate a bowl of ice cream, then coaxed the cat out of his refuge with the melted dregs. Cradling him to her breast, she turned off the stereo and crawled into bed with the cat and her unfinished novel. She expected to lie awake, straining her ears for intruders. Instead, drowsiness overwhelmed her within minutes. She switched off the lamp and slept.

She woke with a start and sat up, dumping the cat off the bed. Her breath caught at the sight of the man in the open doorway.

Recognizing him, she went limp. "Oh, Nigel, it's only you."

He strode over to the bed and sat down. He wore only the terry cloth wraparound. "You find that reassuring? Perhaps you need the services of one of my colleagues."

"Stuff it, Nigel," she said amiably. His teasing smile, faintly visible now that her pupils were adapted to the dark, defused her annoyance. "What's wrong? Did you hear something outside?" Her heartbeat quickened.

Nigel clasped her hand. "Take it easy, everything's quiet."

By now she'd awakened enough to be puzzled at a late-night visit for no apparent reason. She checked the digital clock. Ten twenty-one. "Couldn't you sleep?"

"You're forgetting I'm a nocturnal creature. I can't remember the last time I slept this long past sunset. Couldn't have done it if I hadn't been exhausted." His fingers absently fondled hers as he spoke.

"Well, I'm not nocturnal. Why—" She stopped short, as a likely motive occurred to her. "You're hungry again?"

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His eyes flashed red before he deliberately shifted them away from hers. "Not again—still. I held back, not wanting to frighten you."

"So you decided creeping in here in the dark would be less frightening?" She wasn't afraid, in fact; she was intrigued. "What changed your mind?"

"For one thing, I couldn't let the honor of my species go undefended," he said lightly. "I wouldn't want you to think that's typical of our feeding behavior. I sensed you were almost disappointed when I didn't...demand...more from you." A slight tremor had crept into his voice, and he paused as if to bring it under control. "Well, I'm not demanding. I'm asking."

"And you're avoiding my eyes again."

"Same reason," he said. "Influencing you would be all too easy. What I want is your free consent." His actions contradicted his words; by now he had her hand cupped between both of his. "The truth is, I woke hungry and lay there listening to your breathing through the wall. I stood it as long as I could, but resisting temptation isn't one of my strong points."

She leaned closer to him, reaching up to run her fingers along his jawline, coaxing him to face her. "Look at me, Nigel. I'm not afraid of that hypnotic stare anymore. You have my consent."

He inhaled sharply. He turned his head to kiss the hand that grazed his cheek. "One thing I must tell you, in all fairness. This can't lead to any long-term relationship. I have—no, damn it, I *had*—a commitment. Ultimately, it wasn't good for the woman involved. I won't risk that again."

She strove to keep hurt out of her voice, a futile attempt while with someone who could apparently sense emotions. "A one-night stand? I can live with that." At least he offered more honesty than a lot of "normal" would-be lovers. "By the way, it's probably a few hours too late for this, but what about AIDS?"

He laughed softly. "No self-respecting vampire would touch anyone

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who's diseased."

"You can tell?"

"Of course—the color of the aura is a dead giveaway. Besides, our saliva has antiseptic properties. Even if, impossibly, I were carrying some lethal organism, I doubt it could be transmitted by biting." Now he was tracing feathery circles on the inside of her wrist, sending shivers up her arm. She retaliated by rubbing the back of his neck with her free hand. "Any more questions?" he said. "I want to make sure you have a fair chance to back out before it's too late—and the way you're responding, 'too late' will arrive in approximately three minutes."

She slipped her arm around his waist and snuggled against his shoulder. "You do read emotions, don't you?"

He nodded. "And feed on them. That's why animals aren't enough." His breathing had become ragged. "God, you smell delicious!"

Sherri felt heat flooding her cheeks. Men weren't supposed to say things like that. "I'm not even wearing perfume."

"That's good," he said. "I prefer your natural fragrance. Healthy, passionate female—intoxicating." He stroked her cheek with his open palm. "If you don't stop blushing that way—"

She caught his hand and explored it with the ball of her thumb. "You really do have tiny hairs there."

"More like a cat's whiskers. They react to heat, magnetism, changes in air pressure—" Breaking off, he interrupted her rapt stare with a kiss. His tongue darted between her lips, making her feel as if her insides were melting down. "Right now they're reacting to the blood pulsing under your skin. Listen, how about putting your questions on hold? You've got my stomach tied in knots; I'm in no mood to deliver a biology lecture." Again he kissed her, in the process easing her down onto the pillow.

Sherri wrapped her arms around his neck. "What do you want me to do?"

"I'll do it all."

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“No way. Women of the nineties don’t like being passive sex objects.”

“I’ve almost forgotten what it’s like to possess any other kind,” he said. His voice, deeper, huskier, seemed to resonate inside her. “You might try using your nails.”

“Like this?” She raked down his spine.

He gasped. “Tone it down a little—you’re rushing me.” He slipped one arm under her shoulders, while his other hand explored her body in search of the tender spots where a touch would set her aflame. He found them with unerring accuracy. Dear God, yes, he read her feelings, flowed with every shifting nuance of her arousal. When he paused to slip off her nightgown, the cool touch of his hands on bare flesh made her shiver, but more with pleasure than chill. Stroking his chest, she discovered that the hair was short and fine, almost silken, and grew in a triangle with the apex vanishing toward the navel. She felt him trembling as she ran her fingers down to that point and stopped.

He reclined on the bed to graze on her breasts, his tongue stimulating each nipple in turn into a hard peak. In response Sherri traced the outline of his hipbone with one hand and ventured under the wrap to squeeze his thigh. Muscle and bone, no hint of fat. When she started to probe more intimately, he caught her hand. “You don’t like that?” she said.

His raised his head and breathed deeply before answering. “You weren’t expecting conventional intercourse, I hope? Genital sex isn’t part of our erotic repertoire. We breed—very seldom. Not that I wouldn’t enjoy your touch, but I don’t want to shock you.” Apparently sensing the chill that went through her at that remark, he said, “What are you thinking of?”

“The witchcraft trials. They always said the Devil’s member was like a serpent.”

Nigel said with a shaky laugh, “Nothing like that! Now I’ll have to let you touch, just for reassurance. Undescended testicles, and a



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smaller—endowment—than in the men you’re used to.” He guided her hand back to his groin.

“I’m not used to men at all.” After the first tentative caress, she avoided the empty scrotal sac. The pubic hair, she found, was sparse, as soft to the touch as the chest hair. His penis was smaller in length and diameter than an ordinary man’s, but not grotesquely so, and, she thought, more pointed at the tip. With delighted surprise, she felt a stirring and hardening as she squeezed. Not enough for “normal” intercourse, but enough to prove his sensitivity there. Sighing with pleasure, he resumed nuzzling her breasts.

“If you don’t—copulate—I’m surprised you enjoy this,” she said.

“In this condition, my whole body is sensitized. Will you please be quiet?” His mouth closed on hers, and his fingers sought her inner heat. Piercing sensations sparked along her nerves. She tensed her leg muscles, fighting to hold back the inevitable explosion. “Why are you resisting?” Nigel murmured. “I can tell you’re ready.”

She gasped, “Don’t—want it—to end!”

“Dear girl, this is only the beginning.”

“I’ve never had more than one—climax—at a time.”

“Well, you’re about to.” He renewed his assault, taking her resistance by storm. The tide rose to engulf her. Her whole body felt like a single throbbing pulse. While she still quivered with aftershocks, Nigel’s lips fastened on her throat. From that point of contact heat spread through all her veins. Before she could catch her breath, a second convulsion swept over her. She locked her arms around Nigel and bit his shoulder, hard. For a measureless interval he lapped at her neck, fueling a flame that rhythmically flared and ebbed without quite dying away.

At last he stopped drinking and rolled onto his back, with her head still pillowed on his arm. She felt the firm but gentle pressure of his fingers on her neck, closing the wound. After a few minutes of silence he hugged her to his chest. “Beautiful,” he murmured into her hair. “It’s

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been so long.”

“I feel lightheaded. How much did you take?”

“Not enough to hurt you,” he said. “What you’re feeling is the energy drain. Here, let me up.” Slipping out of her embrace, he left her lying on her back, eyes closed. She opened them when the mattress sagged with Nigel’s weight again. He held a full glass of water. “Just as when you’ve donated blood in the ordinary way, you need to replace fluids. Sit up.” When she obeyed, her head reeled. “Slowly!” He supported her with an arm around her shoulders as she drank. “Now you’d better rest. Need any help getting back to sleep?”

“I don’t think so.” A delightful wooziness enfolded her like a fuzzy blanket. The last thing she was aware of was Nigel pulling the covers over her.

It was shortly after midnight when she woke again. Nigel had settled with a stack of papers in his lap next to the open door of the bathroom, whose light was on. He was wearing slacks and a short-sleeved pullover. Raising herself on one elbow, Sherri said, “Where’d you get...?”

“Oh—the clothes and so forth. I walked down the hill and picked up my car. Luckily I hadn’t stopped at home to drop off my luggage.”

“What are you doing?”

“Exams,” he said. “If the light or my presence bothers you, I’ll move.”

“No, I feel secure with you here.” What a wimpy, unliberated sentiment! But it was the truth. Swinging her legs over the side of the bed, she tried to keep the sheet wound around her while groping for the discarded nightgown. She blushed at the amusement with which Nigel watched this operation. All right, maybe it didn’t make sense to worry about his seeing her naked, after... She glared at him and put on the gown anyway.

In the bathroom she examined her neck in the mirror. She saw a thin scratch that could pass for a shaving cut, if women shaved in that

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location. Finding herself unexpectedly thirsty, she downed two full glasses of water before returning to bed. A wave of dizziness hit her, leaving her barely time to stagger across the remaining couple of feet. From the pillow she glowered at Nigel, who watched her with an expression of mild concern. “Are you sure you didn’t miscalculate?”

“Your aura looks normal, considering the circumstances,” he said. “You’ll be fine by morning.”

She wiggled under the sheet and locked her hands behind her head. Visualizing the interlude they’d so recently shared, she felt a spasm of heat ripple through her lower abdomen. “Uh, would you like to come back to bed?”

“Not now, you shameless wench!” Nigel laughed. “I have a deadline to meet. Grades are due tomorrow—or today, I suppose—at noon. Besides, a minute ago you were worried about overdoing it. Go back to sleep.”

She did. The next time she floated to consciousness, Nigel loomed over her, his hands fondling her shoulders. “Wake up,” he said, bending to kiss the curve of her neck.

“Why?” she mumbled.

He lay down beside her, his hand skimming over her breasts. “Silly question.”

“I mean, why didn’t you let me sleep through it?”

“Didn’t I make it clear that your response is what makes the experience satisfying for me?” he said. “Without your conscious participation, it would be like settling for a burger when I could get filet mignon. And I’ve been living on fast food for too damn long.”

She twined her arms around him, drowsily welcoming the flood of sensuality his kiss unleashed. She drifted into oblivion with his mouth still pressed to her throat.

## CHAPTER 7

What a bizarre way to spend my first full night with a man!

*Or is it appropriate to call him a man?* Sherri wondered. More of a man than her college boyfriend, with his back-seat quickies! She smiled to herself and felt heat flare in her loins again.

Waking at nine thirty, she'd discovered Nigel sprawled, shirtless, on the bed next to her. She patted the cool skin over his ribs. No reaction. If she didn't know better, she would have thought him dead. Or undead? *Now don't start that again!*

She gathered up an armful of clothes and padded to the bathroom. When she emerged, washed and dressed, her visitor hadn't moved. She tapped him harder. "Nigel, wake up."

Slowly his eyes opened. Why hadn't she noticed the shape of his pupils before? Though not so obviously slitted as a cat's, they were definitely more elliptical than round. He drew a deep breath, followed by a stretching contraction and relaxation that rippled down his body.

"What time...?" After a glance at the clock, he flung an arm over

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his face. "Sadist."

"I thought you had to be somewhere at noon," Sherri said.

"Must you remind me?"

Reaching over him to straighten the covers on the side where she'd slept, Sherri said, "You finished your exams?"

"Yes, and computed the grades. Otherwise I wouldn't have wasted time in amorous dalliance."

"Wasted!"

"Forgive me—terrible choice of words." Grinning, he pulled her down on top of him. "Exquisite, delectable, unforgettable—"

She writhed futilely against the iron band of his arms. "Really, Nigel, you sound drunk!"

"I am. You've got me wonderfully, delightfully high." He nuzzled her neck. "I haven't felt this good in—"

Giggling, she tensed against the delicate shiver his caress provoked. "None of that!"

His embrace relaxed. "Absolutely not. There's work to be done. How do you feel?"

She tested the sensations in her head, her throat, the pit of her stomach, her legs. "Better than I expected, but awfully hungry and thirsty."

"Normal. Now, get off me before my good intentions weaken."

Jumping up, she said, "I can't believe you really need—"

Nigel sat up. "Of course not. After what you gave me, I won't 'need' human blood for two or three days. Doesn't mean you don't tempt me. Don't you ever snack when you're not hungry?"

She retreated to the door. "You know, I could get tired of being talked about like food."

His teasing smile faded. "Oh, no, don't think that. It's so much more—a substitute for sex, an addictive drug—and, I hope, in our case, a sharing between friends."

Unwillingly touched by the last phrase, she hid behind flippancy.

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“Well—okay, as long as you don’t start calling me a bountiful wine-press.”

He looked startled. “Any woman who can quote *Dracula* from memory at this ghastly hour is too tempting for her own good.”

At a loss for an answer to that, Sherri went into the kitchen to grind coffee beans. As she was pouring water into the coffee maker, Nigel came in, fully dressed, humming, “I get no kick from champagne...” She resisted the urge to throw something at him; he’d only dodge. To her surprise, he cradled a limp, purring Quark to his chest.

“Last night,” she said, “he was running from you in a panic.”

“I have no trouble calming animals, once I get them immobilized.”

“Like women, huh?” she said. “Great—first you upset my entire life, then you seduce my cat.”

Chuckling, he deposited Quark, in a boneless puddle of fur, on a chair. He frowned at the open curtains above the sink. “Close that, will you?”

Sherri complied. “Sorry, I forgot.”

“She forgot,” he said to the world in general. “More likely suppressed hostility.” He stood next to the circular table, hands in his pockets, examining the posters on the wall. “What, dare I ask, is Radio Free Thulcandra?”

“From C. S. Lewis,” Sherri said. “That’s the name for Earth in his space trilogy. He says somewhere that Christians are like the resistance force in an occupied country, and going to church is like listening to the secret radio broadcasts from the allies.”

“And what variety of Christian are you?”

“Well, mainly the Easter, Christmas, and ‘meet God in nature’ variety,” she admitted, flipping the switch on the coffee machine.

“A very large and popular denomination,” said Nigel with a quirk of his lips.

“What about you? Your kind don’t actually worship Satan, I guess?”

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“Hardly,” he laughed. “Laura participated in that coven for what she could get out of it. Most of us, if not atheists, are rational Deists. I know only one vampire who sincerely practices an organized religion, and he’s anomalous in other ways, too. I personally lean toward the belief that a Creator designed the universe, but I can’t swallow the Christian theory that the First Cause became human. Why would He, She, or It want to? Why would anybody want to?”

“That sounds like a racial slur,” Sherri said. “Want some coffee?”

“It’s not decaf, is it?” When she shook her head, he said, “Good. If you’re going to ingest mood-altering substances, you may as well be straightforward about it.” He sat down at the table, stretching his arms over his head. “I definitely need something to keep me alert. I should be sleeping off this delicious intoxication, not fighting freeway traffic.”

Sherri answered with a derisive sniff, as she took orange juice and fruit yogurt from the refrigerator. “If ordinary people can work the night shift, you can survive working days.”

“How can such a beautiful, generous creature be so cruel?” he asked the ceiling. “It isn’t quite the same. You can learn to sleep by day, while we can’t sleep soundly after dark unless we’re exhausted. Also, darkness isn’t painful to you, as sunlight is to us.”

“I see your point.” When the coffee had bubbled into the pot, she poured a mug for each of them. “What do you want for breakfast?”

She felt herself blushing as Nigel said with a smile, “If we’re going to be friends, you must learn not to ask suggestive questions like that. Actually, I seldom eat breakfast. Good grief, you people spend so much time preparing and consuming food, it’s a wonder your lives have room for anything else. However, I’ll take a glass of milk.”

She poured him a glass, then sat down.

“Is that all you’re eating?” Nigel said. “You need plenty of nourishment.”

She glanced down at the yogurt carton. “All right, maybe I’ll get a bagel or something in a few minutes. I do feel pretty hungry. Look, you

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were going to tell me what you found out about Brewster.”

“I wish we could forget about it,” Nigel sighed. “In Los Angeles I managed to talk to Clive Herndon. Keith Brewster was a none too prosperous real estate agent who wrote for fantasy magazines as a hobby. He told Herndon his boss, whoever that may have been, invited him to meetings of a coven. Brewster actually had a few articles on the subject published, probably with locations and identities disguised. Herndon, like any sensible man, laughed at the report of a winged demon or alien. So Brewster secretly took his pictures and went to the con for a trial run. Maybe he even hoped to hook up with a more cooperative publisher there.”

“You’re saying Brewster’s anonymous boss has to be the coven leader?” Sherri licked her spoon thoughtfully. “If so, he would know where your sister is.”

“It’s the only lead I have,” Nigel said.

“Can you imagine how many realtors there must be in—do you even know where?”

“Somewhere near Carmel, though I can’t be sure how big an area ‘near’ encompasses. I wish I could keep you out of it, but our villain—”

“The mysterious Mr. X,” Sherri said.

“Right. X already assumes you’re involved.” He checked his watch. “I have to turn in my grade reports, and then I’m going home to sleep. I’ll come back here at five, if I may. Let’s hope X won’t get his wagons in a circle to send another, ah, representative before then.”

“Wait a minute. Are you so sure the mugger wasn’t X?”

“Think, Sherri. A man who’d seen Laura change many times and exploited that ability for his own gain wouldn’t fly into a panic at the sight of me.”

“Oh.”

“Nor would a person of presumed respectability risk committing his own mayhem if he could possibly avoid it. Besides, your attacker was too young.”



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"I guess so."

"One slim chance—if that man, or someone else hired by X, comes back, I might get lucky and catch him. This time, he wouldn't get away without supplying some answers."

Sherri felt a chill at the determination in Nigel's voice. She threw away the empty carton and rummaged in the refrigerator for bagels and cream cheese.

"I'm glad to see you with such a healthy appetite," he said in a lighter tone. "Steady donors tend to lose interest in food and have to be reminded to eat. Over the long term, with the decrease in appetite on top of the normal weight loss, some of them become malnourished and prone to infection. Of course, you're far from that stage."

"Weight loss?" She chomped into her bagel.

"A side effect of that anesthetic venom we secrete. Speeds up the metabolism. A steady donor gets thin. Not dangerously so, but thin to the point that any sane society would consider emaciated. In our culture, he or she would fit right into the prevailing aesthetic standard."

"In that case," she said, "you're invited for dinner twice a week!"

Nigel finished his milk, then said, "No, I wouldn't take that chance. I shouldn't have wakened you the second time last night; I ought to apologize."

"No, don't." Again she felt her cheeks growing hot, as she shifted her eyes from his. "I sort of liked falling asleep with you, uh, kissing me."

"Oh, Lord, we're in trouble," Nigel said. "*You enjoyed it.*"

"So? Didn't you want me to? And is getting involved with me such a horrible fate?"

He reached across the table for her hand. "It's you I'm thinking of. The—venom, if you want to call it that, is addictive, but we haven't been together long enough for the addiction to take hold. Therefore, either you enjoy the act in itself—which I did want you to, of course—or you like me personally. Either or both could lure us together again

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and again, until we get mutually hooked in a literal, physical way.”

Probing her emotions, Sherri acknowledged the truth she’d been trying to evade. “Yes, I do like you. Very much.”

Nigel released her hand and stood up. “All the more reason to be very careful. Human blood for us is like a trace nutrient; we don’t need much. But if the frequency is too high, the donor can hardly avoid becoming anemic. Not to mention over-sensitive to sunlight, though much less severely than we are.”

“Will you stop sounding so impersonal?” She sprang to her feet to glare at him. “This isn’t an abstract case; this is you and me. You don’t think we could be careful? Anyway, except for possible anemia, the side effects don’t sound so bad.”

“In honesty, I must admit there are beneficial side effects, too,” he said. “The anticoagulant prevents cardiovascular disorders, and something in our secretions immunizes against most cancers. Also, there’s a retardation of cosmetic aging.” He avoided her eyes, clearly reluctant to encourage her with this information.

Sherri mulled it over and said more calmly, “Since my father died of a heart attack and my mother of breast cancer, that doesn’t exactly turn me off.”

Backing toward the door connecting with the living room, he said, “I simply don’t consider the benefits worth the hazards. Believe me, I’ve been through it before.” He held up a hand to halt her as she advanced on him. “No, don’t tempt me. Right now you’ve got an unfair advantage.”

She stopped, her bewilderment at that remark overpowering her annoyance at his determination to protect her from herself. “What are you talking about?”

Pausing with his hand on the doorknob, he said, “Think I can’t tell you’re premenstrual?”

“How in the world—” The obvious answer occurred to her, and heat washed over her face. “Good grief, you wouldn’t really want—?”

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“Have you forgotten whom you’re talking to?” said Nigel. Sherri noticed that again he was avoiding her eyes.

At that moment, eye contact was the last thing she wanted, too. Staring at the floor, she mumbled, “It’s just that most men won’t touch a woman at—at that time.”

“Most men are taboo-ridden, insensitive idiots.”

The edge in his voice startled her into looking up at him. His gaze was fixed on her again. She felt a thrill of pleasure, knowing she had the power to stir him, even now. “In that case, you should visit in a couple of days. And stop talking as if I’m too feeble-minded to decide for myself—”

He cut her off. “Please, don’t say any more about it. After the immediate problem is settled, maybe we can talk. I’ll see you this evening.”

With Nigel gone, Sherri threw herself into her galley proofs. By mid-afternoon her eyes ached, a small price to pay for the hours of distraction. Did she really want a long-term relationship with Nigel? Out of sheer contrariness, she’d argued for it. In cool reflection, though, she wondered how much a rational assessment of the benefits had had to do with that argument. Did an affair with an inhuman creature out of legend appeal to her as an escape from involvement with ordinary men? Pausing to massage her forehead as she folded up the corrected proofs, she reminded herself that speculating about her motives was a waste of time. Nigel’s determination to dodge involvement preempted any choice she could make.

On the other hand, couldn’t she change his mind if she wanted to? His special needs gave her power over him. She smiled to herself at that thought. After they’d settled the problem of Mr. X and Nigel’s sister, Sherri would make sure Nigel made good on his promise to talk. Unpleasantly reminded of the anonymous harassment, she wondered whether X had given up on her. Or could she expect another attack? She’d be glad to get away from home for the couple of hours required

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to deliver the corrected articles, and out of reach of whoever wanted those snapshots so badly.

The drive, mostly on sun-speckled wooded back roads, relaxed her. By the time she returned home, at almost five, and pulled into her steep, winding lane, the shadowy danger had slipped out of her mind. Braking in her driveway brought the possibility back with a jolt. She frowned through the windshield at the front deck, straining her eyes to make sure nobody lurked there this time. Cautiously she stepped out of the car, darting glances from side to side. No alien shape or movement to be seen. Not by ordinary mortal eyes, anyway.

*Stop this! Are you going to let one bad experience make you paranoid?*

She strode toward the porch steps. The roar of a car engine stopped her. A sky blue sports car pulled up beside her dowdy four-banger. She jumped, her heart tripping over itself. Her knees turned watery when the driver opened his door and greeted her with a wave. "Hi, Nigel," she returned. In a couple of quick strides he caught up with her, and they climbed the steps together.

Watching her fumble with her key chain, he said, "Good, you actually locked the door." When her hand gripped the doorknob, though, he wrapped his fingers around it. "Wait. Something's wrong."

"What are you talking about?"

"Stay here and don't go in," he said, descending the stairs. "I want to look around first."

She watched him disappear around the corner of the cottage. Peering after him, she noticed a broken stalk on one of the tomato vines. Had it been like that in the morning? Her stomach tightened.

A minute later, Nigel reappeared on the other side and said, "All right, you can open the door. You've had an intruder; I found a broken window, but he's gone now."

Her hand shook as she inserted the key. With Nigel's arm around her waist, she flung the door wide.

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A whirlwind of chaos met her eyes. At any rate, that was her first impression. The living room reminded her of a boiling pot kicked over by a giant in a tantrum. She hardly felt Nigel pull her inside and slam the door behind them. Her head reeled with anger; the pressure built until her ears buzzed. She let it out in a high-pitched howl. Gray patches obscured her vision, and she felt herself swaying on her feet.

Nigel wrapped his arms around her. She leaned on his hard chest, one part of her enraged at her weakness in clinging this way.

"You aren't going to cry, are you?" he asked.

Her vision cleared. "Of course not." She blinked back the upwelling tears.

"This upsets you more than the attack last night," he said, rubbing her back. "Why?"

Sherri wiped her eyes on her forearm. "I don't know. Maybe because that happened so fast it didn't seem real, what with you bursting out of nowhere and everything. Now, there's evidence." She gestured vaguely at the ransacked living room. The cushions from the couch lay on the floor. All the desk drawers had been dumped on the rug. Records and tapes had been pulled out of the cabinet under the stereo and left in a heap. The bookshelves showed gaps where the vandal had snatched books out at random. "Quark!" she yelled.

"Shh." Nigel tilted his head, listening. "The cat's downstairs. Shall we survey the damage and get it over with?"

They picked a path to the kitchen, tiptoeing over tumbled papers, envelopes, and file folders. Sherri opened the door to the lower level. Quark stalked in on disdainful paws. Ignoring her crooned greeting, he sat down to groom his tail. "How did you know, right away, that somebody had broken in?" she asked.

"I picked up an unfamiliar scent."

She goggled at him, then thought of another alarming possibility. "What if he was here when I drove up, running out the back that very minute?"

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Nigel shook his head. "He's been gone at least five or ten minutes. I can't make out any heat traces."

To Sherri's relief, the bedrooms weren't so badly trashed. The intruder had opened all her drawers but rummaged in them without emptying them. Though her cedar jewel case was open, her turquoise pendant and jade bracelets remained in their place. Her few valuable pieces—her mother's diamond ring, her father's sapphire stickpin—she kept in a drawer the man hadn't bothered to dig to the bottom of. She groped under the scarves and sagged with relief to find her keepsakes still there. In the closet the burglar had contented himself with shoving a few boxes off the shelf.

"Lazy search technique," Nigel said. "I can think of several other hiding places."

"For the pictures?"

"What else?" In the spare bedroom, opening the closet and a few drawers must have convinced the searcher that little was stored there besides extra blankets and empty suitcases. Nigel started to close an empty drawer hanging open.

"Don't," Sherri said. "We shouldn't mess with anything until the police get here."

Nigel gave her a sharp look. "Police?"

"Did you think I'd let it go without reporting it?" Her voice sounded shrill in her own ears.

"Must you?" he asked. "You know the chances of the burglar being caught are on the close order of zero. And there's nothing missing, is there?"

She edged away from his encircling arm and trudged back to her room. "How can I be sure, in this mess?" She absently tucked the scarves she'd checked back into place. "Honestly, I don't think he took anything. But I can't just forget about this—this invasion! There has to be a chance—" She sank onto the bed and took a shuddering breath to quell incipient hysterics.

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Nigel stood beside her, massaging the back of her neck. “Do what you feel you must. For myself, I’d prefer not to have any attention drawn to this situation.”

She scowled at him. “Criminals are supposed to hide, not victims. I won’t betray you, but there are limits. I’m not about to let your need for secrecy control my life.” She picked up the phone and tapped out 911.

After she’d completed her report, Nigel said, “Look, you realize that with the intruder already out of reach, they won’t treat your call as an emergency. Who knows how long they’ll take to get here? You may as well try to relax while you’re waiting. The kitchen looked clearer than the rest of the house.”

It was. The searcher had given up after opening a few cabinets and drawers. “Sloppy,” Nigel said. “I suspect his main concern was getting through and out before we could catch him. Blast—so much for my interrogation scheme.”

“I’m not sure I’d want to witness your third-degree methods,” Sherri said. She lowered herself into a chair and rested her head on the table.

“You’re probably hungry,” Nigel said. “Did you have lunch?”

Sherri paused to think over the question. Noon seemed to have receded into the dim past. “Not really. Iced tea and an apple. I was scrambling to finish a job. But I don’t want supper. My stomach’s too jittery.”

“Nonsense, food will settle you down. A little wine for the stomach’s sake—” He smiled at her surprised expression. “Like the Devil, I can quote Scripture, even if I don’t believe most of it.” He took a bottled wine cooler out of the refrigerator and twisted off the cap. “Here. I’ll throw together some kind of supper for you.”

Sherri had to admit she felt comforted by the chilled drink trickling down her throat. She eyed Nigel suspiciously as he searched through cabinets. “Can you cook?”

“I can open containers and read directions,” he said in a faintly

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indignant tone.

“Never mind, I couldn’t face a hot meal anyway. Maybe a peanut butter sandwich.”

He assembled the ingredients and got to work. “How about a salad, as well? Fiber, and all that. You people have to go through such complicated operations to get a balanced diet.” Rooting in the refrigerator for lettuce and tomatoes, he said, “Where do you keep the oil and vinegar?”

“Next to the sink. But I prefer regular salad dressing.”

“No, commercial dressings generally contain garlic.”

“That’s not a myth?”

“It’s a very severe allergy,” he said as he tossed the salad. “Makes us violently nauseated.”

A furry head poked through the open door to the utility room stairs. Nigel abandoned his task to crouch on the floor, staring at Quark. The cat gingerly slinked across the kitchen tiles, the tip of his tail quivering. When Nigel picked him up, he went limp, purring in response to the fingers rubbing his belly.

“After a few more occasions,” Nigel said, “he’ll be used to me and come without being mesmerized.” The cat emitted a tremulous meow. “Don’t you ever feed this poor creature?”

“He’s faking,” Sherri said. “He has plenty of dry food downstairs.”

“Hard-hearted wench.” Nigel took the milk out of the refrigerator to pour a saucer for Quark and a glass for himself. The cat lapped ravenously; Sherri hardly ever gave him this treat. “See, he’s hungry.”

“He’ll also get an upset stomach, probably. What about you?”

“I’ve had supper. If you want the specifics,” he said, “warm milk and a quarter-pound of liquefied beef.”

“Liquefied?”

“Even for our kind, inventions like the food processor are an invaluable convenience—although that kind of diet doesn’t satisfy the hunting instinct.” He gestured at Quark. “I’m sure your pet makes up



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for his pampered existence by hunting for sport.”

Sherri nodded. “Grasshoppers. I don’t think he’s ever caught one. Sometimes he gets ambitious and brings home a dead squirrel.” She knew Nigel was trying to distract her from the break-in and welcomed his strategy. As he served the sandwich and salad and sat down opposite her, she asked, “What do you do for your hunting instinct, besides preying on unsuspecting females?”

Nigel shrugged. “Squirrels, raccoons, deer—any healthy mammal. In town, I often have to take stray dogs or cats.”

Sherri cast an uneasy glance at Quark, who was sleeking his ears and whiskers with a damp paw.

“Really, my dear,” Nigel said, “credit me with being minimally civilized! I don’t think of a friend’s pet as food.”

After eating in silence for a few minutes, she asked, “Do you believe there’s much chance of discovering where Laura is, with the slim clues you have?”

“Well, she’s certainly not at her last known address. I called this afternoon, and the phone’s been disconnected.” Abruptly he straightened up and snapped his fingers. “Damn—completely slipped my mind! I do have another possible source of information. Wait here.”

While he went outside, Sherri polished off the sandwich and poured herself a glass of juice. A moment later Nigel returned, carrying a briefcase. “A friend in L.A. lent me a couple of years’ worth of Herndon’s periodicals. We may come across articles by Brewster in one or two of them.” He opened the briefcase and spread an assortment of magazines across the table.

Pushing aside her half-finished salad, Sherri rifled through the pile. “*Crepuscular Shadows*; *Tomb of Silence*; *Haunted Mansion*; he mentions these in his large-circulation magazines, but I haven’t seen more than an occasional issue. This kind of stuff is available only by mail order, you know, and I’m already swamped with subscriptions.” She picked up the nearest digest-sized periodical, whose cover featured

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a faceless quadruped lurking behind a gnarled tree, and skimmed through it. “Even in this limited circulation medium, he seems to publish pretty good book and movie reviews.”

“I didn’t plan to spend the evening reading reviews,” Nigel said. “We’re supposed to be searching for pieces by Keith Brewster.”

“Sure, I hear you.” She tore her attention away from the opening paragraphs of a Lovecraft pastiche. She flipped back to the table of contents. The nonfiction section included articles on California’s predicted mega-quake, lycanthropy in colonial Louisiana, and a new series of ESP experiments; Brewster wasn’t listed as an author. “Hey, what if he used a pseudonym?”

“Not likely,” said Nigel. “You saw his blatant over-compensation for his perceived inferiority.”

“Translation—he was a publicity hound. Okay, I’ll buy that.” As she picked up another magazine, the doorbell rang. She jumped.

Nigel patted her hand. “The police, no doubt. I heard the car pull up. You’d better answer the door—your house.”

She went into the living room alone. Two uniformed county police waited on the porch, a blond, wiry one, and a dark, husky one. They introduced themselves as Davis and Briggs, and she let them in. Taking the seat she offered, Davis, the blond, who seemed to be in charge, produced a notebook and said, “Now, Miss, if you’ll tell us exactly what happened, before we look around.”

Nigel emerged from the kitchen and stood silently near the couch as Sherri answered. She kept her account as brief as possible. All they needed to know was that she’d come home and found the cottage in disorder.

“Do you have any idea how the intruder gained entry?” Davis asked.

When Sherri opened her mouth to answer, Nigel forestalled her. “After we discovered the damage,” he said, “I looked around outside and noticed a broken window on the lower level.”

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“Might as well go check on that,” said Davis to his partner.

Sherri said, “Through the kitchen.” Noticing Davis’ puzzled look, she introduced Nigel. “He happened to drop in at the same time I drove up.”

“Is anything missing?”

“Not as far as I can tell,” she said.

As Briggs disappeared into the kitchen, Davis stood up. “Would you please show me around the house now?”

The tour didn’t take long. The officer frowned thoughtfully at the open bedroom drawers and closets and jotted in his notepad. “You live alone?”

Sherri didn’t trust herself to do more than nod. Did she imagine the insinuation in the query? *Of course you do! Your nerves are shot, girl.*

“I see you have some jewelry. Nothing was taken?”

Sherri shook her head. Davis took a few more notes in the living room, then followed her and Nigel into the kitchen. The policeman’s eyes fell on the briefcase. Nigel had repacked and closed it. “You a lawyer or something?” This time Sherri felt sure she heard the speculation in the officer’s tone.

“No, just a friend,” Nigel said.

Briggs came up the stairs to report. “I found the broken window, like this gentleman reported, over the washing machine. No other damage. I dusted the glass for prints.”

Davis nodded approval. “Probably won’t find any—they always wear gloves. You realize, Miss Hudson, what the odds are against making an arrest.”

And she wasn’t improving the odds by withholding information. No wonder she over-interpreted everything they said. She felt guilty over obstructing an investigation, on top of running away from Brewster’s death scene. “Yes,” she said. “But I thought, if it turned out to be part of a pattern—”

“Good thinking,” he said. “Funny that the perpetrator didn’t steal

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anything. So maybe you scared him off when you drove up, but he could have snatched some jewelry or the tape deck on the way out. That's what they usually go for. Can you think of anybody who'd have a grudge against you? Or do you know what he might've been looking for?"

Sherri hesitated. Her last chance to come clean. *Come off it, why am I thinking like a criminal?* She felt Nigel's eyes upon her, though with no sense of coercion. She swallowed her doubts. "No, I haven't the slightest idea."

The officer tucked his notepad away. "Well, don't hesitate to call again if you have further trouble. If it does turn out to be part of a local crime wave, we may call upon you later for a deposition." After shaking hands all round in the living room, the two left.

As soon as the sound of the patrol car's engine had died away, Nigel strode across the room to take Sherri in his arms. "Thank you."

"For not mentioning the pictures? No big thing. I decided I don't want other people finding out about this, any more than you do." She leaned her head on his shoulder.

"Come and sit down for a minute." After hauling the sofa cushions into place, he settled on the couch and pulled her down beside him, his arm around her. "You feel better now that you've put the problem in the lap of law and order, don't you? Even though they can't do a thing about it."

"Yes," she admitted.

"I don't think I'll ever quite understand the human mind."

She gave him a weak punch in the shoulder. "I just hope I'll be able to sleep here from now on. I don't want the place...spoiled."

"That isn't logical," he said. "These two attacks don't reflect on the safety of your neighborhood. You're being harassed by a particular person for a specific reason. I fully expect to have all this settled within twenty-four hours, and you'll have nothing to worry about."

She didn't bother to mention her belief that he was being over-

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optimistic. "Maybe we should get back to the magazines."

"Excellent idea." He brought the briefcase from the kitchen and divided the stack between them.

Each had fewer than ten magazines to examine, since they were all infrequently published. Resisting the allure of essays on the Loch Ness Monster and stories about nameless entities invoked by forbidden tomes, Sherri eventually unearthed two articles by Brewster. The first dealt with Tarot rather than Satanism. The later piece was entitled, "The Devil Is Alive and Well in California."

"Listen to this," she said to Nigel. "He claims it's an eyewitness account of a Black Mass. No names, of course." She skimmed down the column. "He says, 'On invitation of the coven master, I followed the Pacific Coast Highway for thirty miles southward along the majestic sweep of Big Sur.'"

"Purple prose," commented Nigel.

"It confirms your location of 'near Carmel.' He says, 'In an isolated, wooded enclave of affluence, I entered a restored Victorian house with twin gables. Its subterranean level held a diabolist chapel where I met my co-celebrants, hooded, masked, and cloaked in monastic robes.' Then he goes on to describe the gory details in the same blown-up language."

"Good show," Nigel said, putting aside the last magazine he had been checking. "Unfortunately, there must be scores of houses fitting that description off Route One south of Carmel. Even if we assume the accuracy of his thirty-mile distance. We can look up all the realtors in that area, but I don't see how I can determine which is the right one without visiting them all. That isn't how I planned to spend my vacation."

Sherri pushed her hair back from her forehead. "If only—darn, I keep thinking there's something I should remember. About the convention. I left in such turmoil. Nigel, you can make me remember."

"What?" He shoved the magazines out of the way and hugged her

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close again. “Oh, no, I shouldn’t even be doing this. Sherri, the more often I touch your mind, the harder it will be for us to stay apart. Any decision we make should be rational, not based on the gratification I get from your emotional response. I feel obligated to resist that—that magnetism.”

She tossed her head impatiently. “Well, resist later! Look, what I’m trying to remember may not be anything, or it may be important. We should find out.”

“Granted,” he sighed, “latent memories can hold surprising treasures. Very well, I’ll hypnotize you. If you only knew how much you’re taxing my self-control.” He backed off from her a foot or so, his hands resting lightly on her shoulders. “Look into my eyes. That’s right. I won’t force anything on you, won’t cloud your mind. You’ll remain aware of everything that goes on.”

His violet-gray eyes glowed with a silver sheen, red sparks dancing in their centers. For an instant she stiffened against their allure, recalling how he’d manipulated her at the hotel. She reminded herself that she had asked for this session. Relaxing, she allowed the vibrant warmth of his gaze to wash over her. She felt as if she were absorbing it through her skin, to heat her veins and set her nerves humming.

“Very good,” he murmured. His hands crept up to fondle the back of her neck. “Place yourself in your hotel room late Saturday night. You are packing to leave. Do you recall any new details about the past few hours?”

“The maid,” she said. “Didn’t really forget—just tried to tell myself it wasn’t important.”

“What about the maid?”

“She was searching my stuff. Just like here—nothing missing.”

“Searching your room at midnight?” Nigel said. “That doesn’t sound like an accomplished thief.”

Sherri murmured, “She acted...nervous.”

“Someone must have put her up to it. Don’t you agree?”

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Sherri nodded. Her head felt as if it were floating; she wanted to drowse off in Nigel's embrace, instead of carrying on this tedious conversation.

“Who, though? Can you come up with anything else?”

Suddenly it all flashed together. “The Wookie!”

## CHAPTER 8

The shock snapped her alert like a dash of cold water. She brushed at Nigel's lingering hands. "No, I don't need any more help. It's all clear now."

"Did you say 'Wookie'?" The hypnotic link broken, he sat back.

"Yes. I just remembered how he seemed to be all over the place." Sherri's mind raced, in contrast to the sensuous languor of her body. "I noticed him reading the bulletin board with you, right after you hypnotized Trish Rainbow. Of course I didn't know that's what had happened; she acted strange—dazed—and I thought you'd knocked her flat with your sex appeal." Nigel greeted this remark with a smug grin. "Later the Wookie passed near Brewster's room when I was keeping him busy in the hall for you. Then, when I went back and found out Brewster was dead, the Wookie was hanging around there, too. And he didn't wear a name tag." That last scrap of memory surprised her. Nigel's technique had unlocked things she wouldn't have consciously noticed at the time.



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Nigel thoughtfully ran his fingers through his hair. "So your intuition suggests that the Wookie attacked Brewster and, not finding the photos, decided that you must have them?"

"I don't know if I believe in intuition," Sherri said.

"I do. It's shorthand for the unconscious process of correlating subliminal perceptions. Furthermore, the conclusion makes sense. Of course Brewster's coven leader must have attended the convention—otherwise, how would he have known to pick on you? I made sure nobody saw me with Brewster—"

"So you let *me* be seen with him instead!" Sherri broke in. "All this is your fault!"

"I've already acknowledged that." Nigel put his arm around her. After a second of resistance, she yielded to the sweet warmth flowing over her and snuggled up to him. "It's obvious," he said, "that X—your Wookie—bribed the maid to search your room. When she didn't come up with anything, he unearthed your address and went after you through other intermediaries."

"Knowing he was at the con doesn't tell us who he was."

"It could," said Nigel, "if we could check a list of con members against the yellow pages listing of realtors in the area south of Carmel. That, we can get from the phone book at a well-stocked library. As for the other list, I don't know."

"Trish keeps it on a floppy disk," Sherri said, too pleasantly drowsy to get excited about the subject. "I don't know if she'd let me borrow it—confidential."

"Leave that to me. Get me into her home, and we'll walk out with the disk. We'll copy the other information out of the phone book—where?"

She rubbed her head, catlike, against his shoulder. "The community college library stays open until nine this week. They have a pretty extensive collection of directories from all over the state."

"Wonderful. First you'll call your friend to make sure she's home."

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Then we'll swing by the library for that copying job, followed by a visit to Ms. Rainbow."

"I don't like the idea of your messing with her mind again," Sherri said.

"Only if she's resistant to normal persuasion. And in any case, I certainly won't harm her. Come, now, would you rather try explaining the whole situation to her?"

"I guess not. When do we start this surge of activity?"

Nigel didn't change position, except to guide her head from his shoulder to his chest. "Soon. Right now I don't feel like moving."

"Me neither," she sighed. "I feel a little tired, but—refreshed."

"I'm refreshed, too," he said. "You're tired because I couldn't help draining your psychic energy to some extent during that contact. My instincts associate hypnosis with feeding—and you are so very inviting."

"But I don't feel like I've lost anything. I feel good."

"Ideally, that's how it ought to work. A short rest will restore you to normal."

Leaning on Nigel's chest, Sherri became aware of a low, rumbling growl vibrating in his throat. "Good grief, you're purring!"

"Mmm."

She felt his lips brush her hair. For a few minutes she closed her eyes, lost in his pleasure, which seemed to flow together with hers and submerge them both.

He broke the mood by easing her away from him. "As much as I'd love to spend the night this way, we have work to do. The library closes at nine?"

Sitting up and patting her tousled hair, Sherri was surprised to see, when she looked at the clock, that the time wasn't yet eight. "Sure you wouldn't rather forget the whole thing and go to bed?" she asked, only half joking.

"Persistent, aren't you?" He chuckled, stepping over to the

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disordered shelves to pick up fallen books. “Actually, the bed is optional. It saves me the trouble of picking you up when you collapse.”

She flung a crocheted pillow at him and watched it sail past his head as he nonchalantly sidestepped.

“Better make that call,” he said.

In the bedroom Sherri punched Trish’s number and found her at home. Though Trish sounded puzzled at Sherri’s vague request to “drop in for a few minutes,” she said she wasn’t planning to go out and would welcome a visit. “Don’t I even get a hint about the mystery?”

“Well, it has to do with a man I met at Sequoiacon,” Sherri said. The insinuating tone of Trish’s goodbye demonstrated that she’d accepted Sherri’s intended misdirection and assumed the “mystery” concerned a love affair.

Returning to the living room, Sherri saw Nigel with his back to her, straightening the stereo cabinet. She snatched up another pillow and pitched it at him. Without turning, he shot out his right hand to pluck it from the air and toss it back to her.

“Ready to go? I’ll help you finish cleaning up when we get back.”

The process of locking up before they left dampened her playful mood. “I don’t like this, Nigel,” she said, slipping into the bucket seat of his car. “I’ve always assumed the world was safe. Self-delusion, sure, but now I’ve lost that. It doesn’t feel good.”

Backing and turning the car, he said in an uncharacteristically serious tone, “No, it doesn’t. Someone recently accused me of leading a sheltered life. I have to confess he was right. I’ve been treating this little adventure like a game. To tell the truth, I still haven’t internalized—on the emotional level—the chances of real danger.”

At that moment a Japanese compact chugged up the lane and slowed next to them. Nigel slammed on the brakes. “Damn! Just what we need.”

The man in the other car cut the engine and got out to stroll over to Sherri’s window. Leaning across her, Nigel said, “Hello, Steve.” With

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that clue, Sherri remembered the young man as one of Nigel's students, whom she'd met at the convention.

Steve's puppy-dog eyes widened behind his tortoiseshell glasses. "Dr. Jamison?" When Nigel said nothing, Steve switched his attention back to Sherri. "Hi. Glad I caught you. Had a heck of a time finding out where you live. Your co-workers at the library wouldn't tell me. At the con you escaped before I could pin you down." He grinned.

Sherri couldn't help smiling back at this frank display of interest. "So what brings you here?"

He held up a thick manila folder in his left hand. "Those stories I mentioned the other day. It would be great if you could give me your opinion."

Sherri stretched out an uncertain hand for the manuscripts. She knew from past experience how touchy about their creations some writers could be, even when they'd asked for criticism. "Well, okay, but I'm not sure when I'll get to it."

Leaning on Sherri's door, Steve glanced at Nigel, then said to her, "I was really hoping I could take you out for dinner, but you look busy."

"Well—"

Nigel broke in. "We are. Ms. Hudson is helping me with a research project, and we're in a hurry."

"Oh. Maybe tomorrow night," Steve said. Sherri found his persistence flattering as well as amusing. "Say, Dr. Jamison, did you hear about what happened at the con Saturday night? That guy who was going to display the alien pictures got killed."

"Really? Shocking," Nigel said.

"I was thinking about interviewing him on Sunday," Steve continued, "maybe write an article on the 'alien' for the *Journal of Popular Culture* or some magazine like it. Did you get a chance to find out more about what that Brewster guy had?"

Sherri felt she could almost hear Nigel thinking, *Can't let Steve*

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*latch onto that subject—got to sidetrack him.*

"Listen," Nigel said, "we don't have time to talk just now, but perhaps you'd be willing to help with this project we're working on."

"Sure."

Steve's eager-to-please expression pricked Sherri with a twinge of conscience.

Producing a notepad from the glove compartment, Nigel jotted down a few titles and handed the list to Steve. "I need copies of these articles ASAP. It would save me a lot of time if you'd track them down."

"No problem! I'll try to run them by here tomorrow, okay, Sherri?"

She answered with a bemused nod as Steve, with a wave of farewell, returned to his car and drove away. Turning to Nigel, she said, "What the heck was that list you gave him?"

"A few items picked at random from bibliographies in those fanzines we just went through. Ought to keep him busy for a while. He'll be lucky if he can find most of that material at Berkeley, let alone anywhere else."

Nigel's grim tone surprised Sherri. "That strikes me as a dirty trick," she said. "Why are you so down on him?"

"Because he's an infernal nuisance." Nigel shifted the sports car into first gear. "He's attracted to you. Shall I induce him to get lost?"

Nigel, acting possessive? Impossible! "What makes you think I want him to get lost?"

"For one thing, he's too young for you."

"Of all the—"

"Or should I say, you're too mature for him." Nigel acknowledged her faked indignation with a sidelong smile.

Giggling at the image of herself and Steve as a couple, she said, "Do you think he'll accept that flimsy tale about research?"

"The alternative is to accept that a lovely woman your age would prefer a stodgy, middle-aged professor over a young stud like himself.

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His ego couldn't stand that."

After inching from the winding lane onto the highway, the car surged ahead like an unleashed cheetah. Sherri gasped as inertia pressed her into her seat.

Nigel flashed her a smile. "Tell me how to get to that college of yours."

She ran through the directions. After reciting them back, he said, "Now, let's talk about something entirely unrelated."

The half-hour drive to San Joaquin Junior College, she decided, offered the perfect opportunity to satisfy some of her curiosity about her peculiar new friend. "I still don't fully understand that emotion-feeding business you mentioned. It makes such a big difference to you how the victim responds?"

"Please—'donor'"

"Sounds like a euphemism to me. Is—" Sherri floundered, wondering at her self-consciousness in talking about what she'd participated in with so few qualms. "Is feeding like an orgasm for you?"

"Yes and no." He arched his brows, clearly amused by her embarrassment.

"Watch the road!"

"Don't you trust me to know what I'm doing?" He steered around a curve with the light pressure of a couple of fingers. "It serves the same purpose, yes, but from all I've heard and read on the subject, I'd say an ordinary sexual climax is short-lived and localized compared to what I experience. I feel downright sorry for you people—though human females are less handicapped in that respect than their male counterparts."

"Racist remarks again!"

"You ephemerals have no room to talk about racism," he retorted. "Look at the images of our kind in your media. Either bloodthirsty undead demons, or cartoonish caricatures of Bela Lugosi."

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"You can't blame me for that. Anyway," she added more thoughtfully, "people treat vampires as a joke because nobody believes in them. You don't want people to believe, do you? Or you wouldn't have bothered tracking down those pictures."

"Too true," he said grimly. "I've heard enough stories from my elders about what happened in the ages when people did believe in us. Stakings, decapitations, and burnings by the hundreds. I'd like to believe that if we could interest the scientific community, the general public might come to view us with tolerance."

"Why not?" Sherri said. "After all, some images of vampires are positive. What about Yarbrow's series?"

"You fans forget what a peculiar minority you are, compared to the general public. How many people, out of all those you meet every day at the college, do you think have read Yarbrow? Our Council doesn't think this is the right time to reveal ourselves. I'd like to be able to do something to bring the 'right time' a little closer."

"And you're optimistic because you've led a sheltered life, right? Tell me about yourself, personally."

"You won't hear any fascinating secrets," he said. "For one thing, I'm not allowed to betray anyone but myself. I spent my early childhood in Nevada. We have a sort of headquarters there, and don't bother asking for specifics. My mother turned me over to her brother, my Advisor—a tutor and counselor, you'd say, I suppose—when I reached age four."

"Why?"

Since twilight was closing in, Nigel removed his dark glasses. Sherri noticed his frown of impatience as he had to slow down on the residential streets approaching the college. "Standard practice. Why should a woman, after being tied down to a nursing infant and toddler for three to four years, be stuck with the child all the way up to adulthood? Your child-rearing customs are irrational."

"Didn't you miss her? Or even feel rejected?"

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"I'm the psychologist here, remember?" he said. "Naturally I had some such emotions at first. The pleasures of travel and learning overcame them. Anyway, it's not as if she threw me out into the harsh light of day and bade me never darken her door again. We meet once or twice a year—as friends.

"Needless to say, I couldn't attend public schools. I was privately tutored; then Uncle Ian got me into the College of William and Mary at age seventeen. After that, I took my doctorate at the University of Virginia, with a dissertation on psychohistory. All very ordinary—we aren't that much more likely to lead hair-raising lives than you are."

"What about Laura?"

"She went looking for trouble," he sighed. "She always was reckless about what she called 'learning experiences'—like the time she went backpacking in Yellowstone and tried to hypnotize a grizzly bear. And I thought we weren't going to bring her up for a while."

Following Sherri's instructions, he pulled into the visitors' section of the library parking lot, nearly deserted at this time of year. The library, a white, red-roofed mock Spanish structure like the rest of the campus buildings, stood amid a cluster of pines. Nigel followed Sherri across the flagstoned patio, through the double doors, and past the security turnstile.

The slim young black woman behind the circulation desk smiled a greeting at Sherri as they entered. "Dropping in this time of evening on your vacation? Has the altitude affected your brain, or what?" Her curious gaze silently asked, *Who's the hunk?*

"Hi, Carla. Urgent research," Sherri answered lightly. Not eager to try explaining Nigel, she didn't slow her brisk stride through the carpeted lobby to the reference shelves.

As soon as the stacks shielded the two of them from the front desk, Nigel asked with a sly smile, "Why didn't you introduce me?"

"Because I like Carla," she said. "Why would I complicate her life that way? Everyone you meet seems to end up in trouble."



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“Generalization based on insufficient evidence.”

They walked to the rows of phone directories against the back wall without meeting anybody. “Here’s what we want,” Nigel said, selecting two of the volumes. “Copying machines?”

The copiers occupied their own tiny room off the main lobby. Nigel gave Sherri a handful of dollar bills. “I’ll turn pages while you deposit coins.” After she’d fed the bills to the change maker, marveling that it happened to be functional tonight, they got to work. In the silent library, she felt an urge to peer over her shoulder as they copied each page. The small chamber with its closed door intensified the sense of isolation and secrecy. Why did she feel like a spy duplicating classified documents? No doubt about it, associating with someone like Nigel could really turn a normal person weird.

Or could she call herself normal? Would your average all-American woman of the nineties jump at the chance to spend a night with a vampire?

The overhead lights blinked off and on.

She jumped, spilling quarters from her open palm.

Nigel patted her back. “Easy, there. I assume it’s the half-hour warning before closing time, just the way most libraries do it?”

“Sure—sorry.” She stooped down to retrieve the coins, ducking her head to avoid his amused eyes.

“Why are you nervous? I’m the member of the persecuted minority here, aren’t I?”

“Yes, and I’m beginning to understand why, if they’re all like you.” She inserted another quarter into the slot. “Will you have enough time to finish?”

“Certainly. I’m almost done.” A few pages later, he closed the phone books and rolled up his sheaf of copies.

“If you manage to hit on the right address,” Sherri said as they reshelfed the directories, “how do you figure on finding the place, if it’s as isolated as Brewster implied? Suppose it’s not shown in any of the

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computer street guides?”

“No need to bother with those. I brought along a stack of maps,” he said. “Didn’t you think I’d come prepared?”

“I should have known. Regular Eagle Scout.”

They tiptoed out behind a couple of stragglers checking out novels from the paperback rack. Again Sherri ignored Carla’s silent query about Nigel. Maybe a few weeks later, Sherri reflected, she’d introduce him openly to her friends as her significant other. She giggled at the thought of associating that trendy phrase with him.

“What’s that about?” he asked, holding the car door for her.

“I just remembered a new psychologist joke,” she improvised.

Though his sharp glance told her he sensed she was fibbing, he didn’t challenge her. “Must you inflict it on me? Go ahead, then.” He shut her door and walked around to the driver’s seat.

“Man goes to a therapist,” she said as Nigel started the ignition. “He says, ‘Doc, I have a terrible time sleeping. I keep having weird dreams. Last night I dreamed I was a wigwam. The night before, I was a tepee. What’s wrong with me?’ The doctor says, ‘Young man, your trouble is obvious. You are two tents.’”

Nigel groaned, “Where on earth did you get that abomination?”

“Out of *Boys’ Life*. Carla’s nephew came in with a copy the other day.”

“And insisted on reading you all the jokes?” Nigel pulled out of the parking lot. “I’ve generally avoided contact with the young of the human species, and things like that make me glad of it. How do we get to Ms. Rainbow’s home?”

She told him. Trish lived in a town house only a few miles from the college. “What are vampire children like? How was it, growing up as one?”

“How can I answer that,” he said, “when I don’t know what it’s like to grow up as an ephemeral? I’ve no basis for comparison. One difference would probably strike you—other children. As a child, you

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were doubtless surrounded by playmates.”

“You weren’t?”

“No, I told you our breeding rate is low. With my mother, and later with my uncle, I spent a fair amount of time at the Nevada headquarters, off and on. The other young ones did, too, but our visits there never overlapped by more than a few weeks. There were very few children, and none exactly my age.” Talking and driving, he glanced more often at Sherri than at the road.

She clutched the edge of her seat and ordered herself to ignore his navigational technique. He seemed to find the route with minimal checking of landmarks, and the sports car sideslipped potential disasters with preternatural slickness.

“What about your sister?”

“Except for a few glimpses of a baby in my mother’s arms during our visits, I never met Laura until she was about ten.”

“What did you think of the baby?” Being a younger child herself, Sherri had no basis for comparison.

“Probably what a human child would have thought in the same situation,” Nigel said. “She was a noisy, useless bundle of uncontrolled emotions. Gave me a headache. Once she reached the age of reason, naturally we became friends—hunted cooperatively once in a while, practiced our Spanish together, and so forth.”

“Age of reason,” Sherri echoed.

“Once we’re weaned and placed under an Advisor’s care, we’re expected to begin thinking like adults at a fairly young age.” He added in answer to her dismayed reaction, “Not that we don’t have the emotions of childhood and adolescence—impatience, recklessness, scorn for our elders’ stodginess. I’ll never forget the hair-raising experience we had when Laura talked me into night waterskiing on Lake Tahoe,” he said with a reminiscent chuckle. “I suspect we’re not too different from you, that way.”

“But you don’t have families, then?”

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“Broaden your mind, my dear,” he said. “We don’t have a family structure like yours, based on marriage. We do value the sibling bond—I was taught early that I had obligations to my sister, even though I didn’t spend all that much time with her. For instance, when she has a baby, I’ll be the first choice for its Advisor—provided I’m old enough by then. However, it wouldn’t make sense for creatures who live for millennia to maintain the kind of family ties you do. Childhood takes up such a large percentage of your relatively short lives that you aren’t too badly handicapped by keeping up childhood relationships for a lifetime.”

“What do you mean?”

“That your attitudes remain set,” he said. “Submission to parents, rivalry with siblings. Why, even with your few decades of adulthood, some of you suffer crippling neuroses because you can’t break out of those early emotional patterns. Can you imagine going on that way for five thousand years?”

*Fifty centuries of Tim treating me like a baby sister?* “I can’t imagine one thousand years—or one hundred,” she said. “Can you?”

“Granted, I’m too young, myself, to internalize that reality.” They’d turned into the block of town houses where Trish lived, and the car crawled along the street as he searched for the address. “I believe it, intellectually, because I know men and women who actually have lived that long. Anyway, mothers and offspring relate in adulthood as friends, not as parent and child.”

“We want the next cul-de-sac,” Sherri said. Her brain felt overloaded by the information he’d laid on her, making her glad to suspend the conversation for a while.

Trish answered the door in a green and gold caftan and invited Sherri and Nigel into the cramped living room. She surveyed Nigel with open curiosity when he accepted her handshake in a clasp too lingering to suit Sherri. “Sure, I remember running into you at Sequoiakon.” She darted a glance at Sherri, who ignored the implied

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question. “Come clean—what’s this ‘dropping in’ all about? Anybody want a drink?”

“Which question do you want answered first?” Sherri said, sitting on the wide, angular couch. “We have a favor to ask, and I wouldn’t mind a diet cola.”

Nigel answered Trish’s interrogative look with, “Plain soda, if you have it.” He returned to admiring the Navaho rugs on the floor and the feathered God’s-eye decorations on the walls. When Trish brought the drinks, he sat down beside Sherri and waited for her to explain their request.

In the past few minutes she’d come up with a subterfuge that she hoped wouldn’t sound too feeble. “Nigel met a guy at the con that he’d like to get in touch with again. Something about an article he suggested Nigel write for one of his zines, right?” She turned to Nigel, who solemnly nodded agreement with this fabrication. “The trouble is, he’s misplaced the man’s business card and can’t remember his name, much less his address. It was, you know, late at night, and the libations were flowing.”

A fleeting spark of annoyance in the eyes beneath Nigel’s thick, black brows warned Sherri that she’d pay for making him sound like a drink-sodden incompetent.

Trish said with a knowing smile, “I get the picture. How can I help?”

“Sherri suggested you might let us borrow your computer file of convention attendees,” he said to Trish. “I’m sure I’ll recognize the name when I see it.”

Trish rose and walked around to the computer, on a desk crammed behind the conversation pit formed by the couch and two matching chairs. “Why don’t I just load the file for you right now and let you read the names from the screen?”

“Uh, that would take too long,” Sherri improvised. “We don’t want to keep you.”

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“No problem,” Trish said, pausing with her hand on the plastic disk storage box.

“Actually, we have reservations somewhere, and we don’t want to be late,” Nigel said. “After that, we have a rather full evening planned.” He punctuated the sentence with a blatant leer that Sherri recognized as his revenge for her earlier remarks.

“I don’t know,” Trish said. “These membership lists really are supposed to be confidential. Of course, that doesn’t exactly apply to you, Sher, because you’ve worked on them, but making an exception could be...” Her voice trailed off dubiously. “We have to be careful. Why, Sunday afternoon a man in a Wookiee costume who wouldn’t even identify himself as leaning on me to give out your address and phone number.”

Sherri’s heartbeat quickened. Hot on the scent!

Nigel circled the couch to stand beside Trish. Resting his fingertips lightly on her wrist, he said, “I quite understand. But surely, as you said, in a case like this it’s only a technical point.”

Trish automatically turned toward Nigel when he spoke and stared, wide-eyed, when his gaze snagged hers. “Well—maybe you’re right.”

Nigel lowered his voice. “Of course. You don’t think I’m planning to sell the list to a rapacious mail-order company, do you?”

“No.” Her lips remained parted after she spoke.

Tracing long swirls on her forearm, Nigel said, “Sherri will return the disk in a day or two. You trust her, don’t you?”

“Sure.” As if independent of Trish’s dazed brain, her free hand fumbled in the file box, extracted a disk, and gave it to Nigel.

Sherri found herself sizzling inside at the sight of Nigel caressing her friend. *Can I possibly be jealous? That’s egregiously stupid!*

“Thank you, Ms. Rainbow,” Nigel said softly. “I do appreciate it.” He pulled back from her, breaking eye contact, and glanced at the label on the disk. He flashed an “OK” sign at Sherri behind Trish’s back, as the latter stumbled and caught herself on the arm of the couch. Nigel

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zipped around the couch to pick up Trish's cola from the coffee table and hand it to her.

Trish sipped from the glass and blinked a couple of times. "Sure you can't stick around for a while?"

Leaping up, Sherri grabbed Nigel's hand. "Like he said, we have to run to make our reservations. Thanks a bunch for your help. Talk to you later."

"Delightful to see you again, Ms. Rainbow," Nigel said, allowing Sherri to drag him out the door. Trish stared after them as if she'd just been hit by a minor earthquake.

In the car Nigel, his lips twitching with amusement, passed the disk to Sherri. Shoving it into her purse, she glared at him.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked as he backed the car out of the lot. "You did give me permission to hypnotize her."

"Well, you didn't have to enjoy it so much!" She clapped a hand over her mouth. "That is definitely not what I meant to say."

"All right," Nigel prompted in a humoring tone, "what did you mean?"

"Watching you control her mind made me more uncomfortable than I expected."

"Your terms exaggerate the facts," Nigel said. "I merely nudged her in a particular direction. Even we can't 'control' a person of normal intelligence in the Svengali-like way you're imagining. Not without digging into the deeper roots of the psyche."

"When you touched her, she went under so fast—just like that!" Sherri felt a tightness beneath her diaphragm. Under Nigel's mesmeric influence at the hotel, she must have looked as vacuously enraptured as Trish had.

"Yes, with each successive contact, the trance comes easier and faster. I haven't harmed your friend, though. Twice isn't enough to leave any permanent mark on her mind."

Whipping around the freeway on-ramp, the sports car accelerated to

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seventy within seconds.

Sherri gritted her teeth at the wind streaming in her face. “Do you always flout the speed limit this way?”

“If the First Cause had intended us to be restricted to a mere fifty-five miles per hour,” Nigel said, “He, She, or It wouldn’t have allowed the invention of the radar detector.” He reached up to flick on the little black box mounted above the rearview mirror. “You ephemerals do serve useful purposes other than nourishment—such as devising a complex technology we can take advantage of.”

The cool superiority of his tone made her itch to lash out at him. How much of that represented his true attitude, and how much was a pose to keep her at a distance? “You’re evading the issue.”

“You changed the subject, not I.” Contrary to his usual driving style, he kept his gaze intent on the highway as he continued with, “Listen, my dear, one thing I value about associating with you is the freedom from constant concealment. Up to a point, systematically deceiving everyone I meet can be a pleasant game. Eventually it palls. I like being honest with you—it’s a refreshing change.”

“So?” she prompted when his pause stretched into reverie.

“If we’re to be friends, I won’t suppress or deny my true self. Yes, I enjoyed hypnotizing Ms. Rainbow. It’s natural to enjoy exercising an innate skill, just as it’s natural to enjoy food and sleep.”

“I think I understand,” she said.

“You’re trying to understand.” He relaxed his grip on the wheel, flexing his fingers. “Good start.”

Sherri suddenly recalled the reason he’d offered for his reluctance to mesmerize her earlier that evening. “It probably whetted your appetite, too.”

“A little. But I do possess some rudiments of self-control.” He gave her a sidelong look. “I sensed a different emotion in you, when I touched her.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sherri muttered, furious



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at how easily he could make her blush.

“Not disinterested anger; more like jealousy. You disliked my showing interest—even simulated—in another woman.” His penetrating eyes challenged her to deny the statement.

She turned to face the window. “Shut up, Nigel.”

Back at her house, Sherri loaded the convention disk into her computer.

Nigel stood behind her, watching. “How many names on this list, I wonder?”

“Hundreds and hundreds,” she said. “More than actually attended, I’ll bet. Some people joined at a lower rate as supporting members, and others might have paid full price intending to show up and then weren’t able to.”

“I don’t suppose it’s possible to shuffle the names geographically?” he asked.

“Sure—Trish has the program set up so the names can be grouped by zip code.” Sherri typed in the proper instructions, and the disk drive whirled to life.

The list flashed onto the screen, zip codes in the far left column.

“One problem occurs to me,” Nigel said. “If this includes only preregistered members—”

“No, Trish would have updated the entries right after the con. She uses it as a mailing list for future conventions.”

Nigel leaned over her shoulder to scroll the text. His breath tickled her scalp. “Judging from the zip on Laura’s most recent letter, you should block it starting there.” Sherri initiated the function. Leapfrogging the cursor over chunks of text, he finally said, “That should be far enough. End blocking. Excellent—now, print it, please.”

While the printer clattered to itself, Nigel’s hand rested on the back of Sherri’s neck. She fought the conflicting desires to squirm away from his touch and to lean back against him and beg for more. When the printout ended, Nigel carried the sheets over to the couch where

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he'd left the photocopied pages from the phone books. Sherri felt mingled relief and disappointment at the broken contact.

Sitting on the rug near him, she said, "The list from the con isn't so bad—maybe fifty or so names—but there must be hundreds of realtors here. How could we be sure of noticing a duplicate if we found one? Unless it's a standout like Xavier Zabrowski, or something."

"It's not so bad as all that," Nigel said. "Could be tedious, but no real problem." He silently read through the computer-generated column of names and addresses. After the first pass, he flipped back to the first page and repeated the process. "All right, begin reading aloud the names from the yellow pages."

"All of them?"

He smiled thinly. "If we're in luck, we'll find X near the front end of the alphabet, and you won't have to read them all." He leaned back and closed his eyes. "Fire away."

Shaking her head in puzzlement, Sherri started reading. She skipped unarguably feminine names, since the threatening voice that had called her had belonged to a man. She reached the end of the first sheaf of Realtor entries with no flicker of recognition from Nigel.

"Now the other batch," he said, still resting his head on the back of the couch in an annoyingly relaxed manner. She swallowed to wet her throat and continued the recitation. "A and N Enterprises, DCA Homes Limited—"

"Hang on, that rings a bell," Nigel said. He read from the printout, "D. Charles Alton—try that one."

"Try? How?"

"Call him," Nigel said. "See if you recognize the voice."

"Me?" she squeaked.

"Who else?" he said with a tinge of impatience. "He can't reach through the phone to strangle you."

Simmering at his dictatorial tone but recognizing the logic of the approach, she went into the bedroom and dialed. When a slurred voice

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answered, she said, “Mr. Alton? This is Sherri Hudson. About those pictures—”

“What?” the man on the other end barked. “Lady, you’ve got the wrong number.”

Now that he’d spoken a full sentence, she realized the man’s voice didn’t resemble her anonymous caller’s. Cheeks burning, she hung up and trudged back into the living room. “It’s getting close to my bedtime, and the idea of pestering any more unfriendly strangers doesn’t appeal to me. What now?”

“Keep reading,” Nigel said. When she glared at him, he added more gently, “Brace up, it can’t take much longer.”

Her eyes and throat aching, she resumed reading from the photocopy. In the middle of “E,” Nigel suddenly ordered, “Stop.”

“Elkton, George?”

“The one above him,” Nigel said.

“Eldridge, Donald.”

Nigel picked up the computer list and skimmed down it. “Here it is. Not all that common a name, and the location fits.”

“How do you do that, anyway?”

“Eidetic memory,” he said. “I can’t take credit for it; we’re all born with the inability to forget words and visual images.”

“And I forget my own area code,” Sherri sighed. “What if two or three realtors from south of Carmel happen to have been at the con?”

“If Eldridge isn’t the right one, we try again.”

“What’s this ‘we’?” she said, only half joking.

He got up and paced around the room, skirting the papers and desk supplies still heaped on one section of the floor. “I’m betting on this one, though. I don’t believe in that degree of coincidence.”

“How are you going to confirm your guess?” she asked. “Drive down there and accuse him face to face?”

“You’re going to call him.”

“Uh-uh, one fiasco per night is plenty. I can take only so much

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humiliation.”

Nigel stopped pacing and turned to her. “This is the last thing I’ll ask of you. Call him and say you’re fed up, and he can have the pictures. Invite him here—convince him you won’t feel safe meeting elsewhere. If he doesn’t know what you’re talking about, we go back to the lists.”

“And what happens when he says we have a deal and rushes right up here?”

“Needless to say, you’ll be elsewhere,” Nigel said. “I have no intention of exposing you to danger again. While he’s away from home, snapping at your bait, I’ll drive down, search his house, and come away with Laura.”

“Assuming she wants to leave.”

Nigel shrugged. “Of course. If she convinces me she’s staying of her own free will, all bets are off.”

Sherri rested her chin on her fist, probing the scheme for flaws. “You think Eldridge—if it’s him—will fall for the bait?”

“Why not? You’ve had no success convincing him you *don’t* have the photos.”

“Wait a minute. How will getting Laura away from him stop him from bothering me?”

“Think about it,” Nigel said. “What harm can the photos do him without the living specimen? Once Laura has escaped, a prudent man with a reputation to protect won’t waste energy on side issues.”

“It could work,” Sherri admitted.

“Fine. While you telephone, I’ll straighten up a bit. I’ll leave the desk to you; you know where everything goes.” He disappeared into the kitchen, where she heard him shutting drawers and cabinets.

She took the printout into the bedroom again and punched Eldridge’s number into the phone. When she heard “Hello, Don Eldridge speaking,” a chill tiptoed up her spine. Against all reason, she immediately recognized the commonplace male voice—no doubt this

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time.

“Mr. Eldridge, this is Sherri Hudson.” She detested the sickly quaver of her voice. “You called me recently. About...certain items.”

“Don’t be coy, Ms. Hudson. This isn’t a James Bond thriller, and my phone isn’t tapped. You’ve changed your mind about the pictures?”

“Yes,” she said. “They aren’t worth the hassle.”

“Sensible girl. Where shall we meet?”

His tone shifted her trepidation toward anger. “You come here, to my house. I wouldn’t feel safe anywhere else.”

“You wouldn’t? What about my safety?” he asked.

“Look here, you.” She was past caring whether a show of anger would blow the deal. “I’ve had enough of you and those stupid pictures. I just want to get rid of them. I’m not setting a trap, and I’m not moving from this spot. Take it or leave it.”

“No need to lose your temper, Ms. Hudson. I accept your terms, and I’ll see you in about an hour and a half.” Click.

Sherri slammed down the receiver.

Nigel came into the bedroom and started stacking fallen boxes on the closet shelves. “He agreed? Wonderful. I suggest you go to a friend’s house, or a motel if you prefer, while I—”

“You?” she stormed, hands on her hips. The verbal clash with the man who’d wrecked her peace had seared away both fatigue and fear. “You think I’ll stand back while you—”

He whirled to face her. “Out of the question. You’re not coming along.”

“Who gave you the right to give orders?”

“Think of it as advice, then. Advice you’ll take if you have any sense. After all, you’ve done your part.”

“Insults will get you nowhere.” She tossed aside the computer printout and marched up to him. “I’m the one who’s been attacked and invaded. I have as much right to go after Eldridge as you do, maybe more.”

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“The right to get in my way and slow me down? My dear...” He trailed off with an exasperated sigh.

She punched him in the chest, realizing half a second later how ridiculous she must look. “Don’t patronize me! If you leave me behind, I’ll follow by myself and *really* be a nuisance.”

He folded his arms, glaring down at her. “You would, wouldn’t you?” After a moment of silence, he relaxed and placed his hands lightly on her waist. “You might be useful, at that.”

She stiffened, suspicious of his yielding. “Like in the fable of the mouse and the lion?”

He said with a soft chuckle, “More than that. Depending on what Eldridge has done with her, Laura might be in an—unpredictable—mood. On the way back, you can drive and leave me free to handle her, if necessary.”

“Okay,” she said, shrugging out of his hold. He didn’t try to restrain her.

“However, you stay in the car,” he said as they headed for the front door. “Anywhere else, you would be a liability; the risk isn’t worth it. Understand?”

“I hear you.”

“Think I don’t know the difference between ‘Roger’ and ‘Wilco’?” he said. “I sense mental reservations there, but I won’t try to force your consent. I think you’re intelligent enough not to commit willful suicide.”

“You’re exaggerating.”

“He killed Brewster, didn’t he?”

## CHAPTER 9

*“Bastardo! Cochino!”* Laura spat. A day of rest had reinvigorated her hatred and despair. She was half tempted to fling herself on Don again, inviting him to fire that gun he flaunted. Death would be preferable to this drawn-out agony. What she feared, however, was lingering on in torment for weeks, while he withheld the release of execution.

He only stood in the doorway, smirking. The further Laura’s control slipped, the more complacent he became. “I’m going out, and I thought you’d like to hear that I’m picking up those photos. You could be a little more polite and grateful.”

She molded her face into a blank mask and waited.

“At first I planned on burning them right away,” he said, “but now I’ve got a better idea. How about if I give them to a reporter myself? A real one, not a zero like Brewster.”

Laura straightened, her fingers relaxing from their clawlike contortion. “You’d expose me? After all this time trying to keep me a

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secret?” A bluff, it had to be—or could he be crazy enough to carry out the threat?

“What’s it worth to you to stop me?”

Weariness dragged at her. Why did he renew the tedious argument? “Must you start that again? For the last time, it’s not going to happen.”

He opened his mouth, then snapped it shut. She saw his aura growing turgid and muddy with anger.

Reining his anger, he said in a low voice, “If you don’t make it happen, you might find yourself in a cage in a science lab—or on a table being dissected. Wouldn’t it be some joke if they didn’t know how to kill you first, and you felt every second of it?”

She reached up to brush back the matted hair straggling into her face. “Your threat is the joke, Don. We both know bloody well you won’t tell anyone about me. If the outside world finds out you’ve been keeping an alien predator in your house, they’ll also find out you’ve been running a Satanist cult, and there goes your career.”

He flushed, the vein in his neck swelling as he clenched his jaws. “Now you listen to me, you—whatever kind of *thing* you are—I want a dose of your blood, and I’m going to get it one way or another.” With no further warning, he fired.

The shot reverberated in the small room, a painful blast in Laura’s sensitive ears. Hunger had slowed her reflexes; she didn’t dodge. For a second she stared at her left forearm, trickling blood where the bullet had seared a path across the flesh. The pain and the metallic scent made her head spin. She staggered a couple of feet toward Don.

He whipped the gun up, pointing the muzzle at her chest. “Don’t move! You know where the next one will go.”

Poised in the center of the room, she felt the long-denied urge to transform flood her cells. Weak and trembling, she let it sweep her away. Fire seemed to rage through her nerves as her ear-tips lengthened, nails elongated into talons, fur sprouted with an itch like a thousand ants crawling on her, and wings tried to unfurl through her



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clothes. Before her swimming eyes her arms became the forelimbs of a beast, then oozed back into human form. Her muscles felt like clay being pounded into a grotesque shape by an inept potter. But she couldn't stop the process. While it racked her, she was vaguely aware of Don gaping at her. She collapsed into a fetal curl.

When the pain of involuntary transformation ebbed, she focused on the sting of the bullet wound. It yielded to psychic pressure, and in a moment she pulled herself upright. She didn't have the energy left for stanching the blood that still seeped from the superficial gash, but soon enough, her body would repair itself without her conscious direction.

Still covering her with the weapon, Don stared at her arm. "Well, how about it?"

"Go sodomize yourself," she muttered.

Breathing in noisy, irregular gulps, he said, "I'm leaving now, to pick up that incriminating evidence. When I get back in a few hours, you know what I'm going to do?"

No answer. Fatigue beat at Laura's brain. Despite the late hour, she intended to sleep as soon as he left her alone; at this moment she wouldn't care if he threatened to bring in a meat cleaver and hack off her limbs one by one.

"One of two things will happen." Don started backing toward the door. "Either you'll give me that drink of your own free will. Or I'll shoot you in the chest, then through the skull—and gamble that whatever weird chemicals you have in your blood will work on me even if you're dying." He smiled at her involuntary gasp of horror. "If it works the way I expect, I can get along without you. I'm beginning to think a dead vampire would be a lot less trouble than a live one."

She hardly noticed him withdraw and lock the deadbolt. What he promised would be worse than death, however protracted. While it wouldn't give him the result he hoped for, such an exchange would constitute the ultimate violation for her, akin to having a poisonous serpent burrow into her brain and spawn there. She wrapped herself

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into a quivering ball on the rug and pressed her mouth to the bleeding slit in her flesh.

\* \* \*

In grim silence, Sherri followed Nigel outside and locked the door.

"Your car," he said. "Mine only seats two."

"You don't really believe Eldridge would try to kill us, do you?" Sherri asked as she turned on the ignition.

"On his own turf? Frankly, no. However, I could be wrong." Nigel fidgeted in the passenger seat, seeking a comfortable position for his long legs.

"Anyway, he isn't supposed to be there."

"Never assume," Nigel said as he riffled through a map manual he'd taken from his car. "Head for the coast, of course. I suggest picking up 101 as soon as you can, then crossing over to Route One north of Monterey."

"I could have figured that out by myself," she snapped.

His mouth quirked in amusement. "What's the matter with you? You got your way."

As the car crawled down the hill to the two-lane county road, she said, "Then why do I still feel manipulated and tromped on?"

"Why do you think? You weren't feeling that way last night."

The reminder made her insides churn with a mixture of arousal and anxiety. "Trust a psychologist to answer a question with a question! How could I feel anything but what you wanted me to, with you touching me, casting a spell over me—"

He reached across the back of the seat to touch her, then drew back and stared out the window. "The encounter happened of your own free will." He kept his voice low and neutral. "Do you deny that? Do you seriously believe I coerced you in any way?"

Searching her memories, she grudgingly said, "No. I wanted you. So what does that say about me?"

"What do you think?" he asked quietly.

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Illogically, his detachment annoyed her more than if he'd tried the hypnotic persuasion she claimed to fear. "That I must be warped—turned on by a monster!" She felt heat flood her face. "Nigel, I didn't mean that. Not that strongly, anyway."

If the outburst hurt him, he kept the pain out of his voice. "I know. Yet you do have doubts. Even regrets?"

"No regrets," she said hastily, clutching the wheel as she navigated the ill-lit county road, peering through the windshield for the "Junction 101" sign. "Doubts, yes."

"Natural," he said. "Inevitable. That is why I don't want to get more deeply involved. How could I expect you to accept such a relationship wholeheartedly? It's not what your culture has prepared you for."

She giggled at the contrast the abstract statement conjured up. A suburban split-level with a fenced yard, a dog, and two point five children, juxtaposed against decades of blood-drenched nights. Culture, incarnate in Tim and his wife, would have her committed. "You mentioned a previous affair, and that you'd 'been through it before.' How about telling me?"

For a moment she thought he would withhold any such personal revelation. His silence, though, turned out to be only a pause to gather his thoughts.

"Denise and I attended William and Mary together," he began. "We were friends, and she had no idea of my...difference. After I graduated, I moved to Charlottesville for grad school, while she stayed in Williamsburg to go on for her M.A. We wrote, but infrequently."

"That was your choice?" Sherri guessed. With the sparse traffic on 101 this late in the evening, she felt free to talk, letting the car sail along with minimal attention from her.

"Right," Nigel said. "My attraction to her would have overwhelmed me if I hadn't kept my distance. I didn't think she could accept what I am, and friendship seemed preferable to trying for more and alienating her."

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“She eventually found out, though?”

“Because I let her. Coming back for a visit, I deliberately put myself in a position where she couldn’t fail to realize I wasn’t human.” He gave Sherri a wry smile. “Just as I did with you. Denied it to myself at the time, but the truth is, I wanted you to know. Testing you, perhaps—as I tested Denise’s devotion. You can’t imagine how strong that yearning for intimacy becomes. Once we’re fixated on a particular donor, there’s no logic to it. Damn it, it’s a trap!”

“So you fought it?”

He smiled at her attempt to speak as coolly as he had a few minutes before. “Now you sound like a therapist, all very reflective and non-judgmental. Actually, I resemble Eliza Doolittle’s father in the musical—when temptation comes, I give right in. I had a couple of good years with Denise, visiting her one weekend a month. That was safe, but not enough, never enough. She accepted my need to prey on others in between, but of course she wasn’t happy about it. Nor was I—in contrast, other donors weren’t much more satisfying than animals.”

Sherri’s scalp prickled at this casual dismissal of most of the human race. Well, she’d asked for this explanation, and she had resolved to try to understand. His refusal to soften his true nature for her was a kind of compliment. “Then you left Virginia.”

He nodded. “After receiving my doctorate, I got an offer from the University of California. A tenure-track position at Berkeley isn’t to be lightly turned down.”

“Why would it matter to you?” she asked. “You couldn’t have much need for money, not having to buy things like food and life insurance.”

“Do you think I sleep in a crypt? A town house in Berkeley doesn’t pay for itself, nor does the sports car. Talk about hostages to fortune!” He continued more seriously, “In any case, I did accept the appointment, and Denise didn’t want to leave Virginia, having lived there all her life. She teaches English at a community college, quite

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contentedly.”

“Are you saying you broke up with her then?” Sherri recognized her curiosity on this point as tinged with jealousy. If she were going to consort with Nigel at all, she wanted to be unique for him, not the latest on a list of donors.

“Not at all, and that’s the trouble. We maintained our ties and met at intervals—intervals that have been getting longer in the past year or two.” He shifted in his seat, as if bothered by more than physical discomfort. “I didn’t want to give her up altogether, and she—she’s addicted, too, physically as well as emotionally. It’s getting...weaker, the less often we meet. Yet she still hasn’t become involved with anyone else—no, shall we say, ‘normal’ lovers.”

Sherri glanced at him. He wouldn’t meet her eyes. “You want her to?”

“I know that would be best for her. I’m doing her no kindness, encouraging her to keep her life on hold. We’ll never have a complete, permanent union. Last time we met—four months ago—I sensed she was ready to move on. And now...”

She waited, silently questioning, trying to project sympathetic interest.

“It’s over,” he said with a long, shuddering sigh. “You’ve helped me see that.”

“Gee, and me without even a psychology degree.”

He grinned at the flip remark. “Watch your tongue, woman. What I mean is that if I were still totally dependent on Denise, I couldn’t have felt that instant, powerful attraction to you.”

Sherri’s heartbeat accelerated at this admission. “Is that so bad?”

“It could be, if, in my emotional state, I dragged you into an entanglement we’re not sure we really want.”

“So I’m getting you on the rebound?” The thought reactivated the flutter of anxiety in her midriff. Any healthy woman would have done for him at this time.

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“Whether we’re ‘getting’ each other at all is still unsettled. I don’t think it would be wise.”

“Why do you have to think so much?” she burst out. “What’s wrong with following your emotional impulses?”

“The impulsive choice usually causes trouble,” he said. “I haven’t built a safe, relatively satisfactory life by acting on impulse.”

They lapsed into a silence that Sherri felt no desire to break. She withdrew into gloomy brooding as she maneuvered the car onto Route One. Around Pacific Grove a light fog drifted in from the ocean. In a thick one, Sherri wouldn’t have dared the high, winding coastal highway. When they passed Carmel and climbed into the Big Sur region, her fingers spasmodically clutched the wheel until they ached. Her heart dropped to her diaphragm at every curve, as the headlights swept over rocks tumbling steeply down to the shore. Through Nigel’s open window the salt smell and rhythmic crash of the Pacific assailed her.

She loved the magnificent view in daylight, with someone else driving. Now she cowered before fragmented glimpses of cliffs or dense woods on her left, dizzy space on her right. Every few miles a light pierced the dark from a house lurking in the forest or perched on a spur of land jutting out over the beach. Just when her eyes had readjusted to darkness, it seemed, the lights of an oncoming car would rush toward her.

After the dozenth time she braked almost to a stop while a vehicle flashed by in the opposite direction, Nigel said in a tightly controlled voice, “Can’t you go any faster?”

“Not if you don’t want me to run right over the cliff.”

“Haven’t you ever driven this route before?”

“Once or twice,” she said. “Not at night.” Her cramped hands were slick on the wheel.

“I should have known,” said Nigel. “Confound it, at this rate we won’t get there until dawn.”

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Out of the corner of her eye she saw his fists clenched in his lap. She was too busy holding her distance from a car ahead to waste attention on resenting his attitude. After the other car turned off into a campground along the way, Nigel pointed to a scenic overlook ahead.

“Stop there.”

She automatically obeyed before asking why. Her legs were trembling with tension; she welcomed a respite.

Nigel opened his door. “Move over, I’m taking the wheel,” he said as he climbed out.

Indignation swamped her shakiness. “What’s wrong, you don’t like my driving?”

He walked around the car and opened her door, waiting for her to slide over. “My dear,” he said tightly, “I like a great many things about you. Your driving, however, gives me severe abdominal cramps.”

Sputtering wordlessly, she made way for him.

“Nothing personal,” he said, adjusting the seat and mirrors. “I have the vision and reflexes for this, and you don’t. Safety belt fastened? Very well, brace yourself.”

Sherri’s four-door compact leaped forward with an aggressiveness she wouldn’t have believed possible. Gripping the armrest, she emitted a moan. Nigel barreled down the highway. She didn’t dare look at the speedometer.

“It’s not as fast as it feels,” he said. “Seems that way because we’re going downhill.” Blast him, he sounded cheerful!

Her stomach lurched as inertia flattened her against the backrest. This ride scared her as much as the one and only time she’d dared a roller coaster. More, in fact, because on the highway she recognized the danger as real. “Nigel, do you have to—”

“You doubt my ability? Don’t waste energy that way; save your fear for real dangers.” Careening down upon a truck blocking the right lane, he whipped the car to the left to pass it. When Sherri squeezed her eyes shut, he said, “You shouldn’t do that. You’re likely to get motion

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sickness.”

“I’ll take my chances,” she gasped. Within minutes, though, the roller coaster dipping and accelerating did begin to nauseate her. She essayed a peek between her eyelids. The road was still flying up to meet them at every turn. She looked out her window, fixing her gaze on the fog-veiled waves and gulping the sea breeze. Her queasiness faded. As long as she didn’t watch the road, riding with Nigel didn’t upset her much more than riding with anyone else. Soon a buoyant flying sensation wiped out fear. “Need any help with the map?” she ventured, hoping he’d say no.

“I have it memorized,” he replied. “It shouldn’t be much farther.”

Relieved of responsibility, Sherri yielded to the seduction of the night wind and went limp, leaning against her door. The late hour ambushed her, and she actually dozed off. She woke when the car slowed.

“I’m glad you’ve rested,” Nigel said. “If I find Laura, you will have to drive on the way back. I could have my hands full.” He added in a hesitant tone, “Starvation has strange effects on us. Madness—uncontrolled. I won’t deny she may be dangerous.”

“I’ve come too far to back out now,” Sherri said, wishing he hadn’t upset her spurious calm by broaching the subject.

They were just pulling away from the fringe of a small town, marked by a Spanish mission style motel on one side of the road and a gas station on the other. Since Nigel hadn’t slowed for any of the other hamlets along the highway, she concluded they were close to their destination. He turned left onto a narrow road heading into the woods.

“It should be along here,” he said. “We’ll have to keep a sharp lookout.”

He checked his side of the road and Sherri hers, reading the mailboxes that popped up in the headlights. Most of the houses were set back at the end of long drives, hidden behind trees. Now and then Sherri caught sight of one less completely veiled, a glimpse of a turret,



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a slanting roof, or a double garage. Occasionally a seven-foot redwood privacy fence marked a boundary. She estimated each lot at two or three acres, minimum; guessing the cost of these places from the difficulty she'd had in affording her cottage in a far less upscale location left her gasping in the rarefied air of fiscal Himalayas.

About six miles from Route One, the name "Donald Eldridge" leaped out of the fog at her. She swallowed against the tightening of her throat. Silly, building up a well-to-do degenerate into some kind of ogre. And if her bait had worked, he would be miles away. All she could see of Eldridge's property was a gravel lane disappearing into the trees. To her surprise, Nigel didn't turn down it, but instead continued along the road at a sedate speed.

"Where are you going?"

"Didn't think I'd drive up to the front door, did you?" he said. "I presume you wouldn't want your car seen there, in case of trouble." Half a mile or so further on, he parked on the shoulder under the pines, out of sight of any buildings. "I don't expect trouble," he said, killing the lights and engine. "Nevertheless, you stay in the car with the doors locked. Understand?" His eyes flared red in the dark.

She nodded. In case some eventuality changed her mind, a gesture could hardly be taken for a promise.

"I'm still picking up those mental reservations." He reached over to run his fingers through the hair flowing loose down the back of her neck. "However, I'll trust your common sense. This shouldn't take long. You might try to get some more sleep while waiting."

"You've got to be kidding." Despite the protest, his gentle massage caused a warm heaviness to spread through her limbs. "Hey, I didn't ask you to hypnotize me."

"I'm not," he said. "You're simply tired." He leaned over to give her a quick kiss on the cheek. Before she could either welcome or reject the caress, he slipped out of the car and shut the door.

Sherri twisted around to watch him through the rear window.

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Breaking into a trot, he vanished over the slope of the road. She locked the car, as instructed, and curled up with her legs tucked under her and arms folded over her breast.

\* \* \*

Running, Nigel inhaled deeply of the damp, pine-scented air. Aside from his unpleasant mission, he couldn't have imagined a more nearly perfect night. Well-fed, rested, soaring unhindered through a cool, dark, quiet solitude—the urge to transform coursed through him. He ignored it; the pleasure wasn't worth the risk of being caught in altered shape by the headlights of a passing car. Despite his warnings to Sherri, he didn't believe they faced any danger from this raid on Eldridge's house. Nigel had heard no insincerity in the realtor's voice when the man had agreed to Sherri's proposed meeting. The sooner Nigel forced his way into Eldridge's place and found Laura, the sooner he could rescue her—if she wanted rescuing—and send her on her way. Then he'd be free to enjoy what Sherri had so persistently offered.

He'd promised himself one more night with her. After that, they would part; he wouldn't let her shake his resolve. With Sherri, he knew, sporadic encounters wouldn't satisfy him, especially since she lived conveniently close. He would want all or nothing. Let it be nothing, then. He wouldn't chance the hazards of an intimate, long-term liaison, undermining her health, cutting her off from conventional relationships. Granted, a few of his kind made such liaisons work. He was personally acquainted with only two, Claude being one of them. He and Eloise constituted a special case. Eloise had admired Claude before they'd met and had worked with him on a film script before learning the truth, a truth her background as a writer of supernatural fantasy prepared her to welcome with delight instead of revulsion. With no physical contact at first, their friendship had grown into—love? Something more substantial than obsession, at any rate.

Nigel questioned whether those conditions applied to him. Neither poetry nor psychology had enabled him to pin down the precise

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meaning of love, which he suspected to be a purely human emotion. Claude supposed himself capable of it, but Nigel doubted the word had a definable meaning for their kind. Maybe that cynicism resulted from his own lack of experience; perhaps in the bond of two-way blood-sharing, one learned to love in terms approximating the word's usual connotations. Nigel didn't plan to initiate such a bond.

*Damned analytical, aren't you, Jamison? You're off duty—face the question head-on.*

Very well, could he claim to be in love with Sherri? *I don't know if I'm in love*, the cooler half of his mind answered, *but I sure as hell am in lust.*

Turning down Eldridge's private drive, he slowed to a walk and glided soundlessly from shadow to shadow under the fog-shrouded trees. He had trouble concentrating on the quest that had brought him there. Memories of Sherri's delectable scent and flavor kept intruding. Not to mention her thick, fragrant hair and her lush curves, as indicative of youthful health as the glow of her aura. That she was tall enough to kiss standing up without getting a crick in his neck didn't hurt, either. Best of all, her literary interests rendered her open-minded enough to accept him with surprisingly little fear. Not that Denise had feared him, either, after the initial shock; their long-standing friendship had prevented that. On the other hand, she hadn't welcomed the truth. To Denise, Nigel's alien nature had been a part of him she had to acknowledge, as she might have tolerated a congenital problem of any other sort in an ordinary man. Oh, she'd enjoyed his attentions, yet always with a sense of concession, compromise.

By contrast, Sherri's delight in Nigel's strangeness opened a new dimension to him. At the thought of her convulsed by passion, arching her neck to receive his kiss, his teeth tingled. He paused and drew a couple of deep breaths to clear his head. What was the matter with him? He shouldn't even be hungry again until tomorrow night. Confound it, the girl had bewitched him! Smiling to himself, he

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resumed stalking toward the house.

When it loomed in sight at the end of the driveway, he stopped again, concentrating. He focused inward, drawing upon his psychic powers. As a part of his inborn hypnotic talent, he could cast a temporary glamour around himself, either altering his appearance or blotting it out altogether. The latter came easier, though in everyday life he had little occasion to use the skill. Now he gathered his mental resources to weave a psychic veil, an illusion of invisibility. As long as he concentrated on maintaining it, human eyes would slide over him, unseeing.

Almost as good as dissolving into a mist, he reflected. His insubstantial disguise firmly in place, he crept toward the house. True to Brewster's description, the building was a restored Victorian, three stories high with several gables. Built into the side of a hill, it clung to the edge of a wooded ravine at the rear, a likely spot for mudslides. So far its various owners had enjoyed undeserved luck. From one side of the house projected a clumsy addition, a double garage. No car in the driveway. Not conclusive, Nigel realized; a salesman who relied on a well-kept vehicle would probably store it inside.

Nigel skirted the front yard, his nostrils flaring at the heavy, sweet scent of gardenia bushes flanking the front porch and trimmed to just below the windowsills. He slunk up to a side window and listened. No sound of movement inside. The curtains were closed. He strolled around to the back of the house, still maintaining his shield, his spirits buoyed by the growing evidence that Eldridge had indeed left. In back, windows low to the ground advertised the existence of a basement level half buried in the slope. All these were covered by shutters. Completing his circuit, he found two shuttered windows further reinforced by padlocked metal rods.

Only two? As a barrier against intruders, that made no sense. Therefore the locked windows must be shutting something in, not out. The idea of any member of his race being imprisoned—and by an

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ephemeral!—brought a snarl to Nigel's throat. His illusion wavered. He clamped it back in place and continued to the fourth side of the house.

He'd still neither heard nor seen any signs of occupancy, at least on the ground floor. Might as well break in. He considered and dismissed the hazards of burglar alarms. If he set one off, he'd be long gone before police could arrive on the scene. More to the point, he doubted Eldridge would use an alarm system. A man who housed a Satanist cult and a resident vampire couldn't afford to risk official intrusion.

Nigel let his psychic veil drop and stepped up to a corner window. Selecting a fist-size rock from the border of a flowerbed, he slammed it into the pane. He held his breath for a few seconds, listening. No outcry or scurrying feet greeted the crash and tinkle of glass. Grinning in satisfaction at how smoothly the job was going, he reached through the hole to unlock the window. When he pushed the window up, it stalled a few inches from the bottom, blocked by a rod designed to prevent its being raised farther. A surge of Nigel's inhuman strength disposed of that obstacle. He climbed over the sill.

He emerged into a living room furnished with Victorian reproductions, complementing the house's architecture—Oriental rug in violet and dusty rose, wing-backed couch, claw-footed table with marble top. The fireplace, too, boasted marble trim. To get to the floor, Nigel had to climb over a credenza holding a bowl of fresh-cut gardenias and a pair of silver candlesticks. He picked his way with the delicacy of a cat and strode across the room to the far door. Searching a room so obviously meant for display would be a waste of time; Eldridge would allow no incriminating evidence here.

Same with the dining room, dominated by a cherrywood table sized for eight and a matching china closet. Nigel ignored the hallway for the moment. From the kitchen a pet-shop odor assaulted his nose. Nothing to account for it, at first glance. He saw a large kitchen with a butcher block table in the center of the floor, copper pans hanging on the walls. Eldridge decorated his public rooms as if he expected a photographer

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from *House Beautiful*. Nigel tried one of two doors exiting the kitchen. It led to a pantry/scullery with an oversize sink. A vinyl-covered table held the source of the animal smell: several cages, each housing four white rats. All chattered frantically at Nigel's approach.

His nostrils twitched. Eldridge ought to clean a few of these cages, including the two empty ones at the back of the table. So the man had made a systematic effort to meet Laura's needs. More evidence, if Nigel required any, that she'd lived here awhile and was still here. While tame rodents couldn't appease her hunting drive, the convenience would offset the boredom. Nigel wondered how far she had trusted Eldridge. Not far, her letter had hinted.

The question brought to Nigel's mind, by way of contrast, the kind of relationship he would have with Sherri, should he set aside his scruples about pursuing her. No concealment. None of the manipulation and exploitation Laura had doubtless practiced on Eldridge. Nigel realized how the old ones, even his Uncle Ian, would respond to his thoughts on this subject. They'd accuse him of absorbing human moral standards. Ephemerals were put on earth for prey, and consideration for them should be purely pragmatic. One didn't kill or severely injure them, but only to maintain anonymity, not because the victim had any intrinsic rights. In fact, Nigel thought, his stance had nothing to do with morals. He liked Sherri and valued her unforced response; he wouldn't risk losing that pleasure by treating her as less than an equal.

His mind was wandering again. *You're wasting time—get moving.* Obeying that inner disciplinarian, he moved through the dining room to the hall that connected with the rest of the ground floor. At the bottom of a wide staircase, he listened and sniffed the air. The upper floors seemed deserted. He checked the other rooms. An office, with a massive desk, a file cabinet, and shelves neatly packed with multiple listing guides and textbooks on real estate. The adjoining room held a bookcase full of murder mystery and spy thriller paperbacks, a television and stereo, a couple of shelves of videocassettes, and a glass

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tank occupied by a sleepy four-foot boa constrictor. Nigel smiled in reluctant admiration at this excuse for keeping a pantry full of rats.

He also noticed a locked cabinet. After a moment's hesitation, he decided he had time to indulge his curiosity. With a single wrench he forced the cabinet door. More videocassettes, unlabeled. Obviously not John Wayne and Clint Eastwood classics like the ones on the open shelves. Nigel loaded one at random into the VCR, picked up the remote, and settled in a leather-upholstered recliner to watch. His lips curled in disgust at what flashed on the screen. Men and women wearing hoods such as Brewster's snapshots had shown, and nothing else. Against the background of the altar and the crucified goat, they copulated in a variety of positions on the carpet. The camera bobbed erratically and zoomed in and out for no discernible purpose. There was no dialogue except involuntary grunts and moans. Nigel pushed the fast forward button. More of the same.

Blackmail film? Not likely, with the hoods rendering the revelers anonymous. Eldridge must have made the movies for his own pleasure. Probably sat here late at night with the door locked and the drapes shut, wallowing in solitary vice. Nigel turned off the video and loaded another. When three tries turned up nothing but homemade porn, he decided to give up after one more. The fourth caught his attention.

Laura stood behind the altar, shifting into her nonhuman form. Her image wavered like smoke. The camera held close on her for a moment, then panned around the small room to show bowing worshipers, robed and hooded. It then cut back to the altar. In human shape once more, Laura, naked, walked around to the front of the dais and spread her arms in invitation. One by one the coven members knelt before her, offering their wrists to be bitten.

Though he knew he shouldn't waste more time on confirming what he already knew, Nigel sat riveted by this performance. Laura must have done violence to her instincts to take part in it. None of their kind would willingly feed in front of an audience; a streak of exhibitionism

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would be counter-survival for a vampire. On the other hand, abundant nourishment would make up for a lot—and the atmosphere of that room must have boiled with fear and lust. He could imagine how intoxicating it had been for her.

The film cut the sequence short before all twelve acolytes had offered their blood. In the next scene, Laura stretched supine on the floor before the altar. A heavy-set man, anonymously hooded like the rest, opened the front of his robe and crouched over her. Eldridge, no doubt. Only the master of the coven would have that privilege. Laura's teeth sank into the man's bare shoulder. The camera closed in, showing the blood streaming down his chest. When Laura opened her thighs to the man, Nigel cut off the video. She had a right to degrade herself that way, but he didn't have to watch.

Imagine Eldridge storing such materials in his house, even behind locked doors! Nigel reshelfed the cassettes and headed through the kitchen to the door that, he correctly guessed, opened to the basement stairs.

On the lowest level he found a den finished in dark wood paneling. Human eyes would need the overhead lights to distinguish details, though Nigel, of course, had no trouble. The closed-in air stank. He recalled a description of Dracula's lair in the novel: "as if corruption had become itself corrupt." In real life, vampires, like all predators, practiced fastidious cleanliness. The foul atmosphere confirmed his belief that Laura was being held against her will.

But how? Though young, she shouldn't have been vulnerable to any force a mere man could exert. Trickery? Well, he'd find out soon enough.

Locked doors faced him on both sides. Forcing one, he found another office. Unlike the realtor's public office, this one was lined with books on Satanism, witchcraft, and the occult. Nigel recognized Crowley; the other titles he scanned without interest. He took a moment to dig into the desk drawer, where he found a pocket notebook



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containing lists of phone numbers, each identified only by initials. After a cursory inspection he put it back, seeing no point in absconding with it.

Next door was the chapel. He knew that before breaking the latch, by the stench of stale blood, sweat, and semen. His stomach roiled as he stood in the doorway. A quick glance took in the black-draped walls, the stained altar, the effigy on the far wall. Assured that the room was unoccupied, he slammed the door and hurried across to the other two locked portals.

To his surprise, both of these were dead-bolted on the outside. He'd jumped to a conclusion, however; one wasn't locked, only shut. Easing it open, he found a small bedroom with attached half-bath, the shutters, as in all the other basement rooms, closed. He examined the dead bolt. Shiny and unscratched, it must have been installed very recently. He turned to the last door, which was bolted.

Here the scent of decomposing blood hung still heavier. His ears caught faint, sluggish breathing. "Laura?" he called. No response. Gripping the doorknob, he pondered his next move. His strength couldn't handle the dead bolt. He would need the key, and Eldridge most likely kept it on him. Nigel considered the shuttered window. From outside he could doubtless pry loose the bars, though the process might take some time—

His ears perked up. What had alerted him? Processing subliminal impressions from the past couple of minutes, he realized a door had opened and closed upstairs. Footsteps—the steps of a heavy man trying to walk silently. Nigel knew he'd lost his chance for surprise. With strength and quick reflexes on his side, though, he wasn't worried. He'd leap on Eldridge before the man's eyes could focus on him.

Sidling to the bottom of the stairs, Nigel flattened against the wall. His heart raced with anticipation rather than fear. He heard the door above opening, footsteps descending. The shadow of a man fell on the stairs, his shape outlined by light from the kitchen. The click of a

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switch. Behind Nigel, the den's overhead lamps flashed on. He poised to spring.

Instead of continuing downward, the man said, "Hold it right there."

Nigel glared up at the speaker. He found himself staring into the muzzle of a revolver.

## CHAPTER 10

Sherri woke with a start. Disoriented, she looked around for a minute before remembering why she was huddled in the front seat of her car on a deserted road. She triggered the button to illuminate her watch. Nigel had been gone over half an hour. Shouldn't he return soon?

Gingerly she twisted in her seat to look out the back window. Nothing. One leg was numb from being tucked under her, and her bladder was tight with nervousness. Glancing around to double-check that no buildings or cars were in sight, she limped into the woods to take care of the latter problem. When she returned to the car she stomped up and down next to it, working the kinks out of her limbs. The temperature had dropped; she folded her arms against the cool, damp air.

Her skin prickled with a chill that was more than physical. Nigel had already taken more time than he should have. Perhaps he could use some help. Trotting up to the house to check on him could do no harm.

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*Yes, it could. Nigel said—oh, the heck with him!* If they were to share any kind of future, she couldn't let him keep her on a leash.

*Sherri!*

She whipped her head around. Nigel's voice, calling her name? Impossible—the road was still deserted. *So now I'm hallucinating?* A pain lanced through her forehead, like an icicle drilling between her eyes.

It vanished, leaving her reeling. She leaned on the car, struggling to force air into her tightened throat and chest. *Nigel's in danger.* How could she know that? She wasn't psychic. Yet she couldn't deny the conviction. Still, what could she do about it? If a vampire couldn't handle the threat, how could she?

Arguing with herself didn't help. He needed her. She felt that need like a magnetic pull that overrode her fear. *And some friend I'd be if I ignored it!*

Stuffing the car keys into her jeans pocket, she tucked her purse under the seat and locked the doors. At a brisk jog, she ought to cover the distance to Eldridge's house in ten minutes. The first hundred yards modified this goal. This stretch of road happened to be a steeper uphill grade than she customarily ran. She dropped back to a walk, and soon her legs were aching. *And I thought I was in good shape.* At least she no longer felt cold, instead bedewed by a clammy sweat.

By the time she reached the foot of Eldridge's driveway, only one car had rumbled past. Nice quiet neighborhood. How the affluent residents would shudder in outraged shock if they knew about Eldridge's hobby! Sherri skirted the edge of the drive, trying to lurk under the trees, though with little hope that the owner's headlights would miss her, should he pull in at the wrong instant. Her breath came short, and a pulse fluttered in the hollow of her throat. The magnetic draw she'd felt had vanished. But when she started to retreat, that sense of urgency gripped her again. *Too late to back out, girl.*

She worked her way to the front yard, however, with no mishaps.

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No car in the driveway. Of course, that didn't mean much, since the closed garage doors might conceal anything. Aside from the porch lamp, one inside light burned. She tiptoed out of the circle of light from the porch and caught sight of an open window with a shattered pane at the corner of the house. So Nigel had succeeded in breaking in.

Sidling up to the window, Sherri crouched under it and listened. She heard no movement or voices. Should she go inside or not? *Sure—no guts, no glory, as Tim always says.* Sneaking around out here wouldn't help either her or Nigel and might be equally hazardous.

Clutching the windowsill for leverage, she hoisted herself up. Light leaking from the entryway converted the furniture into gray masses bristling with unidentifiable protrusions. Sherri wiggled through the window and emerged onto a flat surface. Her groping hands collided with some kind of bowl. It fell onto the floor with a splash and a tinkle of breakage.

\* \* \*

*I underestimated him,* Nigel berated himself. *Stupid, careless, overconfident!*

Aloud, he said, "Good evening, Eldridge. I wasn't expecting you."

After one glance at Nigel's face, the man shifted his eyes to stare over Nigel's left shoulder. "Yeah, I can see that. Back up—slowly."

Raising his hands, Nigel obeyed. He still felt more exasperation than fear. Once he got Eldridge into a relatively open space—

"Don't try anything. I don't know your name, but I know what you are."

Nigel didn't let surprise color his tone. "Really? How?"

Eldridge gave the gun an impatient twitch. "The eyes, of course. Keep moving—go in that open door over there. When my—agent—came back with that wild tale Tuesday night, I knew another vampire had to be involved. I hoped I'd get a chance to meet you."

Nigel caught a whiff of fear-sweat, overlaid by the woody smell of an expensive cologne. "Then why the gun? You know it won't do you

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any good.” Crowded by Eldridge’s methodical advance, Nigel backed into the vacant bedroom—furnished with a single bed, a four-drawer bureau, a nightstand with lamp, and nothing else—and sat down on the edge of the bed.

Eldridge didn’t let him retain the advantage of darkness, but flicked on the overhead light. “Correction—I know it won’t kill you. It can knock you out temporarily, which is enough.” He shut the door behind himself and leaned against it.

Taking the opportunity to examine Eldridge more carefully, Nigel saw a man of about fifty, not quite fat, but beefy, except for a face too thin for his build. The texture and gloss of his black hair betrayed artificial color. His complexion, which ought to be naturally florid, had faded to a pallor emphasized by purplish smudges under the eyes, the stigmata of chronic anemia. His aura, too, showed the attenuation characteristic of long-term victimization by a vampire. In the open neck of his checked sport shirt a silver cross glinted.

A cross? Eldridge cherished at least one misconception about vampires, then. A few, brought up too close to human culture, did fear religious objects; Laura and Nigel weren’t among them. Nigel didn’t consider correcting this delusion, nor the one about the gun. A well-placed shot with a high-caliber bullet did stand a remote chance of killing him. Damn, if only he could catch Eldridge’s eyes. “What are you doing here? You’re supposed to be at least fifty miles away.”

His captor was experienced enough with vampires—one vampire, at least—to reply without being lulled into meeting Nigel’s gaze. “So that’s what the Hudson girl’s call was about? I had a hunch. On the way I got a bad feeling about how easily she gave in, all of a sudden. So I stopped and made a call. Nobody home. I knew she’d pulled a fast one, but damn if I can figure out why. What do you want?”

“Does it matter? You said you wanted to meet me, and I’m here.” He volunteered a half-truth that might appease Eldridge. “If you were I, wouldn’t you want to find out where those snapshots came from?”

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“Right, the photos. Did she give them to you? I want them—and the negatives.”

“She was telling the truth. They’ve been destroyed.”

The hand gripping the revolver trembled. “Why should I believe that?”

“Think about it. We don’t want materials like that drifting around any more than you do.”

“Hmph—maybe.” Tension hovered around Eldridge like heat rising from sun-baked pavement. Even the cross and the gun didn’t give him the confidence to face a wary, hostile vampire unafraid. “Look, I don’t want to hurt you. I got this room ready just in case the opportunity came up, but I don’t want to lock you in, necessarily. I think we can make a deal.”

*Don’t want to hurt me? Sure you don’t.* Nigel decided a touch of shock treatment was in order. “Like the deal you made with my sister?”

Eldridge flinched but didn’t drop his guard. “So that’s what you’re here for! Listen, she joined me of her own free will. She’s had a cushy life here.”

Nigel discerned that Eldridge was only half lying; on some level he still rationalized that he was doing Laura a favor. “I’ll believe that when I talk to her.”

“Maybe later. She’s asleep now.”

In the middle of the night? Nigel sensed that Eldridge was telling the truth on that point, and moreover, had no idea how abnormal such behavior was. What had he done to Laura? Nigel’s chest tightened with anger. He suppressed it and said with outward coolness, “If you’re getting along so well with her, what do you want me for?”

“Well, I have to admit she’s turning out to be a disappointment. When I discontinued the Black Masses and tried to talk her into more important things, she wouldn’t cooperate.”

The man’s vagueness grated on Nigel’s nerves. “You’re wasting my time. Get to the point.”

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Eldridge's shoulders twitched. "Heck, when I first invited her to stay, I was just thinking of putting on a better show for my coven. People won't pay for entertainment if it gets too routine, no matter how sensational it is at first. And that's mostly what it was. None of those suckers really believed in that rigmarole about invoking Satan—not until Laura popped up." His heartbeat quickened. "After a while it dawned on me, what I was missing out on. Here I'd stumbled on something really supernatural, and I was using it for a penny-ante con game."

The sorcerer's apprentice conjuring up powers beyond his control? Nigel didn't like the sound of that. "What else did you want to use her for?"

"Look at me—pushing fifty. I try to keep in shape, but it won't last forever. Can you imagine what I'd give to live the way I am now for hundreds of years?"

A blight on the landscape, Nigel thought.

"I asked her to change me into a vampire."

*Oh, Lord, the man's not only a criminal, he's a monomaniac!*  
"What did she say to that?"

"Said she couldn't." Eldridge snorted. "She's fed on me dozens of times, so I know that isn't all it takes. Whatever else is needed, she won't do it."

"Did you consider that she might be telling the truth?"

"More likely, she doesn't want to share the power. What the two of us could do over centuries, accumulating wealth, building up a secure position—she wouldn't consider it. I suspected that I'd have to drink her blood to be transformed into a vampire, but she wouldn't let me."

*And no wonder,* Nigel reflected. To enter that kind of bond with a man she detested!

"I tried—went after her with a knife—but even with her getting weaker, I couldn't manage that."

This flatly delivered confession almost snapped Nigel's self-



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control. He reined his fury. Flying into a rage would get him nowhere. But he no longer focused on lulling Eldridge into a trance; instead, he fantasized about planting a couple of well-placed blows precisely where a human male would enjoy them least. The longer he kept the man talking, the better his chances of getting that pleasure. “So now you’re putting a similar proposition to me?”

Eldridge nodded. “Laura hasn’t been herself the last few weeks. She’s been sleeping most of the time, hardly ever speaking. I’m beginning to think she isn’t strong enough for my purposes, after all. Starting over with you might be the best thing. Think it over—unlimited food, protection, power—”

“I don’t need protection,” Nigel said. “As for power, you’ll have to work hard to convince me. If you expect me to give up my freedom, as she did, you’ve lost touch with reality.”

“I don’t expect that, over the long term.” Now his aura showed insincerity. “For the moment, you don’t have a lot of choice. That window’s reinforced, and since Laura can’t break one of these dead bolts, I expect it’ll hold you, too.”

“Thinking of keeping me prisoner until I see it your way?” Nigel said. “Not too practical—unlike Laura, I have a job; I’d be missed. Quite aside from the fact that I wouldn’t stand for it.”

“What are you figuring to do about it? I know you can’t turn into a mist and ooze through a crack in the shutters, or she would’ve done it weeks ago.” A muffled crash from upstairs interrupted him. His smug expression blanked out, then gave way to alarm. “Excuse me.” He hastily backed out the door, and Nigel heard a key click in the bolt.

Nigel’s pulse hammered in his temples. He felt a cold certainty of who the intruder must be.

\* \* \*

Thrown off balance, Sherri flailed around and slid off whatever she had climbed on. She landed with a heavy thud, adding new bruises to the one on her hip from Tuesday afternoon. Water soaked the cuff of

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one leg. *Some second-story man you are!* she fumed.

She tried to scramble to her feet, slipped in the puddle, and had to grab the polished wooden bulk next to her for support. At that moment she heard footsteps hurrying in her direction. Her ears ringing, she glanced wildly from side to side in search of an escape route. Front door? Too far—he'd probably intercept her. Out the window? She started to clamber up on the whatchamacallit that had tripped her.

Heavy feet clomped up behind. Not Nigel's. Sherri slowly turned, her backside pressed against the slippery wood. She got a blurred impression of a heavy-set, well-groomed, middle-aged man with a gun. The gun was what caught her attention first.

"Well, hello, Ms. Hudson. Charming of you to drop in."

She swallowed painfully. The corny pun was almost enough to submerge her fear and provoke a sarcastic retort—but not quite. No need to act any more stupid than she already had.

When she said nothing, Eldridge continued with, "There's a friend of yours downstairs. Come on." He jerked the muzzle of the gun to his left. "That way."

Sherri let him herd her through a kitchen and down a flight of steps, then across a paneled den to a pair of bolted doors. She felt the gun nudging the small of her back. Maybe a martial artist with decades of training could whip into action fast enough to disarm Eldridge without getting hurt—or maybe Nigel could. *Could he? If so, he wouldn't be Eldridge's prisoner.* Sherri harbored no illusions about her ability to do anything remotely resembling that.

Her captor's right arm encircled her in a parody of an embrace, while his left hand fumbled with a key and unfastened one of the bolts. He shoved her gently into the room.

Nigel stood in the middle of a sparsely furnished bedroom, glowering at her.

Eldridge said, "Got a surprise for you, vampire—say, what is your name, anyhow?" When Nigel didn't answer, he said, "Sit down on the

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bed, both of you, about a foot apart. No touching.”

Sherri obeyed. She had no desire for Nigel to touch her, since he looked as if he were thinking along the lines of slow strangulation. Eldridge strode a few feet closer and trained the gun on Sherri’s chest. “Now I don’t have to threaten to shoot you, vampire—I don’t really want to damage a potential asset. Any false moves, and I’ll shoot her. A bullet might not kill you, but it sure would kill your girlfriend, here. Thought over my proposition yet?”

Sherri marveled at the coolness of Nigel’s voice. “I’ve scarcely had time yet. You’ll need to make your offer a bit more specific before I can decide. Safeguards for both of us, right?”

“You think it over, then,” said Eldridge. “But don’t take too long, or it might be unhealthy for Ms. Hudson.” He paused in thought for a moment. “Maybe I should feed her to Laura. Your sister’s getting pretty hungry.”

“Threatening Sherri won’t raise my enthusiasm for your setup,” Nigel said. “The first condition I’d insist on would be immunity for her—and for Laura, of course.”

“We’ll have to consider that,” Eldridge said. He backed toward the door and slipped out, leaving Nigel and Sherri locked in together.

Sherri jumped up. Nigel sprang to his feet and bore down on her like a charging lion. His hands gripped her upper arms with bruising force. “Idiot! You’re out of your mind! Utterly, certifiably insane!”

Breathing hard, she forced herself to stare into his blazing eyes. “Is that a professional judgment?”

“That is an emotional outburst, and long overdue! Why the hell can’t you do as you are told?” He flung her away from him, stalked to the door, and slammed his fist into it. She noticed a dent in the wood.

Staggering backward, she plopped down on the single bed, a bare mattress with two pillows and a folded quilt. “I thought you might be in trouble.” Her voice came out as a feeble bleat.

“Well, I certainly am now! I might have been able to handle him

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before. Now, with that gun on you every minute, my hands are tied. Confound it, I warned you about acting on impulse.”

She rubbed one of her sore arms. “Your method doesn’t seem to work too well, either.”

“Granted, I miscalculated,” he said. “Last thing I needed was another complication.” He paced back and forth across the room a couple of times, then sat on the bed beside her. “Too late for second-guessing. I apologize for hurting you—uncontrolled anger is counterproductive.”

“Okay, so you have a point. I shouldn’t be here. But how long were you expecting me to stay in the car while you wormed your way out of the trap?”

“Good question.” He bowed his head on his hands, rubbing his forehead. “I wasn’t expecting any of this.” After a moment of silence he forced a smile and put an arm around Sherri. “No, you shouldn’t be here, and I wish you weren’t, but in another sense I’m glad to see you. So refreshing—” He covered her mouth in a hard kiss that left her gasping. “This place feels wrong.”

“Wrong?” She squirmed against his shoulder. “Whatever gives you that idea? We’ve been imprisoned in a house with a Satanist chapel by a gun-waving maniac who collects vampires the way little boys collect bugs. What could be wrong?”

“I’m talking about the atmosphere,” Nigel said. “Not just physical; the psychic ambience makes me feel suffocated. It’s as if the tension, the combined dependence and resentment between Eldridge and Laura, on top of the lust and pain from the Black Masses, has built up like an electric charge.” He gave Sherri an affectionate squeeze. “Eldridge would be enough to make anyone crave sane companionship.”

“Do you think he’s insane?” When Nigel frowned thoughtfully at that, she added, “Never mind what a meaningless word that is—put it in laymen’s terms, please.”

“He certainly isn’t psychotic.” Nigel got up to prowling around the

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cramped room. “In the last century we’d have called him a monomaniac, I suppose—sound on all other subjects, but where vampires are concerned, he has a read-only memory. He has fixed preconceptions that can’t be shaken. Not that Laura seems to have tried very hard.”

“She is here, then?”

“Oh, yes. She’s locked in the room next door. Eldridge says she’s asleep, and what I can hear of her breathing confirms that.” He paused to lean against the wall. “Highly abnormal.”

“You mean vampires aren’t supposed to sleep at night?”

He nodded. “Certainly not so soundly that all this commotion wouldn’t rouse her. I don’t need any further proof that he’s mistreated her—and he as good as admitted it.”

“Okay, you were right about her needing to be rescued.” Sherri drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them. “We aren’t in a great position to do that. How are we supposed to get out of this room? Eldridge seems sure you can’t break through the door or window.”

“If Laura couldn’t with the strength of desperation, it would be a waste of energy for me to try,” Nigel agreed. “However, getting out of this room isn’t the primary goal. I can think of several ways to manage that, off the top of my head. The problem is getting all three of us out of the house unharmed. When Eldridge comes back, I’ll have to string him along, pretend I’m accepting his offer.”

“Yeah, I wondered about that. What offer?”

Nigel said with a humorless smile, “He wants me to take Laura’s place. Seems he’s used up one vampire and needs a new one. The question is, what could he possibly do with you? He can’t let you go, after what you’ve seen. Yet I’ve made it clear that harming you would mean the deal is off. It’ll be interesting to see how he weasels out of that.”

“I don’t want to get shot,” she said. Now that Eldridge had left, the

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possibility seemed remote, as unreal as a scene from a TV adventure.

"I won't let him shoot you," Nigel said.

"Gee, my hero. How are you going to stop him, shield me with your body and let the bullets bounce off your chest?"

"They wouldn't bounce."

"Could they kill you? Eldridge doesn't think so."

Nigel sat down beside her, lowering his voice. "Unfortunately he's mistaken. A large enough bullet, properly placed, could destroy enough brain tissue to make regeneration impossible. Long odds, though—I'm more worried about days or weeks of pain or unconsciousness. Which would be just as disastrous for you and Laura."

The prospect of being shut up here indefinitely made Sherri more anxious than the phantom threat of sudden death. She gnawed at the skin around her thumbnail for a moment, then said, "What does it take to kill you for certain? The traditional stake through the heart?"

"That works if the weapon is left in the wound, to keep it unhealed long enough for tissue deterioration to become irreversible." A visible shudder went through him. "A drawn-out, nasty, agonizing death—though I hear it's mitigated by falling into a coma within a few days. A stake through the head would be more efficient, and some of the legends do recommend a similar procedure. The really reliable ways are decapitation and total cremation. Anything else we can regenerate from, short of amputated limbs."

Dismayed by his grim tone, Sherri said, "Enough about that. What do we do right now?"

"We wait. Eldridge will be back for his answer, once he thinks we're sufficiently softened up. I'll try to get him off guard by talking to him—" He gave Sherri a thoughtful once-over. "You may turn out to be useful, after all."

"As what, emergency rations?"

Nigel smiled at her acid tone. "We won't be here that long. As a diversion. When you think the moment is right, you can distract

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Eldridge long enough for me to get the drop on him. That'll be a case where acting on impulse pays off. Follow your instincts, the more unpredictable the better."

"How long do you think he'll keep us hanging?" Shivering, she hugged herself tighter. "It's freezing in here."

Nigel looked puzzled. "It's about sixty, quite nice. Eldridge must keep it this way for Laura's benefit, though I doubt it's out of kindness. He'd want to pamper his investment."

"Investment?"

"The paraphernalia for the Satanic cult couldn't have been cheap. Then there's the ongoing supply of white rats."

"Huh?"

"Never mind." He rejoined her and put his arm around her waist. "As to how long Eldridge plans to keep us waiting, if he were really sharp, he'd wait until dawn, when I'd be slightly weaker. Let's just hope he doesn't drag the process out for days."

The very thought made Sherri feel as if the walls were squeezing in on her. "You think he would?"

"I don't see how he could expect to get away with it. We'd be missed. And if he hoped to blackmail me by driving me to attack you, he'd have a long wait. Laura may have convinced him we're all gluttons, but that isn't true."

"I know," Sherri said, surprised to find that snuggling up to him made her a little less chilly. "Speaking of that, would you—uh—like a snack while we're waiting?"

Nigel burst out laughing. "That is the most ill-timed suggestion I've ever heard! At least one of us has to remain clearheaded. I won't risk our host breaking in on us while we're drunk with passion. Good Lord, you're more insatiable than I am!"

She stiffened. "Don't flatter yourself. I was just thinking of something to relax me, get my mind off all this."

"Well, there are other ways of doing that." He spread the quilt on

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the bed, plumped up the pillows, and lay on his side next to the wall. "Come here, dear." When she reluctantly complied, still feeling stung by his rejection, he said, "No, I haven't changed my mind, but this will help you relax, maybe even sleep. No sense in wasting energy on a premature adrenaline high. And close together like this, we can talk freely without fear of Eldridge overhearing." He folded a flap of the quilt over her and hugged her around the waist, her back against his chest. "Also, I can warm you."

"How? Your body temperature is lower than mine."

"True, but considerably higher than sixty degrees."

As warmth stole over her, Sherri went limp in his embrace, savoring the sensation, however illusory, of shelter. "You really aren't hungry?"

"I'm set for at least another night or two."

"I bet you're a little thirsty, though," she said with a teasing wiggle.

"Stop that. Granted, you do have that effect on me—very strange. Gives me an inkling of why Laura didn't try harder to break away from Eldridge at the first hint of trouble. He said she'd drunk from him dozens of times."

"He let her?" Sherri said. "I'd have thought he'd want to stay in control."

"Let her, hell—I got the impression he invited it. And that degree of willingness is terribly seductive." He paused to give Sherri a fleeting kiss on the nape of the neck. "Eldridge wanted Laura to turn him into a vampire."

"But that's impossible!"

"So she told him. He didn't believe her—read-only memory."

"How did that myth ever start, anyway?" Sherri asked, glad to escape from their present predicament into an abstract discussion.

"Think of how one of our race would have looked to human observers in a pre-scientific culture. Asleep, we do appear dead. And the changes that come over a long-term donor—loss of appetite, pallor, aversion to sunlight—make the prey look superficially similar to the



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predator. In cases where the vampire allows the donor to taste his or her own blood in return, the donor could have actually assumed he or she was changing into a vampire. Sometimes, after such an affair broke up, the donor, having developed a taste for blood, might go out and act on the supposed transformation.”

“That’s horrible—and sad.”

“I agree,” Nigel said. “No responsible vampire would encourage that delusion. On the lowest pragmatic level, if nothing else, it’s apt to backfire. Unfortunately, not all of us are responsible. And in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many of the elders actually condoned it as a self-defense tactic. Since Eldridge has that misconception firmly fixed in his mind, I may be able to use it against him.”

“He seems to harbor a lot of misconceptions. Didn’t I see a cross around his neck?”

“Mmm.” Sherri felt Nigel’s breath stirring the hair behind her left ear. “Laura must have let him think she’s more vulnerable than she is—intelligent policy.”

“I keep thinking about you and her,” Sherri said, shifting position to fit her body closer to the angles of his. “It’s hard to imagine vampires having a family and a childhood. I can’t visualize a little kid drinking human blood.”

“We don’t,” he chuckled. “That doesn’t start until early adolescence, when the psychic powers also appear. As infants we feed on the mother’s milk and blood. After weaning, we eat raw meat. Around age twelve we lose the ability to digest that and have to switch to animal blood.”

“Makes sense,” she murmured, dismayed to find herself getting drowsy in spite of their perilous situation. “Growing kids need lots of calories. Nigel, weren’t you lonely, with nobody your own age?”

“Lonely?” He sounded perplexed, as if he’d never considered the question before. “A human child in my place would have been, no

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doubt. I never expected any other way of life. Adult companionship suited me fine. You must understand, dear, we're essentially solitary creatures."

"You don't need anybody." Absence of need left friendship a matter of free choice, which was good; on the other hand, not being needed meant being dispensable, an insecure feeling, Sherri reflected.

"One or two close friends, with plenty of space—to use the current jargon—as each requires it." He ran his hand caressingly over the curve of her hip. "But yes, we do need your kind, for psychic as well as physical nourishment. Some of us resent that dependence. I try to enjoy it."

"Dependence sounds like weakness. Earlier, you called it addiction."

"So it is," he said, "but it can be a benign addiction. It doesn't have to be the exploitative mutual parasitism Laura seems to have with Eldridge. The pitfall is, that's so easy to slip into. Or, at best, our kind think of their human partners as pets, not equals. I know only two couples who've managed a healthy relationship. And one of them is a highly special case; the vampire is half-human, a unique hybrid brought up by human foster parents."

"Then you admit it can be done," Sherri said, cheered by this concession.

"Don't draw any unwarranted conclusions," he said. "Can't generalize from a couple of atypical lucky instances. I like you too much to gamble on that with you. It could all too easily go the other way."

"Coward," she purred.

Again his breath tickled her ear. "Oh, what the hell, a few cc's can't hurt you. I don't think you've lost a full unit of blood, in both occasions combined." When she started to turn toward him, he said, "No, don't move. I intend this to be relaxing, not strenuous."

His tongue flicked the hollow behind her ear, sending delicious

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shivers through her. As he nibbled at the earlobe, she could almost see his pleasure enfolding her like a rosy cloud. She never felt the nip of his teeth but deduced, from the rapid lapping of his tongue, that he had drawn blood. Languor flowed through all her nerves.

After a while he lay back, emitting a contented sigh. “You see, Eldridge wouldn’t have to wait for me to go berserk and ravish you. If we were confined together any length of time, mutual desire and sheer boredom would endanger you just as much. “ His hand stroked her midriff in rhythmic circles. “Try to sleep. I’ll wake you before he comes in.”

In the midst of protesting that she couldn’t possibly, she drifted off.

She was awakened by Nigel hissing in her ear, “Battle stations.”

Sitting up, she heard Eldridge walking in the den. “What do—” She rubbed her eyes and pushed hair back from her forehead. “What am I supposed to do?” she whispered.

“Keep a low profile and follow your instincts,” he said, swinging around to sit on the edge of the bed. “Concentrate on Eldridge—on getting his eyes off me. And don’t worry about what I’m doing. No matter how weird it looks, don’t let it distract you. When the fur starts to fly, all you have to do is get down and stay down. Understand?”

She nodded.

Nigel reached across the bed to pat her hand. “Good. The last thing I’d want is—”

He broke off. Sherri heard Eldridge’s key scraping in the lock.

## CHAPTER 11

The door swung open. Eldridge stepped in, brandishing the gun, and reached behind him to shut the door. Seeing the muzzle trained on her brought the possibility of death vividly to Sherri's mind. Dying remained unimaginable, but the pain of a bullet tearing through her breast no longer seemed remote. She felt lightheaded, and her bowels churned.

She knelt near the head of the bed, while Nigel sat rigidly upright on the edge, his hands on his knees. Eldridge flicked his eyes at Nigel for only a second before focusing on a spot midway between the two of them.

"Don't either of you move. Especially you, vampire—I guess you wouldn't want your pet damaged."

"If you have anything new to say, Eldridge," Nigel said, "get on with it."

"You saw the pictures, so you know what I had going here. If we resumed the weekly coven meetings, with you instead of Laura, we

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could add some new wrinkles to the ceremony.” Genuine enthusiasm sounded in his voice.

Sherri wondered if the man really expected Nigel to share his excitement about this bizarre project.

“The sex was too disorganized, for one thing,” Eldridge said. “Next time I’ll make it more ritualized.”

“That doesn’t affect me directly,” Nigel said. He spoke calmly, as though he was weighing the options.

“Sure it does—you’d be the star of the show. Naturally you’d have to participate. I thought of designating a different woman every week as Maiden—we do have a few female members.” His grip on the revolver seemed to relax, though he kept it pointed at Sherri. “She’d get the privilege of being laid on the altar by you. Heck of a lot more impressive than if I do it.” Sherri’s skin crawled in sympathy for the anonymous women suffering Eldridge’s violation.

“That’s impossible,” Nigel said. “I don’t have the capability.”

Eldridge’s brows shot up in surprise. “You’re kidding!” With a dismissive wave of his free hand, he shunted the question aside. “Well, you could fake it, or something. As long as we make a big deal of the blood-drinking. They get a kick out of that.”

“Sounds...interesting,” Nigel said. “What about Laura?”

“I don’t think she’s reliable anymore.”

Sherri noticed the man’s eyes wandering more often from her to Nigel, as he became engrossed in the conversation. She sidled an inch or two toward the edge of the bed.

“I won’t consider joining you unless she’s free,” Nigel said.

“Think you can guarantee she won’t talk about any of this?”

“Doubtless I can persuade her. After all, if I become involved with your operation, betraying you would also endanger me.”

Eldridge looked dubious. “Okay, later I’ll let you talk to her. Convince me she won’t make trouble, and she can go. I don’t need her anymore.” Did he mean that sincerely, Sherri wondered?

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“Another thing,” Nigel said, shifting his weight, poised to spring. “Ms. Hudson goes free, unharmed. Otherwise the deal is off.”

Eldridge bent an appraising stare on Sherri, and her heart raced still faster. In the anemic light of the bedside lamp, his eyes looked as hard as glass marbles.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Think you could hypnotize her into forgetting about me? If not, I can’t risk letting her live.”

“Be reasonable, Eldridge.” Nigel’s voice revealed no emotion stronger than mild irritation. “You got away with killing Brewster, but this is different. What are you going to do when her friends and co-workers come hunting for her? Where do you expect to dispose of the body? Too many variables—I won’t get entangled in a sloppy operation.”

Eldridge winced at Brewster’s name. “So maybe you have a point. You’ve got a thing going for this girl, don’t you?” When Nigel remained silent and expressionless, he added, “We’ll work on it. But I can’t figure what she sees in you in the first place, if you can’t even get it up.”

Nigel ignored the taunt, showing no reaction whatever. “Also, you needn’t expect me to live with you, as Laura did. If I’m satisfied with your arrangements, I’ll drive down here as needed.”

“Drive from where?”

“You don’t need to know any of that until we seal the bargain,” Nigel said.

Eldridge frowned. “You aren’t calling the shots here.” Sherri didn’t think he’d punned intentionally; he looked too grim.

“Don’t waste my time with threats,” Nigel said. “You seriously think you can keep me against my will? I’m older than Laura, you know. I’ll listen as long as you manage to hold my interest, no longer.”

For the first time, Eldridge’s expression of smug confidence wavered. Sherri seized the opportunity to creep another inch sideways, toward the nightstand.

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"All this is short-range stuff," Eldridge said. "What about the big picture? I want you to change me into a vampire."

"Laura was telling the truth when she denied having that power," Nigel said. "She's far too young. You picked yourself a vampire who's hardly more than a child."

"Yeah? What about you?"

Nigel leaned forward, his eyes boring into Eldridge. The other man ignored the lure.

"As I said, I'm older—old enough to have power your half-hearted schemes couldn't begin to comprehend," Nigel said.

Nigel had to be bluffing; Sherri remembered his mention of how young he was.

"And from what I've seen of the way you operate," Nigel added, "I'm not sure you have the intelligence or scope of vision to deserve being one of us."

Eldridge flushed, his hand spasmodically tightening on the revolver's grip. "Look here, I know how to manipulate people. Isn't that the important thing—being able to get what you want out of them?"

Nigel replied only with a sardonic smile.

"I started this coven single-handed, kept it going in secret for months."

"Not much of a secret," Nigel said, "if you misjudged badly enough to bring in someone like Brewster."

"Forget Brewster!" Eldridge's voice was turning shrill. "That was a single miscalculation. Let's have your answer."

"We have many more details to work out," Nigel said in a casual tone sure to exacerbate Eldridge's impatience. "Besides, your first desire isn't to become a vampire. What you want right now is to be bitten by one."

That hit home. Eldridge's weapon hand jerked convulsively. "What are you talking about?" he croaked.

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Nigel's voice dropped to an insinuating softness. "You said Laura had drunk from you dozens of times, yet she's hungry now. So you cut off her supply—only it's backfiring, isn't it? You didn't expect that by punishing her, you'd be depriving yourself, too."

"Bullshit!"

Now Eldridge was completely focused on Nigel, retaining just wit enough to avoid the vampire's eyes. Emboldened, Sherri edged to a spot within reach of the nightstand and crouched in wait.

"You can't lie to me, Eldridge," Nigel said. "That craving shows plainly in your aura. Vampire venom is powerfully addictive, and you're hooked. You want your fix. But you can't discard your pride and make up with Laura, so you've invented this excuse to turn to me."

"Shut up!"

"I can imagine you fighting it, night after night, the memory of her teeth in your neck and that fire flowing through your veins. A fascinating perversion, wasn't it?" Behind the mask of control, Sherri caught a hint of Nigel's disgust.

Eldridge flushed deep maroon in the sickly light. "Shut up, you damned bloodsucking bastard!"

In a quiet tone that Sherri recognized as calculated to infuriate Eldridge still more, Nigel said, "Well, that's two-thirds accurate. Stop wasting my time—if you're that anxious for me to feed on you, say so."

Shaking with rage, Eldridge emitted a strangled, wordless cry. Sherri threw herself at the bedside lamp and shoved it onto the floor. The lampstand shattered with a muffled crash, but the bulb, guarded by the shade, didn't break. She dove for the mattress just as Eldridge whirled toward the noise. Burying her head in her arms, she heard the explosion of the gun. Her ears popped, then filled with a siren-like squeal. Something hot stung her left shoulder.

Dizzy with terror, she rolled onto the floor. She wedged up against the bedstead, on her side in a fetal position, hands covering her eyes. Hearing Eldridge stagger and curse, she ventured a peek.



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Nigel had vanished.

Eldridge spun wildly in the middle of the room. His mouth opening and closing like a dying shark's, he aimed the gun down at Sherri. Gray spots gathered before her eyes.

Behind Eldridge, Nigel appeared out of nowhere. He slammed the flat of his hand down on the nape of the man's neck. Eldridge dropped the revolver and crumpled to the floor.

Sherri hauled herself to her feet, clutching the mattress to keep from collapsing along with her attacker. "You—you—" She gulped air. "You—disappeared." She reached toward Nigel.

He turned blazing red eyes upon her. "Keep out of my way!" He loomed over Eldridge, fists clenched. A growl rumbled in his chest. His whole body trembled.

Sherri staggered back onto the bed, staring at Nigel. His fury beat on her like waves of heat from an open furnace. After a minute or two his harsh breathing quieted, and the visible tension of locked muscles dissipated. He knelt on Eldridge's chest and clamped his fingers around the unconscious man's neck.

"Are you going to kill him?" Sherri whispered.

Nigel glanced at her and said in a normal tone, "I've never killed anyone in my life. On the other hand, I've never been so tempted before." He relaxed his grip and scooped up Eldridge. "I'll have to forego the pleasure. Move."

Sherri scuttled out of the way, and Nigel dumped his victim on the bed. "What are you going to do with him?" she asked.

"Wipe his memory of Laura and me, if I can," said Nigel. "I've never tried mind control that extensive." He picked up the damaged but still functioning lamp and propped it on the nightstand, then sat on the edge of the bed. For the first time in several minutes he looked directly at Sherri, who half-sat on the footboard, her knees quaking. "Don't bleed on the floor."

Groping for her left shoulder, she felt a sticky patch and abruptly

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became aware of pain in that spot. She caught sight of the red stain soaking through her blouse and clamped her jaws against a ripple of nausea. She swallowed hard. “He almost killed us, and you’re worried about messing up his house?”

“Evidence,” Nigel said. “Too bad you had to break the lamp—though I applaud your resourcefulness. Your instincts are in full working order. Damn, I hate to think how Laura will react to the sight and smell of fresh blood.”

Compressing the wound to stop the bleeding, Sherri watched Nigel slap Eldridge lightly on both cheeks.

“Wake up, you.”

Eldridge groaned, reflexively flinching from the blow. Nigel shook him. The man blinked, then squeezed his eyes shut.

“Look at me,” Nigel ordered. He administered another slap, this one harder. When Eldridge bucked, trying to throw him off, Nigel planted a knee in his diaphragm and pinned his shoulders to the mattress. “You don’t want to make me any angrier, Eldridge. Much as I’d love to, I don’t plan to kill you—unless you give me an excuse. You wouldn’t want to do that, would you?” The quiet menace he exuded made Sherri’s chest feel tight.

Eldridge let out a gust of air and opened his eyes. “You can’t control me,” he choked out. “The cross—”

“Oh, that,” Nigel said. “I forgot all about it.” His fingers curled around the silver trinket and snapped the chain. He dropped the cross on the nightstand. “You were saying?”

Eldridge goggled at him. “But Laura—” He shut his mouth in a stubborn line and turned his head sideways.

Nigel gripped Eldridge’s head in both hands and wrenched it around, compelling the other man to face him. “No more games. If you make me do that again, I’ll be less gentle.” His hands and eyes captured the victim, held him paralyzed. Sherri imagined she felt the outer fringe of a force that radiated in concentric circles from Nigel, damping down

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the victim's will as a powerful transmitter might reduce a weaker one to null-content noise. "Much better. Feels good to stop fighting, doesn't it? Now you'll answer a few questions."

Eldridge returned a tentative nod.

"How many people in this coven of yours?"

The man replied in a hoarse whisper, "Altogether—without Brewster—twenty-two."

"And you allow only twelve to attend each sabbat?"

Another nod.

"Do they know the identities of their co-members?"

A single shake of the head. "Unless—they give themselves away on purpose—coming or leaving. I've been careful with—masks. Don't think they would. Blackmail." His breathing was labored and noisy.

"What do they think Laura is?"

"Demon—vampire—I've never said anything except messenger of Satan. Keep them guessing." A humorless grimace twisted his lips.

"Do any of them have an inkling of the truth? Have you brought anyone into your confidence as to where she came from or what she actually is?"

Eldridge shook his head again. "You kidding? Knowledge is power—wealth—"

"How fortunate for you," Nigel said, "and convenient for me. You are going to lose that knowledge, too. First you will forget her true nature. You'll remember her actions at the Satanic meetings as nothing more than special effects concocted by you. Then you will forget her name and the circumstances of your meeting. Finally you'll lose all but the vaguest memory of her physical appearance. As for me and Ms. Hudson, you will forget her name and address, and our visit here tonight will totally vanish from your mind."

"You can't—no way—" Sherri heard terror in Eldridge's strained whisper.

Nigel leaned harder on the man's midriff, eliciting a grunt of pain.

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“Careful, you’re making me angry again. You will also forget that vampires exist. Should anyone suggest the possibility to you, you’ll laugh it off and feel compelled to change the subject immediately.”

Sherri wondered whether Nigel could really edit the man’s memory to such an extreme degree. Eldridge, too, remained skeptical despite his naked fear.

“You can’t do it—I’ll fight—”

“If you do, you’ll suffer agony for no purpose. You aren’t dealing with my little sister now.” As he talked, Nigel’s eyes continued to bore into Eldridge. “I wield the accumulated strength of centuries. All the lives I have ever consumed are mine, to feed my power.”

Recognizing the loose paraphrase from *Dracula*, Sherri suppressed a hysterical giggle. Would Eldridge fall for the melodramatic bluff? The realtor squirmed weakly, again trying to break Nigel’s hold. Nigel immobilized him with no apparent effort. His hands now rested on either side of Eldridge’s head, the fingertips lightly touching the temples. Yet Sherri visualized Nigel compressing the victim’s brain as in a vise, to mold its contents into the desired shape. She seemed to feel energy streaming from Nigel’s burning eyes to drill into Eldridge’s skull and suck out strength and knowledge as easily as he might have sucked the man’s veins dry.

*What the heck am I thinking?* she wondered, mentally shaking herself. *I can’t feel anything of the kind; I don’t have ESP.* Or could her blood-link with Nigel already have grown strong enough to attune her to his emotions in an intense moment like this?

Incredibly, she sensed Eldridge fighting back. With the force of despair, he halted Nigel at the portal of the innermost chamber of his mind. She visualized Nigel on the outside, pushing at a barred door, while Eldridge threw his full weight upon the other side, to hold it shut. The struggle cast a coruscating veil of blue sparks that shimmered around them, as if their mental friction generated electricity. Sherri blinked and shook her head. Momentarily the optical illusion faded,

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then coalesced into being again. Through the veil she saw veins standing out as purple cords in Eldridge's neck, rivulets of sweat trickling down his face. His chest heaved with the effort.

Nigel, in contrast, crouched over his antagonist like a pale statue. All his striving remained internal. Sherri felt the battering of his power. It surged outward to surround her, too. Dizziness blurred her vision. She fought it. Then she felt Nigel's hand clasping hers—yet her eyes told her he was still occupied with Eldridge. A wordless call penetrated her makeshift mental defenses, the same appeal she'd felt when he'd taken her blood.

He wanted her help, her strength. For an instant the memory of his rage froze her. Then, with a shiver of reluctance, she stopped fighting and yielded. Something she hadn't known she possessed surged from her brain to his. The barrier Nigel was assailing burst open. A quasi-organic tremor convulsed her.

Abruptly the room around her snapped back to normal, like a defective TV picture righting itself. She sank to her knees, clinging to the footboard. Nigel stood up and let out a long breath.

"Did it work?" Sherri whispered.

Nigel stepped over to her, pulled her to her feet, and clasped her in his arms for a minute. The fever-dream weakness seeped away, leaving her physically more or less normal. "Thanks to you, better than I expected. Actually, I'm not sure what happened." He waved toward the bed.

Eldridge lay rigid, his eyes unblinking and motionless, arms stretched along either side of him, fingers splayed. "Eldridge, can you hear me?" Nigel said. No response.

"He's not faking, is he?" Sherri asked.

Nigel shook his head. Releasing her, he picked up Eldridge's right arm and positioned it in the air at a forty-five degree angle from his body. It remained suspended there without the slightest quiver of fatigue. "I tried to wipe selected parts of his memory, and it looks like I

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pushed too hard. Couldn't have done it without drawing on you—which is only possible because there's a union between us, however tentative." He clapped his hands inches from the man's nose. Not so much as the blink of an eye. Nigel returned the stiffly poised arm to its place on the mattress. "Prettiest instance of catatonia I've ever seen."

Sherri tiptoed closer and peered at the entranced figure. "I had no idea you could do that."

"Frankly, neither did I."

"How long will he stay that way?" She still whispered, as if she feared waking Eldridge, as clearly impossible as that would be.

"Who knows?" Nigel said. "I told you, I'm as surprised as you are." He bent over to search the man, who remained as inert as a life-size doll. "You'd better clean up that bullet wound. Lucky it didn't lodge in the flesh."

Sherri stumbled into the bathroom and closed the door behind her. A moment later, while she was peeling the blouse back from her sore shoulder, Nigel knocked on the door. "Come in," she said, staring at her face in the mirror. She looked blue around the lips.

Nigel stepped in, jingling a key ring. "Good," he said when he examined the wound. "Hardly more than a scratch—the bleeding's stopped, and you shouldn't need medical attention." He wetted his handkerchief and gently wiped away the drying blood. Under his touch the pain flowed away, too. "Better now? We have to collect Laura and get out of here."

"Right," Sherri said, struggling to keep her voice even. "Lead the way."

She tiptoed past Eldridge, who resembled an undead corpse at this moment far more than Nigel did.

In the den Nigel paused to lock the dead bolt behind them. "In case he does wake up." Outside the adjacent door he said, "Stand back a bit—no telling how she'll react to us."

Sherri obediently took a couple of paces back. Nigel tried one key,

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discarded it, found the correct one, unlocked the bolt, and threw the door open. For a few seconds he stood motionless on the threshold. Hearing no sound from within and frustrated with having her view blocked, Sherri crowded up next to him. A faint smell of decay reached her. She saw Nigel swallow as if controlling an urge to vomit.

He stepped into the room. Taking his place in the open doorway, she viewed its contents in the dim light cast by the den's overhead fixture.

The room, identical in size and shape to the one they'd just left, was almost empty. Sherri saw a closet door, the open bathroom door, and a rectangular chest beneath the shuttered window. Chest? Not a perfect rectangle, but narrower at one end. Surely not...?

"My God, it's a coffin!" Nigel whispered.

In the middle of a sheepskin rug on the floor lay a woman. She was huddled face down, so that all Sherri could see were her red hair flowing to the middle of her back, and the pale caftan, embroidered with a grapevine pattern, that she wore.

"Don't come any closer," Nigel ordered. He strode into the room and knelt beside the woman. "Laura!" He patted her shoulder.

The woman stirred, turned half onto her side. Her eyes opened to slits. "Nigel?"

He pulled her into a sitting position, both arms around her. "Wake up, Laura. It's really me, and I'm taking you away."

"Nigel?" She twitched in his embrace. "How...?" Her gaze wandered from him to Sherri. Her eyes flew wide open, and flames leaped in them.

An icicle plunged into Sherri's heart. She stood transfixed as Laura broke Nigel's loose hold and sprang up. Laura launched herself toward the door, eyes blazing, teeth bared.

Instantaneously—or so it appeared to Sherri's human sight—Nigel flashed from the middle of the floor to a spot right in front of Laura. Laura's right arm lashed out, slapping Nigel in the jaw. He staggered

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backward and stumbled to the floor.

Nigel—stunned? This display of Laura’s berserk strength snapped Sherri into action. She retreated into the den and leaped aside as Laura charged. The she-vampire ignored her. Instead of attacking Sherri, Laura flung herself at the locked door of the other bedroom. Howling like a coyote, she pounded and kicked the wood.

The outburst lasted only a couple of seconds. Laura, wheezing, her drawn-back lips flecked with saliva, whirled to face Sherri. Terror held Sherri paralyzed. Laura’s glowing eyes raked her up and down. In that moment of stasis, Sherri felt something emanating from the other woman—an echo of the hunger she’d felt in Nigel. Sherri laid herself open to it, and it became amplified from an echo into a deafening screech. The ravenous gnawing invaded her own vitals. If this was what drove Laura, no wonder the woman behaved like a mad dog!

Sherri had seen Nigel’s strength and speed. No way could she escape this raging hunger, especially when it attacked from inside as well as outside. “Okay,” she gasped. She threw her head back to bare her neck. “Okay, come on.”

Laura, her hands poised like talons preparing to rend a victim, didn’t attack. She stared, motionless, as if she, too, were paralyzed.

Suspended between fear and pity, Sherri whispered, “For heaven’s sake, get it over with!”

Suddenly Nigel appeared between them. When he descended on Laura, her paralysis broke into a fresh convulsion of fury.

His hands clamped onto her arms. She writhed, kicking with bare feet, straining to bring her teeth close enough to bite him. For the first time Sherri saw Nigel’s physical strength taxed. He breathed heavily as he fought to hold back his sister. She twisted one arm free and clawed his face with inhumanly long nails.

That seemed to be the opening Nigel wanted. With unhurried accuracy he drew back his right arm—the one she’d yanked free of—and clipped her on the jaw. Her head jerked back, and she fell into his



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arms.

Brushing past Sherri, he carried Laura to the den couch. He left her slumped there and hurried to the window to wrench open the pane and the shutters. “Fresh air, thank God!” he said. He looked at Sherri as if just remembering her presence. “Don’t get any closer. I’m going to wake her now. And don’t worry, I won’t be caught off guard a second time.”

Sherri answered with a shaky nod and lowered herself into the nearest chair. Glimpsing the blood that streaked Nigel’s face, she felt no impulse to get any closer to Laura.

Nigel sat on the couch beside Laura, one arm pinning her to the cushions. His free hand smoothed the hair back from her forehead. “Laura, wake up.” His fingertips lingered between her eyes. “Come on, I know you hear me. I can’t carry you to the car. The last thing we need is some officious motorist offering us a lift.”

Laura’s eyes fluttered open. Again their red glow fastened on Sherri. Nigel tightened his clasp around Laura’s waist. “Don’t even think it. That’s not how you repay your co-rescuer. Besides, she’s mine.”

Laura took a long, tremulous breath, slowly exhaled it. The glow in her eyes shrank to pinpoints of red. Her voice surprised Sherri with its husky resonance. “I can see that.” She turned to Sherri. “Relax. I won’t—”

Nigel shot a wary look from one woman to the other. “Go up to the kitchen,” he said, “and bring two of those cages full of rats.” When Sherri stared dumbly at him, he said, “In the pantry—hurry!”

Feeling like Cinderella running errands for her fairy godmother, Sherri coaxed her numb legs into action and scurried up the steps. In the kitchen annex she did find a table covered with wire mesh cages. She snatched up a pair of them, causing the eight white rats to squeak in panic. She awkwardly carried the cages downstairs.

When she drew near, Nigel stood and reached for the first cage.

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Sherri passed it to him, coming no closer than she had to. Laura, her legs folded under her, trembled as she watched Nigel open the wire door and extract a rat. He rolled it on its back in the palm of his hand and stroked the small white belly until the animal went limp. He offered the fuzzy lump to Laura.

She grabbed the rat from him and sank her teeth into it. Blood gushed from the tiny body, spilling over her lips and chin.

Nigel glanced at Sherri and said in a low voice, "You needn't watch."

Though she didn't want to watch, she couldn't summon the will to look away. Now she had leisure for a complete survey of Laura. The vampire woman's hair tumbled around her head and down her shoulders in a tangled, greasy mass. Her bushy eyebrows met above the bridge of the nose. Her pointed nails were two or three inches long and curved like a bird's talons. Gaunt from fasting and paler than Nigel's, her face had a sharp, fox-like cast that didn't cancel its exotic beauty.

Beauty? With a rat's blood smeared all over her mouth? Yes, Sherri decided, even then. Laura was draining her fourth rodent, and Nigel unlatched the second cage. *So that's how vampires look in their natural state.*

Within minutes, eight rat corpses littered the floor. Nigel gathered them up and methodically returned them to the cages. Laura licked her lips and wiped her face on the sleeve of the caftan, which, Sherri noticed in the brighter light of this room, was already so dingy and spotted that a few more stains made no difference.

"*Gracias, hermano mio,*" Laura said.

"*De nada, chica,*" he replied. "We've dawdled long enough. Do you have anything else to wear?"

She uncurled herself from the couch and said, "Yes, one outfit other than ceremonial robes. Eldridge didn't want me to step out of character any more than necessary." Her voice modulated into a hiss. "Give me the key! Let me kill him!"

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Sherri cringed from the blaze in her eyes.

"Dream about it all you like," said Nigel, "but that's not an option. You know the rules." He caught her arm to restrain her from rushing to the locked door again.

Laura gnashed her teeth. "I want his blood! I *need* it!"

"Worst possible thing for you. You're going to break out of that dependence, starting right now. And you know we *don't* leave corpses in our wake."

She leaned against him, shaking. "All right—I'll be good." Glancing at Sherri, she said, "Don't be afraid. I probably couldn't even bring myself to take your—" She gulped. "Let's get out of here!"

Nigel led her into the coffin room to change clothes. Trailing after, Sherri heard him ask, "Have you any personal possessions here that could identify you?"

"Only my purse," Laura said. "In the closet. I didn't bring much with me." Shortly she emerged, carrying a bead-studded leather bag and wearing jeans and a loose silk blouse.

Just before they left, Nigel unlocked the other bedroom door and tossed the key ring in. "There—whoever finds Eldridge will probably attribute his condition and the general chaos to nameless diabolistic rites."

Upstairs, Nigel, carried the two cages into a small entertainment room equipped with stereo, TV, and, to Sherri's surprise, a tank containing a large, drowsily coiled snake. Nigel lifted the tank's lid and dumped in the dead rats. "With any luck, he'll dispose of the carcasses—though we can't count on it, since they're already dead." About to leave, he stopped and exclaimed, "Oh, damn, the videotapes! Laura, how many did you appear in?"

"Just one," Laura said.

"Thank the First Cause for small favors." He selected one cassette from a cabinet and led the way to the living room.

As she followed Nigel and Laura out through the window to avoid

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leaving further evidence of intruders, Sherri said, “Suppose nobody finds Eldridge in time? If he doesn’t come to on his own, he could die of thirst.”

“So?” Nigel said. “You don’t think he deserves it?”

## CHAPTER 12

Sherri felt as if she were plummeting down an elevator shaft. She staggered against a tree. “You’d let him die?”

Nigel’s eyes glowed in the penumbra of the porch light. “*Let* him die? My dear girl, given a halfway reasonable chance of getting away with it, I’d have ripped him into bloody shreds.”

“You’ve done it now, *caro hermano*,” Laura said with a fleeting smile. “Now that your pet has seen what we’re really like, she won’t want to come within miles of you.”

The two vampires started walking down the driveway, and Sherri automatically kept pace with them. “I do not think of her as a pet,” Nigel said.

Relief inundated Sherri, blending queasily with the revulsion left from Nigel’s earlier statement. “And I wouldn’t reject Nigel over a—a philosophic difference!” she said. “I know I can’t expect him to think like a human being.”

“Your lady protests too much,” Laura said.

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“You don’t give her enough credit. Not all ephemerals are like Eldridge.” Pausing, Nigel included both women in a sweeping wave. “By the way, Laura, meet Sherri Hudson. Sherri, meet Laura.”

“Thank you for your part in my rescue, Sherri Hudson,” Laura said gravely. “You are evidence that some ephemerals—maybe—can be trusted as more than tools or domestic animals.”

“Thanks, I guess.” Sherri started to extend her hand to Laura, then thought better of it. The famished gleam hadn’t faded from the vampire woman’s eyes.

They resumed walking. Sherri suspected Nigel was curbing his long strides for her sake. Laura’s eyes ranged greedily over the landscape; she breathed deeply, her teeth bared in what Sherri took for sensual pleasure rather than threat.

Laura confirmed this impression by murmuring, “Beautiful—I was beginning to think I’d never see the outside world again! Or that there was no outside world, just a fantasy I’d dreamed up. I almost went crazy in there.”

Nigel reached over to give Laura’s hand a quick squeeze, then clasped hands with Sherri. She decided not to fight him. Their moment of triumph was no time for dissension. Later she could reopen the question of Eldridge’s fate.

At the car Nigel bundled Laura into the back seat. “Sherri, you’ll have to drive, while I sit with Laura. Can you handle it?”

Slipping in behind the wheel, Sherri wiped off the misted inner surface of the windshield and surveyed the wisps of fog among the evergreen branches. A slight breeze had dissipated most of it. “Sure, as long as you don’t nag me about driving slowly, because I can’t do it any other way.” She hoped Nigel would be too tactful to unmask her assumed cheerfulness.

Confined in the car, Laura withdrew into a quivering heap. Apparently the burst of energy from the rats’ blood had been only temporary. Nigel leaned over the seat to Sherri. “Vampires can be hard

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to deal with when deprived of human blood for too long. Bear with us—you've shown uncommon courage so far."

Sherri felt herself blushing. With an uneasy glance at Laura, she started the ignition.

Laura squirmed in the seat belt Nigel was tightening around her. "Really, Nigel, why scare your...friend...half to death? I'm not about to fly into a maniacal frenzy."

"Glad to hear it," he said briskly. "Nevertheless, I'm the psychologist here, and I intend to keep a close eye on you." He draped an arm around her shoulder.

They didn't converse while driving homeward along Big Sur. Sherri's eyes ached with staring out the window; her fingers cramped on the steering wheel. Behind her, after the first few miles, she heard Laura's breathing change to labored hissing. Glancing back once, she saw Laura shaking, her teeth clenched, while Nigel held her tightly to his side. Sherri made a point of not looking again. Later she heard low snarls from the back seat, mingled with Nigel's soothing murmurs.

An interminable, weary time later, she pulled into her own driveway. Chill dampness covered her arms and forehead, and again her knees were quaking from the tension of riding the brake most of the way. For the past half hour the back seat had been quiet. Sherri discovered Laura asleep—unconscious?—with her head in Nigel's lap.

"Distinctly abnormal," Nigel said. "Let's get her inside."

Sherri was faintly surprised to see the eastern sky lightening to gray through the pine trees. She checked her watch—after five! For the first time in hours she became aware of her own physical condition. She emitted a yawn, and her stomach rumbled.

"You get something to eat," Nigel said as they entered the house. "Poor dear, you didn't bargain for all this, did you?" Carrying Laura, he headed for the hall bathroom. "I suppose this is stocked with shampoo, soap, dental floss, all the etceteras?" he said over his shoulder.

"Sure." Groping her way to her own bathroom, Sherri stripped off

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her ruined blouse. Half blind with fatigue, she blearily examined the scratch on her shoulder. Though the soreness was returning, the wound didn't look serious. A fast shower woke her enough to let her find the kitchen and start coffee. After gulping down a glass of juice, she took coffee and yogurt into the living room, where she found Nigel slumped on the couch.

"You look as exhausted as I feel," he said.

"Laura?"

"Conscious, and more or less in her right mind. She's taking a bath."

Sherri placed her cup on the coffee table and sat next to him. "Should you leave her alone?"

"Well, she can hardly drown," Nigel pointed out.

The lines of fatigue around his mouth reminded Sherri that he'd had a more strenuous night than she had. "You must be hungry, too." Good Lord, did she have to blush every time she spoke to him? "Want some milk?"

"Good idea," he said. "For Laura, too—and please warm it to body temperature."

*Gee, why didn't I think of that before?* Sherri dragged herself back to the kitchen, poured two mugs of milk, and heated them in the microwave oven. Stirring each to distribute the heat evenly, she tested one with a fingertip before offering it to Nigel.

"Perfect," he said after the first sip. "Laura's astonished at how tolerant you are, but I knew I could count on you."

"Don't be so sure," she said. "My tolerance doesn't go as far as leaving a man to die a slow death, no matter what he's done."

"Oh, that. I should have known you wouldn't let it go."

"Darn right!" she said. To her disgust, her hand shook as she spooned her yogurt. After a couple of mouthfuls, she said, "I'm making an anonymous call to the police." She added in response to Nigel's frown, "Look, if Eldridge isn't holding weekly Black Masses anymore,



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he could lie there alone for months.”

“I don’t like the idea,” Nigel said. “The less attention drawn to that house, the better. Still, it probably couldn’t do any harm. I took the videotape of Laura—which I’ll destroy, of course. When the authorities find Eldridge in an inexplicable coma, I hope the Satanist chapel and the coffin will convince them he’s simply a nasty variety of psychotic. If they search for any outsiders at all, they’ll probably stop with questioning his coven members—provided they’re clever enough to find the membership list.”

“There is one?” Sherri said.

“Oh, yes, the proverbial little black book. I left it, figuring Eldridge’s associates didn’t deserve protection and could serve as convenient scapegoats.”

Sherri shivered at his cold tone. “Well, I’m going to make that call and then forget about him. Slimy—” Nausea choked her for a second. “Just between us, in a way I do think he deserves to die of thirst. But I have to do this for me.” She got up and hurried to the kitchen before Nigel could say anything else to confuse her.

She punched 911 into the phone and delivered her message in a single long breath. When the operator began to question her, Sherri hung up. Her trembling fingers rattled the receiver. She leaned against the sink and splashed her face with cold water. “It’s over,” she whispered. “I can forget it. I’m safe.”

*Safe? With a vampire lover as a souvenir of the adventure?* Whatever fond plans Nigel had about saying, “It’s been fun, so long,” Sherri knew that after their momentary union in fighting Eldridge, the two of them had unfinished business to settle. She strode back into the living room, lighter of heart and step.

“Satisfied?” Nigel asked.

“Yes, now I am,” she replied. “I know I can’t hold you to human moral standards, but I sure can’t let you seduce me into abandoning them.” She scooped up a few more mouthfuls of yogurt and said, “I

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can't really be your friend—instead of your pet—if you don't let me be my true self, can I? After all, aren't I accepting what you are?"

Nigel said with a reluctant smile, "Sly, blackmailing wench."

A figure appeared in the archway leading to the hall—a pale, tall apparition in jeans and a sheer blouse. Laura glided soundlessly to an armchair and curled up in it. Nigel passed her the second mug of milk. "Ready to tell me all about you and that bush-league Aleister Crowley? You may as well gratify my curiosity; you need the rehearsal for facing Dr. Valpa."

"Don't remind me! He'll think I've behaved like an idiot."

Laura's red hair, wet from the shower, hung sleek and straight, the tangles combed out. She had shaved her brows to a more human appearance, and the clawlike nails were clean, though not trimmed.

"So you have," said Nigel cheerfully.

After a long drink of milk, Laura said, "All right, I'll talk."

Sherri straightened up. "Shall I leave?"

"No, you stay and listen," Laura said. "Nigel wants you to hear this—I sense that, for some reason, he wants to scare you off." She arched one eyebrow at her brother. "Who did I say was acting like an idiot?"

Sherri shot a suspicious glance at Nigel. "In that case, I wouldn't dream of leaving."

"How in the name of all the Powers of Night," Nigel said to Laura, "did you blunder into Eldridge's orbit in the first place? I didn't even know you'd moved to this area. Last I heard, you were visiting the Castle in Nevada."

"Yes, I was," she said. "That's where I met Eldridge—Don."

"First names?" Nigel interrupted.

"Well, it would have sounded rather silly to call him by his surname all that time, as intimate as we were—physically, anyhow. Don was attending some real estate convention in Las Vegas. I ran across him while walking in the desert one night."

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"If you hadn't done anything but walk in the desert, you couldn't have ended up in so much trouble."

"Don wandered by at just the fortuitous moment," Laura said. "He was out for fresh air, he said, driving around aimlessly, and when he got a glimpse of me, he was curious. He stopped the car for a closer look." She paused, shifting her eyes in an almost embarrassed manner.

"Come clean, what were you doing to excite curiosity?"

"First off, it was just the surprise of seeing a woman alone out there, without a car in sight. Then, when he got closer—" Her slender fingers twisted into a knot in her lap. "Well, you see, I'd already hunted and fed on a pair of rabbits, and I was playing around. Experimenting with trying to control a rattlesnake, if you must know."

"You young half-wit," Nigel said, "you can't control reptiles. They don't have enough brain to hypnotize."

"Cut it out, big brother; you aren't that much older than I am. Yes, I'd been told that, but I wanted to find out for myself. And, after all, how much harm could one snake do me?"

"I presume you found out," Nigel said. "Good God, I'm beginning to think you haven't any more brains than the reptile!"

Laura's obvious chagrin at her misjudgment stirred Sherri's sympathy. "Quit being so hard on her, Nigel. You've probably made mistakes in your time."

"Such as getting caught by Eldridge?" he said with a wry smile. "Point taken. Go on, Laura."

"I thought I was doing well. The snake coiled around my arm quite tamely. And then, all of a sudden, it struck. The pain was—" Her lips twitched back from clenched teeth. "It felt like lava running up my veins. I broke the snake's back and threw it as far as I could, then just collapsed on the ground. I was dizzy—disoriented with fear, too. I'd assumed we were immune to the poison."

"Lots of things we're immune to in the sense that they can't kill us," Nigel said, "but they can still make us damn sick. Didn't Valpa

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teach you that?”

“Probably,” Laura said. “I must not have been listening when he delivered that lecture. My head reeled, I was trembling all over, and I felt myself—changing. I couldn’t stop it.”

“Your body was fighting to throw off the venom as fast as possible,” Nigel said. “Let me guess—Eldridge saw you in winged form.”

Laura nodded. “I was half delirious, not even aware of him until he stood right over me. It took his utter shock to penetrate the fog around my mind. I looked up, and there was this man staring at me, with an expression like he’d just been decapitated and hadn’t noticed it yet. He got another shock when I leaped up, grabbed him, and knocked him flat on his back.”

“Good move,” Nigel said. “What went wrong?”

“Well, I figured human blood was exactly what I needed for quick healing. Afterward, it should be no problem to wipe the whole incident from his mind.”

Sherri listened in fascinated silence; Laura seemed to have forgotten her presence.

“Somehow it didn’t work that way. Don fought my mesmerism. I was still weaker than normal, and he managed to put up a mental barrier, hold me off. We were kneeling there on the desert floor, face to face, both breathing as hard as if we’d been in a physical wrestling match instead of a psychic one. He intrigued me. I’d heard some people, if prepared, could resist us, but I’d never met one before.”

“I wonder how he came by the talent,” Nigel said. “As a salesman, he’d have needed some degree of persuasive power. Yet I wouldn’t have guessed he had the imagination to believe in you straight off and make the appropriate defensive response.”

“I felt his fear,” Laura said. “With his blood still flowing from his neck where I’d bitten, he knew what I could do to him. But his eagerness for power over his fellow men was stronger. He said, ‘Let’s

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call a truce, whatever you are. I have a proposition that might interest you.”

“He was a repulsive lump of protoplasm,” Nigel said, “but I must admit he had nerve! He’d probably have proposed a deal to the Devil himself, if that gentleman actually existed.”

Laura said, “I agreed to go back to Don’s hotel room and talk. At that point, you see, I knew I could get away from him any time, and once familiarity dulled his alertness, I could certainly hypnotize him. I admit it, I underestimated his strength. An ephemeral, get the better of me? Come on!” Sherri could almost taste the sourness of Laura’s disillusionment. “He told me about his coven. It was all a—what word did he use?—a scam. He collected huge donations from the members in return for cheap occult thrills and kinky sex. At first he wasn’t terribly interested in what I really was. I could put on a convincing show as a demon; that was all he cared about. I agreed to give it a trial.”

Nigel shook his head. “Why didn’t you at least ask for advice? If not from Dr. Valpa, from *somebody*?”

Laura’s eyes darted away from his. “Mainly because I couldn’t think of anyone who wouldn’t tell me not to do it. It sounded exciting. And it was. Nigel, the astonishment of those people when I changed before their eyes, and the fear!”

Her hands tightened into fists. “I was drunk on it before I tasted the first man’s blood.”

Sherri’s heartbeat fluttered frenetically. Whose excitement was she feeling? Nigel’s, Laura’s—or her own? *Watch yourself, girl. That reaction may be normal for them; for you, it’s a perversion.*

Laura continued. “That settled it. I decided a half-year or so as a live-in demon was just what I needed. Don said he had a couple of guest rooms in his basement, and I could use one of them. Whenever nobody else was around, I could have the run of the house. So I left my car and personal effects in storage at the Castle and moved in with him.”

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“You voluntarily became a prisoner?” Nigel said. “Of all the harebrained—”

“Come on, I’m not that stupid! There wasn’t any hint of imprisonment at first. He even let me borrow his car now and then. When we weren’t plotting new variations on the Black Mass, his conversation was pretty dull, but he had an entertaining collection of books. And I loved walking down to the beach at night. He asked me not to fly, which didn’t bother me much, since I got to change at the services. Until the last, he always held aloof, the godlike master of ceremonies. It was in private that I drank from him, twice a week.”

“You enjoyed it?” Nigel asked in a tone of distaste.

“Why not? Except for being a little overweight, he was in excellent health.”

“Surely you didn’t like him?”

Laura shrugged. “He was a convenience. What should liking have to do with it? When he started demanding sexual intercourse, I could have done without it, but I didn’t really mind. Anyway, the arousal made his blood taste better.”

“Look here,” Nigel said, “you have the right to lay for your meals, if that’s your choice—you certainly aren’t the first to do it. But how could you possibly do it in public?”

Sherri glanced, puzzled, from Nigel to Laura.

Noticing her for the first time in several minutes, Laura said, “He means at the orgies in the chapel. *Hermano mio*, don’t knock what you haven’t tried. The passion in the air was the most intoxicating experience you could ever imagine. When I got into that windowless room, enveloped in all that lust and fear—well, I don’t think I was responsible for my actions at those times.”

“That, I can believe!” Nigel said. A horror-struck expression appeared on his face. “Good God—you didn’t come into heat, did you?”

“No, I’m too young.”

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“So I thought,” Nigel said, visibly sagging with relief, “but first estrus at your age would fall into the normal range. Thank Providence—there’s a remote chance he could have impregnated you.”

Laura’s mouth twisted in disgust. “I wouldn’t have let it live.”

Sherri interrupted, “You mean vampires can breed with human mates?”

“Sometimes,” Nigel said. “If she’d come into estrus and he had sex with her at that time, she would’ve had a remote chance of conceiving a hybrid.”

Laura waved her hand in a brush-off gesture. “But it didn’t happen, and I don’t want to think about it anymore.”

“So how did you end up a prisoner?” Nigel asked.

She nibbled thoughtfully on the tip of a tapered fingernail. “Things started to go wrong when he got the notion of being transformed into a vampire. He simply refused to believe me when I told him I couldn’t do that. Of course, he knew almost nothing about my true nature. I even let him think that little cross kept me from taking his blood whenever I felt like it.” The red glow in the depths of her pupils flared in the muted light.

“Say, that coffin—I hope it wasn’t your idea!”

“Of course not.” She sniffed. “Don bought it as a prop, to impress the favored few he allowed into my living quarters. Hell knows where he got the thing.”

Sherri’s chest constricted with Laura’s reawakened anguish. *How can I be feeling this stuff?*

“Don wanted me to stay in character all the time, unless he was sure of privacy. He worried me when he started getting obsessed with the vampire thing. Money and manipulating his disciples weren’t enough anymore. He wanted what he called ‘real power.’”

“Sorcerer’s apprentice,” Nigel said. “Why on earth didn’t you get out the moment you sensed what was happening?”

Laura covered her eyes for a second, then dropped her hands to her

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lap with a shuddering sigh.

"I see," Nigel said quietly. "You were already addicted to him."

She nodded, humiliation clear in her silver-gray eyes.

"And he to you, though he didn't know it. He only knew that, for some reason, he couldn't stay away from you."

In a shaky voice Laura said, "I got to the point where I loathed him, but none of the others satisfied me anymore. When he dropped the Satanist meetings, I was relieved. They were becoming a burden. He started demanding sex every time, as a price of his blood. And he never stopped harping on the idea that I should make him a vampire. One evening I woke up and discovered he'd locked me in."

"Almighty God," Nigel said, in a voice that was almost a snarl, "maybe I should go back and kill him!"

"You wouldn't!" Sherri cried.

Both of them turned to look at her, apparently as startled as if the lamp in one corner of the room had come to life and spoken. "No, he won't," Laura said. "He's too damn cautious, and I have to admit his reasons are correct. Anyway, Don told me I'd stay locked down there until I performed that impossible transformation."

Watching anger surge anew in Laura's eyes, Sherri felt the last of her fear of the other woman melt into sympathy.

"And when you still refused?" Nigel said tightly.

"What do you think?" Laura shrugged. "He denied me his blood. When that didn't produce prompt results, he cut off the rat ration, too."

"How long?" Nigel asked.

"I've had nothing but water for sixteen nights," she said in a flat, controlled tone. "I haven't had human blood in almost four weeks."

"That's impossible," Nigel hissed. "I can't imagine why you haven't gone out of your mind or lapsed into a coma."

"I've come close," she said with an attempt at a smile. Suddenly she covered her eyes and emitted a drawn-out moan.

Her hunger twisted like a knife in Sherri's guts. Unthinking, Sherri



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jumped up and started toward Laura. Nigel blocked Sherri's path and pushed her back onto the couch. Crossing the room to Laura, he sat on the arm of the chair and drew his sister's head onto his chest.

"Take it easy. It's going to be all right. You'll spend the day at my place. I'll call Dr. Valpa, he'll be here tonight, and we'll find you a donor. You can hold out that long, can't you?"

"Hey, she doesn't have to," Sherri blurted out. Nigel stared at her. She was almost as startled as he; until the words popped out, she hadn't realized herself what she was going to say. "Why not?" she said. "I'm healthy enough—you can vouch for that."

Laura raised her head to survey Sherri. "I don't need a testimonial; I can see for myself how healthy you are. But I don't know if I could manage to drink from—from anybody. Anybody except—oh, God, I feel so ashamed!" She hid her face in Nigel's shirtfront.

"The question won't arise," he said, "because I won't allow it. Absolutely not."

"And who are you to decide?" Sherri flung at him. "Since when do you own my body?"

"All I'm saying is that it would be appallingly dangerous. You have no concept of what a starving vampire is like."

"I've seen enough tonight to give me a pretty clear idea. She needs—" Sherri choked on the words and struggled to speak calmly. "In fact, I'll bet I know as much as you do, at this point."

"Granted, in practice I've never had to deal with this situation, either. But the idea of you putting yourself in danger—"

"Laura doesn't want to hurt me," Sherri said. By now she'd seen enough of Laura's character to feel almost as confident of that fact as she tried to sound. "And if she...loses control, you're here to stop her." Sherri's skin prickled under the intense fire of Laura's eyes, fixed on her with a blend of hunger and trepidation. Sherri didn't believe she could be imagining her sensations; somehow she actually felt the thirst burning in the other woman. The need to quench it blotted out all

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revulsion.

Sherri walked over to Laura's chair. "Give up, Nigel. You can't stop me. You said yourself that I'm not your pet."

"I also said you're crazy, and I stand by that. Oh, hell, I won't fight it, if that's what Laura wants." He got up to stand behind the chair, his hands resting lightly on his sister's shoulders.

Sherri took his place next to Laura, trembling, in spite of her resolution, at the nearness of the vampire woman.

"I appreciate the thought," Laura said, "but I don't believe I can. You belong—excuse me, I mean right now, you and Nigel belong to each other. Maybe with an anonymous victim I could force myself—"

"Talk sense into her, Nigel," Sherri said. "Is she in any condition to be turned loose on the world?"

Nigel gave Sherri a look of grudging respect. "You know, that's the first intelligent thing you've said on the subject. Very well, you've convinced me. Laura, I advise you to accept the offer."

"I can't—"

Sherri didn't know how much of this waffling her nerve could survive. She cut it short by offering Laura her bare wrist. Laura clamped her fingers around Sherri's forearm and lowered her mouth to the spot where the pulse throbbed. Sherri felt the burning cold of Laura's lips on her skin. After a single flick of her tongue, Laura pulled back.

"Nigel, help me," Sherri said. "We need a little...inspiration." She raised her arm to bring her wrist within reach of Nigel's teeth.

"You don't expect me to—"

"Just do it!"

"My God, girl, you're asking for impossible self-restraint!"

The claim was obviously exaggerated, for without further protest he nipped Sherri's wrist and instantly released it.

Again Laura grasped Sherri's arm. The vampire woman's breathing became fast and shallow. "Nigel, are you sure you don't mind?"

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“Of all the bloody damn stupid questions! Of course I mind! What difference does that make? Get on with it.”

Laura’s mouth fastened on Sherri’s bleeding wrist. Sherri had expected a facsimile of the sexual thrill Nigel’s kiss produced and wondered how she would handle such a feeling for another woman. Instead she felt a silent cry of yearning that seemed transmitted directly from Laura’s sucking lips to her own raw nerves. Painless heat flowed up the veins of Sherri’s arm and spread through her breast and abdomen. Then, like a cresting wave receding, it ebbed, drawing her life force with it, leaving her innermost core chilled. Yet even the cold brought no pain, only a lethargy that invited yielding and rest, like the seductive sensation that, she’d heard, enfolded a person buried in snow.

From a vast distance she heard Nigel’s voice: “That’s enough—stop it—more than enough! I won’t let you drain her.”

Sherri floated back to full consciousness to find that Laura had stopped drinking. Nigel wrapped one hand around Sherri’s wrist to stem the bleeding, while his other traced soothing patterns on the nape of his sister’s neck. Laura licked her lips, then pressed them shut, a visible shudder rippling through her. “Don’t even think of getting sick. I won’t allow it,” Nigel said.

She leaned back against the chair. “I won’t. You can stop now. Take care of Sherri—but I’m sure I couldn’t have drunk that much.”

“No, I timed you to make sure you didn’t,” Nigel said. Under his sharp gaze, Sherri felt her legs buckling. He caught her around the waist and guided her to the couch. “It isn’t the fluid volume; it’s the psychic drain. Just relax,” he said to Sherri. “You’ll feel normal in a minute, and a few hours of rest will repair the loss.”

“I’m okay,” Sherri said, though her head spun as she changed position. “Never again will I say I’m starving when I’ve only skipped lunch!”

“Neither will I,” said Nigel. “Dr. Valpa was right; I have led a sheltered life. We’re not nearly so invulnerable as I believed. Nor

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would I have believed in a creature like Eldridge, at the end of the twentieth century.” He added with a deprecating laugh, “Perhaps I never will understand the human mind. If, as Mark Twain says, there is a human mind.”

Sherri aimed a feeble punch at him.

“Ready to go, Laura?” he asked. “We may as well hit the road before the sun gets any higher.”

She nodded agreement and got slowly to her feet.

Nigel walked over to the window and peered through a crack between the curtains. “Too bad we couldn’t have made it earlier.”

Sherri, her faintness already gone, rose and joined him. She saw a misty, overcast morning outside. “What’s the big deal? As my grandmother used to say, there’s not enough blue in the sky to make a cat’s pajamas.”

“Remember, Laura hasn’t seen the sun in weeks. She’ll be hypersensitive to it.”

“How about if I lend her a hooded poncho and a pair of sunglasses?” Sherri gave Laura an inquiring look.

“Yes—thank you,” Laura said. “And thank you for...everything.” Sherri guessed Laura wasn’t used to being obligated to ephemerals. “Nigel, you’ve really scored this time. She’s a rare treasure—understands our needs already.”

“I know. So keep your distance,” he said with a mock growl.

Sherri wiggled out of Nigel’s proprietary embrace and went into the bedroom to collect the poncho and dark glasses. When she returned to the living room, she heard a knock at the door. At seven a.m.?

She paused with her hand on the knob. “Who’s there?”

“Steve Klein.”

Both amused and exasperated, Sherri opened the door. Steve stood on the porch, his clothes rumpled and hair bristling, holding a manila envelope. “Hi. I figured I’d better drop off these articles first thing. Sounded like you and Dr. Jamison were in a hurry.”

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It took Sherri's fog-bound brain a few seconds to recall Nigel's diversion of the night before. "Yeah—thanks. But I don't think he meant you had to get it done that fast!"

Steve's fingers brushed hers as he handed her the envelope. "Think I could come in for a minute? We could talk about those zines you work for."

Good grief, Nigel was right; Steve really was pursuing her. She had to admit Nigel was right about cutting it off clean, too. "Sorry, Steve, I'm not in touch with this dimensional plane at seven in the morning. Look, I'll mail your stories to your department at Berkeley after I—"

At that moment the door opened farther, and Nigel stepped up beside Sherri.

Steve gaped like an amiable goldfish until he managed to force out, "Dr. Jamison?" The young man turned red, mumbled a goodbye, and clattered down the steps to his car.

Pulling Sherri back inside, Nigel said, "Well, your reputation is now in ruins. I must apologize for compromising you."

She started to scream at him for teasing at a time like this but instead broke into giggles. Collapsing against Nigel's chest, she gave way to hysterical laughter. When it subsided, she wiped tears from her eyes and said, "I hated to see him embarrassed like that—not to mention disappointed. Hey, maybe you should introduce him to Laura."

"Sure, just what she needs, another entanglement," Nigel said.

Laura, wearing Sherri's poncho, slipped up next to them. "Later, perhaps. All I want to do now is hide." She hovered there with the glasses in one hand and her beaded purse in the other.

Nigel took her elbow and guided her onto the porch. "My car is out front. Go wait in it."

"Yes, revered elder sibling," Laura said with a knowing smile.

As soon as the door was shut, Nigel closed the gap between him and Sherri in a couple of quick strides. She clung to him, buffeted by vertigo that had no connection with the blood loss she'd suffered. "You

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are a treasure,” he murmured. “Dark Powers, I hate to give you up!”

“Are you still stuck in that groove? After what happened when you fought Eldridge?” She searched his face.

Nigel’s steady gaze didn’t give anything away. “Yes, that was...most intriguing. I’ve never experienced anything quite like it before. For a split second, our minds touched. You must have considerable latent psi power, for our brief association to open us so deeply to each other.”

“And you’d just turn your back on all the amazing possibilities?”

“My dear,” he said, hugging her tightly and stroking her hair, “after what we shared, I know your worth too well to think of endangering you.”

“Horse feathers! It sounds more like sheer cowardice to me.” She reached up to tease the back of his neck with her nails. “Think you’ll be hungry tonight?”

“Now, stop that! I’m working on it. Hell, yes, I’ll see you tonight.” When she broke into a delighted grin, he traced the outline of her lips with a fingertip and said, “But it’s the last time. I’m resolved on that.”

“You *are* a coward! Just because one relationship fell apart—”

“Sherri, you can’t equate it with an ordinary ‘relationship.’ After I’ve spoiled one woman for any other man, do you think I’d want to—” He broke off and said in response to her indignant glare, “That does sound incredibly conceited, doesn’t it? But it’s nothing personal. You’ve experienced our seductive powers; you even responded to Laura, on the first meeting, when you had every reason to fear her.”

“I see,” Sherri said with a grudging nod. “Any vampire can ‘spoil’ a human being. Like Eldridge’s addiction.”

“Exactly,” Nigel said. “You do understand. How could you possibly want a liaison with one of us, having seen what combined lust and hate did to him and Laura?”

“That’s a cop-out. The cases aren’t parallel and never could be.”

Nigel said with an exasperated sigh, “Granted, we aren’t likely to

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end up loathing each other as they did. However, we can't be sure our attraction is founded on anything deeper than physical desire. We've moved too fast. Suppose, when we get to know each other better, we find we have nothing else in common? By then, it would very likely be too late to avoid mutual addiction. We could be trapped in that dependence without even liking each other." His automatically caressing hands contradicted every word he spoke.

Sherri couldn't imagine any such result—their attraction had begun prior to any physical contact—but she knew arguing the point with him would be a waste of time. "So? Ordinary couples take similar gambles every day."

"It's not the same," he insisted. "Not when the consequences could be so deadly for you. I won't take that risk."

She threw off his insinuating hands and stepped back, her breathing ragged. "I'm a free, full-grown, sentient being! I have a right to choose my own risks!"

He reached across the space separating them to run his fingers gently over the curve of her clenched jaws. His silvery, violet-gray eyes, their flame banked, probed hers. "Perhaps," he said softly, "you do, at that."

The contact forged the link she needed. Since words wouldn't persuade him... Confident in her newfound power, she opened her mind, reached for him, drew him in. This time he yielded without a struggle. His passion swirled around her, enveloping her, and her own desire surged to meet it. "See?" she breathed. "We belong together. When you come to me tonight—stay."

His answer echoed through the core of her being. "I will."

## MARGARET L. CARTER

Marked for life by reading *Dracula* at the age of twelve, Margaret L. Carter specializes in the literature of fantasy and the supernatural, particularly vampires. She received degrees in English from the College of William and Mary, the University of Hawaii, and the University of California, with her dissertation published as *Specter or Delusion? The Supernatural in Gothic Fiction*. Her other works include *Dracula: The Vampire and the Critics*, *The Vampire In Literature: A Critical Bibliography*, and *Different Blood: The Vampire As Alien*. She is also the author of a werewolf novel, *Shadow Of The Beast*, and three vampire novels, *Dark Changeling* (2000 Eppie Award winner in Horror), *Sealed In Blood*, and *Crimson Dreams*, along with a fantasy novel, *Wild Sorceress*, co-written by her husband Les Carter. *From The Dark Places* (a horror novel) is scheduled for release from Amber Quill Press in 2003.

Margaret and Les, a retired Navy Captain, have four sons and several grandchildren. For fans of "Vamp Tales," please do not hesitate to visit her website: The Vampire's Crypt at:

<http://members.aol.com/MLCVamp/vampcrpt.htm>

\* \* \*

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