

Python Place 1: Pleasure and Pain

Kate Hill

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Chapter One

You must never go near there.

Her father's words rang in Hailey's ears as she stood on the crest of a hill behind the country home her family had moved into just three weeks ago. From here she had a perfect view of Python Place with its expanse of stone walls and many steeples silhouetted against the reddish sky. Sunset had always been Hailey's favorite time of day, but looking at the strange and rather frightening mansion, she experienced a thrill that made her heart beat faster and the flesh on the back of her neck prickle. She had to admit, only to herself, that part of that sensation was inspired by fear. The other part was pure desire. Longing for knowledge from which she'd been shielded her entire life.

Even before her family had moved to the village -- her father had been sent to replace the deceased reverend -- they had been warned about the mysterious Terence family. Three brothers, all handsome as sin and rumored to be just as deadly, lived on the estate that had been in their family for so long no one could place the exact date of their arrival. Some said their relations had settled there when the Romans invaded Britain. Others believed they had existed since the time of the Druids. No one knew and no one dared ask, at least no one respectable.

The Terence brothers only associated with those of questionable moral character. Rakes young and old had been known to spend weeks at a time visiting Python Place. Some came out pale, glassy-eyed and too afraid to ever return while others, though no less bruised emotionally, seemed compelled to call upon the brothers again and again. Women were seen coming and going in the dark of night, but not ladies. No lady would ever set a toe inside those decadent walls from which it was said shrieks of pleasure-pain could often be heard in the dead of night.

Hailey had heard such cries when she'd slipped from the house late at night and crept close to the mansion, hoping to catch a glimpse of its inhabitants. Her fascination with all things forbidden had begun long before she'd heard the stories about her devilish neighbors. All her life she'd had a wild spirit, something she'd learned to bury. Her father kept tight rein on his girls, especially after their mother had died when Hailey was eight and her sister, Abigail, ten. The reverend made sure his family spent their every waking moment in work or prayer, for there was a wise old saying about idle hands... Part of her wondered if her mother hadn't wasted away from utter boredom.

Her obsession with Python Place had begun a week after her family moved to the village. Though in her early twenties, she'd led a sheltered life and had a keen interest in anything forbidden by her strict upbringing. She and Abigail had accompanied their father to the square where he'd gone to meet several members of his new congregation. Passing by a shop window, Hailey had noticed the most stunning man she'd ever seen. Taller than average with broad shoulders and thick blond hair tied at his nape with a black ribbon, he emanated such power that she couldn't tear her gaze from him. He was examining a silver-tipped walking stick offered by the shop owner and therefore didn't notice her at first.

Hailey had, quite unintentionally, stopped by the window and stared at the breathtaking man who was clad in black from head to toe. His aquiline nose lent him an aristocratic look and while pale, his smooth complexion wasn't in the least sickly but carried the faintest hint of healthy rose. In spite of the porcelain quality of his skin, there was nothing feminine about him. His strong jawline and rather piercing wide-set blue eyes were distinctly masculine, as was his powerful yet trim physique. Hailey couldn't help but wonder what he looked like beneath his understated garments -- that fine wool cloak, trousers and polished black boots. He appeared so strong and virile that her heartbeat quickened at the thought of being wrapped in his arms and kissing his firm yet finely-shaped lips.

Such thoughts made her dizzy with excitement yet also plagued her with guilt. Those were the devil's thoughts, Father would say. She shuddered to imagine what he would do if he had any idea what she'd been thinking.

Through the open door, she heard the shopkeeper say, "Is it to your liking, Lord Terence?"

Good heavens, it was one of the owners of Python Place! Just as the rumors warned, he was handsome as sin.

At that moment, he glanced up at the window and his gaze locked with Hailey's. A shiver rippled down her spine. Never had she seen such a look in a man's eyes. It was unfathomable, almost inhuman in its strength and depth. It inspired feelings of lust that intrigued yet frightened her. This was a man like none she'd ever met. Decadent. Free. Unhindered by the restrictions of the pious life in which she'd been raised.

She thought a smile touched her lips, but she was too lost in emotion to be certain.

"Hailey!" her father snapped, jerking her out of the dreamlike state in which she'd been floating. "What is wrong with you, girl? Your sister and I nearly left you behi --"

He paused in mid-sentence, his jaw taut as he noticed the object of his daughter's interest. Lord Terence had again focused his attention on the shop owner and was apparently discussing the price of the walking stick.

"Father, I was just --"

"I see what you were doing," Reverend Watson said in the quiet tone that meant he was furious. "One of Satan's children has ensnared you, daughter. That man is Adrien Terence. He and his fiendish kin were pointed out to me and now I issue a warning to you. Keep clear of that family. If evil dwells in this village, its haven is surely Python Place."

Adrien Terence again glanced toward the window. This time his gaze swept Hailey briefly but fixed pointedly on her father. She actually felt the shiver run through her father, much as it had raced through her upon first meeting those scorching eyes.

For the first time she could remember, her father's self-righteous expression faltered and he quickly averted his gaze from that of Adrien Terence.

"Come, Hailey," the reverend fairly growled, grasping her arm almost painfully and hurrying to where Abigail waited a short distance away.

When they arrived at home that evening, the reverend refused to allow Hailey to eat dinner. He instead ordered her to stand by the wall and pray until it was time for bed in order to cleanse her soul of whatever disgraceful thoughts Adrien Terence had inspired.

That night for the first time she left the house and walked across the moonlit fields to Python Place. Hidden in a clump of trees, she watched carriages arrive, saw men and women enter, heard laughter and carnal cries that again sent her thoughts drifting. She imagined Adrien's eyes, his pale hair, and that powerful physique. Her nipples stiffened beneath her demure linen nightgown and her hand drifted to that hot, aching place between her legs. She imagined it was Adrien's hand stroking, rubbing, exploring...

Another shudder tore through her, but this one had nothing to do with fear. It was something dangerous, desirable. Something this reverend's daughter would be forever denied, unless...

No. She couldn't think about it. To destroy her life for a moment's pleasure would be too foolish and Hailey was not that brave. At least not yet.

Python Place lured her in a way she'd never imagined. Night after night she left her bed to observe the mansion with the hope of catching another glimpse of devilishly seductive Adrien. Each night she edged a bit closer as her courage grew.

Now she continued down the hill until she stood so close to the mansion that, through an open window, she saw flames dancing in a vast fireplace. The house was strangely quiet tonight. There were no guests. No cries of rapture.

Glancing around to be certain no one was watching her, she hurried toward the house. Upon reaching it, she pressed her body close to the stone wall. Near enough to

the window so that she merely had to lean a bit closer to stare inside, she waited for her racing heart to still.

Slowly she inched nearer the window and looked in. Except for three dogs sleeping on the rug, the room appeared to be empty. Strange they would leave a fire unattended and on such a hot night, too. There must have been servants about.

Hailey began walking along the side of the house where no lights burned in any of the windows. The mansion was even larger than it seemed when looking from a distance and she wasn't sure how much time passed before she finally reached the back of it. It was then her heart nearly stopped with surprise.

Amidst the lush grass, bathed in moonlight, was a natural pool in which the three Terence brothers swam naked. Briefly she noted that two were tall and black-haired, one more thickly muscled than the other. Both were undeniably handsome and well-built, yet to Hailey they faded next to enigmatic, pale-haired Adrien.

He stood by the edge of the pool, his body glistening with water. Heavens, he was as beautifully proportioned as she imagined he'd be. Neither too thin nor too bulky, he moved with the power of man accustomed to intense regular exercise. A dusting of dark blond hair on his chest tapered down his flat stomach then flared out in a slightly darker thatch from which sprang his cock. Hailey, having never seen a naked man, stared in fascination at the rather thick appendage. She wondered how it would feel against her palm. And the sac beneath. How would it feel to grasp and knead it...

The warm night suddenly seemed much hotter and her legs went weak, forcing her to lean harder against the tree behind which she hid.

"Good evening, Miss Watson."

Hailey jumped, her heart pounding, and stared at the tall, slender man standing nearby. He'd moved so quietly that she hadn't heard him approach. The black hooded cloak draping him from head to toe made it difficult to see him in the shadow of the trees. He watched her with gleaming black eyes set in a pale, angular face.

"I'm sorry to have frightened you."

"How do you know my name?"

"You think we don't know our neighbors?" A slight smile flickered around the corners of his slim lips.

"You're a Terence?" she asked rather dumbly, not quite sure of what to say now that she'd been caught snooping. The danger of the situation struck her. She was basically trapped among four men who could overpower her easily.

"Not exactly. You may call me Dion."

"Mr. Dion, I know how this must look..."

"Simply Dion. Don't worry about how it must look. Here at Python Place appearances are of little concern, as I'm sure you've heard."

"I... if you'll excuse me, I must be getting home."

"Yes, the reverend would be quite upset if he knew you were here."

His rather condescending tone irritated her. Mustering her most haughty look, she brushed past him. "Good evening, Mr. --"

"Dion. Please feel free to call again at any time, Miss Watson."

She paused and turned to stare at him. Was he being sarcastic? Forward? She couldn't tell by looking into those black, black eyes.

"Don't be alarmed, Miss Watson. I've seen you around here before. At night. Watching." With each word he took a step closer to her. In spite of the fact that she wanted to back away, Hailey seemed frozen to the spot. He reached into his cloak and pulled out a measure of sheer red silk with delicate golden threads woven through it. The luxurious fabric was tied with a red satin ribbon. He held it out to her. "For you."

Hailey gazed at the fabric with a longing she couldn't explain. "I sorry, but I can't."

"Consider it a gift of welcome to our village. I insist."

Hesitantly she reached out and accepted the bundle of fabric. It was so smooth against her hands that she could scarcely wait to get home and find out how it felt against other parts of her body. If her father ever found this scarlet fabric and if, heaven forbid, he learned where she'd gotten it from, she hated to think of his rage. "Thank you," she said softly and again met his gaze. "Dion."

He nodded and for some reason she found herself liking him. His large eyes and that angular face reminded her of a stag -- delicate yet strong.

"Dion? What's going on?" a deep, cultured male voice called from the pool. Hailey's heart skipped as she recognized Adrien's voice, just as she'd heard it that day when he'd spoken to the shopkeeper.

Her strange companion glanced in the direction of the brothers who were staring at them from the edge of the water. Adrien took several steps toward her and Dion. Their gazes met and she was once again lost in those captivating eyes. The curiosity and raw lust in his gaze was almost too much to endure. Hailey had always prided herself in being strong-minded but something told her that if she remained here, if Adrien spoke to her, she would be lost to him. She couldn't imagine anyone gazing into those eyes and not bending to his will.

Before he could get any nearer, she turned and ran as fast as she could toward home.

"Come again," Dion called, a hint of amusement in his voice.

Never again, Hailey thought, trembling in spite of the heat. Still, she clutched the red fabric tightly as she ran.

* * *

"What was the point of letting her go?" Adrien snapped. Frustration curled like a snake inside his belly. "I could have *made* her come to me."

"Is that what you want? To drag some poor woman to your bed?" Dion replied calmly from where he lounged in a chair, sipping wine from a crystal glass. "I thought that was the sort of thing you wanted to avoid."

Adrien's teeth clenched and he resisted the urge to thrash Dion within an inch of his --

What good would it do? The bastard was a full-fledged spirit. A godlike creature whom death, as mortals understood it, couldn't touch. Still, it might feel good to harm his corporeal form. At least he'd feel the pain before his soul fled...

"Well is it?" Dion continued in his rather grating voice. He sounded condescending, as if he were speaking to a child or an idiot.

"If my intention had been to harm Hailey Watson, I could have done so long before now."

"I know you don't want to hurt her, but you do want to fuck her, and not like you fuck the whores who linger in this place, satisfying your appetites. And they don't even do that anymore, do they?"

Adrien shrugged and curled his lip. He began pacing the vast sitting room. The fire had burned out but the scent of it filled the room. Even in summertime the large stone mansion remained cool, as Adrien preferred it. His brother, Tyrus, was the one who liked everything hotter than hell.

"*She* will satisfy me. I knew it from the moment I saw her. In all my years and with all the women I've had, I've never seen one -- not one -- with an expression such as I saw in her eyes."

Dion glanced at his wine glass and used the tip of a long, slender finger to trace the rim of it. "Or one who made you feel as she did."

"Or that, too," Adrien said.

"She has a streak of wildness in her nature, I'll grant you that, but really, Adrien, the daughter of a *reverend*? No one says anything when your regular female companions come calling, but this girl will bring nothing but trouble. Are you really willing to risk all that for her?"

Adrien turned on his heel and stared hard at Dion. "I want her and I will have her."

"That dark side of yours is getting harder and harder to control, isn't it? How you're acting now would thoroughly please your mother."

"Don't mention her, Dion. I warn you --"

A slight smile curved Dion's slender lips. "Please. Don't insult me with your threats. Besides, I'm on your side. That's why I'm here. To help you and your brothers find peace, as they say."

"If you didn't think Hailey would bring that, why did you give her the veil?"

"Because she's your soulmate. I can tell by the look in your eyes when you speak of her. The feeling is very distinct when one of our kind meets his soulmate."

"So you've said."

"But you and your brothers have never truly believed me. Do you now?"

Annoyance flared through Adrien at Dion's condescending look. Still, he managed to reply with a clipped, "Possibly."

Immortal beings had a unique ability to know their soulmates on sight. It could take eons to find one, but once located, the connection was fast and definite. When Adrien had seen Hailey looking in the shop window, the sensations tearing through him had been almost painful in their intensity. If he hadn't experienced it, he never would have imagined such a feeling was possible. He needed her. Though as a mortal she might not realize it, she needed him as well. They belonged together.

Dion stood so that he and Adrien were eye-to-eye. "I believe she's your match, Adrien, but she's been twisted by a man who, in his search for good, has touched upon an evil as strong as that which you've spent your life battling."

"I can handle the reverend," Adrien sneered. "His kind I have dealt with all my life."

"But can you handle a young woman who, wild as her soul might be, has been cowed by him? You can't take her like these whores. This is a virgin. Soft, refined --"

"So refined that she lurks in the trees and watches three naked men bathe?" Adrien smiled wickedly. "I know exactly what she wants and I'm more than willing to give it to her. It will be my pleasure to help free her from those pious chains."

"Be careful, Adrien. Her sweetness lures you as your bitterness summons her. There is a fine line between freeing her and destroying her. With your mother's blood, you are predisposed to destruction."

Those words cut more deeply than Adrien wanted to admit, but they also sobered him. That scrawny, coal-eyed bastard Dion was right, as usual. If he wanted Hailey, he would need to exercise a restraint he'd never before contemplated. He would

have to make her *his* whore, but not *a* whore. Such a task required the utmost delicacy from a master of seduction.

A slight smile on his lips, Adrien said, "I share Eris' blood, but she doesn't control me."

"Good. Because if you and your brothers give in to the evil, the discord, she wins."

Adrien nodded and walked to the door. It would be sunrise soon, and long past time for him to retire. Before stepping out of the room, he paused and turned back to Dion. "You never went into detail about exactly what our mother did to annoy you so much that you'd move right in to help keep us on the straight and narrow."

"No, I never did and I probably never will. Good day." Dion lifted his glass to Adrien then took a sip.

Still annoyed, Adrien shook his head and stepped into the hallway.

Chapter Two

The following morning, Hailey and Abigail rose at dawn to start the day's chores. Though the reverend employed a housekeeper, his daughters were kept busy assisting with housework or helping him in his duties.

When she'd returned from Python Place the previous night, she'd hidden the silk Dion had given her in the deepest corner of the chest at the foot of her bed. Her heart still pounding with excitement, she slipped into bed, though it was a long time before she fell asleep. When she did, her dreams were filled with Adrien Terence. He kissed her in those dreams. Undressed her and held her close to his naked body. When their lips met and his hands roamed over her, stroking her in places touched only by her own hands, throbbing waves of pleasure had washed over her.

In the morning she awoke to the reverend pounding on her door. She'd arrived at the breakfast table tired yet her mind still spinning with uneasy thoughts.

Later that morning, after her father had left the house, a messenger arrived with a note addressed to her. Upon seeing the elegant stationery with her name written boldly in black ink, her heart leapt. She knew instinctively the letter had come from Python Place.

"Who was at the door?" Abigail asked, descending the stairs. She'd been airing the bedrooms while Hailey swept the rooms on the first floor.

"Just a messenger."

"Something for Father?"

"No."

Abigail's shrewd hazel eyes darted to the note in Hailey's hand. "Who is it for then?"

"It's mine."

Plainly curious, Abigail stepped closer and reached for the message. "From?"

Annoyed by her sister's behavior, Hailey tightened her hold on the note and jerked it from Abigail's reach. "It's not your affair."

"Hailey, I demand to know who's sending you notes."

"You demand? Do I pry into your business?"

Abigail placed her hands on her hips and spoke in a tone that was frustratingly similar to their father's. "I am your older sister and consider you my responsibility."

"You're only two years older than I am."

A crafty look crossed Abigail's fine features. "Perhaps you'll be more forthcoming with Father."

Gripped by panic and rage, Hailey advanced on her smaller, slighter sister with such ferocity that Abigail actually looked frightened and took several steps backward. "Abigail, I swear if you tell him about this you will regret it."

"I'm not going to tell him," Abigail snapped, regaining her composure quickly and refusing to take another step backward. "Unless you're in some kind of trouble."

"I'm not in trouble," Hailey lied. Any contact with the men of Python Place meant trouble, but it wasn't the sort of trouble she wanted to discuss with her busybody sister. "Abigail, please. You know what Father is like."

"Yes, and I also know what you're like. I can understand why he worries about you."

"But you won't tell him about this?"

"Not if it means so much to you."

"Thank you, Abigail." Hailey impulsively kissed her sister's cheek.

Abigail sighed and raised her eyes to the heavens. "That message wouldn't by any chance be from a man?"

"How could it be? Neither of us have the freedom to meet any men, other than the few Father's brought home in the hope of marrying us off."

Abigail looked pained. The reverend's idea of a suitable man didn't remotely match the sisters' ideas of one. "You're right."

"It's from my friend Anne," Hailey lied.

Anne had been one of the less desirable members of their father's church in the town where the girls had grown up. In spite of their completely different lifestyles, Anne and Hailey had enjoyed each other's company. The reverend had made it plain, however, that he didn't want his daughter associating with Anne outside of the church.

"Oh, her. Such a sad life for a young woman. And so few friends. If she managed to scrape up the funds to get a message to you all the way out here, I certainly won't be the one to tell Father about it."

Hailey smiled and nodded in thanks. Her sister was nosy but kindhearted.

Once Abigail disappeared upstairs, Hailey hurried into the sitting room and broke the seal on the message. Excitement rushed through her as she read.

Miss Hailey Watson,

I hope this letter finds you well and I humbly request your presence for a dinner party at Python Place this Friday evening at eight.

Sincerely yours,
AT

Of course it was impossible that she go to dinner at Python Place, but it was wonderful knowing she'd caught the attention of the enigmatic Adrien Terence. The message carried the faintest hint of sandalwood. She closed her eyes, held it to her nose and inhaled the marvelous aroma before tucking the message into the front of her dress, just over her heart.

* * *

As Friday crept nearer, Abigail thought more and more about devising a way to go to the dinner at Python Place. Perhaps she could tell her father she was dining with one of the members of his new congregation? No. He'd undoubtedly check her story. She could go riding, pretend to have gotten lost and not return until after the dinner ended. Utterly preposterous.

If she was true to her adventurous heart, she'd tell her father she was going to Python Place and refuse to obey when he forbade her. Oh, that was the perfect plan. Then she'd most likely end up peddling flowers on a street corner just like Anne.

There was no way she could accept Adrien's invitation. Not without changing -- and risking -- her entire life. With her father's temper, he might kill her in a fit of rage.

Hailey's frustration grew with each passing day, and it had only a bit to do with her fascination with Adrien. For years her father's stifling hold had been pushing her further and further away emotionally. Now more than ever she longed to truly break away from him, but other than taking up service in another house or finding a husband she had little choice but to stay.

The thought of marrying appealed to her, but not with the sort of man her father preferred. He inevitably tried to match her with men like himself and Hailey had no intention of binding herself to someone like that. At least she had some chance of outliving her father, but tied to a younger version of him, her entire life would be one of bondage. If she managed to get out of the house more perhaps she could find a man who appealed to her. Then, whether her father liked it or not, she would marry.

What do you mean find a man who appeals to you? You've already found one.

Hailey felt dizzy at the thought of pursuing Adrien Terence. He was completely unsuitable, even by her standards. Yes, he was rich and handsome but with a horrid reputation. The chances of him actually marrying were slim. In spite of their wealth, he and his brothers seemed to have no interest in settling down and producing heirs, and she was, after all, just a reverend's daughter and he a lord.

On Thursday Hailey was kneeling by her bed, deep in afternoon prayers in which the entire household engaged when the reverend was home, when someone tapped on the door. She heard the housekeeper answer the door, followed by muffled voices. Moments later the reverend burst into her room, a single blood red rose in his hand and fury in his eyes.

"Who sent you this?" he roared.

"S... sent? Me?" Hailey stammered, though she knew exactly who it was from.

"Don't stammer like an idiot." He grasped her arm hard, jerked her to her feet and shoved the rose in her face. "Who sent it? The card attached was addressed to you but there was no signature."

"I don't know."

"Liar! Strumpet! Not even here a month and already some lecher is sending you red roses. A symbol of decadence. Lust. I will not have it in my house!"

"Let me go," Hailey snapped, trying to pull away from his fierce grasp. He seemed quite mad, his eyes fiery and spittle flying from his lips.

"Come." He dragged her into the hall and down two flights of stairs to the fruit cellar where he flung her inside so hard she stumbled. "You will stay here and pray until morning. In the meantime I will think about what should be done with you. As for your loathsome admirer..." He dropped the rose and crushed it beneath his boot. "Should I discover who he is or should he show his face here, he will meet the same fate as this tainted flower."

He slammed the door shut and locked it, leaving Hailey in utter darkness.

* * *

It wasn't until after dinner the following evening that Reverend Watson released Hailey from the cellar and led her to his study. Seething with rage, Hailey forced herself to appear calm and remorseful in his presence. It was part of the plan she'd devised during the long hours in the dark, damp cellar. Regardless of what happened or the sort of life she might be rushing into, she would not remain another night under his roof.

"Hailey, I have thought long and hard about what to do with you. All your life you've been wild. No amount of prayer or punishment has been able to guide you toward the righteous path. I don't blame you entirely. It can't have been easy for you and Abigail, two girls without a mother, but you're no longer a child. Even so, you're still my responsibility. I've decided to send you to my sister. I sent her a letter this morning with instructions to keep you under close watch when you arrive at her home. She is to help you select a husband for you."

Inside Hailey burned with fury. Now she was more certain than ever that leaving was the best decision. If possible, she detested her aunt even more than her father. A sour witch of a woman, Aunt Miranda had treated Hailey, Abigail and their mother with contempt. She seemed to loathe Hailey in particular.

“What have you to say for yourself?” Reverend Watson demanded.

“Nothing, father. Of course I shall do as you wish.”

The reverend raised an eyebrow. “Perhaps I should have tried the fruit cellar sooner. Well, off to bed. You may join us for breakfast in the morning.”

She would be gone by morning.

Hailey quickly left the room. A glance at the clock in the hallway told her it was seven. If she hurried, she could arrive in time for dinner at Python Place. If she was going to face the world alone, she might as well begin by meeting with the man who stirred her like no other. She only prayed that she wouldn’t be caught leaving the house.

She wore her best clothes, a high-necked dress of pale blue fabric and white lace. Carefully she pinned up her hair and covered it with a net, then added a bonnet that matched her dress. Though she wanted to look attractive, she had little time to waste primping. She hurriedly packed a few personal belongings, clothes, what little money she’d saved over the years, the veil Dion had given her as well as the invitation from Adrien, and a locket with a picture of her mother and sister.

Her throat tightened as she glanced at their faces captured by the artist’s delicate strokes. The reality of her decision struck her when she realized this time tomorrow she wouldn’t have a warm bed to sleep in and might not have a meal, even if her last taste of food had been eaten while imprisoned in a cellar.

Perhaps her father’s home was better than no home after all. Not that she would be in his home for long. She was to be shipped off to Aunt Miranda. Maybe she should wait and run away from her aunt’s house instead. At least she would be in the city with more opportunity to secure a position as a household servant or...

No. It was inexplicable but something drew her to Adrien Terence and Python Place. She wanted, no she *needed*, to go tonight.

Without another moment's hesitation, she opened her window, tossed out her bag and climbed down the trellis, thankful that it didn't break under her weight. Unlike Abigail, she'd never been a small or delicate.

Dusk had not yet settled completely, so as she hurried over the meadow she hoped no one noticed her. She slowed her pace a bit once she reached the other side of the hill. Soon Python Place loomed in the distance and excitement mingled with her uneasiness.

Several carriages waited in front of the mansion. Torches were lit along the cobbled walk leading to the double doors. Light shone in several of the windows of the mansion's many wings. At least she wouldn't be dining alone with Adrien. Knowing this caused both relief and disappointment.

When she reached the house, another carriage had arrived and a man and two women stepped out. All three wore ornately decorated masks and the women's dresses were cut so low that Hailey felt a twinge of embarrassment just looking at them. Oddly, she felt a stirring of desire as well. Strumpets, her father would call them, but they looked lovely nonetheless. The women glanced at her, then at each other and giggled softly.

Rather than give in to her inhibitions, Hailey lifted her chin and swept past them. Strumpets.

She stood for a moment and stared at the brass doorknocker fashioned in the shape of a ram with devilish eyes. Drawing a deep breath, she lifted it and knocked. A butler dressed in a crisp black uniform answered. Hailey stepped into a vast foyer where several other guests mingled. Through the open door to her left, she saw guests, all dressed similarly to the two women who had chuckled so rudely. Men and women danced, talked, and --

Hailey's eyes widened at what she saw. Couples pressed close to one another, their lips attached and hands roaming. Her pulse fluttered. A small part of her that was

still guided by her strict upbringing wondered if she should have come after all. A much larger part of her *wanted* to be here, exploring the forbidden with a man who made her tingle all over just thinking about him. If only she had something to wear other than this old maid's frock --

"Miss Watson. We hoped you'd come."

She turned at the sound of Dion's voice and smiled with relief. "Good evening, Mr. -- Dion."

He glanced at her bag and raised an eyebrow. "Did you plan on staying this evening?"

"I'm actually going away, but I didn't want to leave without thanking Lord Terence for his invitation."

"Going away?"

"Yes." She adjusted her grip on her bag which, after the fairly long walk, was getting to be rather heavy.

With a flick of his wrist he summoned a young male servant who took the bag.

"Please take it to Miss Watson's room," Dion said to the servant who left immediately. He then turned to Hailey and offered her his arm. "And if you'll follow me, we'll find you more appropriate attire."

"What do you mean, my room?" she demanded. Was Adrien's invitation for more than just dinner?

Of course it was. How could she have told herself otherwise. This was Python Place.

"We always provide our guests with rooms, regardless of whether or not they plan to stay the night. It's a place to rest or simply get away from the party if you feel the need."

"I see." Glancing at him warily, she placed her hand on his arm and allowed him to guide her up the wide staircase carpeted in black and red. The entire house seemed to be decorated in a dark flavor. The curtains, cushions, carpets, even the wood done in blacks, burgundies, and forest greens. The elegant furniture was distinctly male.

Hailey knew she was completely out of her element. These people were part of something decadent, bordering on evil, yet she wanted to stay and see all the things she'd been protected from for so long. She wanted to *live*. Explore something she'd never imagined. For the first time, she had the chance.

Chapter Three

Dion brought Hailey to a spacious bedroom with silver paper covering the walls and a thick black carpet on the floor. An oak bed stood against the wall opposite the fireplace. There was a matching dresser and at the foot of the bed, a trunk with brass locks. The servant had already deposited her bag atop the trunk. Resting upon the bed was a gown of scarlet and gold, similar to the veil Dion had given her that night by the pool.

"A maid will come to help you dress," Dion told her. He walked to the bed and ran his fingertips over the gown. "Pity you didn't bring the veil."

"I did," she said almost too quickly.

His lips flickered in a slight smile before he swept out of the room.

Once he'd closed the door, she walked to the bed, sat upon it, and began to worry. What was she going to do in the morning? Where would she go? She had enough money to reach the city, but then what?

Sighing, she gathered her wits and told herself to worry about that problem when it came. Tonight she would, for the first time, step out of the sheltered life in which she'd lingered for too long.

Someone tapped on the door then a maid, dressed in black, stepped inside. She smiled in greeting and guided Hailey to an adjoining room where a bath had been filled with perfumed water. Hailey, never having had a personal servant, felt a bit uncomfortable when the maid helped her undress. However any tension drained from her body almost the instant she sank into the tub. All too soon she was washed, dried and rubbed with scented oil until her skin was softer than she ever imagined it could be.

Afterward she sat in front of a mirror while the maid brushed her hair and arranged it in fat curls atop her head. At first Hailey was taken aback by how low cut the gown was. The tops of her ample breasts swelled above the neckline. A ruby suspended from a fine gold chain nestled between her breasts. She could only imagine what her father would say if he could see her now. But he couldn't see her and there was nothing he could do about her decisions from now on.

A smile touched her lips. These clothes made her feel different. Womanly. Desirable in a way she never imaged herself to be.

What would Adrien think? Would he find her beautiful? Her belly tightened at the thought of seeing him again.

Once the maid finished with her hair, she tied an ornate red and gold mask over Hailey's eyes and asked her to stand. Still staring at herself in the mirror, Hailey allowed the maid to drape the sheer veil over her arms like a stole. The maid curtsied and quickly left the room. Drawing a deep breath, Hailey prepared herself. Now the evening was truly about to begin.

As she stepped into the hall and walked to the stairs, exotic music such as she'd never heard drifted from the ballroom. It evoked carnal thoughts that sent a shiver down her spine. Descending the stairs, she noted the foyer was empty except for the servants who waited by the closed doors to the ballroom. Her heart pounded with anticipation and she almost wished she'd asked Dion to escort her. She didn't relish the idea of making an entrance alone.

At the bottom of the steps, she drew a sharp breath of surprise upon seeing a man standing in the shadows. Dressed in black from head to toe except for a gold cravat with a ruby tie pin, he stared at her with penetrating eyes visible beneath the black mask covering half his face, leaving only his eyes, mouth and smooth shaven jawline visible.

Adrien Terence.

Hailey felt almost dizzy. She'd been dreaming of him for so long and now --

"Miss Watson, you look beautiful." He approached and offered her his black gloved hand. Hailey took it and desire shot through her from that simple touch.

She willed her voice to remain steady and confident. "Thank you, Lord Terence."

"I'm pleased you accepted my invitation."

"I admit I was surprised. I didn't think you knew me or my family."

His sensitive lips turned up in a slight smile. "You don't do yourself justice. Weeks ago, when I saw you in the village square, I made a point to ask who you were."

It startled her a bit to realize she'd impressed him as much as he'd impressed her. "You flatter me, Lord Terence."

"I don't waste time with flattery." He gestured toward the ballroom. "Shall we?"

The servants opened the doors and they stepped into the vast room. In one corner, musicians dressed in flowing robes played flutes, drums and stringed instruments. Most of the room was brightly lit with crystal chandeliers, except for a dim section where men and women lounged, groping one another on oversized satin cushions. Hailey felt a blush rise on her face.

The exotic music stopped and, from a balcony overlooking the dance floor, traditional music began. More couples rose from their chairs in the dining area and began dancing.

"Dinner will be served soon," Adrien said, drawing her complete attention back to him. "Would you like to dance in the meantime?"

"Yes. Please."

They took their place among the other couples. She noted several danced in a rather unconventional manner, their bodies pressed offensively close, at least according to acceptable social standards. Hailey couldn't help wondering how it would feel to be that close to Adrien, to have his powerful body against hers so their heat mingled and their hearts beat in unison. Though he held her at a respectful distance as they twirled across the floor, his lovely eyes stared with such lust that she guessed he would have preferred dancing like the others. His gaze was so intense that for several moments she actually forgot there were other people in the room. His palm warmed her lower back

and Hailey relished the hardness of his shoulder beneath her hand. Unable to resist, she sank her fingers into his coat, gripping tighter to better enjoy the feel of his solid muscles.

The pace of the music slowed and quite unconsciously her body moved closer to his. By the time the song ended, her breasts were brushing his chest. Her chin tilted slightly so that she could meet his gaze. His hands slowly caressed her back and for a moment she was certain he was going to kiss her. Her heart pounded in anticipation, but to her surprise, he stepped away and gestured toward the dining table.

“Dinner,” he said.

Feeling a bit shaken, mostly because she’d desperately wanted him to kiss her, she walked with him to the long table. Adrien sat at one end, Hailey to his right. She glanced at the other guests. Most seemed to know each other and engaged in lively conversation. Seated at the other end of the table was a tall, black-haired man she recognized as one of Adrien’s brothers. Dressed in pure white, a startling contrast to his dark, devilishly handsome looks, he hadn’t bothered wearing a mask.

Probably because he’s too vain, Hailey thought to herself as she watched him flirt shamelessly with the women seated on either side of him. His features were almost beyond handsome, but to Hailey he couldn’t match Adrien’s subtle, burning appeal.

“My brother, Dimitri,” Adrien told her, nodding toward the man in white.

“He doesn’t look much like you,” she observed. “Except through the eyes.”

“We have our mother’s eyes.”

“Then she must be lovely.”

A slight smile tugged at his lips, but he replied in an almost clipped tone, “Some think so.”

They fell silent as dinner was served. Throughout the meal, they engaged in light conversation. Adrien introduced her to several of the guests seated nearby, but paid almost exclusive attention to her. Hailey noted with satisfaction that the two women who had giggled upon initially seeing her now watched her and Adrien with obvious

jealousy. Several times they tried to gain his attention but his replies, though polite, were less than enthusiastic.

Once the meal ended and the dancing resumed, he asked Hailey to join him for a walk in the garden.

They crossed the room, stepping past those reclining on the pillows, and exited through the glass doors. No sooner had they stepped outside than Hailey was struck by the beauty of the enormous garden filled with trees and flowers, some of which she'd never seen before. The full moon lit their way as they walked down a cobbled path, far from the noise of the party.

"I thought we might be more comfortable talking in private," he said.

Warmth spread through her and she instinctively tightened her grip on his arm. "Yes. We really know so little about each other, but I must admit I'm curious about you and your brothers."

"My brothers?" He glanced at her. "And here I'd hoped you'd come just to see me."

Such an honest admission thrilled her. "I did. It's just that you're all something of an --"

"Oddity? Creatures of the devil?"

"I didn't --"

"We do, of course, know what everyone says, but to be blunt, Miss Watson, we don't care."

"That much is obvious, Lord Terence," she stated with more haughtiness than she'd intended. Though he thrilled and attracted her, at times his almost brusque manner irritated her as well. He truly didn't seem the least bit interested in propriety. It was as if he relished living up to his dreadful reputation.

"That bothers you?" he asked, though not unkindly.

"What?"

"That we beasts don't shrink from the self-righteous."

"I would hardly call you a beast, and I believe you mean to say the righteous."

"No, I meant exactly what I said."

"You seem to have such contempt for decent, god-fearing people," she said. Why on earth was she defending the very thing she'd run away from? It wasn't that she really believed a man like her father was better than a man like Adrien, but his arrogance was most irritating. She'd just fled one arrogant bastard and hadn't expected to end up in the company of another so soon.

"On the contrary, I take no issue with people living life as they see fit. It's the *decent* people who have contempt for me. Would you like to know, Miss Watson, how many of these *decent* people come to Python Place and enjoy our *entertainment*? They sin one day and repent the next."

"At least they acknowledge what they do is wrong."

He chuckled. "That makes it fine then?"

"I didn't say --"

"Why are *you* here, Miss Watson?"

"You invited me."

This time he laughed rather loudly and she dropped her hand from his arm. Her attraction to him had turned to anger, and she was sorry she'd ever decided to come to this hellish house.

"I believe it's time for me to go. Good night." She turned abruptly and walked back toward the house.

"Go at this time of night? Without a carriage or even a horse?"

She stopped, her heart pounding, and listened to his boot heels click on the cobbles as he approached. He stepped in front of her and touched his hand to her chin. He'd removed his gloves before dinner and now the sensation of his warm skin against hers rekindled her desire.

"You came here without your family's knowledge, didn't you? And, since you arrived with a bag, I take it you've left the house of your fine, upstanding father, the reverend?"

She jerked her chin away from his touch and glared at him. "That is not your business."

"I don't believe for an instant my invitation was so alluring you'd leave home for it. Tell me why you left."

"Why should I?"

"Because I'm asking. I might be able to assist you."

"Assist me?" She glared. "I can only imagine how after visiting this... this house of decadence."

"Do you think you can be honest for all of five minutes?"

Now she was truly offended. "What?"

"Everybody in this village and all those surrounding it knows the reputation of Python Place. I'm sure you are no exception. You wanted to come here because we don't sicken you as much as you pretend. I saw the look in your eyes that day our paths crossed in the village square. I saw that same look tonight when we were dancing. You're a lovely woman, Hailey Watson, and I want to know you better, but I can't do that if you lie to me and hide behind this prudish façade."

Hailey's head spun. No one had ever spoken to her like this before. Yes, her father had accused her of having impure thoughts, but no one had ever suggested that such thoughts were *acceptable*. No one had ever asked what she wanted or offered to help her follow a path *she'd* chosen.

"Why me?" she asked, still holding his gaze. "There are dozens of women here who could offer you much more satisfaction than I can."

"I doubt that."

Her breath caught and she paused a moment, her gaze fixed on his, before she continued, "Why bother with me? Is it because you want to seduce a reverend's daughter?"

Again he chuckled, genuine amusement shining in his eyes. "I've had reverends' daughters before, though none quite so pure as you."

"What makes you think I'm pure? I'm here, aren't I?" she retorted.

“As long as you’re here, why not get what you came for?”

Her heart pounded and hot waves of passion washed over her. She’d come for *him*.

He placed his hands on her waist and tugged her closer. His mouth covered hers, and Hailey closed her eyes and melted against him. No one had ever kissed her before and she’d never dreamed it would feel this wonderful. His lips were soft, yet firm and slightly moist. They moved gently against hers, asking, yet at the same time demanding.

When she felt the tip of his tongue against her lips, she opened her mouth to him and moaned softly. His tongue thrust against hers and she responded with fervor. Her hands gripped his shoulders, then slid up his neck to the back of his head. Clutching his thick, satiny hair, she surrendered to him completely.

When Adrien broke the kiss, she was breathless, her body throbbing with a need only he could fulfill. His lips caressed her cheek and neck. Her eyes closed, Hailey tilted her head and didn’t protest when he tugged down the sleeve of her dress so he could lick and kiss her shoulder.

“Soft,” he purred between kisses. “Deliciously fragrant and beautiful.”

Her lips parted, she allowed herself to float on a warm sea of pleasure. She didn’t protest when he lifted her in his arms. Actually she was grateful since her legs no longer seemed able to support her. Longing to taste him as well, she began kissing his neck and using the tip of her nose to gently outline his ear before she began licking and nipping that, too. The scent of sandalwood and raw male filled her and every wanton desire that had been locked inside her burst forth. For the first time in her life, she was truly Hailey, without pretense, without concern for what others thought. At that moment the only people who mattered were her and Adrien.

He carried her deeper into the garden, behind a wall of immaculately trimmed hedges, to a patch of lush grass. In its center was a fountain with Roman woman carrying a vase from which water poured.

Adrien knelt and placed Hailey on the grass. It was soft beneath her and carried a damp, earthy scent that seemed to fit the moment.

They didn't speak, merely held each other's gaze for several heartbeats. Hailey knew she probably shouldn't be here. Whatever lascivious thing he planned to do went against everything she'd been raised to believe, but she didn't care. She wanted him to keep touching her. She wanted this night to go on forever and she wanted no one but him.

He stretched out beside her, his movements slow and sure, as if she were a wild animal whose trust he sought to gain. His head propped on his hand, he gazed at her and used his free hand to slide her sleeves down her arms. Hailey's breath caught when she realized that if he pushed the fabric down the slightest bit more, her nipples would be exposed. Instead he leaned over her and began covering her neck and collarbone with kisses. While his lips traveled over her sensitive flesh, he caressed her belly and ribs, his hand moving slowing upward.

Sensations of pure pleasure broke over her, and she closed her eyes and wove her fingers through his hair. She ran her hands over his shoulders and wished he'd take off the layers of clothes so she could feel his flesh just as he felt hers.

She was scarcely aware that *he'd* tugged her dress down farther, completely baring her breasts, until his tongue flicked across one nipple. The feeling was so intense that Hailey moaned and arched against him. A primal groan escaped his throat as he took her nipple between his lips and sucked.

"Oh, please," Hailey gasped, clutching handfuls of his hair in an attempt to pull him even closer to her breast.

The wonderful, rhythmic sucking was interspersed with laps of his warm, wet tongue. Hailey's body was completely aflame. This was beyond anything she'd ever dreamed of!

While his mouth was busy with one breast, his hand teased the other. He cupped and kneaded it with his palm, then gently pinched the nipple between his thumb and forefinger. The intense feelings of pleasure focused not only on her taut, straining

breasts but between her legs as well. She was hot, wet, and throbbing, her hips lifting in an ancient dance for lovers alone.

When her nipple became so affected by his touch that pleasure almost turned to pain, he moved to her other nipple and continued this marvelous torture. At the same time he began raising her skirt. She instinctively lifted her knees and spread them to accommodate his hand that began stroking her soft mound. When he dipped a finger inside her pussy, her entire body tensed and her eyes flew open.

He lifted his head from her breast and smiled at her, his eyes almost glowing with passion. "You came here to learn about pleasure, didn't you?" he whispered.

"Yes," she breathed, "but not simply pleasure. Pleasure with you."

When she spoke these words, his eyes became even more brilliant and a look of such desire passed over his handsome features that she knew at that moment she'd affected him as deeply as he affected her.

He moved down her body, his hands sliding over her inner thighs and parting her legs even more. When he lowered his head between her legs, she considered protesting, but the thought fled as soon as his tongue ran up her plump, aching nub. While his hands massaged her inner thighs, his lips and tongue lapped and tugged at her stimulated flesh until she thought she might go mad with need.

Her heart threatened to leap through her chest and her breathing was completely out of control. She moaned and writhed as the sensations became almost unbearable. To keep her steady, Adrien was forced to grasp her buttocks firmly. His tongue plunged into her pussy, exploring thoroughly before he began lapping her clit with rhythmic strokes that hurled her over the edge she'd been teetering upon for several moments now.

Massive pulsations rocked her body, and she moaned and sobbed as he continued licking until she lay panting and spent, her entire body weak.

After several moments, he kissed her mouth and she tasted the slight residue of her passion. Her eyes opened and she noticed he'd pulled her skirts down and replaced the sleeves so that she was again presentable.

"Are you recovered enough to return?" he asked, a slight smile on his lips.

"Y... yes." She grinned and pushed herself onto her elbows. "That was the most wonderful thing I've ever experienced."

His hand drifted to her cheek and he caressed it tenderly. "There's much more pleasure men and women can share together."

"I'm sure," she murmured, then sat up, slipped her arms around his neck and kissed him. "I sense that, as pleasurable as this was for me, it could have been more so for you. Can't I repay you in some way?"

He drew a deep breath, his finely shaped nostrils flaring a bit.

Hailey's pulse raced at the thought of pleasuring him in a similar way, touching, stroking and licking his gorgeous body until he lost all control.

"You may repay me by telling me why you left home," he said. "The truth."

Taken completely off guard, she lowered her gaze. Should she tell him? What difference would it make?

"My father isn't the sort of man most people think he is. He can be --" She stopped and shook her head.

"Go on," he said softly.

"He can be cruel. The life he has planned for me isn't the life I want for myself."

"Your life with him is so bad that you'd risk the dangers of being a young woman alone on the streets?"

"Yes," she snapped, her gaze again meeting his. "And I wouldn't be at home. I was to be sent off to my aunt, who's even more hateful than he is, if possible, so that she can find me a husband. I cannot live like that."

"Of course you can't. Anyone can see you have too much spirit for such a life."

She glared. "Are you saying that because you think it's what I want to hear? I might have led a sheltered life, but I know enough to realize men will say practically anything to get a woman to lift her skirts, much like I did tonight."

"You're wise, but in this case wrong. Besides, *you* are the one who came to *me*."

"You must admit your invitation was difficult to resist."

He looked pleased. "I'm glad you thought so, Miss Watson. Now, putting my debauchery and your righteousness aside, I have an offer for you."

"What sort of offer?" she demanded.

"Rather than rush off to a life of poverty and service, you may stay here until you decide exactly what you wish to do."

"In return for what?" she demanded. "Being your bedmate? One thing is certain, I have no intention of making my way as a strumpet --"

"If you can keep silent long enough to hear me out, I have no intention of asking you for any illicit favors. All I ask is that you allow us to get to know one another better. I will ask nothing of you that you don't want to give, and you may stay here without fear of harm or attack. You will be under my protection."

His words took her aback and she stared at him for a moment. "Why? Why would you do this?"

"Because just as I am like no one you have ever known, you are like no one I have ever known. I admit that I want you, Miss Watson, quite desperately, but I'm willing to wait."

"Your offer is most generous, Lord Terence, but I cannot accept it."

"Because you don't believe me?"

"Because there are some things even you cannot protect me against. If my father..."

"Your father is of no consequence. You will be safe here from him as well as any other man. Until you say otherwise, your presence here will remain a secret."

Hailey's heart pounded. She had no reason to believe this man, with a reputation as soiled as hers had been pure, would assist and protect her, yet when she looked into his eyes something told her he spoke the truth. Faced with trying to make her way on the streets or remaining for a time at Python Place, she realized this was actually the lesser of the two evils. "Thank you, Lord Terence. I would like to stay for a while."

He nodded, took her hand, and they rose to their feet. "You may call me Adrien."

"Then you must call me Hailey."

Their gazes met before he guided her back to the ballroom.

When they stepped inside, the entire mood of the room had changed and the reason was obvious. Everyone had cleared the floor to watch a woman wearing a scanty beaded top and sheer black pantaloons dance provocatively on bare feet. Hailey couldn't help being fascinated by her exotic beauty. Tall and curvaceous with long black hair and vivid blue eyes, she wore a slight smile on her painted red lips. She seemed to know exactly how lovely she was and how every graceful yet shameless movement of her voluptuous body aroused almost every man in the room.

Hailey glanced at Adrien to see his reaction and was shocked to find his jaw visibly taut, rage gleaming in his eyes.

Dimitri, looking annoyed yet at the same time amused, approached and stood beside Adrien.

"Shall we get rid of her or let her stay this time?" Dimitri asked.

"Do whatever you want," Adrien said in a clipped tone. "I don't want to deal with her tonight."

"Seems she has other ideas," Dimitri whispered as the woman danced closer to them. She carried a sheer black veil that brushed teasingly across Dimitri's face, then she slipped it around Adrien's neck and held his gaze as she gyrated her rounded hips in a dance unlike anything Hailey had ever seen. Though she scarcely knew Adrien, she felt a twinge of jealousy and was glad when he tore the veil from the woman's hands and tossed it in her face. He turned to Hailey, grasped her hand and strode back outside.

She could almost feel the anger emanating from him and followed in silence as he guided her through the garden and along the side of the house until they reached a small door almost completely hidden by ivy.

"Adrien?" she asked softly.

He opened the door and they stepped into a small, dim foyer with a narrow staircase leading to utter darkness.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "Who was that woman?"

Holding up a defensive hand, he closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head. "Not now, Hailey."

"But --"

"Please," he said, a harsh edge to his voice that took her aback. He reached out and caressed her cheek and added in a softer tone, "Not now."

"All right," she said, holding his gaze.

He kicked the door shut behind them, leaving them in utter blackness. She gasped with surprise when he lifted her in his arms. Excitement tinged with fear darted through her as he began ascending the stairs.

"Where are we going?" she demanded.

"I'm taking you to your room. I think we've both had enough socializing for one night."

She couldn't argue with that, especially after that little episode with the black-haired woman that seemed to upset him so.

"How can you see?" she whispered after a moment. For some reason it seemed wrong to break the stillness by speaking in a normal tone.

"Just keep hold of my neck," he replied continuing swiftly up the stairs, not faltering once. Finally he stopped and placed her on her feet, but kept an arm around her. Between the darkness and the sensation of supporting herself again after having been carried upstairs, she felt slightly off balance.

He opened a door that led to the lamp-lit corridor she recognized from earlier. They had reached the floor where her room was located. What an odd yet intriguing house. How many other hidden stairways and corridors did it possess?

Hand in hand, they walked to her room. As they stepped inside, the restrained part of her surfaced once again and she nearly panicked. How could she possibly stay alone in a bedroom with a strange man, no matter how much she wanted to be with him?

As if sensing her hesitation, he grasped her chin and tilted her face toward his. "Is something wrong?"

She met his penetrating gaze, recalled the wonderful sensation of his kiss, and shook her head. "No."

"Good." He leaned down for a kiss and she stepped back.

"Yes."

"Which is it?" he asked, a hint of amusement on his face in spite of the lust glistening in his eyes.

"I'm not sure." She began pacing the room. "You did say you wouldn't take advantage of me if I stayed."

He looked almost insulted. "I assure you, Hailey, I have no intention of taking advantage of you. If I meant to harm you, I could have done so by now. And as you can see by our company here, I have no shortage of willing women."

"I didn't mean to offend you, but surely you can understand my feelings."

Again he smiled. "I understand them better than you do. Good night, Hailey."

He departed quickly and left her standing by the door. Longing for his touch and frustrated beyond belief, she couldn't decide if she was more angry at him or herself.

Chapter Four

Adrien left Hailey's room with a nagging hunger, annoyed that he hadn't tempted her as easily as he did other women. It was because he'd handled her too gently. If he'd tried to take her in the garden when she'd been aroused beyond rational thought, he doubted she would have had the will to deny him.

Of course he'd taken Dion's advice and tried to lure her with kindness. Strangely, he'd wanted to please her, not for the sake of gaining the fulfillment he needed, but because he *liked* her. She was different from anyone he'd ever known -- completely innocent yet with a spirit that matched Adrien's own. All she required was the opportunity to explore her desires. Together they could provide for each others' deepest, darkest needs.

His pulse quickened when he recalled how it felt to dip his fingers into her warm, wet cunt. The taste of her berrylike nipples was still sweet on his tongue. She'd responded so enthusiastically to his touch. Unlike the harlots who frequented Python Place, she wasn't seeking power through lust, nor was she using it for survival. It burned inside her, something smooth and beautiful, not tainted and ugly.

He could scarcely believe the intensity of his feelings for her. Nothing had prepared him for meeting his soulmate. Even now he couldn't actually believe it had happened to him.

Just thinking about her pushed his longing to agonizing heights. By the time he arrived at his wing of the house, his breathing was ragged and his body damp with sweat. He strode into his room and slammed the door behind him. His teeth clenched and his cock aching with need, he fumbled with the pin on his cravat. He tore off the cravat then his coat and tossed them aside. Quickly he began unbuttoning his embroidered waistcoat. The damn clothes were suffocating him. Every nerve in his

body was alive and screaming with pleasure-pain. This was the price of power unlike any a mortal could comprehend.

He and his brothers were daemons, results of love affairs of the immortal spirit, Eris, and three mortal men. Because he was half human, he thought he might not have inherited the power to know his soulmate at first meeting.

Adrien, Dimitri, and Tyrus possessed supernatural powers, yet these *gifts* inherited from their mother came at a cost. They had overpowering needs that, if not sated by human flesh, robbed them of their sanity. Without intense physical contact, especially intercourse, they suffered unspeakable pain that could drive them mad and eventually left them in a corpselike state. The decadent games of Python Place were not simply for the brothers' amusement, but for their very survival and the safety of those around them.

Adrien loathed this weakness, especially since it seemed to please Eris. A mischievous spirit who relished her power over humankind and had no consideration for anyone but herself, she wanted more than anything for her sons to follow her wicked ways. For years she'd tormented them, doing her best to lure them into the darkness she relished.

Perhaps if she hadn't left them to be raised by their mortal fathers, or if she'd chosen men who shared her love of cruelty, they would have turned more easily to evil. As always, Eris selected her human lovers by physical beauty instead of looking at their hearts. The fathers she'd chosen for Adrien, Dimitri, and Tyrus were as good as she was evil and their influence during the brothers' formative years was practically absolute. Eris had no interest in raising children, but three handsome, powerful men were quite a different story. She had more than her share of enemies in the immortal world and the brothers would be infinitely useful to her as companions in evil.

Alone, the brothers occasionally had difficulty controlling their dark sides, but together they were an impenetrable force. Unfortunately they still required sexual energy and part of them would always be vulnerable to the evil in their blood. At times his brothers seemed comfortable with this and thoroughly immersed themselves in

nightly orgies, but Adrien longed for something more. Until meeting Hailey, he'd been certain he hadn't inherited the immortal perception to instantly identify his soulmate. Dion had told him it would happen, but Adrien had always had doubts.

It wasn't all that long ago that Dion had arrived. A lustful spirit yet a full immortal in complete control of himself, he promised to help the brothers defeat Eris for all time. If they found one partner whom they loved totally and who loved them completely in return, they would no longer be forced to sate their carnal appetites with a variety of partners. They would no longer live with the threat of becoming lust-crazed beasts if they couldn't find willing partners.

Dimitri and Tyrus scoffed at the idea of settling down with one woman. Immortality and a hint of evil weren't all they'd inherited from Eris. They were also as fickle as she was. Adrien rather liked the idea of having one woman who belonged to him without trickery or payment. Unfortunately finding a soulmate had proven far more difficult than he realized. He'd started to agree with his brothers that such a relationship was impossible for them, until he saw Hailey.

Thinking of her only increased the agonizing need raging inside him. One of the buttons on his waistcoat stuck and, cursing, he tore the front of the garment open. Several buttons rolled across the stone floor, stopping only when they struck the edge of a carpet.

"My, we're in a bad temper tonight."

Adrien glanced sharply over his shoulder to Eris who had appeared in a cloud of silvery smoke that carried the faintest scent of cinnamon. Still dressed in the scanty beaded top and pantaloons she'd been dancing in down in the ballroom, she sauntered toward him. Loathing twisted his stomach, yet some small part of him felt kinship with her. Such conflicting emotions directed at a woman like her sickened him.

"Come, darling." She opened her arms as she reached him and looped them around his neck. "Give your mother a kiss." She brushed her lips across his cheek then touched his forehead. A look of exaggerated concern crossed her lovely features.

"You're burning up. Haven't you fed tonight? I thought you would have taken that charming young woman you were with earlier."

He broke her hold and stepped away from her. "Get out, Eris. I have no tolerance for you tonight."

"Or any night," she muttered. "What is wrong with you, Adrien? You're worse than your brothers when it comes to this annoying stubbornness. Don't you know I love you?"

"Just like you loved my father but, while married to him, conceived Dimitri with his cousin and Tyrus with their mutual friend?"

She raised her eyes to the heavens. "It was merely mortal marriage, and it secured a title for you, didn't it? When are you going to admit we belong to each other and we belong together?"

"I belong to myself," he stated.

"Not now you don't. You need to feel the heat of a woman. Why torture yourself like this when there is a houseful of women ready to satisfy your every need? Even better, you could go into the village square and force one of them in the dead of night..."

Adrien should have been relieved that, by the way she was talking, she had no idea Hailey was his soulmate. If she did, she would have probably tried to kill her already. That was another reason Adrien wanted Hailey here under his protection. The faster they bonded, the safer she would be.

Adrien grasped her upper arms hard and dragged her so near that their noses almost touched. He spoke through clenched teeth, his self-control close to shattering. "You make me sick. Your ideas of amusement make me sick. I want you out of this house. Do we understand each other?"

Her brow furrowed and she glanced from one arm to the other where his fingers bit into her soft, smooth flesh. "This is actually quite uncomfortable. Painful almost. Could you apply a bit more pressure? Maybe draw blood? Then it might be enjoyable."

He released her abruptly and snarled.

"I saw how you were looking at that girl you were with tonight. Don't look surprised that I noticed. If one of my sons lusts after a woman that much, I pay attention. She's innocent. Pure, but eager to learn. I can sense that from her. She wants to be mastered, Adrien, and being a son of mine you're just the man to do it. Go to her. Now. Take what you need to stop this pain you're feeling. Take her fast and hard."

Eris crept up behind him. Her hands slid snakelike around him and began unbuttoning his shirt. She whispered close to his ear, "Maybe even kill her. Sometimes killing is more satisfying than fucking. I found that out long ago."

He spun abruptly and shoved her away. "Like you killed my father and probably Tyrus' father, too?"

"Who told you that?" she murmured, for the first time looking a bit uncertain, then her face took on an ugly glare. "It was that fop Dion, wasn't it? He always was a meddler. And a liar. You'd best send him away. And I didn't touch Tyrus' father. He was a solider and died fighting."

Adrien laughed, a sharp, humorless sound. "That's rich. You calling someone else a liar and a meddler. As for what you did to my father, I learned about that a long time ago. And it doesn't matter where or how Tyrus' father died. You still could have had something to do with it and I wouldn't put it past you. I'm only surprised you didn't kill Dimitri's father, too."

She wrinkled her nose. "No. He was too good a nursemaid. If not for him, I would have had to care for the three of you. Perhaps I should have done that. Found an immoral nanny who could have nurtured your evil side."

Adrien would have choked her, except he didn't want to sully his hands on her filthy flesh. "Get out. Now."

Her fists clenched and lip curled, she shook her head in disgust and disappeared in a cloud of smoke that left behind the scent of cinnamon.

No sooner had Eris vanished than Adrien began to contemplate taking at least some of her advice and going to visit Hailey. Like Eris, he could turn to smoke and

enter the rooms of mortal women. Then he could take their bodies as they slept and when they woke they would remember him like a dream -- or a nightmare.

The pain clawing through him was scarcely manageable. One way or the other he needed to fuck someone tonight.

With a savage growl he left his room and walked briskly to what the brothers called the common wing where they held most of their social affairs and housed their guests. Music still drifted from the ballroom and from behind many doorways came cries of rapture, yet Adrien paid no attention. Completely focused on the drives of his body, he made his way to Hailey's room and, in a smoky haze, passed through the door without opening it. She lay asleep in bed, her reddish brown hair spread out on a pink satin pillow. The matching sheet covered her to the waist and the ties on the front of her nightgown were open, revealing a good deal of her full, creamy breasts.

Back in solid form, his heart throbbed almost painfully in his chest. The raw desire coursing through him was so intense that even walking was becoming more and more difficult. He slowly approached the bed, his fists clenched so hard that his short nails bit into his palms.

Sweat dripped down his temples and trickled hotly down his spine as he sat on the edge of the bed and stared at her. She was warm, beautiful, and *alive*. Even a kiss would provide him with enough energy to make this agony tolerable. To fondle her and fill her with his cock would annihilate it completely. If she wanted him as well, responded with fervor --

A soft moan escaped his throat and he closed his eyes for a moment, struggling for control. Then he stared at her again and this time allowed his hand to hover over her hair. He touched the silken waves gently.

"Hailey," he said in a hoarse whisper. His hand moved to her cheek, then her partially exposed breasts. They were soft and warm and --

Cursing, he pulled back, filled with self-loathing. He'd made her a promise and intended to keep it. If she gave herself to him, he would take her with pleasure, but until then she was forbidden.

It took unimaginable strength of will for him to stand and walk away. Only when he reached the door did he pause and glance back at her. Her eyes opened halfway, and he turned into his vaporous form and stepped through the door before she fully awakened.

If he couldn't have Hailey, he needed someone else. And fast. He found a servant and asked him to bring one of their party guests to his bedroom, then he hurried back to his wing, tore off the remainder of his clothes and lay on the bed. His cock was swollen to the point of bursting, yet even if he satisfied himself he would be hard again in seconds. The painful erection would last until he took what he needed from a woman. Unable to resist, he curled his fist around his cock and stroked. The velvety shaft pulsed in his grip. His eyes closed and body arched in passion, he stroked fast and hard. Just before the moment of crisis, a tap sounded on the door. Panting, every muscle in his body screaming for relief, he released his cock and growled, "Come in!"

Tabitha Sommers, the wife of a wealthy merchant, stepped inside. The slender blonde frequented Python Place when her elderly husband left the village to indulge his gambling habit. A young woman, completely unsatisfied in every way except financial, slept with all the Terence brothers, though she showed a particular preference for Adrien. In truth he didn't find her especially appealing, but tonight he was in no condition to be particular.

"Adrien," she said, a lustful grin on her lips. "This is a pleasant surprise."

"Come, Tabitha," he commanded.

"Impatient?"

"I'm in no mood to wait tonight."

"Good." She peeled off her clothes on the way to the bed. "I'm never in the mood to wait."

In spite of her words, she gasped when he took her arm and practically flung her onto the bed.

"Mmm, you're so hot," she purred, spreading her legs to his accommodate his hand that began rubbing her mound.

His fingers pushed inside her while his thumb brushed her clit. She was fairly wet, but not quite enough. With a grunt, he moved from her groping hands long enough to retrieve a jar of lightly scented oil from the table beside the bed. The oil had been created specifically for lovers to enhance their enjoyment as well as make any orifice wet and ready for penetration. He oiled his cock and then began stroking her with his slick fingers.

"Adrien, oh, I want you so much," she breathed, her hands roaming over him. She reached for his cock and pumped him with skilled hands. His body, desperate for fucking, responded yet somewhere in the back of his mind he thought how being with her paled when compared to the brief moments spent with Hailey in the garden. If only it were Hailey with him now instead of this painted wench who had fucked more men than the beach had grains of sand...

There was none of the emotion that had flared between him and Hailey. This was purely physical.

Grasping her shoulders, he positioned her on her back and covered her body with his. With a long, slow thrust he filled her damp cunt with his cock. Her walls tightened around him and she clung to him tightly, meeting him thrust for thrust.

"Ahh, Adrien!" she cried, her nails raking his flesh as she writhed and bucked beneath him.

Staring at the headboard, he pounded into her, absorbing the carnal power emanating from her body, feeding on her like a vampire feeds on blood. As his pain ebbed, his hunger satisfied, he grew cold. It was just like all the other times with all the other women. His physical needs were met but his immortal heart rested like a piece of stone in his chest. He continued thrusting for several moments until Tabitha again shrieked and quaked beneath him, her body straining in climax. A couple more fast, hard thrusts and he came as well. His eyes closed and his body experienced the orgasmic pleasure, but afterward he pulled out quickly and sat up.

He glanced at Tabitha who lay for several moments, her eyes closed and a smile on her lips. Finally she sat up as well and stood to retrieve her clothes.

"I must say this evening was far more enjoyable than I anticipated," she said, glancing at him coquettishly as she dressed. "Perhaps we could do this again?"

"Perhaps." He stood and rang for a servant to see that Tabitha left his wing. Also a bath was definitely in order.

"Unfortunately my husband is returning tomorrow so I won't be able to come until he decides to travel to the city again," she explained. Before she left, she slipped her arms around his neck and kissed him, not seeming to notice or care that his lips had no more warmth than those of a statue.

The servant tapped softly and at Adrien's command stepped inside.

"Roger, please escort my guest back to her room and have a maid see to my bath."

"Yes, Lord Terence."

Tabitha glanced at Adrien, lust still gleaming in her eyes. "Good bye."

He nodded and walked to the window across the room. A moment later the door closed and Adrien sighed. Now more than ever he wanted Hailey. He would *have* her. He would have the physical pleasure and the emotional bond they'd only glimpsed of tonight in the garden. She'd never made love to a man and he'd never fucked a woman who touched his heart. When they fucked, it would be like nothing either of them had ever experienced before.

* * *

Hailey awoke late the following afternoon and her first thought was of Adrien. She could scarcely wait to see him again and almost regretted not inviting him to her bed the previous night. She wanted him badly but she needed to be certain she could trust him. Already she sensed he was not the fiend his reputation proclaimed. Strange and lewd behavior occurred at Python Place, but Adrien hadn't forced anything upon her. He'd treated her with kindness and respect. Though he made his attraction to her plain, he was willing to wait for her to come to him.

What made her uncomfortable was a very strange occurrence that happened after she'd retired to bed. In spite of her excitement over the events of the evening, she'd

been quite tired and fell asleep quickly. She'd awakened later in almost utter darkness and seen a smoky figure standing by her door. The apparition looked like Adrien and she leapt up, startled, but the vision faded so quickly she believed it had been part of a lingering dream. After that, she found it difficult to fall back to sleep.

Sighing, she left the bed and rang for a maid. Still unaccustomed to having servants see to her needs, she politely asked where she could find fresh water for washing. The maid said she would prepare a bath for her and have a meal sent up.

"I'm sorry to be any trouble," Hailey said. "And I don't normally sleep so late."

"You're actually quite early, miss," the maid replied almost shyly. Hailey wasn't surprised, as she knew most servants were either treated poorly or ignored by those above their station. "The masters generally don't rise until after dusk. Here at Python Place, days and nights are reversed."

"I see," Hailey said. "I'm Hailey Watson. What's your name?"

The maid's eyes widened a bit. "Rose, miss. I'll see to the bath."

"Thank you, Rose."

Hailey watched the maid leave and thought how different life was here at Python Place. Though her family had never starved, Hailey had never seen this kind of wealth. What could Adrien possibly want from her? He had more than enough women to satisfy his needs, and if he sought companionship surely he would prefer someone of his own class.

During her bath and breakfast, Hailey's curiosity about her charming host turned to apprehension. Tired of sitting in her room, she began to explore the house. There was a vast library she intended to visit once she'd completed her tour, two parlors and many locked doors which she guessed were bedrooms. The last room she stepped into was spacious and furnished only with a high-backed wooden chair in each corner. Many paintings adorned the walls. Most were nudes in a variety of settings ranging from midnight fields to strange stone temples. Fascinated by a painting of a group of maidens dancing around a satyr, she stared, so lost in the picture that she didn't realize Adrien had joined her until he spoke.

"Good evening, Hailey."

She turned to him sharply, her heart pounding. "Good evening."

"Did you sleep well?"

"Yes. Did you?"

A slight smile flickered across his finely drawn lips. "Well enough."

"I'm told this household functions by night and sleeps by day. May I ask what sort of profession allows you to keep such odd hours?"

This time he smiled broadly. "I thought that would have been obvious last night."

His explanation shouldn't have stunned her, yet she felt a blush rise in her face. "Then this is a brothel?"

"Such a harsh term." He gazed at her with amusement.

She turned her back on him. "Doesn't it bother you to earn your living in such a way?"

"My living isn't earned, it was inherited," he told her. "At least to a point. My father, the late Lord Terence, dabbled in shipping. Unlike most, he hated to be idle. He's been dead for close to twenty-seven years. I own the shipping business now along with my brothers."

"Then what's the reason for this place?"

Slowly he began circling her and she turned, her gaze fixed on his. "Don't you like it here, Hailey?"

"Yes, but --"

"Many people do. Python Place exists for pleasure."

"This kind of pleasure is evil."

"Those are your father's words. People here aren't forced to do things they don't want to. From what you told me last night, you couldn't say the same about your father's house."

"That doesn't make your way right."

He paused a moment and folded his arms across his chest, studying her carefully. "What do you want?"

"Excuse me?"

"From this existence. What's your heart's desire, Hailey Watson?"

His question took her aback and she walked to one of the wooden chairs. Perched on the edge of it, she thought for several moments. What did she want? For years she'd been told what she wanted. Now, for the first time, she could speak for herself.

"Happiness," she said finally. "Love."

"Love," he murmured, turning toward a painting of a bare-breasted mermaid. "I'm assuming you don't simply mean the physical sort?"

"I do want that, but it should be accompanied by some measure of affection. I didn't want a man selected for me by my father or my aunt. They know little about me. How could they possibly find someone I could love?"

"Very true."

"I've answered your question. Now I'd like to ask one of you."

He gestured with his hand for her to go on.

"What interest do you have in me?"

"I thought that much would be obvious." A faint smile touched his lips. He approached, dropped to his knee in front of her and took her hand.

"And if I give you what you want? What then? You send me on my way?"

"I'll see that you want for nothing, Hailey."

Anger sparked inside her. "Then I'm to be another of your whores?"

"You're misunderstanding me."

"I don't think I am," she snapped.

His brow furrowed and an angry look crept into his eyes. He seemed about to reply when Dion hurried into the room and said, "Reverend Watson is at the door."

Panic nearly overcame Hailey and she leapt up.

Adrien rose and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Now is your chance to return to the life you abandoned. Do you want to go to your father, or would you like us to hide you?"

Hailey's heart pounded and she glanced from Adrien to Dion then back again. "Hide me," she said.

He took her hand and walked to a life-sized painting of a Greek youth and pushed upon it. The painting swung away from the frame and opened to a narrow passage. Adrien guided her inside and she pushed against the painting until it clicked back into place.

She heard Adrien say, "Show the reverend in."

Then everything fell silent. The tunnel was completely dark and she wished she'd asked for a candle. A shudder tore through her when she imagined that rats could very well be hiding in these walls. Enormous old houses such as this were known for rats.

After several moments she grew restless. With her father's violent temper, there was no telling what might happen. Not that she didn't think Adrien could handle him, for he was younger and she'd felt the power in his body the night before. Still, she hated to cause trouble for him. Python Place had enough of that on its own.

Her hands pressed against the wall, she began moving down the passage, surprised by how long it was as well as the many twists and turns. A thrill coursed through her. This was almost like being in one of the exciting, romantic novels she loved but which her father forbade her to read. In the reverend's house, his daughters read the Bible or nothing at all. On occasion, she managed to purchase a novel or two when shopping with Abigail. Her sister knew about the books but had never spoken a word about them.

Hailey felt a twinge of longing for her sister's company and wished there was some way to let Abigail know she was safe, but it was impossible. Even Abigail would never understand that Hailey *wanted* to be at Python Place. As much as Hailey sought a loving husband, Abigail longed for a respectable one. Someone with a decent

occupation and an impeccable reputation. Her sister was somewhat past the marrying age, but Hailey hoped that someday she would find a husband. She didn't doubt Abigail would have married long ago if her father hadn't been adamant about her staying home and overseeing the household while he went about his religious duties.

Hailey's thoughts of Abigail calmed her somewhat and she quickened her pace along the dark tunnel until she bumped into something warm yet solid.

"Lost, are we?" said a deep male voice.

Hailey screamed.

Chapter Five

"Quiet! Shh!" the voice continued and two strong hands grasped Hailey's shoulders, shaking her slightly. When he began dragging her along the corridor, she started fighting, kicking and clawing until they both tumbled through a door and practically fell into a brightly lit parlor.

"Will you stop it!" snapped her captor, a tall, slender black-haired man.

Adrien burst into the room, fury in his eyes, and strode toward them. "Tyrus, what the hell is going on?"

The black-haired man released her. Glaring, she stepped away from him.

"What the hell is she doing wandering the secret halls?" Tyrus demanded.

"This is Miss Hailey Watson. Hailey, this is my uncouth brother Tyrus."

Tyrus turned to her and nodded then stepped closer to Adrien and snapped, "You still haven't explained why she's hiding in the walls, and what do you mean I'm uncouth?"

"She's trying to avoid her father."

"Don't tell me you've turned to abduction? Good lord, man, don't we have enough problems around here?"

"He didn't abduct me," Hailey said. She'd been in Tyrus' presence for mere moments, but already he annoyed her.

"She is our guest, Tyrus. *My* guest specifically."

"Ah." Tyrus smiled wickedly. "I remember now. This is the young lady who has sent your black heart aflutter."

"Tyrus," Adrien said through gritted teeth.

"Forgive me." Tyrus held up a defensive hand, then lowered it toward Hailey who reluctantly extended hers. The black-haired devil brushed his lips across the back of her hand and Hailey tugged away from his hold.

"That's enough," Adrien snapped. "Tyrus, Dion will explain our situation regarding Miss Watson and her obnoxious father. I'll see you later."

"Obnoxious?" Hailey asked and followed Adrien out of the room.

"I'm sorry, my dear, but I don't know how you managed to survive with that man for as long as you did. He would be the perfect match for my mother."

"Your mother? Is she very religious, too?"

Adrien threw back his head and laughed, a sarcastic rather than humorous sound. "Ahh, no. Not religious exactly, but obnoxious."

"My father gave you trouble then?"

"You apparently dropped an embroidered handkerchief from your bag on the way over last night. He found it on our property and didn't believe me when I said you weren't here. I gave him permission to search the house. When he began harassing several of our guests by bursting into their rooms and tearing them out of bed while spouting all sorts of rubbish about evils of the flesh, I showed him out. He said he'd return later with the constable."

Hailey glanced at him with wide eyes. "I'm so sorry about this."

"We're accustomed to trouble, scandal, whatever you want to call it. I'm sure once the constable checks the house and grounds, you won't have to worry about being found anymore. Right now the house is being emptied of anyone who might want to avoid open scandal, so not to worry. Besides, you'd be surprised to know how many *upstanding* citizens visit Python Place. Few would dare speak against us."

"You mean you're not concerned about me being found here?"

"They will not find you and even if they do, you're no longer a child and are more than welcome to stay here for as long as you like."

"That would bring more trouble than even you can comprehend," she murmured. She could only imagine the reaction if townsfolk knew a daughter of the local reverend was living in an expensive brothel.

"Enough problems. Let's enjoy the night. I'd like to show you my wing of the house. To keep from driving each other mad, my brothers and I each have our own wing. Right now we're in what we call the common wing, where we entertain guests."

"The brothel."

He chuckled. "You're absolutely fascinated by sexuality, aren't you?"

Her brow furrowed in anger, then smoothed as a smile took over. She shook her head and laughed softly. "I suppose I am. Especially after last night in the garden."

"Then we should continue your education."

Hailey's heart pounded with anticipation as she followed Adrien through the house. They descended the main staircase of the common wing and walked down a long corridor that opened to another enormous hallway carpeted in black with a spiral staircase leading up.

"Welcome to my home." Adrien gestured with his hand.

Hailey glanced around at the dark yet elegant room. In spite of the simplicity of the furnishings and the understated colors, this wing oozed sensuality. It seemed to reflect Adrien's inner self and Hailey loved the place immediately.

He gave her a tour of the wing which ended in his spacious bedroom. The gray walls contrasted beautifully with the darkness of the rest of the room. The oak dresser and breakfast table that stood in front of doors leading to the balcony were enhanced by dark stain. The doors were open slightly so the sheer black curtains covering them seemed to dance in the warm breeze blowing in. Black satin sheets covered a bed that was low to the ground and roomier than any Hailey had ever seen. Upon one of the bedside tables, also stained dark, several bottles and jars rested atop a round glass tray. On the wall across from the bed was a fireplace. Above the hearth hung a painting of a fierce black leopard prowling amidst a tangle of jungle plants. A black chest with brass

locks and a jade rose adorning the cover stood next to a door which she guessed led to the bath. The subtly arousing scents of perfume and incense hung on the air.

She walked to the hearth and gazed at the painting. Adrien came to stand behind her and rested his hands on her shoulders. Warmth spread through her and desire tightened her belly.

"You said you came here to learn, Hailey." He slipped his arms around her waist and tugged her nearer. His lips close to her ear and his voice just above a whisper, he continued, "The best way to learn is through experience. Do you still want to learn?"

"Yes," she murmured, sliding her hands over his. "But slowly."

"Of course. These lessons can't be rushed."

He turned her in his arms and kissed her. Hailey opened her lips to his tongue and met it thrust for thrust. Closing her eyes, she ran her fingers through his hair and tried to imprint on her memory everything about him -- his scent, his taste and the way his hard, warm body felt so near to hers.

He broke the kiss only to move his lips to her neck. Between licks and kisses, he asked, "What do you want to learn first?"

"You." She breathed, pulling back slightly so that he stopped kissing her and met her gaze. All her life men in their raw state had been hidden from her. Ever since seeing Adrien naked, she wanted to know how he felt, the texture of his skin and how to make him belong to her alone. Last night he'd touched her in a way that made her heart soar. She wanted to learn how to do the same for him. This man had power over her and she wanted that same power over him. "I've never known a man's body and I want to."

A slight smile flickered across his lips and he stepped back.

Adrien studied Hailey with discerning eyes. He didn't doubt her interest in the male form, but also realized that this was probably the most comfortable place for her to start her education. With the attention on him, she would feel in control. The more relaxed and powerful she felt, the more she would open up to him. Not to mention the idea of showing her how to please him was thoroughly appealing.

"The best place to begin is by undressing. Come here," he said.

Hailey stepped closer, her eyes aglow with anticipation. Her enthusiasm and innocence were most refreshing and far more appealing than the jaded women he was accustomed to dealing with. Hailey Watson would be his entirely, trained from the heart, not paid to perform.

Strange as their situation might be, they had come together out of mutual desire and feeling for one another. When it came to genuine emotion, Adrien was, in a way, as much a virgin as she. Good thing he had excellent control of his body, because using himself to educate her would challenge him more than he wanted to admit. Already his cock tingled with anticipation of her lovely hands and lips on his body. He forced his breathing to remain slow and even, and kept himself focused on her lessons rather than his passion.

"You want me to undress you?" she asked.

"It might seem unimportant or perhaps selfish on my part. However, when it comes to seduction, the art of undressing one's partner can be more erotic than you might imagine."

"I believe you," she breathed. Clearly she was remembering the previous night when he'd partially undressed her and brought her to climax.

"The key is to move slowly yet with confidence. As with all things, skill will come with practice. Start with the cravat. Remove the pin, then unknot the cloth. Take your time. There's no hurry. We have all night."

Hailey stood close to him. She lowered her thick lashes and fixed her gaze on the jeweled pin resting amidst the gold silk. As she removed the pin with her slender fingers, he studied her carefully. Though she wasn't conventionally pretty, to him she was beautiful with her smooth, rounded cheeks, long, straight nose and large hazel eyes. Her lips were small and the lower one full, reminding him of the plump little lips painted on a china doll. He knew how soft and moist they felt, how sweet against his tongue.

She removed the pin and placed it in his hand. For several seconds her fingers lingered over his palm and her eyes, wide with expectation, stared into his.

He slipped the pin into his pocket.

"The cravat," he said with more detachment than he felt. Already his pulse had quickened and there was an unfamiliar tugging in his heart when she held his gaze.

Nodding, she began unfastening the neckcloth. She tugged it off and glanced around for someplace to rest it.

"Just drop it on the floor," he said, eager to continue.

Damn, he needed to keep his passion in check. This night was for her and he wasn't about to ruin it by allowing his dreadful hunger to overcome him. Good thing he'd fed on Tabitha the night before. He only wished it had been Hailey whose hot, wet cunt he'd filled with his cock, whose lust he'd absorbed. What would it feel like to sate his hunger with a woman he actually cared about?

Once Hailey discarded the cravat, she turned back to Adrien. He held her gaze, a slight smile on his lips, and waited to see what she'd do next. The tip of her adorable pink tongue moistened her lips as she unbuttoned his coat and pushed it down his shoulders. He shrugged it off and draped it over a chair. Hailey followed him and began working the buttons on his vest.

"How do you men wear all these layers of clothes, even in the summertime?" Her brow furrowed in frustration when one of the buttons stuck. It took a second for her to loosen it, then she continued smoothly.

"No worse than women with your silly corsets and such."

"I thought men liked the way undergarments make us look."

"I prefer women wearing nothing at all."

She glanced up at him and gave a snort of laughter. "You would."

He chuckled and brushed her lips with a kiss. "Finish."

Once the vest had been discarded, she began unbuttoning his shirt. He waited, outwardly calm, yet eager to feel her hands on his flesh. Finally the shirt was completely open and she slid her hands beneath the fabric. Her touch was feathery yet

warm. She kept her gaze fixed on her hands as they moved up his stomach to his chest. Dark blond hairs curled over her fingers as she caressed his chest, her strokes becoming more confident with each passing moment. Lust gleamed in her eyes and her lips parted slightly. She seemed completely absorbed, learning the texture of his skin and the shape over every hard plane and curve.

When her hands moved to his shoulders and slid the shirt off him, she lifted her gaze to his and desire nearly overcame him. Of all the women he'd been with, none had looked at him with such raw passion as this sheltered virgin. Years of restraint seemed to fall away from her and a thrill coursed through him when he realized her desire challenged his own. They were a perfect match.

Hailey drew a deep breath, her gaze once again focused on his torso. Her hands swept over him and she used her fingertips to trace his ribs and playfully circle his navel.

"The trousers are next," she ventured rather breathlessly, a minx-like smile on her lips. He nearly laughed aloud. Sweet Miss Watson was enjoying every minute of this lesson in seduction and she was arousing him more than she could possibly imagine.

"It's preferable for you to remove them while on your knees," he stated.

"Really?" she said in a husky voice, her eyes fiery. This told him much about her -- what sort of behavior aroused her.

She sank to her knees and rested her palms on his hips. With the same initial gentleness with which she'd touched his chest, she swept her hands down his thighs then let her fingertips stray to the front of his fitted trousers. She took several moments to completely outline the bulge that grew in spite of his attempt to maintain control of himself. It was too much to ask even of a man of his supernatural constitution. Besides, she seemed to enjoy the effect she'd on him.

"The buttons, Hailey," he said in a rather commanding tone. He didn't want to seem impatient, even if he could scarcely wait to get on with it.

Glancing up at him, she smiled the slightest bit and opened the buttons, then slid down his trousers. When they reached his ankles, he grasped her shoulders and gently moved her away, then quickly removed his trousers, shoes and stockings.

"Come, Hailey," he ordered, walking to the bed.

Hailey's heart raced with desire as she watched Adrien walk to the bed. Goodness, he had a gorgeous backside. And those legs! Lean yet muscular and lightly dusted with dark blond hair, they were absolutely perfect. Everything about him seemed perfect. At least to her. Her gaze traveled up his spine to his broad shoulders, noting the well-defined muscles. None of the men her father brought home had ever looked like this.

When he reached the bed, he stretched out on his back and said, "Hailey, come here."

"Yes," she breathed, unable to tear her gaze from him. She didn't even think about removing her clothes. All she wanted was to touch him. The way his cock had swelled beneath her roaming fingertips gave her a sense of power that heightened her curiosity. If he enjoyed being stroked through his trousers, how much more pleasure could she bring him? She could hardly wait to find out, perhaps use her lips and tongue on him as he'd done to her.

She climbed onto the bed and knelt beside him.

"I want you to get to know my body. Touch me anywhere and in any way you want. Don't hesitate to ask questions. Tonight is for you alone, Hailey."

"Really? It seems like it's more for you," she said quietly, though she longed to have free reign over his body. The thought was heady.

He stared at her with such intensity, almost anger, that she was taken aback. "If it was for me I would have already taken your lush young body and filled you with my cock. I would have suckled your breasts and thrust my tongue into your luscious cunt until you collapsed in fulfillment. You have no idea how much I want that, Hailey, but I swore not to claim you until you give the word. Do you want it now?"

Yes, yes, yes! Inside she screamed for his touch, but she couldn't -- wouldn't lie with him in that way. Not yet. Besides, she was enjoying this seduction. She wanted to keep touching and exploring him.

"We'll continue as we are," she said with as much dignity as she could muster when all she could think about was curling her fist around that thick ivory cock and taking its bulbous pink head between her lips.

"Then come to me. I'm yours, Hailey Watson. Utterly."

She fought to control her breathing and calm her racing heart. How should she start? Though she longed for his cock, it was best not to rush. The anticipation would excite her and, she guessed, tease him. This man deserved some teasing. He was so sure of himself. So collected. Still something told her she could drive him to the brink of passion and with the right intuition, push him over the edge. She'd love to see him writhe and moan, just like she had when he'd fondled her in the garden.

It was funny, but here in his room, life with her father seemed to fade away. Here she was free, a seductress alone with an irresistible man who desired her.

Edging closer, she decided to start at his head and move to his feet, caressing until not a part of him went untouched, except for his gorgeous, well-veined cock. Beginning at his temples, she ran her fingers through his hair. His gaze fixed on her, filling her with such passion that she had to look away or else beg him to take her then and there. Instead she focused on her hands. She took tendrils of this silky hair and let it slide through her fingers, tickling and teasing her flesh.

She bent and kissed along his hairline then moved to his forehead. She kissed it thoroughly, relishing the feel of his warm skin and the faint scent of sandalwood that clung to his skin and hair. Closing her eyes, she continued covering his face with lingering kisses. Her lips fluttered across his eyelids and trailed down the length of his nose. Before kissing his cheeks, she brushed her face against his. He must have shaved that night because his skin was incredibly smooth, no hint of a whisker. Finally she reached his mouth and covered it with hers. The kiss was chaste at first, then she moved her lips against his. As he'd done to her, she trailed her tongue along his lips which

instantly parted, giving her access to his mouth. His tongue caressed hers with sure, wet strokes and she responded with fervor. For several intense moments they searched each others' mouths.

Adrien refused to use his hands on her, though she would have loved to feel his touch again. When the kiss broke, she sat up, breathless, her nipples taut and a pleasant ache between her legs. The restrictions of her clothes annoyed her and she decided this would work much better if she undressed, too.

She lay on her stomach, her gaze fixed on Adrien who turned to her with a curious expression.

"Would you unfasten my dress?" she asked softly, hoping to sound enticing.

A faint smile on his lips, he sat up and accommodated her. Once he'd unfastened the buttons on her dress, he tugged the garment off her and tossed it aside. She sat up and removed her shift. Her pulse raced with excitement. Here she was, completely naked except for her shoes and stockings.

Adrien reached for one of her feet and slipped off the shoe, then he removed the other. Next he began rolling down her stockings. When they were discarded as well, he ran his hands over her ankles and caressed the arch of her foot, then released her and lay on his back. Watching her with devilish eyes, he waited for her to continue her "lesson." She stretched out beside him and when her bare leg brushed his the sensation was so wonderful that she pressed even closer and draped her leg over him. Her knee touched his cock and she was surprised by its velvety texture. The urge to grasp it overcame her and she curled her fist around it.

Adrien drew a sharp breath and when she glanced at him, the fire smoldering in his eyes aroused her so much that she trembled.

"How do you like to be touched?" she asked.

Wrapping his hand around hers, he showed her how to squeeze and stroke, speeding up and slowing down the rhythm to keep him teetering on the edge of fulfillment. After a moment, his hand left hers and she continued caressing him by instinct alone. Though she never released his shaft, she began kissing him again. Her

lips covered every inch of his neck. Between kisses, she licked his flesh all the way from one shoulder to the other, paying careful attention to his collarbone. Everything about him fascinated her and she couldn't get enough of him.

After several moments, she released his cock and moved her hand to his chest. His warm flesh and hard muscles felt wonderful against her palm. Without a second thought she straddled him so she could caress him with both hands. His cock pressed intimately against her backside and her breathing quickened. This position also seemed to ignite Adrien's passion, for he groaned softly and moved his hands behind his head, as if to keep from touching her. His eyes darkened with lust and his lips parted so she couldn't resist kissing him again. This time his tongue met hers more forcefully. Instinctively she began rocking atop him. The motion stimulated the stiff little nub between her legs, sending ripples of intense desire coursing through her. Her breathing quickened and her straining nipples brushed provocatively against his hair-dusted chest.

She tore her mouth from his and gasped, "Oh, Adrien. I love how you feel. It's so good. I want... I need..."

"I know," he said and slid his hand between their bodies. His fingers found her plump bud and stroked it. Hailey moaned and rocked faster, but he grasped her hips and held her steady.

Panting, her heart pounding, she stared into his eyes and whispered, "Please."

"This could be even better for both of us," he said.

His rigid staff pressed between the indentation of her buttocks and she knew what he meant.

"Do you want it?" he asked softly yet with an authority in his voice that she longed to obey.

Did she want his thick, velvet-skinned cock buried deep inside her? Yes. Most desperately she wanted it, but she couldn't. Wouldn't --

Adrien's thumb rolled over her nub, sending a shiver of passion through her. His other hand cupped her breast. He squeezed and caressed. His thumb and forefinger gently pinched and stroked her nipple.

Hailey's breathing was ragged. Her entire body screamed for climax. Without thinking, she rose to her knees and moved over his hard cock.

"Take me in your hand and guide me inside you," Adrien said. "There might be some pain at first."

At the moment she didn't care. All she wanted was fulfillment. She did as he said and grasped his cock. The bulbous head pressed against her hot, wet pussy lips. Slowly she lowered herself upon him. Her eyes flew open and met his gaze. He was right. There was some pain -- or more accurately discomfort from the unfamiliar sensation of his thickness.

"It's all right," he said soothingly. His hands came to rest on her hips and he caressed lightly, then used his thumb to rub her stiff, aching bud.

The rekindled sensations of desire made her groan with pleasure-pain as she continued lowering herself upon him. She clenched her teeth, wondering if it would be better to just take him inside quickly. By the time he was buried to the hilt, her entire body felt like an inferno. She opened her eyes partway to look at him. Sweat glistened on his brow and upper lip and the look of intense need on his handsome face both startled and aroused her.

"Are you all right?" he asked, his voice husky.

She nodded and began moving a bit. Now that she was growing accustomed to him, her desire returned in full force. She began rocking atop him while he fondled her breasts. His hands felt hot on her flesh and unbelievably good.

"Oh, Adrien," she murmured, her eyes slipping shut. "This feels wonderful."

"You have no idea how much I want you, Hailey. How much I've wanted you since the first time I saw you looking in that shop window."

"I dreamed about you almost every night," she panted, rocking faster, her body arching atop him.

His ragged breathing told her that he was as close to fulfillment as she was. His cock pulsed inside her and his hands moved from her breasts to her hips, holding her as she bucked and writhed. The marvelous tightening inside her was almost unbearable now. Any moment she was going to --

"Ah! Oh, Adrien!" she gasped, her entire body throbbing with ecstasy from the roots of her hair to the bottoms of her feet.

At the moment of crisis, an odd yet wonderful feeling enveloped her. It seemed as if she was no longer inside her body, but deep within his. She felt pleasure as a man would, the tightness and marvelous frustration. It lasted only seconds, then she was back within herself.

With a primal cry, his hips lunged upward, his body straining as he came. Hailey collapsed atop him and he held her tightly for several moments. Her face pressed against his shoulder, she felt their hearts throbbing in unison and heard the rasp of their breath. When they recovered, Hailey moved aside and gazed into his eyes.

"You lured me," she said, both teasing and serious.

"No more than you lured me." He rolled over, his body half draped over hers, and covered her mouth with a probing kiss.

"I shouldn't have done that," she said.

"You're a bit too late, my love."

He stood and walked across the room, took a basin of water and two cloths off the dresser and returned to the bed. Gently he cleaned blood off her thighs. The tender gesture touched her and she reached for the other cloth to wash his cock.

"What if there's a child --" she asked, realizing it was too late to start thinking sensibly in that direction. Deep fear struck her.

Before she panicked, he said, "I told you I'd take care of you and if there was a child, it would never want for anything, but there won't be, Hailey."

Her brow furrowed. "How can you be sure?"

"Because I can't have children."

"How can you know that?"

"Believe me. I know."

Hailey admitted to feeling relief, yet at the same time disappointment. Obviously if she had a child she wanted to be married, otherwise life would be unbearable. Yet some part of her loved the idea of having a child with Adrien. She was being foolish to hope for a permanent arrangement with a man like him, but since leaving her father's house she'd been acting like a wanton fool.

"Hailey." Adrien tilted her chin toward him. "I told you not to worry."

"How can I help it? If not for your generosity I would either be on the street or packed off to my aunt. Not only that, what are you going to do if my father returns with the constable to search the house?"

"First, you saw our secret passages. No one will find you. Second, the constable isn't about to lift a finger to anyone who can't pay him well. I'm reasonably certain I can afford a bit more to persuade him to ignore the fact that you might be here than your father can afford to inspire him to prove that you are."

She gazed into his eyes, her brow furrowed. "Why are you willing to do all this for me? You scarcely know me."

"You've given me more tonight than you can understand and I feel I do know you, Hailey."

"What do you mean?" she demanded, unable to fathom what he was talking about. Not only that, he was looking at her with possession she found almost frightening. Her father looked like that. Arrogant. Demanding. Immovable.

"I mean there is a good reason our paths crossed in the village square and you decided to leave your father's house.

"What reason could that be?" she asked warily.

"You belong here at Python Place. With me."

Chapter Six

Hailey stared at him in disbelief. Was he insane or was she? At the moment it was difficult to tell.

"I belong here?" she said with a hint of sarcasm. "As what? Another of your harlots?"

"Of course not," he snapped. "Do you think I would have been this patient with a harlot? Would I have tried to woo a harlot? I want you as my companion, Hailey."

"But we scarcely know each other."

"It doesn't matter." He cupped her face in his hand. The expression in his eyes frightened her because, for a moment, she almost believed him. He gazed at her with such intensity, such conviction, that she was almost convinced he was right. "You're concerned about your father and about how you will survive on your own, correct?"

"Correct, but --"

"And I want you as my companion. There is a way for us both to get what we want. You will be forever protected from your father. He will no longer have a hold over you."

Hailey felt a bit dizzy. This was insane. She was almost afraid to ask her next question. "W...what are you suggesting, Lord Terence?"

His lips curved up in the slightest smile. "Back to Lord Terence, are we? I am suggesting that you marry me."

"Marry you!" Hailey leapt out of bed, not caring in the least that she was stark naked, and paced the room. Her lip curled and she glanced at him. Twice she started to speak but couldn't find the words. Finally she said, "Are you insane?"

"I am quite sane."

"Even if I agreed to this madness, my father would stop us as soon as the banns are read --"

He raised his eyes to the heavens and shook his head. "I mean we'll elope."

She stared at him, stunned. Could it work? "But we scarcely know each other!"

"If you married a man selected for you, whom you don't know, how would that be any different than marrying me?"

"That's exactly why I left home. To avoid that problem."

"You said you left because you wanted love."

"But you can't love me --"

"I want you, Hailey. I know there can be love between us if you give it a chance. Do I repulse you? Is that the problem?"

He looked so smug about what her answer would be that she very nearly said yes, she found him repulsive, just to wipe the arrogant look off his face. "Obviously I don't find you repulsive, but I see how you live here. It's exciting and pleasurable and free, but how can I possibly tie myself to a man who has harlots in his bed every night?"

Anger blazed in his eyes for a moment, then faded a bit as he sighed. "There are many things you need to learn about me, as I'm sure there are things I must learn about you. Hailey, agree to our arrangement and there will be no whores in my bed ever again."

"Only a fool would believe that."

"Only a fool would run away, penniless, with the hope of finding love," he snapped, stood, and grasped her arms in a firm hold. His vibrant gaze bore into hers. "Well, little fool, you have found it. Here. With me. Marry me and everything I have will be yours. You will want for nothing and you will be protected. Always."

"And what do you expect in return?"

"Your heart. Your loyalty."

For a long moment they stared into each other's eyes. This was utterly preposterous. It was a fairytale, to be swept away by a handsome prince. But life was not a fairytale. Hailey knew that all too well.

"Well, Hailey? Shall I continue to hide you, as if the pleasure we share is a sin, or when your father returns with the constable, should I present you as my wife?"

"But he'll most likely return sometime tomorrow."

"Yes. So we ride off tonight and be married so that tomorrow I can present you as my wife. What is your decision?"

Hailey doubted she'd get a better offer anywhere else, and she did enjoy being with Adrien. He was rich, handsome, powerful... why did he seem bent on having her?

"There's something you're not telling me, Adrien. Why do you want a woman who has nothing when you can have any woman?"

He shook his head, a slight smile on his lips. Taking her face in his hands, he kissed her. It was a possessive, affectionate kiss that weakened her legs and made her feel more loved than she ever imagined possible. "You don't see yourself as you truly are, Hailey. I've looked for you all my life."

She raised an eyebrow. "Looked for me?"

"Yes. These other women can't compare to you. How often do you think a man like me finds someone so pure, so *real*, who wants him in return? Python Place alone is enough to frighten off most."

"But you're nothing like the rumors I've heard about you," she said softly and took his hands in hers.

"Marry me, Hailey." The pull of his intense gaze was almost magical. Even if she wanted to, she doubted she could resist him. "Marry me."

"Yes." She nodded. He was a far better choice than her father or the streets. "I'll marry you, Adrien."

* * *

Almost before she realized what was happening, Hailey found herself on her way to Scotland with Adrien and Dion. By the following afternoon she was married and when she stepped into Python Place, it was no longer as a timid guest, but as mistress of the house.

Adrien brought her directly to his wing by way of a private side entrance. Before they stepped inside, Dion called, "Adrien, I want to speak to you."

"Later, Dion."

"I'd prefer now."

Adrien paused, an annoyed look in his eyes, and turned to Dion. "Now I have business to attend with my *wife*."

For several heartbeats the men glared at one another before Dion said, "Far be it for me to keep a loyal husband from his lovely wife. See me when you're finished."

Dion turned and stalked off.

"Adrien? Is something wrong?" Hailey touched his arm, but it took a moment before he stopped glaring after Dion and turned to her.

Finally he smiled, though the gesture seemed almost forced. He touched her face gently and replied, "Nothing that need concern you. Now, my love, we have lessons to continue."

A thrill of desire coursed through her when she thought of the carnal education he'd promised her. For some reason, now that they were married, such games seemed even more pleasurable.

Adrien sent word to his staff that, except for an urgent matter, he was not to be disturbed. Once in the bedroom, he lit a candelabra and drew the drapes.

Her belly taut with pleasure and anticipation, Hailey smiled and stepped toward him as he approached. He drew her into his arms and kissed her deeply. The sensation of his warm hands on her back combined with the delectable taste of his lips and tongue drove her desire to a fever pitch. Trapped between their bodies, his cock hardened and she couldn't resist gently thrusting her pelvis against him.

He groaned and broke the kiss to nuzzle her neck. "Hailey..."

"Adrien." She smiled, threading her fingers through his hair.

Slowly he undressed her until she stood naked before him.

"Get on the bed," he ordered and tugged at his cravat. She did as he asked, though her gaze never left him as he quickly shed his clothes and walked, naked, to her.

He sat on the edge of the bed and studied the variety of glass bottles and jars on the nightstand. His graceful fingertips hovered over them before he selected one. After tugging out the glass stopper, he held it to her nose and she sniffed.

"Umm. It's wonderful," she breathed. The scent alone seemed to drive her passion to greater heights.

"Another lesson. Massage," he said. "Turn onto your stomach and I'll demonstrate."

"I can hardly wait, Lord Terence." She grinned and did as he asked, watching with interest as he poured the scented oil into his hands and rubbed them together.

"Close your eyes," he said.

Without hesitation she did so and a moment later felt his large, warm hands on her ankles. He stroked and kneaded all the way up her calves to her thighs. When he reached her buttocks, he squeezed and caressed the spheres until a lustful moan escaped her lips. It felt incredibly wonderful to be caressed by Adrien's well-oiled hands. As he worked his way up her back to her shoulders, she couldn't help wishing that he would massage her front as well. Those palms and fingers on her nipples, or better yet between her legs, would be...

"Umm," she purred when he rolled her over and began the sensual massage again. He saved her breasts until last and paid careful attention to the berrylike nipples, pinching them gently and rolling them between his thumb and forefinger. By the time he reached her plump, aching clit, her breathing was ragged and she was almost desperate for his touch. His thumb rolled over the damp, aching flesh then his fingers dipped into her pussy and explored.

"Oh, Adrien!" she gasped, trembling with need.

He chuckled deep in his throat and covered her body with his. Hailey's eyes opened and met his intense gaze. Slowly his cock filled her and she was already so aroused from his massage that it took merely a few thrusts before she cried out in ecstasy. Her eyes closed against the marvelous pulsations that made her tingle from head to toe. Somewhere in the midst of pleasure, she felt as if her body and soul were

again mingling with his. She experienced his need and then his fulfillment as if they were one being.

Finally the sensations ebbed. He rolled off her and tugged her close so that her head rested against his chest and their legs entwined.

"That was wonderful," she murmured.

"And the day is young."

She lifted her head and, with a coquettish smile, stroked a lock of hair from his eyes. "Maybe I should practice that lesson in massage on you?"

"Practice does make perfect."

"I'm your ever-attentive student." She kissed him, melting atop him as his hands once again rekindled her desire.

* * *

Two hours later, after Adrien was certain Hailey was asleep, he donned his dressing robe and walked to the common wing. Just as he'd anticipated, Dion waited in the first floor parlor. The room was empty, as most of the guests had either left for the day or retired to their rooms.

"Did you tell her?" Dion asked, not bothering to rise from the sofa on which he was sprawled.

"This isn't your business."

"I lied for you." Dion glanced at him with those all-knowing black eyes. At times the arrogant beanpole annoyed Adrien beyond belief. "I lied so that you could marry but you swore to me you would tell her the truth."

"I said I would tell her the truth at the proper time."

"If now isn't the proper time then when? You married the girl, for heaven's sake! You married her and she has no idea what you really are."

Adrien curled his lip. "It's only mortal marriage, more for her sake than mine."

With a contemptuous snort, Dion rose and sauntered toward Adrien until they were almost nose to nose. "Keep telling yourself that. You lie to benefit yourself. Just like your mother."

"I am nothing like Eris."

"I know how hard you've tried not to be, but by lying to your soulmate..."

"If Hailey had left, how could she possibly discover that we're meant to be together? This way she's safe and she's mine."

"But, Adrien, it's only mortal marriage." Dion flung Adrien's own words back at him.

Adrien's fists clenched and he resisted the urge to attack Dion, mostly because the man was right.

"In order for her to truly save you --"

"I don't need a woman to save me!"

"The hell you don't. And if you and your brothers don't do something about your appetites, that's where you'll end up. In hell and probably enjoying it just like your --"

"Enough about Eris!"

"Not hardly enough because telling Hailey the truth and getting her to agree to a permanent joining is the only way that either of you will ever be safe from Eris' evil."

"Eris has no power in this house. She can't harm anyone in it. Even she can't overpower me and my brothers, not to mention you."

"But she can come and go at will and that means she can lure your fragile human bride out of the safety of these walls. Once away from Python Place, she can kill her."

"You think she'd go that far?"

"I know she would," Dion said with such conviction in his voice and hatred in his eyes that Adrien was almost taken aback.

"Surely she must know that if she harms my soulmate she would lose me forever."

"No, Adrien." Dion grasped his shoulders in a firm yet affectionate gesture that again surprised him. This was so unlike the collected, carefree spirit he knew. "If she destroys your soulmate, you'll be filled with hatred such as you've never known. You

would despise her but she would have sent you down the path to vengeance and evil, which is exactly what she wants.”

Adrien wished to rebel against that notion, but deep inside he knew Dion was correct. He sighed. “I will tell Hailey, but it must be in my own time and in my own way. I will do it soon, though.”

Dion nodded and glanced past Adrien to Dimitri and Tyrus who had just stepped into the room.

“Did you do it?” Tyrus asked, looking almost disgusted.

“Yes,” Adrien stated, leveling his sternest look on Tyrus before turning to Dimitri. “Did you speak to the constable?”

“Yes,” Dimitri replied. “He agreed to our terms for far less than I expected and will arrive early this evening. Funny how cheaply some men can be bought.”

Adrien shrugged. “Why should he care who Hailey marries? It’s not as if I forced her. She came to me.”

“Yes, and now you’re in chains.” Tyrus shook his head.

“No, I was in chains before her,” Adrien snapped. “Just as you are.”

“If having as many beautiful women as I want in my bed each night is what it means to be in chains, then here. Lock me up.” Tyrus held out his wrists to Adrien in mock surrender.

Adrien snorted. “Beautiful women. Paid harlots. Except we’re even more pathetic than most men who bed whores because we need them to live.”

“Now you need a plain little reverend’s daughter.”

“Tyrus,” Dimitri snapped, apparently noticing the rage in Adrien’s eyes.

Adrien advanced on Tyrus, but Dimitri stepped between them, a hand on each brother’s chest.

“Gentlemen, please.” Dimitri smiled broadly. “Wouldn’t Eris love to see us like this? Tyrus, if Adrien has found his soulmate, wish them happiness and let that be the end of it. No one is forcing you to change your lecherous ways --”

"No one is more of a lecher than you," Tyrus scoffed. "How many did you take last night? I lost count after the redhead and those three blonde sisters."

"Well I'm glad to see you were paying close attention to a master." Dimitri chuckled. "Learn much, little brother?"

"I've heard enough and I have far better things to do than argue with the two of you," Adrien said and walked toward the door. He could hardly wait for the day Dimitri and Tyrus found their soulmates. Especially Tyrus. When that happened, he'd have a good long chuckle and never let the young brat hear the end of it.

Adrien returned to bed where Hailey was still fast asleep. He stretched out beside her and watched her for several moments, thinking how lovely she was, how innocent of the sort of life she'd just married into. Struck by a twinge of guilt, he decided to tell her the truth when she awoke. He'd wanted more time for them to get to know each other, but perhaps Dion was right. She needed to know everything and he had to convince her to undergo the ritual that would join them for all time.

* * *

It was early evening when Adrien and Hailey awoke, washed, and dressed. They were about to go to the dining room for a meal when Adrien's butler arrived to say that Reverend Watson and the constable were waiting in the foyer of the common wing.

For a moment Hailey felt almost dizzy and her stomach knotted. Adrien approached and took her face in his hands. "It will be all right."

"But his temper --"

"Means nothing. You're no longer his daughter but *my* wife. Now, come with me." He offered her his arm which she grasped, her fingers gripping his crisp linen sleeve. The steeliness of the muscles beneath comforted her.

They walked down the corridors toward the common wing. With each step Hailey's heart beat faster. The last person she wanted to see was her father. In spite of Adrien's reassurance, deep inside she felt something terrible was about to happen. The very idea that she'd found a perfect man who had married her this quickly was simply

too good to be true. What started out as a dream would end in a nightmare. She simply *knew* it.

As they neared the common wing, the reverend's bellows shook the walls. "I know she's here! Spawns of Satan, bring me my daughter!"

"Reverend, calm yourself," the constable snapped.

"We said she's here. Now get a hold of yourself, man, until she arrives," Dimitri stated, sounding annoyed rather than intimidated by her father's rants.

Hailey glanced at Adrien and noted his jaw was taut, a frigid look she'd never seen before in his eyes. The fear drained from her as she realized that here she truly was safe.

Adrien glanced at her and his lips flickered up in a reassuring smile. "Don't worry," he told her.

Then they ascended the steps toward the foyer where her father and the others waited. Besides the constable and Dimitri, Tyrus and Dion also stood there.

"Finally," Tyrus muttered, glancing toward the newlyweds.

"You!" The reverend's face was flushed with rage as he strode partway up the stairs to meet them. He reached for Hailey with a clawed hand, but Adrien grasped his arm.

"Keep your hands off my wife," he growled.

"Wife?" the reverend scoffed, practically foaming at the mouth with rage. "A creature like you doesn't marry! You keep concubines. Devil women. Sluts."

Dimitri chuckled wickedly and cocked a sleekly groomed eyebrow. "Is he always like this? It's a wonder you didn't run off sooner."

"Get your demonic paw off me!" The reverend tried to break Adrien's hold, but it was impossible. The younger man forced him down the stairs and shoved him toward the constable.

"What is the meaning of this visit?" Adrien demanded.

"I'm sorry for the inconvenience, Lord Terence, but the reverend said his daughter has been missing and feared that she was abducted by someone in this house."

"If a wife living with her husband is considered abduction then I'm guilty."

"I'm sorry, Lord Terence. I had no idea you married."

"They're not married I tell you!" Hailey's father ranted. "They're living in sin."

"Clearly this man isn't right in the head," Tyrus stated. "He's acting worse than an animal."

The constable cleared his throat rather nervously and glanced at Adrien. "I assume you can prove you are indeed legally married?"

"I can provide you with all the necessary information, and you may speak with the minister who performed the ceremony."

"Yes! I want to know who allowed this atrocity!" Reverend Watson raged.

Hailey's temper flared and for the first time in her life she advanced on her father, her fists clenched. "You dare speak to me of atrocity, you old hypocrite?"

The reverend looked momentarily shocked, then said, "That's enough out of you, girl. Once we get you home I'll see that your demons are expelled and maybe we can salvage a life for you."

"I am home." She held out her hand, exposing her wedding ring. She pointed to Adrien. "This is my husband."

"If you're satisfied, constable, we would like some privacy," Adrien said.

"Of course. Again, I'm terribly sorry for this intrusion."

"I will not leave without my daughter!"

"Good lord, man, do you not have ears and eyes? They're married. You are the one who could be punished for these accusations against Lord Terence. Now come along before he decides to take action." The constable nudged Reverend Watson toward the door.

"That was a charming experience." Dimitri chuckled as the group dispersed, except for Hailey who stared after her father, wanting to see him walk out of her life forever. Adrien stood beside her.

Hailey's father turned at the door. "You're dead to me girl. And you, demon lord, are simply dead."

The reverend pulled a pistol from the folds of his cloak and fired at Adrien. It must have been a trick of the eye because as the bullet struck him, he seemed to turn into something between smoke and solid form, then he collapsed. The constable's bellow of surprise mingled with Hailey's scream of terror as the former lunged at the reverend and the latter dropped to her knees beside Adrien who lay gasping on the floor, a gaping wound in his chest.

"No! Oh god!" Hailey cried, instinctively pressing her hands to Adrien's chest in an attempt to slow the bleeding. While the constable and Dimitri pinned the reverend against the wall, Tyrus and Dion carried Adrien to the nearest bedroom.

Hailey followed on trembling legs, tears streaming from her eyes. She wiped them away with bloodied hands. While Dion saw to Adrien's wound, Tyrus slipped an arm around Hailey and guided her out of the room.

"This is all my fault," she murmured.

"That's ridiculous," Tyrus said and lead her to a chair. "Adrien will be fine."

"He's dying. Did you see the wound? It's because of me and my father." Pure rage overtook her and she stood, her teeth gritted and hands curled into fists. "I'm going to kill him!" Never in her life had she been this furious, not only because her father had again tried to ruin her happiness but because she cared about Adrien. They hadn't known each other long, but he'd already made a place for himself in her heart. Now he was dying because of her.

"Hailey!" Tyrus grasped her in a firm hold before she reached the stairs. She struggled fiercely, but he was too strong.

She stopped as Dimitri joined them and said, "The constable has taken him away. He offered to send back a doctor, but Dion has medical training that I trust more than some charlatan the constable would bring back. Everything will be fine."

Tears filled her eyes and she shook her head. "That's exactly what Adrien said to me just a short time ago."

Chapter Seven

Dion and Tyrus stood by Adrien's bedside, staring at him with concern. Though he'd tried changing to smoke before the bullet struck, he hadn't been quick enough and had suffered the injury in his corporeal form. Dion had treated the wound and because of Adrien's supernatural constitution it had already begun to heal. Still, the injury had depleted him greatly. Engulfed by a fever that would have killed a mortal, he was already lost to the delirium that preceded the deathlike state into which he would sink without absorbing the energy his daemon body required to heal itself. Irons secured his wrists and ankles, yet he strained against them, raving like a lunatic. Luckily once the delirium set in, he could no longer turn to smoke.

"I'm bringing him a woman," Tyrus stated.

Dion curled his lip. "Be serious! Who would willingly sleep with him in this state? I doubt you could pay anyone enough for that."

"I didn't say she had to be willing."

"Really?" Dion raised an eyebrow. "Now you're talking like your mother."

"I'm talking like a man who doesn't want to watch his brother suffer and spend eternity as a living corpse!"

"How do you think Adrien would feel about it? Of you three brothers, he's the one who detests Eris' evil most."

"I don't care how he'd feel about it. He's not in the condition to decide. I will not lose my brother. Do you understand me?"

Dion studied Tyrus carefully. The most jaded and self-centered of the brothers, there were few things he allowed himself to truly care about. Abandoned by both mother and father, Tyrus had learned to love his brothers deeply. With Adrien injured,

he was beside himself. Convincing him that forcing a woman to fuck a crazed daemon was wrong was simply out of the question at present.

"Before you frighten some unsuspecting woman to death, let me talk to the only one who might be willing."

Tyrus' eyes widened slightly. "His wife? Of course! Why didn't I think of that?"

"Because you still know so little about love."

"I know --"

"Do be quiet, Tyrus. Watch over Adrien and I'll be back in a few moments."

"When you come you'd better have a woman with you, whether it be Hailey or a whore."

Dion swept out of the room, not in the least surprised to find Hailey waiting outside with Dimitri.

* * *

As soon as Dion stepped out of the room, Hailey tore away from Dimitri and approached.

"How is he? I can hear him ranting. Why don't we send for the doctor like the constable suggested? Exactly how experienced are you in medicine and why won't you let me see my husband?"

Hailey paused, her heart pounding. Just a few short hours ago she was convinced both she and Adrien were crazy for marrying. They scarcely knew one another. Yet now that he'd kept his word and protected her -- was probably losing his life for doing so -- she realized that perhaps they were meant for each other.

"Hailey, I must speak to you about Adrien. After I do, you will be free to see him and I pray that you will."

"I want to see him now," she stated, not bothering to control her anger.

"Please. Listen to me first."

Dimitri's brow furrowed. "What are you going to tell her, Dion?"

"The truth about Adrien."

Hailey's head spun with confusion. "What are you talking about? What truth? I demand to know what's going on."

"Come." Dion offered her his hand. After a moment's hesitation, she took it and followed him to a sitting room where he closed the door so they could speak privately.

"Sit, Hailey."

"I don't want to sit."

"I said sit."

With a sigh, she dropped into a chair and watched as he sat across from her.

"Adrien wanted to tell you this himself when he thought you were ready. Now his very existence as we know it depends on you hearing the truth and accepting him as he is."

"Dion, please stop talking in riddles." Hailey sighed. Her husband was probably dying. Perhaps he even wanted her with him, but she had to listen to this rubbish from Dion first. "Just tell me."

"Did you ever think it odd that a man like Adrien would live somewhere like Python Place?"

"Well, yes. He doesn't seem the sort who appreciates this kind of life. Except for his appetites, that is." A blush rose in her face as she thought of the carnal games they enjoyed.

"Exactly." Dion smiled slightly. "As you might have guessed, he certainly doesn't need the monetary rewards earned by Python Place. It's the carnal energy he requires."

"Dion, I don't see how this conversation --"

"It is important. I am not trying to embarrass you or blacken Adrien in your eyes, but if you are to be his wife --"

"I *am* his wife."

"You must know the truth. He and his brothers are demons."

"Demons?" Hailey's chest tightened with fear. Had she married into a madhouse after all? If her father had actually been right, it would be too cruel.

"Not demons. Daemons. A half spirit or demigod."

"There is but one God."

"But many creatures beyond humanity. Spirits that exist in many worlds and in many forms. The Terence brothers had human fathers, but their mother is a spirit called Eris. Because of her, they are immortal."

"This can't be true," Hailey murmured. She stood and began pacing the room. "This is insane."

"What you said about Adrien's wound being fatal was true. At least it would be true if he was a man. As a daemon he will suffer horribly and exist for eternity in a corpselike state. Alive yet dead. He will breathe and his heart will beat, but he will not be able to move or communicate. It will become a living hell from which there is no escape unless he feeds soon."

"Feeds? What are you talking about?"

"Daemons' immortality comes at a price. For him to live a normal life and be the man you know, he must absorb the sexual energy of others. Humans have called his kind many things -- demons, vampires, incubi. Like some spirits are evil, some daemons are evil. Eris thrives on wickedness and more than anything she wants her sons to follow her path. They reject that and have banded together to fight the evil inside them. That's why Python Place exists. Here women come to them and they can feed without causing fear or harm."

"No." Hailey shook her head. She closed her eyes and covered her face with her hands. This couldn't be true. Adrien wasn't some kind of monster. He wasn't the spawn of Satan her father believed him to be. "This can't be."

Or perhaps it was. It was said the devil uses charm, wealth, and appeal to gain followers. Adrien had lured her. He was rich and handsome. But he'd never hurt her. Still, he'd slept with her. *Fed* off her without telling her the truth. But how could he? She wouldn't have accepted it.

"Hailey, I know this is difficult, but you must listen to me. Adrien is constantly fighting a battle with evil. He refuses to surrender to it, but you can help him overcome

it forever. It is said that when a spirit meets his soulmate, he knows it instantly. He *feels* it. Adrien felt that when he met you. That's why he wanted you so desperately. Couldn't you sense his love for you?"

"This is impossible."

"No. It's not. He's wounded, Hailey. He needs your help. If you have any feeling for him at all, you'll go to him now and give him what he needs."

"But how can I... *bed*... an injured man?"

Dion's lips flickered up in a sad smile. "A daemon is always ready to accept a woman, at least physically. I warn you, if you agree to help him, he is not the man you know. Before the deathlike state takes over, he is overcome by delirium. He won't even know you until he is restored by your energy."

Hailey was in a turmoil. Should she go to this daemon to whom she'd unwittingly bound herself in matrimony or should she flee this tainted household as she should have done from the first?

"I'll go to him," she replied quietly. "I believe I owe him that much."

Dion nodded and led the way to the room where Adrien lay. He opened the door and called to Tyrus who exited. The youngest Terence brother stared at her warily as she entered the room, but Hailey didn't care. She scarcely noticed the door closing behind her. All her attention focused completely on Adrien.

Bound to the bed with irons, he scarcely resembled the man she knew. His eyes blazed and a horrible snarl curved his lips as he shouted at her in incoherent sentences. His body bathed in sweat and his chest swathed in a bloody bandage, he writhed against his bonds like a man possessed.

But he was not a man, if what Dion said was true. He was a daemon.

She briefly considered fleeing, then she recalled how gently he'd touched her, how kindly he'd spoken. He'd sheltered her, protected her. Fed off her, she reminded herself. Yet even that had been pleasant.

As she approached, he stopped struggling for a moment. Panting, his red-tinged eyes fixed on her, he furrowed his brow in a pained expression that wrenched her heart.

“Hailey,” he whispered.

“Adrien.” She reached for him, but he began fighting again. He seemed so strong that for a moment she thought Dion had been lying about his weakness, but the look in Adrien’s eyes spoke the truth. He was desperate, like a mad dog, yet even amidst his suffering he’d recognized her, as that wretched dog recognized its master. At that moment she was determined to save him.

Quickly she shed her clothes and took a jar of ointment from the dresser. His gaze fixed on her as she began rubbing the oil around her pussy. A shudder tore through him and he closed his eyes and shouted, “No! Evil goddess. I’m not your savage!”

The sound of his raw voice and the look of pain on his face struck at her heart. Slowly she approached and his eyes flew open, once again staring at her. The pupils were so large that she could scarcely see the blue surrounding them. He shouted and gnashed his teeth, the bed shaking from his struggles.

Her heart pounding, Hailey jumped back, fearful that he might escape, then she gathered her courage and placed her hands on his shoulders. His flesh was burning hot and slick with sweat. She straddled him, almost surprised to find his cock rock hard. He bucked so forcefully that she nearly lost her balance. Claspings him with her knees, she used one hand to guide his cock inside her well-oiled pussy.

It was familiar, to be filled by him, yet at the same time unfamiliar. Adrien was a considerate lover, not like the ranting thing beneath her. She closed her eyes and imagined making love in their bed. How he would touch her, whisper tender words in her ear.

She began riding him slowly at first, then as her memories brought forth waves of passion, she rocked faster. His cock rubbed against her sensitive flesh and all at once her body turned to flame. She gasped and groaned softly, her heart pounding and entire body tingling with need. Impulsively she began stroking her taut nipples, her internal muscles squeezing his cock as passion grew.

The suddenness of her climax almost took her by surprise. She gasped and moaned, pleasure rolling through her and she experienced that heady feeling like she was somehow inside his body. Perhaps this was what it felt like when he fed. Yes. That was it! She was burning hot, the pleasure almost painful in its intensity. She needed... no he needed... she was starving and this was food... no, he was starving...

"Hailey, ah! My love!" Adrien gasped.

Her eyes opened and held his gaze. It was *him*. No longer the beast.

"Adrien," she murmured, melting onto him and covering his mouth with hers. She ran her fingers through his damp hair and caressed his face as her tongue thrust into his mouth. His tongue met hers with long, tender strokes that made her feel how much he loved her. For the first time she sensed that he was still drawing her energy, but she didn't care. She wanted to feed him. The idea that he needed and wanted her so much rekindled her passion and she began rocking atop him again, for he was still hard inside her.

"Adrien, oh, yes," she breathed. Her hands roamed over his chest. She felt the bandage and remembered his injury. Immediately she stopped. "Am I causing you pain?"

"No. I'm healed," he replied, his gaze fixed on hers, once again calm except for a hint of desire. "You know about me, don't you?"

A slight smile touched her lips. "Yes, I know, but if I didn't it would be difficult to hide now."

He chuckled softly. "I love you, Hailey."

"I love you, too, Adrien Terence. I think I did from the first."

"I know I loved you."

"Well we are soulmates, are we not?"

His smile broadened. "Yes. We are. Now get my fool brothers in here to release me from these chains so I can show you how much I appreciate you."

* * *

Adrien and Hailey spent the rest of the night and much of the next day in bed. They made love and Adrien answered her questions about his daemon half. He confirmed that he could indeed turn to smoke, but also that he'd known he couldn't have children because daemons couldn't reproduce. When they finally rose to have a meal in the dining room, Adrien dismissed the servants so they could speak in complete privacy.

"Hailey," he took her hand, "you have no idea what you've done for me."

"I do."

"No. You saved me. For that I will be forever grateful. You're my wife, but it doesn't have to end here."

"What more can there be?" she chuckled.

"You already know about my mother."

Her expression hardened. "Yes. She sounds as bad as my father."

"Probably worse. At least in his own depraved way he thinks he's doing right."

"That didn't help me."

"No, it didn't." He agreed, gently squeezing her hand. "You saved me, but I have been terribly selfish and unfair when it comes to you."

"Adrien, if you're talking about feeding off me, it was my pleasure --"

"No. I don't mean that. Inside Python Place, no one, not even my mother, can harm you. Outside, unless you are with me, she is a very real threat to you."

"Because you love me?" she asked. A twinge of fear started in her belly. The last thing she wanted was an evil spirit after her.

"Yes. There is a way to protect you and me from her evil forever. I won't lie and say I don't hope you'll agree to it."

"What?"

"Each spirit or daemon is allowed to share a ritual with his soulmate that will make her immortal, too. It can only be done once and once it's done, there is no turning back. You will be immortal, able to change to smoke and defend yourself against other spirits."

"But my human soul will be forever trapped in this life as we know it," she said then held his gaze. "Will I be evil?"

His brow furrowed. "No. You will be exactly as you are, but immortal. Unlike a daemon, who is the child of a spirit and a mortal, you will not be forced to feed on the energy of others, only off my energy. We will feed each other. That is the biggest difference between what you will become and a pure spirit, your total joining with me. We will be bound to each other. Soulmates."

"This is not only an enormous change for me, but for you as well. You're saying I'll need you to survive."

"As I need you."

"No. You could survive off others."

"But they're not my soulmates." He shook his head. "Until you're in spirit form, you won't understand the true meaning of those words. When I saw you, Hailey, I knew I couldn't be without you. I need you. I want you. But this must be your choice. I once swore never to force you and I never will."

"I love you, Adrien. I do. But I need time to think about this."

"Of course. I understand." He kissed the back of her hand.

Epilogue

For the next few months, Hailey and Adrien spent almost every waking hour together. Hungry to learn all they could about each other, in bed and out, they found that, other than the usual annoyances every couple experiences, they were a perfect match. As Adrien had warned, his mother Eris dropped by several times, each time with stories about him more grotesque than the last as she did her best to taint his image and lure Hailey out of the safety of Python Place.

Finally, one clear spring evening, Hailey agreed to the ritual that would bind her and Adrien for eternity. That night no guests were allowed at Python Place. Dimitri, Tyrus, and Abigail stood by as witnesses. Reverend Watson was no longer a problem to his daughters since he'd been carted off to a madhouse shortly after the incident with Adrien.

Dion performed the ritual, which took place in the parlor of Adrien's wing. The couple stood, Adrien looking stunning in black and Hailey in a gold dress and the red and gold veil Dion had given her that night by the lake. She'd learned it was, in the immortal world, similar to a wedding veil.

In the center of the room, Dion faced the couple. He held a gleaming, pearl-handled dagger and offered it to Adrien who used the tip of the blade to slice his lip. A bit of blood welled and he held out the blade to Hailey who did the same, then they kissed.

"The rite has begun," Dion stated, taking the blade back from Hailey.

Her eyes closed, she clung to Adrien who also held her tightly, pressing her to the hard length of his body while they tasted each other's essence until she lost her breath. She thought she might lose consciousness, but then Adrien's breath filled her and they were one, similar to the times when he fed off her.

The kiss went on as Dion continued, "Adrien and Hailey are forever bound. One soul from two. The heavens have allowed this so the joining is unbreakable. Now and always."

The kiss broke and they held each other's gaze. For several heartbeats no one existed except her and Adrien.

Then a sharp voice called, "I will not allow this abomination!"

All gazes turned to Eris who, in a smoky haze, stepped through the doors leading to a garden. As she strode toward the couple, rage gleaming in her eyes, she became solid.

"You are not welcome here." Dion's lips curled in a wicked smile.

"I warn you, Dion. I will not allow --"

"Too late. It's done." Dion flicked his hand in Eris' direction and a great gust of wind blew her out of the now open doors. Her screams were silenced as the doors slammed shut.

Still smiling, Dion glanced at the others. "Refreshments, anyone?"

"Yes." Adrien turned to Hailey and kissed her again. "This is a night to celebrate."

"And we will, Lord Terence," she said, wearing her most teasing expression.

"I'm sure we will." He grinned, swept her into his arms and carried her to the dining room where the servants had spread a feast. Though the food looked delicious, later that night there would be a far better feast. In the bedroom.

The End

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Kate Hill is a thirty-something vegetarian New Englander who likes heroes with a touch of something wicked and wild. Her short fiction and poetry have appeared in dozens of publications both on and off the Internet. When she's not spending time with her family or working on her books, Kate enjoys reading, working out, and researching vampires and Viking history. Feel free to drop her a note at katehill@sprintmail.com or visit her website to learn more about her current releases and upcoming projects. You can find Kate online at <http://www.kate-hill.com>.