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Plagued

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Electronic book Publication: July 2007

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K.Z. Snow

Trademark Acknowledgments

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BMW: Bayerische Motoren Werke Aktiengesellschaft Harley: Harley-Davidson Motor Company Kia: Kia Motors Corporation Pall Mall: R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Co. V8: Campbell Soup Company

Author Note

The murderous bacterium Yersinia pestis kills people in one of two ways.

In warmer months, when the fleas that carry it are active, it infiltrates the lymphatic system, a fertile breeding ground, then surges through the bloodstream. (The term *Black Plague* derives from hemorrhagic bruises—red splotches that turn black—visible on the skin.) This is the bubonic form of the plague, so named because of the buboes formed by swollen lymph nodes.

In colder months, when fleas are dormant, the microscopic invaders are transferred via the coughing of victims whose lungs have become infected. This is the pneumonic form of the plague – and by far the more merciless.

Both manifestations decimated the population of the civilized world in the midfourteenth century. Both delivered death within days, in an unpreventable and particularly ghastly way.

Has the plague disappeared? No, but it's now treatable through antibiotics. The World Health Organization reports over one thousand cases each year, usually in Third World countries where pest control, general sanitation, personal hygiene and overall health may be lacking.

Although the last rat-borne epidemic in the United States occurred over eighty years ago, two New York City residents were hospitalized for bubonic plague in 2002.

Sweet dreams...

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Glossary

Angelus bell – in Catholic Church tradition, a bell tolled in the morning, at noon and in the evening to signal the times when the Angelus prayer should be recited.

Atilliator – a medieval artisan, usually serving at a castle, who crafted arbalests or crossbows.

Beadle – a minor law-enforcement official usually affiliated with a specific church or parish.

Bolt - the arrow discharged by an arbalest or crossbow.

Bubo – a noticeable and painful swelling of a lymphatic gland or lymph node, usually in the groin or armpit, resulting from an infectious disease; the condition from which "bubonic plague" got its name.

Ell – an archaic length measurement in England, roughly equaling forty-five inches.

Fevamp (*coined*) – female vampire.

Mercer – a merchant specializing in finer cloth.

Mortality or great mortality, the – a term commonly used in the fourteenth century to refer to the bubonic or "Black" plague, which eliminated one-quarter to one-half of the Eurasian population.

Oleum magicale – latin for "magical oil", it is often applied to the body by practitioners of witchcraft and ceremonial magic before or during rituals.

Sexton – a church official responsible for building maintenance, bell ringing and often, burial of the dead.

Strigoi mort - in Romanian legend, the evil walking-dead; a vampire.

Tenement – a residence or dwelling.

Tumbrel – a two-wheeled cart drawn by draft animals.

Wallachia – formerly a principality in southeastern Europe; united with Moldavia in 1861 to form Romania.

Prologue

London, April 1349

The Angelus bells rang. Another day for death to stalk Londoners. And a day for John de Bartes, constable, to stalk death.

Keeping his nose and mouth covered, the constable tried to hurry down the narrow, twisting streets. Early morning light was just beginning to break, struggling to penetrate the acrid haze of smoke from thousands of hearth fires. The beadle, many paces ahead, was barely visible, his lantern little more than a bobbing yellow smudge in the enveloping grayness.

We should not have too far to go, John reassured himself. He still felt besotted with sleepiness. Irritably, he nudged aside the unyielding bulk of a pig, snuffling in the overflowing drain channel, then deftly sidestepped a sprawling heap of dung outside a stable. A little farther on he passed two putrescent pig carcasses crawling with maggots. John yawned, nearly undoing the cloth tied over the lower half of his face. A squawking rooster that suddenly flew across his path startled him into wakefulness. He stretched his eyelids and trudged forward.

A slight breeze rose, signaling dawn. It carried the distant, mounting din from the marketplace at Cheapside and the nose-searing stench from the Fleet River. John hugged a building to let a tumbrel pass. Five shrouded corpses rocked like birch logs on its creaking bed.

When will it end? John tightened the woolen cloth. His wife had soaked it in lavender and powdered stag horn dissolved in water. The rag hadn't even dried yet because the air was so damp.

He rounded a corner and lengthened his strides to catch up with the beadle, who was obviously spryer than he. Speedier passage was impossible. People began spilling into the streets and lanes, further impeding his progress. A bucket appeared at a window on his right. Before John could react, its stinking contents sloshed across the cracked leather of his boots.

He cursed. The city, at least inside its ancient walls, had become a reeking and overcrowded sty. As more people succumbed to the Pestilence there were fewer rakers to clean the streets. London seemed to be drowning in malodorous filth—rotting food scraps, human waste, animal droppings, blood from slaughter houses...and now, diseased bodies oozing noxious fluids. As if to underscore the constable's unpleasant thoughts, two more corpses came into view. They lay, head to foot and carelessly covered, close against the wall of a tenement.

From what Thomas the beadle had told him, this common sight was nothing compared with the horror that awaited at the mercer's dwelling.

John thought he spied that dwelling at the end of the lane—a rather handsome tenement enclosed by two stone walls, twenty ells long according to the beadle's description, with a fine green garden and fillet-gutters below the roof. At least these citizens took some pride in their home and were considerate of their neighbors. Pity they'd been murdered.

The beadle stood at the dwelling's timber-framed door. "You can go now," John heard him say to a heavy woman stationed at the stoop. She cast a nervous glance at the approaching constable before drawing her hood over her head and mincing away.

"What was she doing here, Tom?" the constable asked.

"She was the one who summoned me. It seems she brings fresh eggs and goat's milk to these people every morning before she makes her way to the market. I asked her to stay outside the door until we returned. The woman has her wits about her...and for that we should be grateful." The beadle reached down to pet an orange cat that had suddenly appeared and begun rubbing against his leg. It darted off after a rat slinking along the base of the garden wall. The beadle straightened, his expression turning grave. "We don't want the public to know what's inside this house, John."

The constable studied him a moment. Thomas was not, by nature, of a solemn bent. "What's that woman's name?"

"Alice Mortande."

John made a mental note. "And she didn't send up a hue and cry when she discovered –?"

"No, thank the saints."

John scratched his head. "Why?"

A slouching man stumbled passed them, coughing. The beadle immediately turned his back to the stranger and crossed himself. "There was nothing to be gained by rousing the neighbors. Whoever did this," Thomas motioned toward the door, "had by then disappeared. Perhaps he's in a church now, seeking sanctuary. But I doubt that."

"I doubt that as well." The constable scratched at his neck. *Damned fleas*. "The murderer stole into this place at night. He certainly stole out while it was still dark. If nobody saw him, he has no need for sanctuary." John reached for the door latch. Fully awake now, the dirty city boiled at his back. "Come, Thomas," he said to the beadle. "I am certainly not going to face this alone."

Upon opening the door, John noticed nothing at first except the lingering smell of boiled cabbage and traces of smoke from the sputtering fire. As his eyes adjusted to the dimness, he saw a broken egg on the flagstone floor. The floor was a bit of a surprise...until John remembered that the master of the house was a mercer and could afford such luxuries. A loose bundle, likely the one in which the neighbor woman carried her produce, sat on a nearby table. The egg must have rolled out of it.

The constable glanced over his shoulder. Apprehension began to worry his belly. "Where are they, Tom? On the upper floor?"

"No, that's used for storage." The beadle's arm rose as he pointed past the constable. "Back there. In the sleeping chamber."

John stared at the plank door, cracked open by several inches. He heard Thomas say in a very low voice, "Can't you smell death?"

And suddenly, as if Tom's words had entered his nostrils instead of his ears, John *could* smell death. He swallowed hard against a rise of bile and stepped toward the door. "Bring your lantern, Tom."

The beadle appeared beside him. John entered the room first.

He instantly recoiled, his eyes watering. The woolen cloth, which had slipped down around his neck, was of no use to him now. "Dear God in heaven," he whispered.

A man and woman of middle age lay crisscrossed on the bed. The woman was on the bottom, on her back. The man was on top of her, on his stomach. Both were naked – an unusual state in and of itself, given the sodden chilliness of the season. John took a few halting steps toward them. Again, he winced. Their skin was grayish white, the color of bone. For a minute the constable wondered if both the neighbor and the beadle had been mistaken about the couple's cause of death. Perhaps they'd perished from the Pestilence. Perhaps, knowing they wouldn't be on earth much longer, they'd attempted to make love in their final hours.

John looked around the room. He saw clothing scattered hither and yon, as if it had been flung aside. When he examined the pieces closely, he noticed many were torn. John shot an uncertain glance at the beadle, who lingered near the doorway.

"Look at their heads," Tom instructed. "Then look at their necks." He approached the bed, extending his lantern toward the bodies. "There is bruising too, here and there."

The constable leaned over them. "Sweet Savior," he murmured, thunderstruck.

The side of each skull had not just been cracked but crushed. Brain matter bulged and glistened dully between fragments of bone. Even more disturbing, the couple's heads lolled at unnatural angles, making them look like fully bloomed roses sagging on broken stems.

"It looks like their necks have been snapped," he said, his timidity finally giving way to curiosity. "But..." John looked up at Thomas. "Where's the blood?" He turned up his hands and rotated his body. "This room should be painted sanguine!"

"I wondered that as well," the beadle said.

John's gaze began to scour the chamber's surfaces. He noticed a few spots of blood, some brighter and some darker, on the bedclothes and a few streaks on the bodies themselves. The victims' hair—which should have been drenched, given their massive head wounds—showed only minor clotting near the skull openings.

He peered around further, taking in the walls. This was a stone house, its building material likely carted in from the Hackney quarries. The interior walls were covered with a thick layer of daub. John noticed two concavities in the walls. Walking up to them, he studied each one in turn. The indentations went clear through to the exterior stone, some of which even looked loose.

Then the constable noticed something else...and it made him grimace. Both damaged areas were slick with moisture to which hair and bone chips and bits of tissue clung. He heard Thomas approach. "Whoever did this bashed their heads against the wall," John said to the beadle. "And he was either very strong or very angry."

Thomas put a hand on his shoulder. "Or both."

A splintered voice came from the doorway behind them, making both men jump in shock. "You had better look at their necks more carefully, dear sires."

Constable and beadle turned simultaneously.

A small woman, her face largely lost in the shadow of her hood, stood before them.

"Who are you?" John asked on a thin breath. He strode toward the woman and grabbed her arm. *Bag of bones*, he thought. He wondered if she was sick. That possibility made him quickly release her.

"A concerned citizen," the crone said in a snide singsong, pulling her arm even farther away from John's reach.

Thomas stepped forward. "Go. You have no business here. We don't need your 'concern'."

John noticed the wiry, silver-threaded black hair that crept from beneath the woman's hood. He noticed she had eyes like flakes of slate. Those features, combined with her speech, made him realize she wasn't English. "Where are you from?" he asked with some suspicion.

She took a step back, meeting his wariness with her own. "Wallachia. I'm in this country to look after my sister. Her English husband brought her here then died. She *needs* looking after." The woman lifted her arm. A gnarled finger pointed at the livid, battered figures on the bed. "Just as you need my counsel regarding *them*."

The constable and beadle exchanged bewildered glances.

"What we need," John said, "is to prevent a crowd from gathering. The Pest already flies on demon's wings from one person to another. We need not shorten its trip."

"Fools!" the woman cried. Her finger stabbed the air between the doorway and the tragically laden bed. "Do you want them to rise and walk, right before your eyes? Do you want them to drain your blood the way theirs was drained? Look at their necks, I tell you...then chop off their heads!"

John shot a glance at the beadle, whose eyes were as wide as his own must have been. His skin tingled with gooseflesh. The substance of what the woman said was made even more terrifying by her accent and the very sound of her voice, which seemed like thin, dry bark, rattling in the wind.

"You're a gypsy," Thomas breathed.

"What if I am?" the woman hissed. "You'll thank me for my wisdom before this day is out."

Heart thundering, John went to the bed. "Watch her," he said to Thomas as he bent over the corpses.

There was finally enough natural light in the room, just barely enough, for the constable to see by. He squinted to sharpen his weakening vision and trained it only on the dead ones' necks. He didn't want to see their faces – their lips or tongues or eyes. As he lowered his head, the smell arising from them made him wrinkle his nose and hold his breath.

John soon saw what the hag expected him to see.

Gasping, he threw a hand to his throat and stumbled backward. "Sweet Virgin Mary. Oh sweet Mother of God, spare us!" He desperately crossed himself—over and over again—and felt so spurred by fear he wanted to dash into the street.

"What's wrong?" Thomas said, obviously alarmed. "John, what did you see?"

"Lay them on winding sheets," the gypsy said in a low, even voice. "Chop off their heads and place them between their feet. Secure the bodies within the sheets." She inclined forward. "*Then burn them*."

John's trembling legs managed to carry him back to the beadle's side. "They have the mark," he said, gripping his companion's arm. "Both of them. That's why there's no blood."

"It now flows through someone *else's* veins," the crone said in an arch tone, as if she took perverse delight in the scene.

The men ignored her. Thomas kept his gaze fixed on John's face. "Are you saying...?"

The constable twitched out a string of nods. "They were visited by a vampyr. There's no mistaking it."

The beadle's red cheeks paled. "Shall we inform Lord Mayor Lovekyn and the council?"

"No. We cannot tell a soul. The Mortality has wreaked enough havoc in the city. If people knew of this, they'd start killing each other for every manner of silly reason—a wrong look, an ill chosen word, a step outside the door after nightfall." John vigorously shook his head. "No. We must do as the gypsy says."

"And as quickly as possible, I might add."

John glanced at her. She still stood in the doorway. Her mouth seemed to twist into a smirk. He anxiously looked at the bed behind him. Given the antic way his mind now spun, he could easily fancy he saw the dead couple move if he watched them long enough.

"I can see to the death certificate," John said, his throat dry as sand. "I know the notary quite well."

"But what about...?" Thomas put a hand to his forehead. Frantically, his eyes shifted from side to side. "What about informing next of kin? What if the relatives want to arrange a proper funeral?"

"Have you lost your senses?" John cried, grasping the beadle's arms. "These people can't be given a Christian burial! They can't be placed in hallowed ground! They can't even be put in a *common* grave!"

"Pardon me, sires, but my sister can inform their son."

Thomas dropped his hands from John's arms. The men turned their heads to regard the old woman.

"The son is their only kin and is grown now." She seemed to know whereof she spoke. "He travels a great deal in the service of his father's business so may not even be in the city at present. He may not even be in the country. But my sister knows of him. My sister will...make a point of speaking with him. And I'm certain there are family lawyers who will handle the estate." She added, again lapsing into tartness, "Mercers always have lawyers."

"Well?" Thomas asked John.

"We can't burn them. That, too, would draw a throng of people...and far too many questions." The constable looked to the gypsy for further advice.

"Then, when you wrap them, put heavy stones where their heads should be," she instructed. "Load them onto a tumbrel and take them to the banks of the Thames. After nightfall," abruptly, she turned toward the front door, "throw them in."

The beleaguered constable went to the bedchamber's doorway. Grasping its frame, he leaned into the front room. "But you said -"

The gypsy paused before the street door. She turned to face the constable. "Fear not, sire. Water is adequate for your purpose." She lifted her hand, fingers pressed together, and glided it beneath her chin in a slicing motion. "Once their heads are off, that is." The hag whirled out the door, thudding it closed behind her.

"Quickly," John said to the beadle as sweat broke out on his forehead. "Find an ax or hatchet."

"I believe we have until nightfall," Thomas said, "before we *truly* need to worry."

"Do it now, and don't tarry. I want these bodies well on their way out to sea or at least at the bottom of the river before the moon rises."

Chapter One

When Adin Swift felt lust stir beneath the serene facade he presented to the world, its rustling was accompanied by another feeling—an itchy tingle beneath the nail of his small finger, right hand. It meant the nail was growing, its edges honing themselves to razor sharpness, its tip tapering toward hypodermic efficiency.

Adin pierced, not bit, to draw blood. It was a characteristic of the more dominant breed in his mix of two. He knew his canine teeth could grow just as spontaneously...but only under certain circumstances.

It was imperative, Adin felt, that he avoid those circumstances. How tiresome, not to mention inconvenient, to be a fanged creature like so many other vampires. He was blessed with perfect teeth and didn't have to worry about hiding them. In fact, he was revolted by *all* the characteristics of his recessive breed...not the least of which was a vicious, amoral aggression that would turn him into a heartless predator.

As long as he found sexual release during or shortly after he fed, he could keep those characteristics from surfacing. Masturbation wouldn't work. He had to find fulfillment with and through the person on whom he fed. A bonding impulse seemed to be woven into the fabric of his dominant breed. It didn't have to be deep and permanent bonding – hell, that was a virtual impossibility – but a joining had to occur nonetheless. And that meant his donor had to be more than a circulatory system. Adin had to be attracted to her...or to him, as the case may be.

The young woman he'd idly been watching—the one with the sweet ass and bouncing breasts, both tightly swaddled in silk chiffon—disappeared into the crowd of gyrating dancers. Adin's fingernail immediately stopped tormenting him. Almost resentfully, he squinted against the garish lights, flashing in time to the jarring music. He caught a whiff of pot smoke. More filaments of odor snaked past him—orange juice, perfume, sweat, beer, pussy. He was getting impatient. Shifting on the padded chair, he jacked his right ankle onto his left knee and took another swallow of his gin and tonic.

Why do I bother hunting in places like this?

Adin invariably grew irritable in clubs. They had an overabundance of sensory stimulation, most of it unpleasant. After a couple of hours it began to overwhelm him, grating on his nerves and fragmenting his concentration. Still, the answer to his question was obvious.

Clubs and concerts and shopping malls were gathering places for mortals with firm, ripe, blood-rosy flesh. They offered vitality...and the best opportunities for the fucking that must accompany his feeding.

* * * * *

"Oh shit, look at that jagbag in the patent leather pants. They're fuckin' pink!"

Celia Quill could feel her friend's lacquered fingernails digging into her arm. "I'm sick of looking at jagbags," she murmured. "Sometimes I think that's all the male gender consists of."

Tory—a combination of amusement, distaste, and astonishment on her face—continued to stare at the guy. She finally released her grip on Celia's arm and fastened it on her drink glass.

Nicole, who'd wended her way back to the table from the dance floor, dropped ungracefully into her seat. After taking a long swallow of rum and Coke, she sighed extravagantly and swiped stray, damp hair from her forehead.

"Well?" Tory asked.

"Well what?"

"Was he a keeper?"

Nicole took another, smaller drink. "You don't see him at this table, do you?"

Tory shrugged. "Just thought I'd ask."

Nicole turned toward the guest of honor. "Cee, you really need to get off your ass and circulate if you expect to find your farewell fuck."

"She's got a point," Tory added. "Doesn't matter if you can't sift out all the bozos and turn up a gold nugget. You're not gonna be stuck with the dude, you're just gonna enjoy him on a very temporary basis—like, twelve hours, max. I mean, hell, this could be your last chance to get laid for God knows how long."

Celia couldn't deny that dismal possibility. It was precisely why her friends had brought her here. She'd be moving to her new place in less than three days. Considering her new place was in an unincorporated town at the edge of the North Woods, the manpickin's would likely be very slim.

"I don't know," she said, as much to herself as to her friends. "I can't seem to get with it. Maybe I'm too preoccupied."

Nicole tried to turn her around. "The move will go fine," she said, leaning toward Celia. "Just put it out of your mind 'til tomorrow. You're pretty much ready to roll, anyway. Nearly everything's packed, the truck's been reserved and we'll be there to help."

Celia put her hand over Nicole's. "Are you absolutely sure it's okay for you to take Monday off? Are you sure Robert won't feel put out?" She glanced at Tory, directing the question to her, as well. Robert, who'd volunteered to drive the truck, was Tory's boyfriend.

"Cee, listen up." Tory rested her forearms on the table and craned her upper body in Celia's direction. "We've been over this a dozen times. And this is going to be the last. You know damned well we *love* having an excuse to blow off work. Robert doesn't

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even need an excuse 'cause he has Mondays and Tuesdays off, anyway. Plus he gets to drive a truck. That's a big deal for a guy who owns a Kia. So instead of wasting your energy on all this bullshit stressing, pick a hot dawg from this lively pack and direct it toward *him*."

Nicole nodded in agreement. "Couldn't have said it better myself. Well, maybe a little more eloquently."

"The fuck," Tory countered, sitting back.

Nicole ignored her. "So relax. Enjoy." Her eyebrows rose suggestively. "We *are* surrounded by some fine-looking specimens."

Tory grabbed her handbag as she rose from the table. "Just stay away from the dude with the pink plastic pants." She was obviously bound for the ladies' room.

"I'd better stop at the wayside too," Nicole said, getting to her feet. "You coming, Cee?"

"No, I'd better stay put and get some exposure." Her eyes made a quick sweep of the crowd. "Actually, I do see some potential here." She smiled up at the girls. "Sorry if I've been a pain in the ass. Thanks for the reassurance."

Nicole smiled down at her. "That's what friends are for, babe."

"That's *one* of the things," Tory said, grabbing Nicole's arm. "The other is to accompany each other to the can. Now come on, my bladder feels like a 747 fuel tank before a transcontinental flight."

Celia laughed as they headed away, squeezing their short-skirted butts between people and tables. Sighing, she dropped her chin to her hand and idly scanned the club's interior.

The place was frothing with energy. Not surprising, since it was early May and cabin fever had finally broken. Celia felt another drizzle of anxiety. *Cabin fever*... God, she'd surely get a dose of it next winter in her new house.

Once again, she started second-guessing her decision to make this bold move. Once again, she ran through her reasons for doing it.

First, she, a country girl, had never much liked living in the city – visiting, yes, but not permanently residing in. Too much hustle and hassle and expense, too little peace and privacy. Second, her mortgage payment, property taxes, and homeowner's insurance combined would be less than her current apartment rent. Third, her budding career as a feature writer allowed her to live pretty much anywhere she chose, as long as she had Internet and post office access. Fourth, her parents lived in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, so she'd be considerably closer to them. Finally, she was a resilient and resourceful twenty-four-year-old who'd never been afraid of taking risks and, in fact, hungered for new experiences.

Besides, Celia reasoned, if her North Woods home ended up becoming more of a prison than a retreat, she could always sell or lease it and move on.

Then Celia's optimism-building hit a snag, the same one it always hit when she envisioned the house in Woodbine. It had nothing to do with any particular aspect of the house, but everything to do with the *feel* of it. Celia could be no more specific than that. Something about the place made her uneasy. For weeks she'd been trying both to analyze and dismiss this irrational reaction. Vaguely but tenaciously, it continued to dog her. She finally ascribed her unease to apprehension—about relocation, first-time home ownership, the prospect of a more or less solitary existence. The house, after all, was the embodiment of these mild terrors, so it made sense she'd view *it* as the source of her tension.

Everybody Celia knew seemed to agree.

"All right, enough. Let it go," she murmured to herself.

It was time to have some fun.

* * * * *

Adin felt a warm hand rest on the back of his neck, smelled damp armpits.

"Hey, you seem to be alone tonight. Wanna dance with me?"

To be civil, he turned and looked up. He was always mindful of his manners. A woman with dark, chopped hair and enormous breasts, lolling within a "Bite Me...Please" t-shirt, stood over him. Her smile, he guessed, was supposed to be alluring but came across as stoned and salacious.

The message on the t-shirt made him smile. "Thanks, but no. I was just about to go to the men's room." He lifted his glass. "Too many of these, I guess."

Her hand crept over his shoulder and down into the front of his shirt. "So let me go with you. I just scored some great -"

Sparing Adin the embarrassment of being too blunt, a skinny guy with a sallow complexion and virtually the same ragged haircut suddenly lunged at the woman. "Val, hey, Zoozoo's here. You know him—he won't hang around long. C'mon."

"Catch you later," the woman said to Adin, making a gun out of her thumb and forefinger and shooting it at him.

He lazily saluted her and watched the couple hurry away on unsteady legs.

Val would've been an easy mark—*very* easy, probably even enthusiastic—but for some reason Adin wasn't interested in the women who'd approached him tonight. Four had already come up to him and he'd turned them all away.

What the hell was he after?

Adin rested his arms on the table, hands loosely curled around his drink, and fell to brooding. He felt out of sorts. This freakin' madhouse of a nightclub was definitely responsible.

Being here was starting to seem like an annoying waste of time. He considered leaving, trying to pick up the trail of an old enemy instead of some circulatory system

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that would bring him only momentary satisfaction. He could certainly get by on substitute nourishment for another day or so.

Another thought came, a surprising one. But maybe I'm here for a reason...other than a desire to feed.

Adin lifted his nose and took a series of short breaths. It was an exercise in futility. There were simply too many people here, too many scents. *Take it easy. You'll know soon enough.* He sipped at his drink and idly looked around.

And spotted her.

Adin felt the pull as soon as his eyes met hers—and how fortuitous, he thought, that they should notice one another at exactly the same moment. It wasn't her prettiness that caught his attention. Youth, beauty, body shape—even gender, for that matter—were rarely factors when he was choosing a target, although youth definitely had its advantages. Instead, he relied on unerring instinct to lead him to his connections. Different people carried different gifts. To thrive rather than merely exist, a vampire had to look past appearances. Information gathered solely through one's senses and filtered solely through one's lust could be very misleading indeed. And it could result in a waste of valuable time and energy.

The pull, this time, was very strong. Adin was unsettled by it. He knew he was not being misled.

What makes her special? What is it she has to offer me?

Rather boldly he studied the woman's face, hoping for some revelatory clues before he made his move. And he *would* make a move, or at least respond to one – of that he was fairly certain. Still, he couldn't seem to delve beneath the surface. The woman, who seemed intrigued yet disconcerted by his attention, gave him a demure smile and looked away. Uncertainly, her eyes soon returned to him. After another small smile she looked down at the table, impulsively grabbed her drink and took a rather hefty swallow. Adin's smile broadened for an instant. The woman struck him as selfconscious and a little tense. That mental state, combined with the distractions provided by this environment, made her a difficult read.

What the hell, Adin thought laconically, so I'll just take pleasure in looking. More than willing to settle for this, he took an indulgent pull on his drink and continued to study the woman over the rim of his glass, his eyelids lowering. She darted him only the most fleeting glances now. Adin had seen this happen many, many times before. She was trying to determine as casually as possible if he was still watching her.

And of course he was. Centuries of wide-ranging experience had made Adin immune to embarrassment, able to slough off disappointment. If he hesitated in approaching someone, it was only because he was either assessing or manipulating a situation. Seduction, like any attack, required strategy.

Yes, she was *quite* pretty. Her feathered hair, neither long nor short, softly framed her face and looked naturally blonde, although there may have been some artificial highlights. Its color contrasted strikingly with her large, dark brown eyes. She wasn't spackled with makeup, either—just a touch of mascara, a hint of blush, a whisper of lipstick. Adin had never been fond of cosmetic enhancement. It seemed gaudy and alien to him. He preferred clean, unadorned skin.

Waiting until she angled her chair away from him—not many people could bear up under his scrutiny for long—Adin took in the woman's body. It looked delicious. She had nicely rounded, creamy breasts topped by obviously irrepressible nipples, which her clingy red dress showed off to such advantage Adin wanted to bare them on the spot. Her legs and arms were more athletic than willowy. Good, Adin thought, good. She'll need that strength when she's with me. Her mouth looked inviting, receptive the perfect vessel for a dense, needful cock.

As his imagination began putting these components together in the context of an erotic encounter, Adin again felt the burning beneath his smallest, right-hand nail. He slowly curled his fingers into his palm and was startled to feel a pinprick. The nail had already grown to its piercing length and sharpness.

Privately, Adin smiled. He knew exactly where he'd insert the nail when they were finally alone together.

* * * * *

A hand swept up and down in front of Celia's eyes. "Yo, Cee, what zone are *you* in?"

Tory and Nic, back from the ladies' room, resumed their places at the table. The hand had been Tory's. Celia coughed once, unnecessarily, and quickly took a drink.

She'd made up her mind. That man's stare had sent a small current from her cunt down into her thighs and up into her abdomen. She wanted him. As soon as their eyes met, her nipples stiffened. She wanted to get naked with him and press and rub her breasts against his chest and her mouth against his lips and feel his cock jackhammer into her. She wanted to do these things and more...all night long.

Celia rose from the table without a word, lightly tugged and smoothed her dress to straighten it, and made straight for the man's table. He didn't seem to be with anybody. If he was, Celia decided she would simply apologize for the misunderstanding, rejoin her friends, and not so much as look in his direction for the rest of the evening.

He watched her approach almost tauntingly, his left elbow resting on the table, his forefinger idly inscribing curlicues around his chin and his delectably parted lips. Celia found those simple movements unbearably alluring. With a subtle bow of the spine, she thrust her breasts out further, knowing her nipples were pushing out the fabric by a good quarter-inch. The man's tongue appeared briefly between his lips, which slipped into an appreciative smile. His startling eyes – they struck Celia as oceanic – glimmered like sharp sunlight on indigo waves.

She stopped beside his table without sitting down. Musing smile still in place, the man lazily tilted his head up and to one side to regard her.

"Are you alone?" she asked, not caring how abrupt she was being.

"Not anymore." Languidly, the man unfolded his left arm, curled his fingers around the top of a chair and pulled it away from the table.

Heart pattering, Celia sat beside him. "I don't mean to sound presumptuous, but I got the distinct impression you were watching me. Intently."

"I was." His gaze lowered briefly, caressing her breasts. When it moved back up to her face, his eyelids seemed heavier.

Celia felt a flash of moisture between her legs. The man was breathtaking. His collar-length hair, curling slightly and erratically, had the rich color and sheen of finely finished rosewood. It beautifully complemented his flawless skin. Those mesmerizing eyes were turned down a bit at the outer corners, and their shape combined with the sweep of dark lashes gave them a certain dreaminess. *Bedroom eyes*, Celia thought. But it was his expressive mouth – those somewhat full but clean-lined lips – that plunged the dreamy look into lush sensuality. His lithe body, Celia knew, would immeasurably strengthen the effect.

He sat forward, linking his hands on the table. "Is there anything else you'd like to ask me?"

"A million things," Celia said. Her voice sounded strange, distant. "Is there anything *you* want to know?"

"Yes." The man lifted her hand, turned it up, and slowly pressed his lips to the palm. His tongue gave it a quick, teasing lick. His eyes turned up to her face. "Would you like to leave with me now so I can make love to you?"

Chapter Two

Without answering, Celia rose from the table. She hadn't even bothered asking the man his name. Maybe she didn't want to know it. Maybe anonymity was part of the raw excitement she felt.

He may have shared her feelings, because he didn't ask her name, either. He simply followed her lead and stood up, then moved behind her and gently placed a guiding hand on the small of her back. It was an almost possessive gesture that stoked Celia's mounting desire. She fancied she could feel his warm breath on the back of her neck.

Celia only broke her silence when she stopped briefly at her friends' table to say, "I'm going now. Don't wait for me." As they gaped at her, she snatched up her bag and kept moving toward the exit.

Once outside, in one of the parking lot's pools of shadow, Celia stopped and turned to her new lover. "I don't have a car. I came here with my friends. So it might be more convenient for you if we went to my place. It's only about two miles from here."

"I'm amenable." He kept watching her, his eyes scintillating darkly. "Was that dress expensive?"

This time, Celia held his gaze. "Not too."

"Does it mean anything to you?"

"No. Nothing."

As if in slow motion, his hands floated up from the darkness, curled around the dress's low neckline, and pulled it in opposite directions. With a low, hissing sound the fabric tore, fully exposing Celia's breasts. She began to pant, her chest pumping. As a draft of cool night air tightened and heightened her nipples even further, a low moan of arousal came from the man's throat. He cupped his hands around the heavy outer swell of her breasts and lowered his head toward the left one. Celia rolled her head back, closing her eyes, weakened by the feel of her half-nakedness and of the man's large hands firmly grasping and raising her breasts to his hungry mouth. She felt the hot, humid pulse of his breath against her skin just before his lips closed over her nipple.

Suddenly, Celia felt a tiny exquisite lightning-strike to her flesh. It was less painful than a bee sting yet somehow infinitely more intense...and exquisitely pleasurable, since it was very near her soft, swollen areola. She sharply drew in her breath as her mind hazed. The man's mouth began a deep, luxurious sucking, his wet tongue dancing around his treasure.

As Celia's knees buckled, her pussy oozed slick moisture and she had her first pounding orgasm of the night.

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When the woman began to crumple, Adin reluctantly lifted his mouth from the font of her breast and put his arms around her. Limply, she clung to him, one hand absently stroking the hair at the back of his neck. She murmured something and kissed the topmost arc of his shoulder.

Damn, but he craved more of her – more of her soft, yielding flesh, more of the fragrance of her pussy, and certainly more of that sweet, rich, trickling stream he'd drawn from the reservoir of her eager body.

"Have you had enough?" he asked, knowing full well she hadn't. Still, he wanted to hear her answer, because something unusual was happening. For the first time in longer than he could remember, Adin's passion was being fueled by his partner's passion. He wanted this woman to crave him as much as he craved her.

Her answer was immediate and unequivocal. "No. I want more. I want much more."

"You'll have it."

Recovering, she straightened. Her arms immediately crossed over her breasts. "Let's get to your car."

"We'll get there," Adin said. He pulled her arms away from her body. "But I want you to display yourself proudly as we walk."

"Does it turn you on?" she asked in a throaty voice.

"Yes, I think you know it does. And I think it turns you on too."

She didn't get coy and deny it. Adin liked that. Instead she asked, "Is your cock hard?"

He nodded. "Very. I need to fuck you. Soon."

The woman's breath accelerated once more. Her gaze fell to his crotch. When her hand began to move toward it, Adin grabbed her wrist. "You're going to experience ecstasy tonight," he said quietly, looking deep into her eyes, "the likes of which you've never known before. And in return, you're going to do or refrain from doing whatever I ask. I'm not going to hurt or humiliate you – unless it's in ways we both find arousing – but, make no mistake about it, I *am* going to dominate you. Utterly." Adin released her wrist. Taking her face in his hands, he crushed his mouth against hers, dragging his lips and tongue across her lips, across her cheeks. "Do you want to go back to your friends? I'll give you my shirt or jacket if you do."

Glassy-eyed and breathless, she stared at him. "I accept your terms," she whispered.

Showing his approval with a smile, Adin slipped an arm around the woman's waist, steering her toward his BMW. Occasionally, his hand slid up her rib cage and rested lightly beneath one breast, so he could feel it bobble as she walked. Whenever he did so, his cock gave a responsive throb. As they drew near the car, Adin told her to stop.

"Walk toward me when I tell you to," he instructed.

Adin pulled a remote control from his jacket pocket and used it to unlock the vehicle's doors. He went up to the passenger side, turned, and faced his half-naked companion. She'd have to take at least twenty steps to reach him.

Casually leaning against the car, arms and legs crossed, he said, "Now."

Face impassive, the woman approached him with measured, aggressive strides that jounced her breasts. A thin dark line angled down from one nipple—obviously, the puncture he'd made had leaked a tiny bit more blood—and the sight of it sent fire through his straining cock. Vaguely, he felt grateful for the control he'd developed over centuries of sex play.

When the woman reached Adin, she simply stood before him, silently looking into his face.

Lightly supporting her breasts with his hands, he quickly swiped his thumbs over the nipples. The woman's neck and back automatically arched, inviting more of his touch. But he dropped his hands.

"You want everything I have to give, don't you," he whispered.

Her eyelids fluttered. "Yes."

Adin kissed her again, one hand on her face, the other on her bare back. She responded ardently, grinding her breasts against his chest, thrusting her tongue to meet his, sucking and biting at his lips. Adin's hand slid down to her thinly clad ass and pressed her hips against his hard-on. Gasping, she squirmed against it.

He began to chortle quietly. Tonight was definitely going to be worth his time.

Reaching behind her, Adin opened the passenger door. He took off his jacket and handed it to her. "You might want to put this on before we get to your place." He flashed her a smile. "I don't want your reputation sullied."

The woman's lips twitched into an answering smile as she donned the jacket. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. What's your name, by the way?"

"Celia."

"That's lovely." Adin adjusted the jacket on her shoulders. He made sure her breasts were covered. "It suits you."

Without telling Celia his name, he guided her into the car. It was too soon to divulge anything about himself—*anything*. He circled around the front of the BMW and seated himself behind the wheel. After asking for and getting directions to her apartment, he started the engine and headed out of the club's parking lot.

Adin reached over to Celia's lap, hiked up the minimal length of dress that covered it, and gently began fingering her cunt. Damn, it was wet. There was even a slurry of moisture down the insides of both thighs. Celia's head fell against the backrest as thin, birdlike sounds came from her throat. Her ass wriggled on the seat.

"Would you like me to make you come?" he asked.

She managed a strained affirmative.

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Pulling aside the thin fabric of her thong, Adin probed her flooded pussy and teased her slippery clit. Celia's mouth opened. She'd begun panting. A quavering *uhh* came out with each fevered breath. Within seconds her body tensed, relaxed, and fell forward against the shoulder harness.

"You'll have a lot more before the night is out," Adin said. "I promise you that." He slid his fingertips inside his mouth and sucked off the residue left by Celia's responsive body.

By the time they reached her building and walked from the parking lot to her ground-floor apartment, the befogged woman seemed to have gathered her senses. Adin was glad. He didn't want to wear her out too soon. He still craved his own climax, not to mention more of her blood.

The coarser traits of his recessive breed were beginning, ever-so slightly, to stir.

Just inside the door, as Celia flipped on a light, Adin pulled up short and stared around the living room. Stacks of boxes—some closed, some still open—stood everywhere.

"I'm sorry it's not very hospitable in here," Celia said with a wan smile. "I didn't have a chance to tell you - I'm moving in a couple of days."

Adin nodded. "I can see that. It doesn't matter, though." His eyes scanned the room once more. *No, it doesn't matter at all...*

Celia motioned toward a hallway on their left. "The bed is still—"

"We won't need the bed," Adin broke in. "Not right now." He grabbed Celia's hand and led her to a desk and chair on the left side of the room. "Take off all your clothes."

Staring at him expectantly, Celia did as she was told. "Do you have a condom?"

"Yes." Adin went to the other side of the room and snatched up a ball of twine and roll of packing tape sitting on one of the cartons. When he came back, he tossed them onto the empty desktop. After a brief pause, he appreciatively ran both hands down the length of Celia's smooth body, lowering himself to a kneeling position as he did so. He wanted to study the landscape of her flesh. She was like a bouquet of carnations, he fancifully thought, all white and pink, silky and fragrant. It would be difficult to choose where he next wanted to pierce and drink from her.

Before he rose to his feet again, Adin cupped Celia's thighs. Lifting his head and closing his eyes, he slipped his tongue between her labia and gave a long, languorous lick from the rear wall of her vagina to the edge of her pubic bone. Celia let out a weak, whimpering sigh as her hands slid into his hair.

Adin stood up and eased off his shoes and socks. "Undress me," he whispered, delivering a quick nip to her ear lobe.

"Gladly." With trembling fingers, Celia began peeling off Adin's clothing, beginning with his shirt. "You're so beautiful," she murmured. "God I want you. I can't stand this, wanting you so much."

Adin could feel her heat rise as she pulled the shirt from his body. It virtually lapped at him. As soon as she began fondling his chest, Adin's hands locked around her wrists. "No," he said firmly. "That's for later. Right now you have to free my cock." He pulled a packet from his jeans pocket and tossed it onto the desk.

Thwarted, Celia looked both frustrated and dismayed. But she obeyed him. She unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans, grasped the waistband and coaxed them down his hips. Adin felt the light layer of sweat on her palms.

Celia dropped to her knees and let his cock spring into the light. "Oh please, let me suck it," she said breathlessly, turning beseeching eyes up to Adin's face.

He stepped out of his jeans and kicked them aside. "Not yet." It required a monumental exercise of willpower to refuse her request. Adin's cock had been painfully turgid for the better part of two hours. Now it stood, head purpling, at a steep angle from his body. Only the thought of blood kept him from granting Celia's wish.

He helped her to her feet, then grabbed the tape and twine from the desk. "Sit down."

Apprehension scudded across Celia's face. She'd certainly deduced his intention to bind and immobilize her. Maybe this was something new in her sexual experience. Or maybe, Adin told himself, she was just exhibiting a normal degree of trepidation. After all, as much as he had whetted this woman's appetite, he was still a stranger to her.

"Please, don't be afraid," he said gently, then dipped down to kiss her. "We'll both like this."

Silently, she sat down.

"Put your feet up on the desk and spread your legs as far apart as you can."

Celia did so. Adin's cock jerked at the glorious, full exposure of her pussy. He laid a section of tape over each of her ankles, securing them to the desktop.

Moving behind her, Adin took her wrists and crisscrossed them behind the back of the chair. He bound them with more tape, thrusting Celia's breasts forward. Getting impatient now, provoked by his agonizing erection, Adin snatched up the ball of twine and tied Celia to the chair, passing the coarse, braided sisal several times around her breasts and making sure one strand cut across a nipple. How exquisitely sensitive it must be right now, Adin thought, glancing hungrily at the high, hard nub before he compressed it. He gave the twine a little tug, and Celia, breathing heavily now, let out a feeble wail as the cord bit into her.

Adin could smell her stimulation. Even if she hadn't known it before now, Celia obviously liked having her pleasure sharpened by an occasional nip of pain. He angled his hand over her gaping cunt and felt nothing but slickery wetness. The chair seat was already glistening from it.

Ducking down, Adin scuttled between Celia's outstretched legs and knelt facing her. He began kissing and caressing her bound, naked body—rising up, leaning over, gliding down, using his lips and teeth and tongue, his hands, even his breath to make her crazed with desire.

As crazed as he was.

Three times his little finger arched up and plunged down, striking like the viper Cleopatra had held to her breast. His finger made its diving arc so rapidly, any mortal eye would have perceived little more than a fleeting blur. Three times he closed his mouth, almost desperately, over the red nectar that beaded and ran from each tiny well. He'd drunk twice more from her succulent, bulging breasts, once from the inside of her thigh, very near her pussy. Each time, Adin greedily sucked and licked up all he could – there would be no streaks left behind. Between blood-strikes he fed at Celia's cunt, drinking in a different kind of nectar.

Celia kept writhing and crying out. She kept begging to be fucked. Adin dimly wondered if her frenzied arousal might be pushing him to extremes. Had he ever inserted his instrument too deeply into her? Cut instead of punctured? Drawn too much blood? He could tell she felt the sting of his strikes – her body always convulsed slightly when his nail penetrated her flesh, and afterward she always let out a wavering sigh – but, blinded by his own haze of need, he couldn't accurately gauge whether or not she was in distress. Hell, *she* probably couldn't even tell.

Enough, then. His cock had been leaking for some time now and required its own kind of respite. Immediately. He knew he'd almost pushed the envelope too far.

Adin grabbed the condom from the desk and smoothly unrolled it over his erection. It wasn't necessary, but he donned it to put his partner's mind at ease. Half kneeling on the chair, facing Celia, he braced himself as best he could and thrust his rod into her streaming cunt. Its muscles immediately tightened around the shaft. Adin groaned – the feeling was exquisite – but he didn't break his rhythm. It gradually accelerated, the thrusts becoming deeper and harder, until the rigor of orgasm overtook Celia's body. Just as it started to subside, making her wilt, he let go. His head rolled back. He let out a barbaric cry of release. Hot cum pounded out of him until Adin, as drained as he was full, nearly lost consciousness.

It was an unsettling feeling. Blinking and gulping air, he deftly removed the full rubber and undid Celia's bindings. She may have wondered how he accomplished this, since they all fell away simultaneously, but Adin didn't think she had the presence of mind to notice much of anything.

Standing up, he bent over to kiss her forehead. "I hope I didn't hurt you." He meant it.

Celia laughed silently and shook her head. "I'm not sure *what* you did to me." When she met Adin's gaze, her expression became more weighty. "I just know I loved it...down to every last cell. I've never felt so alive. It's as if I were drowning in my own senses." She reached up and, with wonderment, ran her fingertips along Adin's face. "I can touch you now, can't I?"

"Yes, you can touch me as much as you like. I *want* you to touch me." Adin felt his own ripple of wonder. Usually, after having enjoyed someone, he preferred *not* to be touched. His skin always felt uncomfortably sensitive—somehow tighter, thinner—

right after his hunger had been fully satiated. Now however, he almost yearned for this woman's touch. He found it soothing.

So soothing, in fact, that he felt impelled to ask, "Would you mind if I spent the night with you?" How oddly diffident he sounded to himself!

Celia put her hands on either side of his face and kissed him. "I demand it."

Chapter Three

After having had four or five orgasms sweep through her, Celia felt as if she'd been flattened by a steamroller. Every remaining vestige of energy seemed to seep away as her last terrific climax waned. Still, she didn't want to let go of this strangely compelling, unbearably exciting man. Her curiosity about him was now as keen as her desire for him.

"My name is Adin. Adin Swift," he murmured, almost grudgingly, as they walked to the bedroom.

Celia hadn't asked, only wondered. She looked up at him—he was a good eight inches taller than she. "It's very nice to make your acquaintance, Adin Swift."

He glanced at her, smiling at her drollery, and briefly tightened the arm he'd curled around her waist. "The feeling is mutual, believe me."

As Celia turned down the bedding, she noticed that a provocative ache had settled into her arms and legs, her breasts and cunt. Her breasts actually burned a little, and it turned her on – enough to keep her nipples taut. She watched as Adin slipped his long, lean, tightly muscled body beneath the covers and was glad she had a full box of condoms in the nightstand drawer.

Damn, she thought, I could eat him up.

He crossed his arms behind his head and gave Celia a taunting look. "Well? I thought you wanted to touch me. What are you waiting for?"

A trapezoid of moonlight angled across his handsome face and firm chest, further luring Celia into bed. She crawled in beside Adin and immediately pressed her body along the length of his. With one hand, she began lazily exploring its contours.

"You're stunning," Celia whispered, kissing his shoulder. "I've never known a man quite like you."

"Is that good or bad?" Adin's eyes were closed, but a slight smile lay on his lips.

"I'm not sure. Not yet."

He cracked an eyelid to look at her. "Yet? It sounds as if you expect us to keep seeing each other."

Yeah, it does, Celia realized. She didn't want to come across as presumptuous or, God forbid, possessive. Not only were those man-repelling attitudes, but her own pride wouldn't allow her to look for her future in some guy. Besides, she'd be moving in a few days.

"I don't expect anything," she clarified. "I went out tonight to get laid. I've achieved that goal, in spades. From now on, *que sera*, *sera*."

He grabbed her roaming hand and kissed it. "Whatever will be, will be. Can't fight *that* philosophy."

"Do you have a 'philosophy'?" Celia's fingers glided across the hard mounds of his chest, her fingernail flicking at his nipples.

"Hm. How about 'come and go' or 'fuck and duck out'?"

Celia's hand stilled. What message was he sending? She tried reading his facial expression but could detect nothing.

Unexpectedly, Adin laughed. He rolled his head on the pillow to face her. Moonlight glimmered in the facets of his eyes. "That's what I *would* say if I fancied myself some Billy Badass lady-killer – which, I suspect, is how *you* think I see myself."

Celia was even more intrigued. "Well, you do give the impression of being—"

"A control freak?" Adin shook his head. "Don't confuse sex play with lifestyle, Celia. I'm not some heartless misogynist. Far from it." He leaned toward her and kissed her tenderly, his lips incomparably soft, his silky hair whispering against her cheek.

Befuddled, Celia stared at him. She stroked his tousled hair, touched one finger to his mouth. His tongue crept out and lightly licked it.

This wasn't supposed to be happening. Tonight should've been an isolated, selfindulgent episode centered on gratification of lust. It should've been an orgy of fucking and sucking that led to lusciously aching breasts and a lusciously aching cunt and a gorgeous, perfect cock slathered in bodily fluids.

And it had been. And it could continue to be. But now, something else was going on.

Celia no longer felt only lust for this man.

"I'd like to know you better, Adin." It was a sincere confession and a bit regretful. "I'm sure that's never going to happen, but I just needed to tell you...that I believe you're worth knowing."

Adin smiled. "Never say 'never'." Nudging Celia onto her back and raising himself up on one arm, Adin delivered the most luxuriantly passionate, expressive kiss she had ever experienced. He took his time with it—so much so that Celia felt consumed by him.

When he finally lifted his head, he eased backward by a few inches and, still facing Celia, rested his head on his hand. "So, where are you moving?"

She scooted a little higher on her pillows. "Up north. Woodbine. It's a small crossroads town at the edge of a forest."

"State or national forest?"

"National. Nicolet, actually."

Showing his surprise, Adin raised his eyebrows and pulled down the corners of his mouth. "That'll be a change. It must be beautiful up there. But what are you going to do?"

"For a living or during my leisure time?"

"Both."

Celia chuckled softly. "You must be a true city-dog."

"Not really," Adin said. "In fact, I'd prefer to live in the country. I'm just curious about your plans."

Celia turned toward him. "Professionally, I'll be doing the same thing I've *been* doing. I'm a freelance writer. So," she shrugged, "have computer, will travel."

"And what do you write about?" His expression turned impish. "I suppose I'd better not guess cooking or fashion. You'd probably slap me."

"You'd be dead wrong if you guessed cooking or fashion. And I wouldn't slap you, but I'd seriously consider ending the evening right now."

Adin lifted his eyebrows. He seemed both impressed and amused. "Well, is it fiction or nonfiction?"

"Non. I write science-based features for lay readers, sometimes even for children. Not the kind of heavy stuff you'd see in professional journals or specialty periodicals, but articles with broader, popular appeal. I've sold to magazines in a variety of niche markets – nature, travel, news, women's..."

"Son of a gun." This time Adin seemed genuinely impressed, without the amusement. "So you're a nerd in disguise."

Celia chuckled. "Maybe I am. But I'm doing what I love."

"Good for you," Adin said with a slight smile.

Celia sensed admiration in his look, his tone. And she found it inordinately gratifying. *Well, at least he knows I'm not some oversexed bimbo*.

"And when you're not writing?" Adin asked.

Celia had given the issue plenty of thought. "The rest of the time I'll work on the house and property, get out and meet people, explore the area, maybe do some volunteer work, garden, read, paint." Impulsively, with something very like affection, she lifted her hand and let her fingertips trail down the side of Adin's face, enjoying his artistic bone structure and smooth, lightly dusky skin. "What do *you* do?"

Her touch had made him smile. Celia was starting to love seeing him smile. She wanted to kiss him but refrained, because she didn't want to seem too clingy and moonstruck.

"I'm a computer-dependent freelancer, too," he said. "A translator, to be exact. I get foreign-language documents from corporations, universities, government agencies, religious institutions."

It was Celia's turn to be surprised. "Really! Wow. That must be fascinating. What languages do you specialize in?"

"Recently, needless to say, I've been doing a lot of work with Chinese, Japanese, and Arabic. But I'm usually called upon to translate older dialects that aren't commonly

known or taught anymore. Every year there are more and more proficient translators out there who can deal with modern tongues."

The more he talked, the more he impressed Celia. "Exactly how many languages are you familiar with, Adin?"

"Quite a few, but with varying degrees of fluency. Some I can read but can't speak very well. Others I manage to converse in but can't read without a dictionary at hand."

Celia was enthralled. "Who would've thought?" she murmured. "A multilinguist who looks and fucks like a porn star."

Adin's hand fell away from beneath his chin. Laughing, his head dropped back against his pillows. "Get some sleep, nature girl. Long Schlong from Hong Kong ain't done with you yet."

Celia grinned, but rumbling beneath her delight was a fault line of trepidation. The last thing she needed, especially now, was to develop a sexual and emotional addiction to a man she wouldn't see again after tomorrow. Maybe he'd do them both a favor and creep away in the middle of the night.

As Celia drifted off, her last conscious thought was, *Oh but what a sweet, sweet addiction that would be...*

* * * * *

Once Adin knew she was asleep, he quietly got out of bed, slipped on his jeans, and walked back to the living room, where he'd noticed a pair of patio doors. He slid one open and stepped outside. Earlier, he'd thought this might be a good place to catch an hour's sleep. Now, unable to sleep, he figured it would be a good place to think.

The night air was crisp, the moon three-quarters full. Nice. Adin inhaled deeply. He could smell the city — asphalt, vehicle exhaust, a trace of dog feces — but this was a clean Midwestern city of only moderate size, so the odors weren't nearly as strong as in other urban areas. And nowhere near as offensive as they'd been in fourteenth-century London.

After all this time and despite his vast experience in the world, Adin still relished the smell of fresh air scented by dozens of kinds of flora. He raised his head and whispered into the night, "Whan that Aprill, with his shoures soote, the droghte of March hath perced to the roote, and bathed every veyne in swich licour, of which vertu engendred is the flour; whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth inspired hath in every holt and heeth the tendre croppes..."

Adin dropped his head with a forlorn chuckle. As much as he had come to despise the city of his birth—a wonderful, vibrant city now, but forever befouled in his memory—he'd never lost his love of his native tongue. It was a lush language, lyrical and sonorous, and Adin often spoke it aloud to himself—sometimes, as now, reciting lines from Chaucer—just to hear it again.

He sank down, sitting on the concrete and resting his back against the wall.

K.Z. Snow

Celia... What was this encounter *really* all about? Adin sensed a significance to it that was belied by their almost insane physical attraction. He certainly wouldn't have to worry about reverting to his recessive breed with *this* woman around. But there was more to it than that. Even at the club, he felt somehow purpose driven when he first saw her. Yet, both aspects of the pull she exerted on him—the obviously carnal one and the mysteriously meaningful one—had begun to fill Adin with guilt.

Using people was part and parcel of his existence. There was just no getting around that unfortunate fact. But Adin had always tried strenuously to give as much as he received. He took blood and sexual fulfillment, yes, but in return he imparted the keenest, most bone-rattling pleasure imaginable. He had graced more mortals with more orgasms than he could even begin to estimate.

But he never led them on. He never blathered about love or hinted at commitment just to advance his cause. He never fed unrealistic romantic hopes or encouraged emotional attachment. Whenever one of his partners did start veering off in that direction—and it had happened dozens of times—Adin's response was always essentially the same—"I'm sorry, but that's not what I'm after. I can't return your feelings. So, for your own good, we'd better part ways." Then he'd disappear and move on to someone with no emotional investment in him.

So why the bloody hell did he tell Celia, "Never say never"? Because he wanted to pursue something through her? But *what*? What occult destiny did he think she held the key to?

Then again, maybe it was much simpler than that. Maybe he saw in this woman a long-term opportunity to fulfill his two greatest needs. With her, he could abandon the hunt. No more prowling bars and clubs, parties and the Internet to find suitable partners.

Whatever Celia's lure, whether complexly significant or strictly carnal, Adin found it both baffling and deeply disturbing.

"Shit," he murmured.

Resting his forearms on his bent knees, he linked his hands together. Just glimpsing his piercing finger made him hot again for Celia, made him want more of her. That unquenchable desire was like a red flag signaling unwelcome complications.

God damn it, I don't want her to become infatuated with me!

Continuing to see her, be intimate with her—especially if he brought ulterior motives into the picture—violated one of Adin's most sacrosanct principles. *I will never let a mortal fall in love with me.*

"Adin?"

Startled, he jerked into alertness, turning his head up and to the right.

Celia, lightly swaddled in a filmy, purple robe, stood just outside the patio doors. Adin had been so lost in his own thoughts he hadn't even heard her approach.

"At first I thought you'd left," she said—and in a surprisingly neutral way, as if she'd been *expecting* him to steal away while she slept. "Then I saw the rest of your clothes near the desk." She crouched down beside him and stroked his hair. "What are you doing out here? Can't you sleep?"

"What I'm doing out here is guilt-tripping. And I *am* something of an insomniac." *Might as well start being honest,* Adin thought.

"Guilt-tripping, huh? I hope you're not married."

That drew a laugh out of him. "Lord, no." Again striving for frankness, he added, "I *was* married at one time, but my wife passed away."

Celia eased from a crouch to a sit. "Oh, Adin, I'm so sorry. You're still so young!"

"Not too. I'm twenty-nine." Although chronologically...

"When did it happen?"

"Some years ago." He obviously couldn't be too specific in answering *that* question.

"What...was the cause?"

"A fast-onset pneumonic infection." Of course he couldn't say *respiratory bubonic plague*.

"You mean pneumonia?"

"Something like that, but more virulent."

"How did she contract it?" Celia asked.

"I don't know." Not precisely. But it was certainly from one of the thousands of other Londoners who had it.

This line of questioning was turning into a kind of slow torture. Not only was Adin forced to equivocate, which he hated doing, but ugly, unwelcome images had been surfacing in his mind, images he'd assiduously been trying to banish for six hundred sixty years. Even vampirism—especially his own rather genteel form—couldn't compare to the terror of the Black Death in either of its manifestations.

"I think I need to be alone for a while, Celia." Adin gave her a reassuring smile. "I'll be all right, really. I just need a little more time out here."

She nodded. "I'm sorry I intruded. Come back to bed if you feel like it. If not," she shrugged, "be careful driving home."

Before Adin could respond, she rose to her feet and disappeared into the apartment.

He dropped his head to his knees. "Fuck, shit, fuck." Now his head was really spinning...with memories of a dead woman, with conflicted longing for a living one, with questions about the path he should now take.

Eyes closed, Adin rolled his head back until it touched the wall.

Margery, his wife of four short years, so dainty she couldn't seem to carry a pregnancy to term. Despite her sweetness and good cheer, she silently mourned the loss of her two unborn babies. She mourned every hour of every day.

K.Z. Snow

The Pestilence, a scourge that ferociously mowed down half the population of England and millions more people elsewhere.

Every one of Adin's senses began to relive the tragedy.

Midwinter. A dreary time in a dreadful year. A year in which it rained almost without respite, month after sodden month. Adin's father, a successful merchant, had sent him to East Anglia to search for the finest wool money could buy. Since midsummer, rumors as well as the reality of pestilence had been creeping across England from every coast. Yet Adin wasn't fearful. He was young and vigorous and on the brink of success, the kind of success that might soon allow him and his wife to leave the filthy, stinking confines of the city and take up residence beyond its ancient Roman walls.

But the plague didn't care if Adin Swift chose to ignore its advance. On his return trip to London, he became increasingly aware of that fact. The agonized cries of the dying mingled with the lamentations of the living. It was a soul-numbing chorus that seemed to issue from every second or third dwelling. In some streets, bodies were stacked like cordwood.

No, Adin's homecoming was not joyous. Apprehension galloped alongside him as he approached his house. And for good reason. He found his twenty-one-year-old wife—limp and pallid, coughing and perspiring—on their bed. She was alone. The woman who'd been in their employ had fled, leaving a bucket of water, drinking cup, bloody rag and wood cross on the small table beside Margery.

She reacted violently when she saw Adin standing in the doorway. Grabbing a corner of her shawl and covering half her face, she shrieked hoarsely at him to get away, keep his distance from her. When, thunderstruck, he backed out of the doorway, she began to weep.

"I want to welcome you, my dearest, but I cannot," she choked out. "Adin, I implore you to do everything in your power to save yourself. Do not think of it as abandonment. Think of it as defiance of death. My fate is sealed. Yours is not. Embrace life, dear husband, as you once embraced me." She pulled the covers more tightly around herself, as if ashamed of her condition, and waited for deliverance.

Adin wasn't yet a vampire – that wouldn't come until later, following the slaughter of his parents – but he still somehow managed to escape infection. The most likely reason was that he carried a genetic immunity. To this day, even with his acquired knowledge of disease transmission, Adin didn't know with any certainty why he was spared.

He only knew that for thirty-six hours, give or take, he held a deathwatch. There was nothing he could do but grieve and tend the hearth fire. He had to keep feeding the fire, regardless of what he knew would be Margery's spiraling fever. For both their sakes he had to stave off the damp cold. Adin cooked food only so he could offer his wife some sustenance. He himself ate but a bite here, a bite there.

But offering Margery food was pointless. She coughed almost incessantly and often spewed blood. She vomited. If Adin did try entering their sleeping room, she thrashed on the feather mattress and screamed in protest... as much, that is, as her ruined lungs and ravaged body would allow. He *had* to keep his distance lest he provoke more of the same reaction.

Soon, the stench was almost unbearable.

Then Margery ceased to exist.

Their modest but well-kept home became just one more putrid, smoke-filled charnel house among so many countless others in London. All Adin could do was walk the ugly streets, looking for a carter who would carry Margery's body away. He didn't want to leave her outside in the grimy lane. Once she was removed from the house, she would probably be taken to the vast no-man's-land burial ground northwest of the city. But it didn't really matter where she was taken.

Because Adin knew her shell was now empty. Her spirit, released, had flown. He returned to the house only long enough to point through the doorway at the room that contained her corpse, which he'd lovingly washed and dressed in her finest garment. When the carter asked him if he had a coffin, he said no. He didn't bother explaining he hadn't had either the time or presence of mind to secure one. But that, too, didn't matter. Even in this stressful time, the innumerable dead of London were treated with respect.

As Margery's enshrouded body was carried through the portal of their home, it ceased to be a home. Adin touched her one last time and whispered, "I love you." He closed the door, walked away and never came back. He left everything they'd owned behind. None of it mattered anymore.

Taking a deep breath, Adin rose from the floor of Celia's patio. He was startled to feel the moisture that had collected in his eyes. When did he last cry? During the Holocaust, he remembered – during and immediately after, when more atrocities were revealed. So he hadn't wept in sixty to sixty-five years.

He stepped into the dark living room, closed the door behind him, and indecisively looked around. What to do now?

Embrace life...

He sniffled once, and the memories began to dissipate. *Well, I guess I'll be staying.*

Chapter Four

When Celia awoke just after six the next morning, she was surprised to see Adin Swift's long body arrayed beneath the covers to the left of her. She had no idea when he'd come back to bed. He certainly hadn't touched her. Celia knew she wouldn't have slept through even the lightest whisper of a caress from this incredible man.

He was naked and warm and absolutely still. Sleeps like the dead, Celia thought. Leaning toward him, she was tempted to engage in some foreplay. But no, he'd had a difficult night. The insomnia, the recollections of his wife's illness and death... And what exactly *did* he mean about "guilt-tripping"? If not a wife, did he have a girlfriend he knew he was betraying? Celia wasn't sure if she should follow up on that statement or just let it go. She decided on the latter. After all, she'd be letting *him* go...very, very soon.

It wouldn't be easy. Celia already knew that memories of Adin would nag at her – at least until, busy with her new house, she couldn't afford them any mental space. He was a complex, fascinating man – exceedingly passionate yet exceedingly tender, self-possessed yet sensitive, and obviously intelligent.

One of a kind.

As Celia drifted out of the dark bedroom and into the dim living room, she saw her torn red dress lying like a pool of blood near Adin's shed clothing. Smiling wistfully, she picked it up and examined it. Definitely not salvageable. Just looking at the torn garment, not to mention the remnants of tape and twine on the desk, the chair, the floor – generated a faint throb and tingle between Celia's thighs. Before Adin left, she definitely had to have more of him.

She hung his jacket on the desk chair, picked up the titillating reminders of her bondage, and scooped the rest of their clothing off the floor. The dress along with the lengths of tape and twine went into the trash—almost reluctantly, because Celia considered saving them as mementoes. But no, that seemed too juvenile. Besides, she didn't need more crap to move. She put the remaining clothes in the washer and started it.

After showering, Celia decided, she'd make them breakfast. She padded to the bathroom, took off her robe, and hung it on one of the door's three hooks. As she turned back to the shower stall, she stopped.

It was the first time since last night she'd been able to look at herself in a mirror. Aside from the smeared mascara, she immediately noticed her breasts. Still crosshatched with pale pink lines, obviously from the twine, they were also dotted with several tiny marks—no bigger than pinpricks, actually, but still noticeable. Leaning over

the sink, Celia tried to examine them more closely. Yes, there were minute red specks circled by hair-thin, bluish haloes. And they were slightly tender to the touch.

Frowning, Celia pulled back from the mirror and tried to remember how she could've gotten them. She did vaguely recall feeling a little sting now and again—a sensation that at the time was wildly arousing. Well, maybe Adin had a ragged fingernail or chipped tooth.

Celia stepped into the shower. As soon as she began lathering her body with the soapy sea sponge, she began to crave Adin. Washing her breasts made them feel heavier, made her nipples tighten. Washing her pussy stimulated a flow of lubricant.

The door opened and Adin, without speaking, stepped into the shower with her, taking her in his arms and kissing her deeply while his hands slid madly all over her water-slicked body. Celia's world shrank down to his mouth and hands. They seemed to be everywhere, gliding and grasping. He took the sea sponge from her hand and began using it too—massaging her breasts, her stomach, dipping down to slide it between her legs, deftly pressing and pulling it against her clit.

When he put his marvelous mouth where the sponge had been, Celia had her first shuddering orgasm.

Moaning, she dropped to her knees. Her legs could no longer support her. Entwined on the floor of the shower, she and Adin kissed again, heatedly, their lips and tongues moving over each other's mouth and face, neck and chest.

"Stand up," she gasped.

When Adin did, she knelt before him and drew the silk-sheathed wood of his cock into her mouth. She wrapped one hand around its base and used the other to fondle his low, heavy balls. Slowly, she sucked and pumped, circling and tweaking his cock head with her tongue, pulling at it with her lips, nipping at it. She reveled in the feel of the engorged vein on the underside of his shaft, straining against the smooth skin like a pipe under pressure, ready to burst. She drew two fingers back and forth along either side of it as she continued to suck and suck, losing herself to the dense, hot column of flesh that filled her mouth.

She could feel Adin straining for control. Inevitably, though, the first sweet drops of pre-cum oozed onto Celia's tongue. Before she knew what was happening, Adin swept her up as if she were light as the sponge and put her on the small corner seat molded into the shower's wall. He jabbed his cock against her aching, taut nipples—first one, then the other, back and forth, sinking its head into her breasts, fucking her breasts. Growling, relinquishing that amazing control, he gripped his rigid shaft. Thick cum began spurting over Celia's breasts and dripping off their peaks. She impulsively squeezed her whitened nipples between trembling fingers, sending a thrilling frisson from clit to vagina. She put her fingertips in her mouth, savoring what she could of Adin's cream…and she came again.

Adin stood panting, arms hanging limply at his sides, with his eyes closed and head rolled back toward the shower stream. Water cascaded over his long, sinewy body.

Celia rose, grabbed up the sponge, soaped it, and began washing him. She did it slowly, almost reverentially, her eyes adoring each hard muscle and soft, glistening hair. The man was simply beautiful.

He stood still and submitted to her adoring ministrations. When Celia was finished with him—after lingering a while on the smooth, tight globes of his ass, which she washed with her hands—Adin whispered, "That was lovely. All of it. *You're* lovely." He turned his midnight eyes on Celia, caressing her face with a look. "Thank you."

She suddenly felt demure. "You're welcome."

Immensely fulfilled yet somehow troubled, confused, Celia stepped from the shower and toweled herself dry. She began to dread having to watch Adin walk out of her life. It wasn't just because of the sex. He'd touched some essential chord in her, and with every passing moment it reverberated more strongly.

She was starting to have feelings for him. Feelings that superseded lust.

Celia reached for her robe just as Adin emerged from the stall. He'd probably taken a moment to wash his hair, she thought. As she lifted a clean towel from the rack to hand to him, Celia abruptly turned toward the shower. Adin was almost directly behind her, his body at an angle to hers. He vigorously shook his head, sending droplets of water flying off his curls and onto Celia as well as...

Eyes wide and breath shallowing, she anxiously looked behind her.

The mirror.

Celia saw herself in the mirror, even through its thin layer of fog, but she couldn't see Adin.

The towel she was about to offer him fell from her hand to the floor. Celia backed away from the vanity and tensely shifted her eyes between him and what had suddenly become a frightening Alice in Wonderland looking glass. Adin Swift was not reflected in it.

Suppressing a thin cry that started rising in her throat, Celia bolted out of the bathroom. She heard Adin call out, "Celia? Are you all right?" And, after a brief pause, a dismayed "Oh, Jesus."

* * * * *

She was nestled in a corner of the couch, legs tucked beneath her body and arms wrapped around her chest in a tight hug. Adin was still securing the towel around his waist as he dashed into the living room. He stopped indecisively beside a small tower of boxes, as if Celia's large, apprehensive eyes had thrown up an invisible barrier. Trying to collect his thoughts, he sank into the desk chair, watching her and waiting.

"This is crazy," Celia said with a brittle laugh. "I must be losing it. What with the move, the excitement of being with you..." She shook her head and sounded the same laugh. "My nerves must be short-circuiting."

"What do you mean?" Adin asked softly. He already knew, of course, but it was the logical way to advance the conversation. And it had to be advanced so he would know how to proceed.

He kept silently cursing himself for his impetuosity, his sheer stupidity. Upon waking, he so hungered for Celia that he barged into the bathroom as soon as he heard the shower running. Of course he hadn't fed for hours, and that fact—combined with his great expenditure of energy last night and his lack of a genuinely sound sleep—made him incorporeal, as it were, before reflective surfaces. It was a rare confluence of circumstances, but it had happened nonetheless.

Now, depending on Celia's persistence, Adin might have to take that disturbing plunge to the rock-bottom truth of his existence.

At the moment, she seemed stymied. "I could've sworn," she breathed another mystified laugh, "I couldn't see you in the bathroom mirror, Adin. You were just inches away from me. I could see myself but I couldn't see *you*. It was as if you weren't really there. Like I'd just made love to a ghost. Or a product of my imagination."

"I'm here," Adin said, trying to smile. "You're not 'losing it', Celia." He knew what was coming next—the rationalizations. She'd start telling herself the mist on the glass had obscured her view of him, or her own body had, or the angle at which they were standing in relation to the mirror.

She managed a weak smile, rather empty of conviction. "Thank God." Uncertainty scudded across her face. "But still...just to ease my mind, Adin—and I know how idiotic this sounds—would you go back in there with me?"

He sighed and rubbed his eyes. "No." Why shock her any further? "I think I'd better just leave, Celia."

"You can't," she said, staring at him, obviously stunned by his refusal. "I put your clothes in the washing machine." She nervously began fingering the cloth of her robe.

Despairing, he dropped his head. *Now* what?

"Just indulge me, Adin." Celia tried lightening her tone. "I know it was a freaky little optical illusion, but I do have an inquiring mind and I'd just feel better if -"

"No," he broke in, more snappishly than he'd meant to. "It *wouldn't* make you feel better. Believe me." Adin got up from the chair. "Where are your laundry machines? I'll just wear wet clothes."

Celia rose, too, and met him in the middle of the room. "What's going on?" she whispered.

It pained him to look into her beseeching eyes. He realized he truly cared for this woman. She didn't need her life turned upside down and inside out. What she needed was to be rid of him and get on with her life.

Gently, Adin ran his hands up and down Celia's arms as he gazed into her face. "I've had a wonderful time with you. Far more wonderful than I'd expected. I wish I could have extended that time. But now," he shook his head, "it isn't possible."

"Why? All because of some nutty delusion I had about a goddamned mirror?" Petulantly, even defiantly, Celia's expression hardened. She clearly wasn't going to settle for an abrupt departure *sans* explanation. "Fuck you, Adin. I deserve better than that. Now tell me what's going on. And tell me the truth."

"Goddammit, Celia, why are you pushing this? You have no idea what you're asking for." Adin wanted to be angry with her, *tried* being angry with her, but instead found himself admiring her. And he felt something almost like...hope.

"Don't underestimate me," Celia said evenly. She pulled her robe to one side, exposing her left breast. "Start by telling me how I got these marks."

Both her spirit and her nakedness began to arouse Adin. He slowly lifted his right hand until it was level with Celia's face. Right in front of her astonished gaze, the smallest fingernail lengthened and sharpened into a talon that looked at once delicate and deadly. Before she could react any further, Adin curled his hand beneath her left breast. The nipple immediately stiffened, responding to his touch. Adin could hear Celia's breathing, could feel her chest expanding and contracting beneath his palm. His little finger arched backward. In the blink of an eye, it darted forward and drove into her flesh. Quivering, Celia inhaled sharply and expelled a tremulous mewl, half terror, half acute excitement. As a crimson thread crept from the tiny puncture, Adin lowered his head and drank.

He felt Celia's hand cup the back of his skull and press his mouth more firmly to her eager body. He felt her warm breast heaving against his face. When he'd taken all he could, he lifted his head and realized Celia had been watching him the whole time. She looked dazed, her eyelids heavy.

"Now I need to fuck you," he said, his voice a coarse whisper.

Adin easily lifted Celia with the one arm he had curled around her waist. Pulling his towel aside with his free hand, he guided the befogged woman's body onto his blood-stiff cock. Her arms came limply around his neck. He didn't bother exercising control to prolong their coupling—under the circumstances, that would've been pointless. So, with a few strong thrusts, he found the release he needed. Celia let out a thin moan. Gently, Adin lowered her to the floor.

"It isn't possible," she said on a breath.

Contradicting her, Adin nodded. "Yes, it is." He took Celia's hand and led her back to the bathroom. When they stood together in front of the mirror, he at first cast no reflection. Then his image seemed to form out of the very air, gradually taking on shape and color and detail as Celia stared, transfixed.

"Your blood invigorated me," he quietly explained.

Celia's hand rose and touched his hair. They both watched the motion in the mirror. "What year were you born, Adin?"

"Thirteen twenty."

Celia's mouth opened as she exhaled in wonderment. "But...you're circumcised!"

Adin almost burst into laughter. That was the first thought that came into her mind? Still, it was an astute observation. Most medieval men were not cut—not medieval Christian men, anyway.

"I was born a Jew," he said.

"Am I to assume," Celia said, her voice unnaturally constricted, "that you're...not like other men?"

"Yes."

"Are you or do you consider yourself...a vampire?"

"Yes."

She blinked a few times. "At least I'm not crazy." Glancing at him without any trace of fear – wariness, maybe, but not bald terror – she moved to the door. "I do need to sit down, though. And I think we'd better talk. I'll put your clothes in the dryer."

As Celia walked away, Adin expelled a long breath that puffed out his cheeks. He braced his arms on the vanity and hung his head between his shoulders. Well, the cat was out of the bag again—it didn't get out often, but it did get out occasionally—and this time the slip was all because of a fucking bathroom mirror, the existence of which Adin should've taken for granted. He knew damned well he had to avoid mirrors when he was hungry. None of this would be happening if he'd either stayed away from Celia while she was in the shower or had fed on her there. Or if she hadn't pressured him to go back in the bathroom. Or if he'd just fucking blown out of here, regardless of her demand to know the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but. He surely could have come up with *some* reason for wanting to leave, even if it resulted in hurt feelings and a mildly bruised ego. Men did that kind of shit all the time…and women almost always recovered from it.

But there was that goddamned, inexplicable *hope* he'd felt, as if this accidental revelation were some kind of opportunity in disguise. It all came back to the intensity of the initial pull when he'd first laid eyes on Celia. It came back to his question, *What is it she has to offer me*?

Adin straightened, pulling his hands over his uncombed hair. The only thing to do now was see how it would play out. He squared his shoulders and went back into the living room.

Celia was once again on the couch, same corner, but not as protectively folded up as she'd been earlier. Adin briefly debated whether to sit near her or far from her. He opted for the latter. It seemed more respectful.

He turned the desk chair around and sat with his arms crossed on its back, over his jacket. "So, talk."

"How will all this affect me, Adin? Will it affect me?"

"No," he said with absolute definitude. "Nothing I did to or with you has any physical consequences. Even those little marks will be gone in a day or so."

Celia's stare was unwavering. She seemed to be scrutinizing him, determining his credibility. Then she gave up and grasped her head with both hands, as if trying to keep it from flying apart. "None of this makes any - fucking - sense, Adin! The only 'vampires' are supposed to be those Goth-type, real-life wackos with blood-drinking fetishes."

"They're not vampires. They're...wackos with blood-drinking fetishes. True vampires are not mortal and are much more low-profile. We try to blend in, not stand out. Flamboyance is self-defeating."

"But...you don't have fangs. You don't sleep in a grave or a coffin." Celia waved an arm through the air, apparently indicating the ever-increasing light in the room. "You can move around in the daytime." More bewildered than ever, Celia shook her head and dropped her hands to her lap. "For all I know, you're just an expert illusionist, a stage magician who's mastered certain...stunts. The mirror thing. The fingernail thing."

"To what end?" Adin asked, frowning. He didn't comprehend her logic. "Just to scare people? Fuck with their minds? Jesus Christ, Celia, if I *were* all that expert, I'd sure as shit be performing in Vegas or on television, making buckets of money."

"I don't know!" she cried, throwing up her hands in frustration. "Maybe you're some kind of pervert who does it just to enthrall gullible women!"

Adin narrowed his eyes. "I don't need to resort to trickery to find sex partners. Or to impress them."

Celia cast him a sullen glance. She certainly knew *that* was the truth.

"Honey, I *wish* this were only about some acquired skill," Adin said. "But my existence, and that of others like me, is a very complicated matter. We're not all Dracula clones. There are different breeds of vampires. Quite a lot, in fact. And many of us are mixed breeds."

That got her attention. "Breeds?" She sounded skeptical. "You mean, like dogs?"

"Why shouldn't there be? Evolution is the primary force of survival, and survival is the primary force of life. How could vampires possibly escape it? They couldn't. So, over the millennia, different breeds evolved. Our characteristics have become quite diverse. We have different methods of invasion, different strengths, different weaknesses. We differ in appearance, temperament, ancestry, tastes, and needs. The only things we continue to have in common are certain superhuman powers, a degree of death defiance, and our...sustenance requirement."

"Blood."

"Yes. But different breeds require different amounts. I, for example, can get by on very little, supplemented by more traditional food. And some fevamps have found that semen is an adequate substitute." Adin smiled, trying to be playful. "In a pinch, so to speak."

Celia obviously didn't see the humor. "What other characteristics do you have?"

Adin wondered just how much he should divulge. It wasn't in his best interests to tell her *too* much. He certainly didn't want to explain his need for sex after feeding...worse, the consequences of a lack of sexual release. That would either terrify her or make her think he was trying to justify a rampant horniness.

"Well?" Celia asked. "Are you manufacturing characteristics on the spot?" Her voice had a snide edge.

"Goddammit," Adin snapped, "I'm not manufacturing *any* of this! I just can't tell you everything, that's all."

Celia looked down, then up at him again. She seemed to be assessing every word he said. "Then tell me what you can."

Sighing, Adin rubbed his forehead. "I didn't have to die to enter this life. Come close, yes, but not flat-out expire. Maybe that's why I'm not exclusively a night creature and don't have to sleep in some moldering coffin, thank God. Although I can tolerate daylight, I have difficulty with intense, prolonged, heat-producing sunlight. It won't kill me, but it will make me damned sick. That's why I've usually lived in northern climates and now prefer to have access to air conditioning. I don't need much sleep and can sleep wherever I choose—although being in contact with the earth seems to bring me the most restorative rest. Garlic and crosses don't repel me." Adin was tempted to say something about the ineffectuality of crosses on him, but he refrained. "There are other things I find repellant, though."

"Like what?"

"I'd rather not say."

"And your reflection can only be seen in a mirror—"

"When I'm more or less fulfilled."

"How much is 'more or less'?"

"You don't need to know that."

"Can you fly? Climb up the sides of buildings and around ceilings?"

"Ditto."

"Can you shapeshift? Transform yourself into other creatures?"

"I'd rather not discuss metamorphosis."

Celia shot him a pointedly resentful look. "You know, Adin, I'm the one who should be suspicious and guarded. Don't you think? I'm the vulnerable one, not you."

"That's not entirely true," he murmured.

"But why should I trust you? Vampires are known—well, through folklore, anyway—as notorious deceivers, self-serving, indifferent to human suffering..."

"Not all," Adin said with quiet sincerity. "Please believe me, Celia. Not all." Again, with a slight internal shudder, he thought about the many horrors that would accompany a reversion to his recessive breed. Never, ever did he want that to happen.

Celia covered her face with her hands, rubbed it, stilled her hands but kept her face covered. "I don't know what the hell to make of all this," she said, wagging her head from side to side. Her voice was muffled, but her weary confusion came through clearly enough. She lowered her hands and looked at Adin. "What are my choices? Either you're one adroit grifter with some bizarre hidden agenda, or you're...a monster."

That detested word hit Adin hard, especially coming from Celia Quill. He didn't know why, but it felt like a gut stab. "I'm neither," he whispered with fierce pride.

He rose from the chair. "This is going nowhere."

Adin snatched up the jacket still draped over its back. Without looking at Celia, he strode around the apartment until he found the scaled-down washer and dryer combo tucked into a niche behind a pair of folding doors. He pulled his clothing from the dryer, yanked the towel from around his waist and stuffed it in the washer, got dressed, and checked his jacket pocket to make sure his car keys were there. On his way to the front door, Adin noticed Celia was still sitting, silently, in the same spot on the couch. He refused to look directly at her. Pausing only long enough to slip on his shoes, he considered tossing her a "thanks for everything" but decided against it.

Adin Swift didn't thank people for calling him a pervert or a monster.

Without a single departing word, he opened the door, swept into the corridor, and was gone.

Chapter Five

Sunday night, dog-tired but satisfied with the progress she'd made, Celia showered and did one more walk-through of her apartment. It really wasn't necessary – Nic and Tory had spent the last two days helping her clean the place to pristine perfection and pack up nearly everything that hadn't yet found its way into a box. Early tomorrow morning, Celia would bag up her pillows and comforter, stuff her dirty clothes and used linens in a laundry bag, gather all remaining toiletries into a small suitcase, and put the few things that remained in the kitchen into a box that stood open beneath the counter, waiting to receive them. She made a mental note to return the keys to the super on her way out.

Hands on hips, Celia stood in the kitchen and looked around. She couldn't ignore the anxious thumping of her heart. It had been going on since she'd gotten out of the shower. She knew she was in the kitchen for a very specific reason. Still, she balked at acting.

The phone book lay on the counter, challenging her.

"Okay," she exhaled, picking it up.

Fingers trembling, Celia flipped through the pages to the S section. His name wasn't there.

She curled a hand over her forehead. "Shit."

If all he had was a cell, she'd be screwed. If he did have a landline but his number was unpublished, she'd be screwed. Her only hope, Celia realized, was that he had a landline with a not unpublished number.

Hurrying into the bedroom, she picked up her cell phone from the nightstand – the only thing there other than the ravaged box of condoms, a lamp, clock radio, reading glasses, and bottle of antacid tablets – and flopped onto the bed. She dialed information.

And she hit pay dirt. Now her heart was pattering like a rabbit's.

Please be home.

"Hello."

"Adin?"

Tentatively, "Yes."

"It's Celia. Celia Quill. Please don't hang up."

Pause. "You're the only Celia I know. And I hadn't intended to hang up."

She briefly lowered the phone so she could let out a deep sigh of relief – although she didn't feel *entirely* relieved. Now her heart thumped audibly. "Well, I'm calling because I'll be leaving early tomorrow, and I...Adin, I hated the way we parted

yesterday morning. It was all my fault. I just wanted to ask you to forgive me. I'm so very, very sorry."

Celia strained to listen, but no sound came through. "Are you still there?"

"Yes. I'm just wondering why you're doing this."

Celia responded with a nervous laugh. "I'm wondering too. All we had was a glorious one-night stand, but..." *But what*?

"You like tying up loose ends," Adin offered.

"Something like that. But there's more." Celia scrambled around in her mind for the right words to describe her motivation. "Maybe it's because I've always hated unfairness, and I didn't treat you fairly. I feel like shit about it. I haven't been able to get it out of my mind. I really like you, Adin. I don't see you as a monster — not by a long shot." Celia dropped her forehead to her hand. Just repeating that insulting word filled her with shame and remorse. "Regardless of...well, regardless of what you claim to be and no matter how much difficulty I have accepting it, I still think you're a very special man and I'm truly grateful for the time we had together. So please accept my apology."

Worried she'd been running off at the mouth and perhaps losing his attention, Celia did the natural thing. She added a postscript to her babble. "Damn it, I probably sound all breathless and tongue-tied, like some ditzy twelve-year-old girl calling a boy for the first time."

"Kind of," Adin said with a smile in his voice. "But what's more important, you sound sincere. Thank you."

Finally, Celia wilted in genuine relief. "Thank *you* for listening. I feel a lot better now. You know, Adin, I was pretty bowled over by you. And I don't just mean the sex—even though it was spectacular."

"Back at ya," he said without hesitation, giving Celia a little thrill. "By the way, I hope you haven't told anybody about our...conversation. The fewer people who know what I am, the better. I rarely share the truth about my nature."

"Even if I'd been inclined to talk about it," Celia said, "nobody would've believed me anyway. But I wasn't so inclined. Your secret is mine now too."

"Good. Please keep it that way." Adin sighed. "So, you're ready for the big move?"

"Yup. One of my friends even volunteered her fiancé to drive the truck. Barring complications, we should be out of here by nine a.m."

"I'm glad it's going smoothly for you, Celia."

God, just the sound of his voice sent a quiver through her diaphragm. Celia nibbled a fingernail. And now for the *big* risk. "Adin, when I come back here to visit, I'd like to see you. Would that be all right?" With a nervous chuckle she added, "I don't mean so you can 'service' me. I honestly enjoy your company."

His tone became more grave. "Even in light of what happened? You know, it isn't going to go away, Celia. The things I showed you and told you, and more – they're still going to be there."

"I have no problem with that," she said earnestly. "None at all. I mean it."

Adin took a moment to digest this. "Yes, I'd like that."

They exchanged cell phone numbers.

Unaccountably happy, Celia couldn't seem to stop smiling. "Well, I'd better get some sleep. Big day tomorrow. Thank you for being so gracious, Adin."

"It came naturally. I'm glad you called. Good night, Celia. Sweet dreams."

"Back at ya," she said fondly.

* * * * *

Chattering with assumed authority, Nicole, Tory, and Robert, all trying to be supervisors, showed up at seven-thirty the next morning. Celia felt optimistic despite their occasional quibbling. Getting ready for the road shouldn't be too much of a hassle. Robert, who'd once worked for a moving company, knew his stuff. He'd made sure there were plenty of pads to protect Celia's furniture and he was blessedly familiar with the logistics of proper loading. The sleeper sofa and double bed would be the biggest pains in the ass, but the four of them would just have to soldier along until the job was done.

Robert immediately set to disassembling the bed while the women began carting boxes outside, either carrying them or using the dollies that came with the truck. At least they didn't have to bother with transporting appliances. Celia's new house came with a stove and refrigerator, washer and dryer.

It was on her second trip to the truck that Celia felt the box she was carrying float out of her arms. Startled, she nearly stumbled backward as her suddenly empty hands fell to her sides. A tall, lean man with rich auburn hair and a delectable ass strode away from her toward the truck, the heavy box balancing as easily as a pillow on one crooked arm.

"Adin?" Celia sprinted toward him.

Smiling, he turned his head and looked down at her. "Hi. Thought you might need some help." As effortlessly as he'd lifted the box from Celia's arms, he set it down beside the truck's loading ramp.

Impulsively, blissfully, she hugged him. Adin's arms immediately curled around her back, holding her firmly against him. He lowered his face to the gully above her collarbone. Celia felt his lips resting against her skin, felt the warm pulse of his breath. He didn't kiss her, just kept his face nuzzled against her neck. Suffused with warmth that was far more emotional than physical, Celia's eyelids drifted closed as she settled her cheek against Adin's fragrant, satiny hair.

Feeling a contentment beyond words, she dimly realized she could stay this way forever.

When Adin lifted his head, he looked into Celia's eyes. She felt mesmerized, almost stuporous. Her reaction to seeing him confounded her. Over the past forty-eight hours,

she'd pretty much convinced herself of her relative indifference toward him. If she saw him again some time in the future, fine. If she never saw him again, fine. Her primary concern had been to make that apology.

It wasn't that way now. *Indifferent* did not describe her feelings.

Just as their faces were drawing together for a kiss, Celia caught a glimpse of her three helpers pulling up short on the walkway and staring in her direction. She turned toward them, her face flushed.

Tory lifted a hand and wiggled her fingers.

"Looks like it's time for introductions," Celia murmured.

"Guess so." Adin cleared his throat and also turned toward the trio.

Of course, Nic and Tory had grilled Celia mercilessly about the "hot guy" she'd left with on Friday night. Despite their persistence, she'd told them next to nothing—just that he was a twenty-nine-year-old translator—and this dearth of information only whetted their curiosity. "Well how," they inquired, "did you hook up so fast and why did you leave the club so abruptly?"

"Instant attraction," Celia answered. "And we both wanted to cut through the bullshit and get to the fun ASAP." Naturally, the girls wanted to know if "it" was "good". Celia assured them "it" was very, very good indeed. She put a cease to their questions by saying she'd likely never see the man again, so they may as well drop the subject.

But the subject had unexpectedly reappeared.

Smiling amiably, he sauntered up to the small group, Celia beside him. "Hi, I'm Adin Swift," he said.

The other movers introduced themselves. Robert, who was pushing a dolly, had the only free hand for Adin to shake. "I suppose we don't need to ask if you know Celia," Robert said.

Adin chuckled. "No, I suppose you don't." Turning to Nic and Tory, he said, "Here, let me take those." He grabbed the boxes they were holding and deposited them near the truck.

Celia couldn't seem to take her eyes off him. He was wearing an old chambray shirt, sleeves rolled up to the elbows, and faded, ratty jeans with naturally made, not manufacturer-produced, holes. She saw Nic and Tory eye up his ass as he walked to the truck.

Nicole silently mouthed *wow* beneath lifted eyebrows.

"Well," Tory said, crossing her arms over her chest, "I didn't know we'd have an extra pair of hands today, Cee."

"I didn't either."

"It was a spur-of-the-moment thing," Adin said, rejoining them. "I just finished a project I've been working on, so I thought I'd come over and lend a hand."

"Good decision, man," Robert said with obvious gratitude. "Another male back could spare mine a trip to the chiropractor."

"You're such a freakin' *old* fart, after all," Tory muttered. Her boyfriend was all of twenty-five.

Over the next hour, they loaded the truck with amazing efficiency. Celia had little chance to talk with Adin, although they often touched and smiled at each other in passing. The more progress the five of them made, the more Celia's heart sank. She no longer looked forward to her departure. "God, aren't you going to *hate* walking away from him?" Nicole whispered at one point. It was the last thing Celia needed to hear.

As she vacuumed the empty apartment, her three friends came in. "Where's Adin?" Celia immediately asked, fearing he might have left before she could say goodbye. She turned off the machine, pulled the plug out of the wall socket and rewound the cord.

"Finishing up inside the truck," Robert said as Tory and Nic did a final walkthrough. He took a swig of his bottled water. "Shit, that dude is strong. It's almost...unnatural. He must fuck like a freakin' bull." His eyes slid toward Celia to see if he'd provoked a reaction.

Aside from the almost imperceptible smile she'd allowed herself, she kept her expression impassive and said nothing.

"I'm jealous," Robert muttered.

Nicole reentered the living room, followed by Tory. "You mean you're envious," she corrected.

"That too."

"So am I," Tory confessed.

Lips compressed, Robert gave her an irked look. Snatching up the vacuum cleaner, he walked back outside.

"He seems a little peevish," Celia said dryly.

"That's because he's envious," Nicole reminded her.

"No," Tory said, "it's because l'm envious. God, Cee, Adin is really a find. He's gorgeous, he's smart, he's polite. And he fills out those jeans like –"

Robert stuck his head inside the door. "Hey, you all ready to hit the road?"

"After we hit the toilet," Tory told him.

"And get ourselves off," Nic mumbled.

"No shit," Tory added. "Honestly, Cee, isn't it just killing you to have to leave that piece behind?"

Galled by the question, the answer to which was obvious, Celia put up her hands. "Listen," she snapped. "Quit rubbing salt in the wound, okay? I didn't know he was going to show up today. I didn't *need* him to show up today. Damn it." She kneaded her forehead and suddenly felt like crying.

Nicole sympathetically rubbed Celia's arm before heading toward the bathroom.

Tory gave Celia a quick hug. "Hey, hon, look at it this way—it's not like you're moving to Nepal."

Celia nodded as Tory moved away toward the bathroom. She dropped her forehead to her hand and curled an arm around her rib cage. How the hell was she going to say goodbye to Adin without making a fool of herself?

"Ready?"

Celia's head snapped up. Adin was leaning into the foyer, his hands grasping either side of the front door's frame. She tried mustering a smile. "Ready as I'll ever be."

He inclined his head toward the outside. "Come on. Robert's waiting."

"Um, Adin—" Hell, she didn't want to bid him adieu in front of everybody.

Nicole, then Tory, came scurrying back through the living room. Adin stepped aside to let them out the door. He hadn't taken his eyes off Celia. "You were saying?"

"Well, I just wanted to thank you and...you know...have a private little farewell. So why don't you come inside and close the door?"

He didn't move. "I don't like farewell scenes."

Celia's face fell—apparently so dramatically, it elicited a chuckle from Adin. She, however, found no humor in his apparent insensitivity. Using resentment to steel herself, she marched toward the door.

"All right. Let's go."

Adin caught her by the arm and spun her toward him. "We don't need a farewell scene," he whispered, drawing Celia close. He put his hands on either side of her face and slowly lowered his mouth to hers.

Weakening within his embrace, Celia could barely breathe when she felt the soft, leisurely press of his lips. She responded heatedly, almost desperately, wanting his imprint to be strong enough to last until they could see each other again.

"Hey," he whispered, withdrawing slightly, his thumbs gently caressing Celia's cheeks, "is there enough room in your house for overnight guests?"

Chapter Six

He had to be with her. Adin realized that as soon as Celia called him the night before. But maybe the truth was even broader. Maybe she had to be with him too. More and more, their togetherness seemed draped by inevitability. Adin didn't understand it, but he certainly felt it.

So the caravan that left for Woodbine was extended by one vehicle. Robert, as planned, piloted the truck. He'd be taking it back, too, and returning it to the rental company. Tory drove her car, in which she and Nicole had arrived at Celia's apartment. Nicole graciously offered to take over Celia's car, so Adin wouldn't have to—wink, wink—drive alone.

"You sure you're okay with this?" Adin asked as the city began to thin out around the freeway.

"Very sure," Celia answered. Her smile was serene, confident and a bit mysterious.

Adin wondered what she was thinking. At first Celia was stunned by his proposal that he stay with her for a while. It seemed she wouldn't let herself believe it. After Adin explained quite reasonably that he could use a vacation—no strings attached, he emphasized—and Celia could likely use some help with her house, she became radiant.

Damn, she really wants to be with me, Adin thought...with decidedly mixed feelings. He obviously wanted to be with her, too, but his reasons were considerably more complex and not entirely bound to romance or sex. A deepening of their intimacy, which seemed inevitable, could make the whole situation very messy indeed.

Celia rested her left hand on his thigh. "Since we're going to be living together for the foreseeable future, I think you should tell me more about yourself."

She had a point. Adin clearly hadn't put any time-limit on his stay. His laptop and a bulging briefcase were on the backseat, a full suitcase and tool chest in the trunk.

Adin glanced at her. Although Celia was no longer smiling, the same serene confidence informed her expression, as if she'd made up her mind about many things.

"How much do you want to know?" he asked.

"As much as you feel like telling me." Celia's smile returned, briefly. She turned her head forward and gazed out the windshield. "I'm obviously going to have to...get used to some things."

"No doubt." But how much *did* he feel like telling her? It was that old quandary again. Adin tried to relax into the seat and get as comfortable as possible. He wanted to be matter-of-fact about this, not dark and edgy and dramatic. Celia needed to realize he wasn't either delusional or deceitful.

"I was born and raised in London," Adin began. "My father was a merchant. He traveled a lot in Europe and around the Mediterranean, which is how he met my mother in Tunis. Her parents were from Provence and Castile, now in France and Spain. She was Jewish. That's why, as you already know," he gave Celia an impish glance, "I'm circumcised. That's also why I have a Hebrew name, although I've come to use the Anglicized pronunciation."

Celia looked at him. Maybe she was studying him. "What does your name mean?"

Adin couldn't restrain a smile. "One who is sensual."

Celia responded in kind before she looked forward again. "Appropriate," she murmured.

"Anyway," Adin continued, "my father brought my mother back to England, where I was born two years later. I was an only child. We lived comfortably. Not by today's standards, of course. But at that time, the merchant class was far better off than most of the population."

"How old were you when you married?" Celia asked delicately.

"Twenty-four." Adin's stomach began to knot.

"And your wife –"

"Margery," he said woodenly. Even though Adin didn't like being reminded of her passing, she deserved to have her identity.

"She died of the Black Plague, didn't she? The Bubonic Plague."

Mildly surprised, Adin glanced at Celia. "You know about it?"

"Only a little. I once wrote an article on infectious diseases people think have disappeared from the planet but haven't really disappeared. I know epidemics and pandemics are fueled by all kinds of prevailing circumstances." Celia seemed to hesitate before asking her next question. "Why did the plague spread so wildly in *your* time, Adin? Have you studied it? Do you know?"

Slowly, Adin nodded. "In the fourteenth century, so I've read, sirocco winds off the Sahara made drought-stricken central Asia even drier. Much of Europe, on the other hand, had been inundated with rain in the late 1340s. That's what caused the migration of the black-rat population. They infiltrated caravans and trading ships. Their fleas infected the people in those caravans and on those ships. Ultimately the plague was spread, in one way or another, by humans *and* fleas – from Mongolia to Persia and India and Tartary, to the whole Mediterranean basin and throughout Europe. It didn't help that the population was generally unhealthy. It didn't help that we had piss-poor hygiene and sanitation practices. It didn't help that the science of medicine was, well, *medieval.*" He made this last point with a dour laugh.

Of course, Adin hadn't come upon this information until hundreds of years later. When nineteenth-century medicine was finally able to identify the bacillus, he devoured whatever information he could about the plague and its historical consequences. As Celia had said—and as he knew from experience—it hadn't struck

once, but many times. To this day, the subject filled him with both horror and a grim fascination. After all, Bubonic Plague had largely defined his mortal life and determined what path it would take.

Celia turned toward him in her seat. Her face was drawn. "Did anybody understand at the time what was happening?"

"Fuck no," Adin chuffed. "The nature of contagion wasn't understood at all. I can still remember hearing discussions about it. People of a religious bent thought the Great Mortality stemmed from God's wrath or the Devil's malignity. Astrologers claimed it was caused by some unfortunate planetary conjunction. Common folk who weren't overly pious blamed every possible agent – tempests, fire, wind, well water."

"But wasn't it obvious that human contact was involved?" Celia wondered.

"It soon *became* obvious," Adin said, "but it still wasn't understood. Shit, there was even some speculation the scourge could be delivered via sight. The closest we ever came to comprehension was the 'poisoned air' theory, but that led to all kinds of nonsensical practices. Efforts to prevent or cure the disease were even more mired in ignorance than speculation about what caused and transmitted it."

"It must have been a nightmare," Celia murmured.

"The gruesome death of twenty million people usually is."

Adin felt Celia give his thigh a sympathetic squeeze. There was so much more to this dreadful episode in history, only a small portion of which had personally affected him. But that portion was abhorrent enough. To make matters worse, he'd had to watch the blackened hand of the plague rise again and again to smite the population of Europe. It seemed to return once every generation, well into the eighteenth century. Adin couldn't begin to count the number of times he'd fled to different parts of the world just to escape witnessing these deathblows...and all the rampaging ignorance and fear that accompanied them.

Ignorance and fear... Two distinct, unbearably contrasting images of his parents took shape in Adin's mind. He wished Celia would speak again. Her voice would chase away the images. Her questions would redirect his focus.

But when Celia did speak again, she went on to a different and equally disturbing subject. A *related* subject.

"Was it during this time that you became...a vampire?" she asked tentatively.

Again, mindful of keeping his tone neutral, Adin immediately answered, "Yes. Not long after my wife died." He hurried into a general kind of narrative lest Celia start pressing him about his particular circumstances. "The plague proved a field day for the vampyrii. I guess it's understandable. There seemed to be no escaping that mammoth, pestilential wave. I even thought of it when I saw the tsunami footage from Indonesia."

Through peripheral vision, Adin could see Celia nodding. "I suppose it really strained people's faith too."

Adin laughed without amusement. "Strained it, broke it, shattered it. Many believers throughout disease-ravaged Christendom felt their Church and their God had abandoned them, since prayers brought no deliverance—not even prayers to Saint Roch, the recently dubbed patron saint of the plague. Many forfeited all hope of being spared. Some turned to flagrant debauchery. Grasping for another kind of salvation, others turned to the vampyrii. They were driven to accept the Blood Birth by desperation in the face of almost certain death—often premature, usually agonizing. You can't begin to imagine how agonizing…"

Celia's hand moved soothingly over his thigh.

"Near the end of the year 1349," Adin went on, "I met an older but quite beautiful Irish woman—a vampire of considerable experience and wisdom." At least these recollections weren't nearly as appalling as the others.

"Did you love her?" Celia immediately asked – a bit anxiously, Adin thought.

"No, I don't believe so. Admired her, yes, but I felt no passion for her. I was still mourning the loss of my wife. It wasn't possible for me to feel passion. But I did let her become my birth mistress."

"I don't understand what you mean." Celia's voice was more tremulous.

"I suspect you don't. Do you *want* to know?"

"Yes."

This was, Adin knew, very alien territory for Celia. Still, she was bearing up surprisingly well. Feeling encouraged by her strength, he decided to describe the process. "A birth master or mistress is an elder of the vampyrii who, at a mortal's request or at least with his or her permission, initiates that person into...the kind of life I lead. Some of the 'lower' breeds don't bother with consent, though. They just take what they want, regardless of consequences for the victim."

"I don't understand these breed distinctions," Celia confessed.

The look she gave Adin made him realize she was taking him seriously, was even being absorbed by his story. Her interest, if it didn't veer toward prying but simply led to belief, would smooth his path considerably.

"Breeds," he explained, "are identified by their characteristics, which are determined by when, where, and how they were birthed. There are the Ancients—the oldest and most powerful—and the Tribals, who are pretty strange and frightening, even to other vampires. There's the Pagan Breed, the Eastern, the Plague, the Slavic, the Black—"

"Black as in African?" Celia asked.

"No, as in Black Sea, or rather the region surrounding it. That was a virtual vampyrii breeding ground in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Unfortunately, they're a low breed, unscrupulous and even violent. Let's see... there's the New World Breed and the Modern Breed. And of course there are cross-breeds."

"You must be one of the Plague Breed," Celia said. For a while now, she'd been watching Adin quite steadily, even intently.

Her assumption, even though he should've anticipated it, made his stomach twist. He felt an upsurge of shame. "Only in small part," he quickly told her. "A vampire is like a child inheriting dominant and recessive genes from its parents. In my case, the Plague Breed is recessive." Adin had always hated being associated with them generally a pathetic, bitter, disillusioned bunch, in many ways worse than the Black. "In terms of dominant characteristics, my heritage is Pagan."

"I see. Because of your...birth mistress, is that it?"

"Yes. I was quite fortunate." The unintended irony of this declaration made Adin smile—wryly, but with a touch of melancholy. *Fortunate, my ass.* "Well, in that regard, anyway," he added. "Otherwise, I could've been like—" Adin abruptly censored himself. Shit, that was careless of him. Had he finished the sentence, it would've led to a series of questions from Celia, questions that were premature and far too invasive. "I would've been like the others of my time," he concluded.

The near slip-up prompted Adin to wonder, again, what was behind his determination to accompany Celia to her new home. Idly, he glanced at the landscape on either side of the freeway. There wasn't yet much hint of the heavy forests farther north. The low, rolling hills through which they'd first passed had now given way to a patchwork of farmland, pine plantations, and woods. It was a pleasant enough drive but not remarkable. So, aside from truly enjoying Celia's company, what was spurring him on?

"Well, how did it come about?" she gently prompted.

Jarred out of his reverie, Adin refocused on the subject at hand, his new birth. "Not in the way you might think," he said. "It took place over a two- or three-day period, but I didn't die and was never buried or entombed."

"You mean you were conscious the whole time?" Celia angled toward him, her curiosity growing keener by the moment.

"Semiconscious," Adin said. "After the bite, that is."

That shocked her. "*The bite*? Adin, you said your breed—"

"Hold on." Adin touched Celia's hand—the one she'd just withdrawn from his thigh. "Let me just start at the beginning. On the night of the full moon, Rahenna, my birth mistress, led me to a copse at the edge of a churchyard. She had me strip naked. She pulled a silver chain, beautifully crafted, from her dress. The chain was in the shape of an ankh." Adin glanced at Celia. "Do you know what an ankh looks like?"

Spellbound, she merely nodded.

Adin turned his eyes back to the highway. But he was looking inward, as well. Remembering... "As Rahenna chanted the birthing words, she placed the upper loop of the chain over my head and let it hang around my neck. She extended the horizontal 'arms' and affixed them to my nipples. The vertical portion, or the lower section of it, she wound around my genitals. She had me lie down beneath an ancient oak.

"Using the nails of all five fingers, she pierced the left side of my chest. The wounds made a circular pattern, meant to symbolize ensnarement of my heart. She didn't drink, though. She let the blood flow freely. That was the release of my mortal life. I fell into a kind of swoon."

"From loss of blood?" Celia whispered, her eyes wide.

"No," Adin said. "The wounds weren't severe. It was simply because of the process Rahenna set in motion. While I was in that drowsy state, she lowered her face to my neck. I briefly felt her lips on my skin. Then I felt the plunge of the fangs. And I had the most intense, gripping, thunderous orgasm of my life..." Just recalling it made Adin's cock stir. "If that's what it was. I'm still not sure. The sensation was indescribable."

"But...what about the fangs?" Celia's voice was thin, barely audible.

"Oh sorry," Adin hastened to say, "I didn't explain that part. You see, the Pagan Breed grows the vampyrii fangs during the birthing process. That's the only time they bite to draw blood."

"And what happens after that?"

"Rahenna slit open the balls of two fingers on her left hand and pressed the cuts against the puncture wounds in my neck. She let her blood flow into them and mingle with mine."

Adin saw Celia's face blanch. She swallowed hard but kept staring at him.

"After that," he went on, "I developed a high fever. My whole body ached from the inside out—nerves, tissues, muscles, bones, flesh. It was quite a shock, especially after that divine orgasm or whatever it was."

"Did you think you were dying?"

"Yes. And, in a way, I was." Adin could almost feel it. He struggled to concentrate on his driving. "I soon slipped into delirium. I had vivid, surrealistic dreams of the vampyrii—their history and haunts, their hungers and behaviors. It was both enchanting and terrifying. But, little by little, I felt an affinity develop. When I finally began to see *myself* in the dreams, sometimes in the form of one or another kind of animal, my pain melted away and my fever broke."

"And when you were well again, how did you feel?"

Adin smiled. "Like a titan."

They drove on in silence for a while. The land was flat now, groomed into the tidy acreage of potato farms, cranberry bogs, and fields of peas that would soon become fields of corn or beans. Adin rolled his window down farther. He not only relished the smells from outside, he needed to feel the wind in his hair and on his skin. The heightening sun was beginning to heat the air.

"Are you getting warm?" Celia asked.

Touched by her solicitous tone, Adin was even more determined to overcome his slight discomfort. "A little. But not enough to justify turning on the AC. It can't be much more than seventy degrees outside."

After a pause, Celia asked another question, in a lower voice. "Are you hungry?"

Adin's breath shallowed. He slid Celia a glance to discern her meaning.

"*I* am," she said, putting her hand on his crotch and slowly massaging his thickening cock.

Celia bent over and grabbed her handbag from the floor. She lifted out her cell phone and made a call. "Nic, we're going to be pulling into the next wayside. Don't follow us. Would you call Tory and Robert and tell them? Thanks." Flipping the phone's cover back in place, Celia stuffed the cell in her purse, folded her arms over her chest, and gave Adin a satisfied smile. "How does that sound?"

"Perfect," he breathed, marveling at this development.

Celia was offering herself to him.

The next wayside was six miles ahead...and deserted. Adin was grateful but not surprised. It was a weekday, and too early in the season for regular tourist traffic. Any truckers who might've spent the night there would've pulled out hours ago.

Adin steered toward the pet-walking area at the back of the wayside, behind the small rise on which the restroom buildings sat.

"Get out," he told Celia once they were parked.

She had already peeled off her jeans and panties in the car. Her acquiescence alone made Adin nearly insane with hunger, and her half-nakedness put even more of an edge on his appetite. He jogged around to the passenger side, which faced nothing but an open field, and saw Celia pulling her t-shirt and bra up over her breasts. Adin trapped her against the car, his arms and legs braced on either side of her body, his engorged cock pressing against her hips.

Celia moaned and squirmed within the cage made by Adin's body, further arousing him. He kissed her with unrestrained passion as he squeezed her ripe breasts and high nipples. She responded by pushing them into his commanding hands. Not even aware he'd already pierced her, Adin made a guttural sound of desire when he smelled the blood. Shuddering, he dropped his head to Celia's left breast and fed, sucking on the nipple as he sucked at the small wound, sucking harder and harder as Celia mewled and arched her back, pressing her flesh more firmly against his mouth. When the trickle of blood slowed, Adin pierced her right breast and fed there.

Once his blood lust was sated, he quickly undid his jeans and shoved them down past his hips. He lifted Celia the way he'd done in the shower, as easily as if she were a doll, and she immediately twined her arms around his shoulders and her legs around his waist. Unerringly, Adin lowered her body and thrust his turgid cock deep inside her. As he pumped, he felt the slick clutch of her vagina, urging him toward climax.

Panting, they both came quickly and strongly. Adin's orgasm was almost like the relief he'd felt after the pain of his birthing. As the cum jetted out of him, the torturous ache he'd felt just moments before began to subside in wave after luscious wave.

Still entwined with Celia, Adin lowered them both to the grass.

"That was very generous of you," he murmured, only half facetiously, against her cheek.

"No," Celia countered. "That was very selfish of me. I'm bewitched by you, Adin Swift, and I want as much of you as I can get."

Adin didn't know how to respond. He felt a surge of excitement, but his anticipation of further, perhaps even limitless, pleasure was underlain by apprehension. He still couldn't determine what was goading him into being with her. *Well, well. This* could *be the most interesting vacation I've ever had...*

Chapter Seven

Adin and Celia caught up with their caravan shortly after exiting the freeway. The whole group had lunch at a small café in a quaint town – during which, of course, there were raised eyebrows from Robert, Nic and Tory and comments like, "Bet you didn't get much rest at that rest stop." Despite all the teasing innuendo, Celia gladly picked up the check. From there, the crew proceeded east and northeast on state and county highways as civilization thinned out around them and roadside scrub-growth thickened into forest.

"We're almost there," Adin said after checking his GPS screen.

"I'm starting to feel very small." Celia touched the side of his face, thinking for the hundredth time how beautiful he was. "I'm glad you came along, Adin."

He smiled. "I am too."

"Have you ever birthed anyone?" The question, although posed without preface, didn't exactly come out of the blue. Celia had wanted to ask it since Adin's earlier revelations. He'd answered her other questions quite directly and with little or no hesitation, but this one seemed to take him aback.

"No," he said rather abruptly.

"Why not?"

"Because it's an enormous responsibility, and one I don't take lightly."

"Have people ever asked you to do it?"

"Yes, but I've always refused. Their reasons have never been sound enough."

"I'm guessing more women than men have asked. And I'm guessing many of them wanted it so they could stay with you."

Adin's gaze skittered nervously in Celia's direction.

Turning sideways on the seat, Celia laughed, which seemed to startle him even more. She affectionately glided a finger over Adin's lips. "Don't worry, sweet man. Becoming a vampire was never on my agenda, so I won't try to burden you with me for eternity."

Adin allowed himself a wary, conditional smile.

Celia's next thought was a bit more troubling, although she tried to convince herself it was lighthearted. *But I've never fallen in love with a vampire*.

* * * * *

Celia was talking about her plans for the near future when Adin glimpsed the spiked posts of a wrought iron fence perhaps a quarter mile ahead on the left. Behind

that fence a mansion brooded, surrounded by stout trees. It immediately snagged his attention.

Adin's heart began to pound. Sweat broke out on his forehead and upper lip. He couldn't seem to keep his eyes off the place.

The speed limit dropped to thirty-five. They were at the southwestern edge of Woodbine. Robert, Nic and Tory were some distance behind them, because they'd pulled into an Indian crafts store about twenty miles back. Celia was telling Adin which driveway to turn into. "Just up there," she said, pointing, "by that mailbox painted like an American flag," But all he could do was pull over to the side of the road across from the mansion. He had to.

"What are you doing?" Celia asked, dropping her raised arm to her lap. She looked from Adin to the mansion back to Adin again.

"I don't know." His voice was barely above a whisper.

"Do you recognize the place? Have you seen it before?"

Dumbly, Adin shook his head.

Because of the large, fat-trunked trees in the deep front yard, only parts of the building were visible—a gnomish tower with a domed roof, a pair of windows so deeply set they looked devoid of glass, an abyssal arched entry that was sunk into the structure like a cave. The entire facade was made of reddish brown stone blocks, their surfaces grimy and lumpish. All in all, the house resembled a massive malformed fruit, blighted and worm-riddled. It was textbook Richardsonian Romanesque, the epitome of architectural ugliness.

"Who lives there?" Adin asked.

"I don't think anybody does."

"Where can I find out about it?"

"Uh...I don't know." Seemingly mystified by Adin's fixation, Celia tossed up her hands and shrugged. "I guess the county historical society. Or maybe the realtor who sold me my place. But why -"

"What's the realtor's name?" Adin broke in, looking at Celia.

She withdrew by a couple of inches and blinked at him. "Betty Summerfield. She works out of a log home at the other end of town."

"Thanks." Starting to feel a bit foolish, Adin put the car in gear and headed for Celia's driveway, which was just past the mansion's extensive parcel. "I need to find out some things." His mouth twitched into a self-conscious smile. "Don't ask me what or why, because I don't know yet. I'm sorry that's all I can tell you."

Although preoccupied, Adin wanted to share Celia's excitement about her new place. He liked the fact that it was set back from the road, at the end of a fairly long driveway. Celia told him that Betty Summerfield's husband, who owned a construction company, would grade it gratis whenever necessary—"Apparently one of the perks of

being his wife's client." As they drove up to the house, Adin again voiced his pleasure. It was charming. A modest white farmhouse built in vague approximation of Queen Anne style, it was probably close to a hundred years old but had obviously undergone some renovation. Adin liked its privacy, its clean simplicity, its ties to the past. He liked the crabapple trees that grew in clusters throughout the yard, which took up about an acre of the five that came with the house.

As she prepared to get out of the car, Celia chattered happily about other of the property's features. But Adin's smile faded as soon as he took a few steps on the overgrown grass. That cold tension he'd felt when he saw the mansion sprang into his body again, tightening every fiber. Nearly hyperventilating, he looked around, as if he could spot some clue to his reaction. There was none.

Don't do this to her again, he admonished himself. Get a grip. You can deal with it later, whatever "it" is.

"And I got it for such a low price." Beaming, Celia turned to Adin.

He hadn't been listening. All he'd caught was that last phrase. Composing himself, he asked as lightly as possible, "Why *was* it so cheap?"

Celia shrugged. "I guess it's just the going rate for homes in this area. It's fairly isolated. Jobs are hard to come by and winters can be brutal. Those are two huge deterrents for buyers."

Distractedly, Adin nodded. He had a feeling there were more reasons than that, although he couldn't imagine what they might be. Yes, he definitely had to do some digging.

The other three vehicles finally trundled up the driveway. Adin felt relieved. Once he threw himself into the job of emptying the truck and filling the house, he wouldn't have to engage in much small-talk.

He began hauling furniture and boxes like a man possessed, periodically cautioning himself to slow down and keep his pace more in line with Robert's. Had Adin worked to his full capacity, Celia's friends would've been thunderstruck. His strength, speed, and stamina were not what mortals were used to and certainly not what they considered normal. Adin didn't want either to scare them or invite unwanted questions.

Occasionally, though, he did catch Celia watching him, her eyes tripping admiringly down his arms and legs, across his shoulders and chest. She was beginning to understand what he was about and, so far, clearly liked what she saw. Adin couldn't deny that it pleased him.

But Celia's understanding was far from complete. Experience had alerted Adin to the steps in any mortal's fascination with him. Celia was still in the earliest stages of her love affair with a vampire. Thinking she'd overcome the biggest hurdles – those having to do with suspension of disbelief, acceptance and trust – she'd started falling prey to the darkly romantic allure of the legends, not to mention the unique allure of her own erotic and exotic secret liaison. But Adin knew, and knew well, how misleading that allure could be. Many times before, he'd seen women slip into then be catapulted out of an idealistic infatuation with him. He'd also seen them slide even deeper into that infatuation until they were obsessed with him.

When all was said and done, a vampire's lifestyle was not easy to accommodate. Celia didn't realize that. Adin already hated the thought of her ending up like the others – either repelled by him or lost in him. He hated it like hell. And he already knew there were only two developments that could prevent these outcomes. Either he exit her life as soon as possible, before their involvement deepened, or he fall in love with her.

At this point, neither was an option.

Once the truck was empty, Adin stood for a moment at the kitchen sink and looked out over the backyard, again trying to determine what it was about this pretty little house that made the bile rise in his throat. He saw laundry lines, a small equipment shed, an overgrown flower bed in the middle of which a silver gazing-ball sat on a concrete pedestal. What lay beyond the ragged lawn, within or past the encircling woods, he didn't know. But he intended to find out, just as he intended to explore the cellar.

Adin felt a hand on his back and turned. Celia was looking up at him, her large brown eyes full of contentment.

"Hey, beautiful," he said, curling an arm around her waist and kissing her temple. "Have you and the girlfriends made any progress?"

"A little. The bed's made. The bathroom and kitchen are partially set up. My computer is ready to rock. And Robert checked all the appliance hook-ups." Celia absently caressed his chest. "I don't want to work those three too hard. They've done enough for me already, and they still have to drive back. I told them all they should just get their butts home."

"Yeah, they shouldn't be driving when they're all wrung out."

"They're intrigued by you, y'know."

Adin laughed softly. "I suppose they are. An introspective translator who appears out of nowhere, moves furniture like a human forklift, and fucks their friend 'Cee' at every opportunity."

Celia giggled. "Don't forget, 'and is drop-dead gorgeous and now staying with Cee at her new house'." She looked up at him. "Honestly, Adin, I think they're beginning to suspect I'm secretly wealthy and hired you to be my stud."

"You wouldn't have to hire anybody," he said with genuine affection.

"I hope not. My budget's already strained to the limit."

They stood together quietly, stroking each other's back. Adin realized he was beginning to cherish these moments of simple contact. Dimly, they reminded him of his mortal years—his first, silly infatuations, when the lightest touch of a girl's hand dizzied him, and his later, deeper love for Margery, when such touches became eloquent beyond words.

He was both soothed and disturbed by this connection.

Celia voiced his name in a small, querulous voice.

Adin glanced down at her. "Hm?"

"I know there's something about the Browning mansion that really bothers you," she said. "Maybe something about this place too."

Startled that Celia had picked up on his reaction, Adin's brow furrowed. He didn't want his behavior to upset her. Before he could formulate a denial, she spoke again.

"Why don't you go talk to Betty Summerfield? She's usually back in her office by now. I'm afraid you won't be able to relax until you get whatever answers you're looking for."

Adin surprised himself by saying, "I'm afraid I won't be able to relax *after* I get those answers."

* * * * *

Adin and Celia said their goodbyes and expressed their gratitude to Robert, Tory and Nicole. Hugs and handshakes were passed out all around, along with promises of emails and phone calls and visits. Once Celia's friends pulled out of the driveway, Adin immediately headed for Betty Summerfield's office.

Celia retreated to her recliner with a glass of lemonade. She let her eyes roam over whatever of the house she could see from her position. The soft light, typical of a late afternoon in early May, graced the disarray with a certain placidity.

But it didn't do the same for Celia's mood.

Adin, too, felt the house was tainted somehow. Celia was certain of it. She read the reaction in the tightness around his mouth, the focused rigidity of his movements. She read it in his distracted air and the way his eyes darted around as he moved from outside to inside and from room to room. Although her unease had never been as strong as Adin's seemed to be, his discomfort now fed her own, especially since it seemed linked to the Browning mansion. Celia didn't like the glowering structure—who would, aside from members of some ill-conceived cult? Her distaste stemmed from the look of the place. Adin's feelings, however, went far deeper than aesthetics.

"What's going on?" she whispered into the air.

Something like a chemical reaction was taking place, some mixing of elements that would produce unexpected but inevitable results. Celia began second-guessing her decision to move here as well as her entanglement with Adin Swift. She almost wished she hadn't bought the house or met the man who claimed to be a vampire.

But when that man returned, Celia knew, she would be thrilled just to see him walk through the door. And when the gaze of those depthless indigo eyes captured her, she would not want to be released.

* * * * *

Betty Summerfield was a large, lovely, amiable Native American woman who seemed capable of welcoming just about anybody into the rustic home that also served as her office. When Adin introduced himself as Celia's Quill's boyfriend, she clapped her hands together, let out an exclamation of joy and surprise, and grabbed Adin's upper arms.

"How wonderful! So she's all settled in? Oh I'm sorry, please sit down." Betty motioned toward a leather armchair. "Can I get you something to drink, Adin?"

"No, thank you." The woman made him smile. He loved her broad, handsome face and fleshy ebullience and the gleaming silver streaks in her thick hair. He even loved her clinking jewelry and blindingly colorful clothing.

Betty chugged around to her desk chair and sank into it with surprising grace. "That girl didn't tell me she was moving in today. If I'd known, I would've brought over some flowers and a couple of breads. But I thought she was coming next weekend."

Adin had to improvise an answer, since he had no idea what Celia's plans had been and whether or not they'd changed. "I think she just wanted to get it done. Besides, it's easier to rent a truck during the week than on a weekend."

Betty raised a forefinger and cocked her head. "Ah, very true, very true. Well, just make sure she calls me if she needs anything. I'm the 'go-to lady' around here. Which reminds me," Betty linked her hands on the desk and leaned forward, "is there anything in particular that brings you to my humble office?"

Adin rested his right ankle on his left knee. "Curiosity, I guess. I'm kind of a localhistory buff. Folklore too. So while Celia's resting, I thought I'd start doing some research."

"Let me guess—you're wondering about the Browning mansion. Next to Celia's place."

"Yes, that's the one. And her house, too, for that matter."

Betty nodded in satisfaction as she pushed back from her desk. "Here, we can start with this." She walked over to a small table flanked by two chairs, shifted the small pile of home magazines stacked there beside a similarly neat pile of her own company brochures, and pulled out what looked like a photo album. Lifting it in Adin's direction, she said, "My daughter's into scrapbooking. She put together this kind of Woodbine history and points-of-interest guide." Sitting down again, Betty slipped on a pair of reading glasses and began thumbing through the scrapbook. "I can't say it any better than Enid Humphreys did in," her forefinger ran to the top of a page, "1962."

Clearing her throat, Betty rested her forearms on the open book and began to read in what Adin assumed was her campfire-scary-story voice. She occasionally glanced up at him over the tops of her glasses.

"'In a small town at the edge of a dark forest – the town of Woodbine, to be exact – there looms a deserted and misshapen mansion built in the eighteen seventies. About it could be said the same things Shirley Jackson wrote of Hill House.

"'For over three decades this gloomy fortress had been the home of a lumber baron named Simon Browning. After the Great Peshtigo Fire of 1871 destroyed well over a million acres and twelve hundred lives just to the southeast, Browning was determined to construct a home that could not be devoured by flames. And he succeeded.

"'Yet, despite his wealth and foresight, Browning was not admired. He was a cruel dark-eyed man reputed to have had a hideously deformed son and hideously mad wife. Rumor further claimed that both of these...well...*inadequate* heirs met their ends beneath a cool full moon. At one of the baron's sawmills.

"People said the moon that night turned red. And the Browning mansion, lights ablaze, was full of wild and obscene revelry.

"And then the lumber baron of Woodbine...disappeared'."

Eyes narrowed and lips seamed, Betty gazed at Adin over her glasses—for melodramatic effect, obviously. Slapping the scrapbook closed, she shoved it to one side and tossed her glasses on top of it.

Adin raised his eyebrows. "That's quite the story. Does anybody give it any credence?"

Abandoning her storyteller persona, Betty dismissively waved a hand. "Ah, only the ones who want to believe in ghosts."

"Some people think the mansion is haunted?"

"Well of course! I mean, look at it. Human beings would have to have their imaginations surgically removed *not* to think the place is haunted." Betty got up and poured herself a cupful of water from an office cooler. Bringing the cup with her, she resumed her seat. "So once in a while, some 'eyewitness account' will circulate through the grapevine. Mysterious lights, sounds, a figure in a window, a shadow in the yard. That sort of stuff."

Adin had put an elbow on the chair arm and was thoughtfully moving a finger over his lips. "By the way, what did happen to Browning?"

"He supposedly pulled up stakes and moved to Europe in the early nineteen hundreds. Just emptied the place out and left."

"Who's owned the property for the last century?"

"It's always been in some branch of that family." Betty took a drink, leaned back, and linked her hands over her stomach. "Twice since Browning left, two different descendants have showed up and *sort of* taken up residence there, but not fully. Maybe they just used it as some kind of novelty retreat or something. In any case, they never really became part of the Woodbine community, which, of course, generated even more rumors. About ten, fifteen years ago, the county took the place over because property tax payments were in arrears—even hired a part-time caretaker and started some haphazard renovation—but they ran out of money. Or rather, the county board couldn't justify the expenditure. I'm still not sure why they haven't just put the damned thing up for sale. One person told me it's because the historical society is intent on hanging onto

it. Someone else told me a claim was filed by one of Browning's heirs, so the whole ownership issue is stalled in the court system."

Adin nodded. "So it's empty again."

"Yup. Has been for quite a while."

"And that caretaker, is he still around?"

"Archie Grumbach. People call him Grumpy. Eccentric old coot, but he grows on you. He doesn't do much of anything, really. Does his little walk-around once in a while, checks to make sure the doors are still locked and no windows have been broken. I don't know that he even bothers going inside." Betty barked a laugh. "Hell, *I* wouldn't, considering how many critters must inhabit the place. I'm not even sure Archie's getting paid anymore, since there's no clear owner. Whatever 'caretaking' he still does, he could be doing more out of habit than responsibility."

"And he lives right here in town?" Adin asked, thinking this man might be his most valuable resource.

Betty smiled, apparently at her own knowledge of Archie Grumbach. "He lives at the Tip Top Tap, mostly. Otherwise, he's in his little blue house on Buck Run Road, about two miles northwest of town. But to tell you the truth, Adin, I wouldn't believe a word that man says. Archie's a little—" Betty rotated her wrist, flipping her hand up and down.

One side of Adin's mouth hooked into an understanding smile. "I really do thank you for your trouble. This is some fascinating stuff." He rose from his chair. "I won't impose any longer. We can get to the history of Celia's house another time."

Betty rose, too, and shook Adin's hand across her desk. "It was no trouble at all. And having a good-looking man in the room sure as heck is no imposition." She cackled hoarsely and walked him to the door, one hand resting lightly on his shoulder. "Oh, Adin, if you want to know more about Celia's house, ask Celia. There's no mystery involved, though. It's just an old farmhouse that's been upgraded. That's about the long and the short of it."

He got the feeling her parting statement was too strenuously offhanded. There was indeed some niggling little mystery, but Betty preferred to keep it under wraps.

Chapter Eight

Celia pondered how or even whether to tell Adin what she'd seen in the backyard. Or thought she'd seen. She certainly didn't want them to feed each other's imaginations. Bad enough that taking up residence here had made her hinky from the start, for no discernible reason. Bad enough that Adin had had such a powerful reaction to the Browning mansion, for no discernible reason. Bad enough he claimed to be a vampire and she had yet to come to terms, fully, with that.

The back door's abrupt squeal made Celia jump. She was in the process of hooking up the cluster fuck that would become her entertainment center—television, CD and DVD players, attendant speakers—and her concentration on the tangle of wires was intense. Bolting upright, she almost undid much of her work.

When Adin strolled into the living room, Celia's body immediately relaxed. Her expression softened. She smiled. The mere sight of him seemed to perfume the air.

His smile was a bit more distant but no less sincere. He held out his arms. "C'mere. I need to hold you."

Celia walked over to her lover and stepped into his embrace, savoring its confident strength. Whatever reservations had crept over her while he was away were now gone. One thought took their place. *Whatever this man is doing to me, I don't want it to stop.*

Adin lowered his head and snuggled it against hers. "So what has my busy little bee accomplished?" he murmured, his breath stirring her hair. "By the way, I won't leave you in the lurch from now on. I do plan on pitching in."

"That was the furthest thing from my mind," Celia said. "You were never bound by duty, but you've still performed above and beyond its call. And I've accomplished enough for one day." She pulled away by a few inches and ran her fingertips over Adin's handsome face. He looked tired or troubled or both. "Can I get you something? Would you like a snack, perhaps?" Taunting him with a smile, Celia pulled the neckline of her shirt to one side.

"If I accept your offer," he said, eyeing her exposed skin, "you'll have to accept my hard-on."

Curiously, Celia studied him. "Is it just my imagination, or are feeding and fucking somehow bound together for you?"

Adin cupped her neck in his hands. His thumbs caressed her pulse points. He hesitated before answering, as if the question made him uncomfortable. "It isn't your imagination. I can have sex without feeding, but I can't…" He stopped.

The conclusion to the statement was obvious. "You can't feed without having sex," Celia whispered. "Why?" Adin seemed disturbed by this revelation, and that disturbed *her*.

"May we discuss that another time?"

Although his voice was quiet, Celia sensed the tension in it. She wasn't going to press the issue. It was obvious Adin divulged his secrets as he saw fit, and she'd come to respect that. "Yes, it can wait."

Adin's heavy-lidded gaze steamed over her neck, her face, and came to rest on her lips. He slowly lowered his head and delivered an impassioned kiss. Celia's cunt had begun to moisten as soon as he held her, but now it oozed. She felt his fingernail dart into her neck. Without lifting his lips, he glided them from her mouth to the small opening he'd made in her flesh. As he sucked and lapped, Celia again felt the flood of hot ecstasy unleashed by the sting. Her nipples rose against his chest. Her pussy gushed. Rolling her head back, she closed her eyes.

As soon as Adin lifted his head, Celia grabbed his hand and led him over to the couch. She quickly removed her clothing then bent over the arm of the couch. She heard the rasp of Adin's zipper being lowered and the soft rustle of his jeans sliding down his legs. *Any second now*, she thought, eagerly awaiting that first gripping thrill of his demanding cock pushing into her body, stripping her of all will and reason and control.

When he grasped her hips, his nail drove into her flesh as his cock drove into her body. His heavy balls slapped the backs of her thighs. A cry of pleasure exploded from Celia's throat. Adin sucked and pumped, sucked and pumped, the fingers of one hand reaching down to massage her clit.

Celia's cries disintegrated into fragments of weak sound as Adin ejaculated, hard, his pulsating cock discharging burst after burst of cum. Quivering, electricity branching down her legs, Celia gave in to her own release. As it ebbed, she sank to her knees.

After pulling up his jeans, Adin lowered himself beside her. "That," he said, "is what you're going to be in for as long as we're together."

"Promise?"

Chuckling and shaking his head, Adin drew her into his arms. "Damn it, you're going to spoil me." Tenderly, he stroked Celia's still-naked body. "Uh...I don't know if this is possible, but right now I'd love an icy gin and tonic with a twist of lime."

Lifting her head from his shoulder, Celia grimaced. "That might be tough to produce. I haven't—"

Adin's face brightened. He grabbed Celia's hand. "Forget it. Let's go out."

"Go out...where?" Celia held out her arms and looked down at herself in dismay. "Adin, even after I get dressed again I'm going to be a mess!"

"You're going to be a beautiful mess," he said, kissing her forehead. "Besides, the more of a mess you are, the better you'll fit in around here. Believe me. I doubt the Tip Top Tap has a dress code."

"The wh-"

"Come on." He helped her off the floor.

Celia scrambled to put her clothes back on. She'd no sooner slipped into her shoes than Adin began pulling her toward the kitchen and the back door.

"Shuck your vanity and get your pretty ass in the car."

Celia felt his hand on it, rubbing and squeezing.

"I'll even let you stay dressed this time," he added, grinning at her.

On the way to the Tip Top Tap—which wasn't much of a drive, since the tavern was roughly in the middle of town—Celia listened to Adin's account of his meeting with Betty Summerfield. It was interesting, granted, but he still balked at explaining why the Browning mansion had caught his attention in the first place. "I'm hoping I'll be able to let the whole thing go," he said. "I just need to find out a little bit more."

The Tip Top Tap was as unpretentious as a bar could be. Sandwiched between a Laundromat and drugstore, its plain red-brick facade was broken only by a red steel door and the two horizontal windows that flanked it. If it hadn't been for the glowing neon beer signs in the windows, Adin wouldn't have thought the business was still in operation. The chipped and faded wood sign that hung just beneath the building's roofline looked like it had been there for half a century.

The bar's interior was just as unprepossessing but, somehow, cozy and welcoming, starting with the antique sleigh bells that jingled as Adin opened the door. The warm, mingled odors of wood and wax and beer greeted them. Despite the dim lighting, he and Celia both noticed what must have been the original wood floor and pressed tin ceiling. Old lumbering tools and photos lined the walls. On the left, the straight bar was a masterpiece in black walnut, its grain and patina immeasurably enriched by the touch of thousands of hands. A pool table pretty much took up the rest of the room's space. That, along with a TV set high in one corner, a wall-mounted juke box and a poker machine sitting at the far end of the bar were the only sources of entertainment for patrons – aside from themselves, that is.

Because it was suppertime, Celia and Adin had the place to themselves. They pulled out a couple of slightly scarred, red padded stools, settled into them and rested their feet on a genuine brass rail.

Adin was entranced. "I love places like this," he said quietly, still looking around. He scanned the parade of red and amber glass ashtrays on the bar and lifted one. "Do you believe it? A tavern that the health police haven't sucked the life out of. A tavern that's still a tavern. I'm surprised there isn't a spittoon or a wood burning stove." There was, however, an enormous muskie mounted and hung over the back bar.

"I wonder if the fish sings," Celia said with a grin.

"Spittoon's been gone for a while. Wood burner's out back." An older man with a shock of ginger hair ambled behind the bar from some rear room. He slid two coasters

in front of his new customers and took their drink orders. "I used to have a little potbelly over there, just inside the door." He inclined his head toward the entrance. "But the drunks kept burnin' their asses on it, spilling their drinks on it, throwing their coats over it. Insurance company finally said, 'either get rid of the damned thing or go without coverage'." The bartender delivered a frosty beer to Celia, an icy gin and tonic to Adin. "We tried to teach the muskie to sing," he added, "but it kept choking on that treble hook in its throat."

Adin chuckled. Both the place and its owner made him feel good.

"I can't believe you have all those microbrewery beers on tap," Celia said, still admiring the lineup. She counted eight different handles but only recognized the names on two—and even those were from medium-size, regional breweries in which the founders' families were still involved. She was also surprised, and heartened, to see a small grill overhung by a ventilation hood. Her stomach was empty.

"Well, I'll tell ya." The bartender tossed each of them a free-drink token. He rested one elbow on the bar. "As soon as some of the old breweries started getting bigger and bigger and gobbling each other up, not to mention gobbling up the smaller operations, their products went to hell. So I said, Screw it, I'm gonna serve beer that's brewed by people, not corporations. I mean, I still have to stock some of the biggies, but I only carry them in bottles and cans." Without transition he asked, "You vacationing or just passing through?"

Celia explained.

The bartender nodded. "Oh yeah, that's right. Roy Summerfield said Betty sold Everley's place." He pulled a Pall Mall from a pack in his breast pocket and lit it. "I can tell you're from Madison. What a politically correct sinkhole *that* town is turning into."

Adin threw his head back and guffawed.

Apparently pleased by this reaction, the bartender finally introduced himself. "I'm the owner, John Fell. Everybody calls me Red. Let me know if you're hungry. I don't have a 'full menu'," on this phrase he lifted a pinkie finger and fluttered his eyelids, almost causing Celia to choke on her beer, "but I can do brats and burgers and cannibal sandwiches and microwave pizzas. And chili in the winter, of course."

Adin glanced at Celia. "Well?"

"I'd love a cheeseburger."

"And I'll take the raw beef," Adin said. "You can leave out the onion and the rye bread. Just give me a fork and some pepper, please."

"Now that's about as fuckin' manly as a man can get," Fell said with admiration, squashing out his cigarette.

As the bartender busied himself preparing their humble supper, Celia slid Adin a glance and tried to contain her smile. "You're still hungry?" she murmured.

"I haven't had solid food in my belly for a while," he told her. "I do need it now and again. That's another of my - "

"Characteristics?"

Adin nodded. He turned to fully face Celia. "Tell me what you know about the person or people who used to own your property."

She sipped her beer and shrugged. "There isn't much to tell. His name was William Everley. He was a middle-aged salesman who traveled a lot. Owned the place for maybe ten, twelve years but was hardly ever there. At some point he got married or at least took up with some woman he met on the road. Betty only saw her a couple of times. Nobody around here really got to know her."

"Why?"

"Because within a year, I guess, she became ill, so Everley checked her into a clinic somewhere. Whatever she had, it only got worse. She ended up in a hospice. It was right after she died that Everley decided to sell the place. Adin, why do look so...bothered by this?"

He waved away the question. "Did you meet him at the closing?"

John Fell deposited two squeeze bottles of ketchup and mustard on the bar in front of them, in addition to a jar of horseradish, salt and peppers shakers, and a napkin dispenser. Soon, he returned with an exquisitely thick, greasy cheeseburger and a mound of raw ground round, both of which sat on old-fashioned diner plates. The raw beef was comically garnished with a couple of wilted parsley sprigs. "That's for your feminine side," he told Adin, who snickered in response. After John refilled their glasses with fresh drinks, he turned on the satellite-fed TV, tuned in a news channel and disappeared into the back room.

"Well, did you?" Adin lightly peppered the ground round and ate a forkful.

Napkin at the ready, Celia swallowed the first bite of her sinful cheeseburger. "No. Everley wasn't at the closing. Just his lawyer. He blew town...when, I'm not sure." She dabbed at her lips. "I can tell you this much, though. He left it in pristine condition. Betty said it looked virtually the same when he sold it as it did when he bought it. Except that he installed those top-of-the-line windows with the blinds between the panes. Everything else barely looks used, including the appliances."

Celia went after her burger again, but she kept her eyes on Adin. As soon as she'd finished talking, he'd looked away from her and down at his plate. He ate methodically, not really savoring the beef. In fact, he ate like a man lost in thought who was stoking a stove.

That's all he's doing, Celia thought. *He's feeding his body fuel. The only nourishment that truly brings him pleasure – deep, thrilling pleasure – is what I carry within my veins.*

The thought gave her a slight shiver of both remembrance and anticipation. She felt her nipples tighten. Maybe, later tonight or tomorrow morning, he'd feed on her again. It was as if she were becoming addicted to it.

"What brought that on?" Adin murmured through a smirk. Glancing at Celia, he grabbed a napkin, wiped his lips and fingers, slid his plate away, and rested his crossed arms on the bar.

"Brought what on?" Finishing her meal, she unintentionally mimicked Adin's movements.

He swiveled to face her. Lifting another napkin from the holder, he gently blotted a speck of something from the corner of Celia's mouth. "You're horny again," he said alluringly, his steamy gaze sweeping over her face. "I can tell. What brought it on?"

Celia felt a simultaneous rise of heat in her face and moisture in her vagina.

"How can you tell?" she whispered, wanting to kiss him, wanting to fondle his cock.

Adin smiled secretively. He leaned forward and whispered back, close to the side of Celia's face, "I just can." His tongue danced lightly around her ear. Withdrawing, he propped his elbow on the bar and rested his head on his hand.

Celia knew she would never understand Adin's unique senses. He probably had many attributes that would forever elude her comprehension. "You're near me," she said in a matter-of-fact way. "That's what brought it on."

He kept watching her in that smug, amused way he had. It used to make Celia nervous. Now it made her want to smile. What caused the change was obvious. She realized, probably when he showed up at her apartment that morning, she had as much mastery over him as he had over her. And it was a mastery both of them reveled in.

"You're wicked, Adin Swift." She took a drink. She liked applying that adjective to him. It fit. And it titillated her.

"Maybe, a little," he admitted. "But I've found that most women worth knowing don't like really *good* boys."

The front door jangled, startling them both out of their cocoon of seduction.

A grizzled man in bib overalls and a battered cowboy hat took a few faltering steps and squinted around the bar's interior. As he hiked himself onto a stool, he lifted his chin and called out, "Hey, Red! Is this a drinking establishment or a goddamned dating service?"

Fell trundled out of the kitchen, wiping his hands on a towel. He scooped up Adin's and Celia's dishes and stashed them under the bar. "Time for some local color," he muttered to the couple as he snatched up the condiments too. "When the hell are you gonna learn some manners, asshole?" he grumbled, grabbing a can of "corporate" beer from a cooler beneath the back bar.

"When you learn how to run a business." The gray man tipped his hat at Adin and Celia. "My apologies."

Adin tensed as soon as he got a good look at the man. "Might you be Archie Grumbach?"

He put the can of beer to his mouth and audibly poured a hefty stream down his throat. "Might be. And who might you be?"

Adin suddenly realized he'd painted himself into a corner by already giving his real name to two of Woodbine's more prominent citizens. Although he didn't want to give it

to *this* man, the allegedly quirky caretaker of the Browning mansion, he couldn't really lie, either.

Celia stepped in and saved him. "I'm Celia Quill. I bought the old Everley place and just moved in today." She laughed lightly and put a hand on Adin's arm. "Thank God I had some helpers."

Adin wanted to hug her. She'd deflected attention from him by relegating him to the status of minor player. Celia obviously remembered everything he'd told her about his meeting with Betty Summerfield and the impressions he'd gotten. She just as obviously sensed that, to do more investigating, he needed to keep a lower profile.

He also knew he'd have to come clean with her...soon.

The gray man looked back and forth between them. "The Everley place, huh?" He took another swig of beer, its residue glistening on the stubble that peppered his upper lip. "So how'd you hear about me? From that gossip Betty Summerfield?"

"Your name just happened to come up in relation to the Browning property. So, are you still the caretaker there?" Celia sipped at her own beer and watched the man, who clearly *was* Archie Grumbach, with exactly the right touch of idle curiosity.

He hitched up his shoulders and cracked his neck. "I check it out now and again." He tacked on a postscript—rather craftily, Adin thought. "Sometimes during the day, sometimes at night. Gotta make sure no punks sneak in there and raise hell. It's a grand old house. Don't wanna see it trashed."

"Hey, who owns it now, Grumpy?" John Fell asked from the opposite end of the bar, where he was washing glasses. "Did that business ever get straightened out?"

Archie appeared to be contemplating his beer can. His whiskered left cheek crinkled ever-so slightly, suggesting a small, private smile. Adin wondered for a moment if he'd even heard the question. He seemed to be drifting off.

Apparently giving up, Fell dismissed Archie with a disgusted flap of his hand. He picked up a bus pan and carried it into the back room.

As soon as he was gone, Archie muttered, "Browning owns it. He'll always own it."

Adin and Celia exchanged wondering glances.

After waiting a moment for Archie's fugue to pass, Adin casually said, "You must be pretty familiar with the town's history, huh."

The gray man's rheumy eyes flickered up to the couple. He smiled more broadly, but still with that sly suggestion of hidden knowledge. "I know the shit you ain't gonna find at the historical society, let's put it that way."

"That's the most interesting kind," Adin said.

Archie's shoulders hitched from a single, silent laugh. "At least Enid got some of it right," he mumbled. More beer graced his throat.

The name tripped a trigger in Adin's memory. Before he could give it more thought, Celia leaned on the bar and asked Archie another question. "Do you know about *my* house?"

Abruptly, the gray man drilled her with a look. "I can tell you this, little lady." He extended an arm in Celia's direction and tapped a soiled finger on the bar. "You shouldn't spend much time in the cellar or go near that old well in back."

Almost simultaneously, Celia asked, "What old well?" and Adin, "Why the cellar?"

Archie blinked at them. He withdrew his arm from the bar and curled a hand around the beer can. "Just because, you know, rats and funguses can get into those old cellars, and any uncapped well with crumbling walls is dangerous. Period."

"Betty never told me about a well," Celia said.

"She prob'ly don't even know about it...the old cow," Archie muttered.

"Maybe we can get together some time," Adin said to him, "and you can tell us about the town's history. We were thinking about going to the historical society and local library to read old newspaper articles, check out old photos. But it sounds like you know more about the unrecorded stuff."

"I know what I know," Archie said, slurring the words a bit. This obviously wasn't his first drink of the day. He didn't respond to Adin's suggestion.

Fell appeared behind the bar again. Celia slid him a bill and said, "Buy Mr. Grumbach a drink on us."

Archie inclined his head and lifted his can in acknowledgment. "Preciate it."

"A free beer brings out the courtesy in him," Fell told Adin and Celia.

Smiling, they both shook his hand and thanked him for his service. Adin made sure to leave a hefty tip. As they got down from their stools, Archie Grumbach came alive again.

"Hey, if you wanna look at pictures," he waved an arm around the room, "start here, for chrissakes." His arm stilled, forefinger pointing toward the wall on the other side of the pool table. "He's there. Oh yeah, you betcha. The face behind the face. He's there."

"Grumpy, shut up and drink your beer," Fell said irritably as he swabbed the bar. "You're gonna make this nice lady think she moved to a loony bin."

"I know what I know," Archie repeated sullenly.

"You don't know shit," Fell said as Adin and Celia circled the pool table.

"What do you suppose he meant by all that stuff he said?" Celia whispered.

"I don't know yet." Adin put an arm around her waist as they pored over the framed pictures scattered among the old tools. "But we can talk about it later."

Grumbach's phrase, *the face behind the face*, had sent a chill through Adin's gut. Now, as he studied the graying or sepia-tinted photos, a mounting anxiety made his heart jump around in his chest.

Could it be, after all these centuries...

He heard a soft gasp come from Celia, felt her hand tug at the front of his shirt. "Adin," she said breathlessly, "I didn't get a chance to tell you what I saw earlier this evening."

At the moment, it didn't matter. Adin could only focus on what *he* saw...now, just slightly above eye level on the wall of an otherwise ordinary small-town bar.

A photo of a large, opulent room decorated in Victorian style, a room in which gaslights glowed. A group of finely dressed men, some seated and some standing, hoisted glasses toward the camera. Adin peered closer, aware of Celia's eyes trained on the same small area of the picture.

A man standing at the back of the group seemed to have two faces. There was a fairly clear and certainly more obvious "forefront" face—a little fleshy, bearing a stiff smile between mutton-chop sideburns—but on or behind his left shoulder a shadowy ghost-face hovered.

Any casual viewer who noticed the anomaly would likely ascribe it to the whiskered man moving his head as the shutter opened. Cameras of the late eighteen hundreds were known for not being able to capture movement, it always appeared as a blur. But Adin – and Celia, too, it seemed – saw things differently.

There were features on that misty face. Adin knew that the man standing behind or beside the forefront figure wouldn't want his picture taken. Since this was a formal group photo and he was part of the group, he had no graceful or even believable way of getting out of the shot. So, at the last second, he'd tried ducking behind his associate. Only after the photo was developed would his absence be discovered...and, as usual, blamed on some inopportune movement on his part, a wrong half-step in the wrong direction at the worst possible moment.

But he hadn't fully succeeded in his attempt to conceal himself. The photographer had taken him by surprise. Perhaps the man had been too preoccupied with his own plan for evasion to pay close enough attention.

John Fell's voice suddenly cut through Adin's thoughts. "Simon Browning might be in that one. It was taken inside his place. But nobody knows which gent he is 'cause no other photos of him exist." As an afterthought he tossed out, "Maybe he didn't like cameras."

Archie Grumbach snickered.

Almost in awe, Adin touched the nearly transparent face. Most vampires don't - for the same reason they avoid mirrors.

"Birkett," he whispered.

Chapter Nine

"What did you see earlier, Celia?" Adin stared through the windshield. Is this why I picked her out of the crowd? *Is this why I'm here? Because, through her, I'll have access to my lifelong enemy?*

"I took a walk around the yard after you left," she related in a monotone. "As I passed the gazing ball, I thought I saw...I thought I saw a face in it. When I stopped and looked closer, it was gone. So I tried convincing myself it was just some arrangement of trees and clouds. But I had trouble believing that. A reflection so natural wouldn't have startled me, wouldn't have even caught my attention." Finally, she turned her head to look at Adin. "It was *his* face, the same smeary arrangement of dim features, likes swirls in a fog bank."

"You're sure."

"Yes. I knew it as soon as I saw the photograph. That was the image I glimpsed in the gazing ball."

Adin gripped the steering wheel to keep from quaking. He'd been waiting for this kind of breakthrough. He was closing in on a creature he'd wanted for over six centuries to destroy.

Or was it Birkett who was closing in on *him*?

After turning into Celia's driveway, Adin stopped the car at one point, got out, and pulled up some emerging mullein. He stuffed it in the pockets of his jeans. Celia looked at him curiously but didn't question him when he got back in the car. As he resumed his slow crawl up the driveway, he thought it somehow seemed, on this starless night, like a tunnel—narrow, foreboding, inescapable.

* * * * *

"Who was Simon Browning, really? And what does he have to do with you?" Celia, hands curled around a cup of instant coffee, sat at one end of the couch, her brooding lover at the other. She was dead tired but wouldn't let herself go to bed without a full disclosure.

"His name isn't Simon Browning." Adin said hollowly. "It's Birkett." He stared at the floor. "And he's the reason I became a vampire."

The answer jolted Celia. She thought it was the plague that had caused Adin to seek the Blood Birth and a female who'd done the birthing. Rather than bombard him with questions – for which she had little energy, anyway – she simply said, "I think you need to come clean with me, Adin."

He dropped his head and nodded. "Yes, I do."

"Is it because of this man that you came up here with me?"

Adin gave her an almost sheepish glance – tinged with guilt, Celia thought. It made her feel cold and slightly ill. "Not just," he said quietly. "At first, I wasn't sure what drove me to be with you, starting with that night at the club. Now I know," his gaze become more direct, "you yourself are a big part of the reason I'm here. Please believe that before I say anything else."

He watched her steadily now, obviously awaiting her response. It was uncanny, Celia thought, how Adin could use his eyes to convince her of his sincerity.

She looked down at her coffee mug. "I want to believe you."

"Then do. It's the truth."

But pressing for the *whole* truth, completely unvarnished with kindness – that, Celia knew, required more courage than she'd had to exercise in a long time. "Still, you *are* mostly using me. Isn't that the truth, too?" She forced herself to look at him.

Adin leaned forward, putting his elbows on his knees, dropping his head to his hands.

"Don't think about what you're going to say," Celia insisted, "just say what you're thinking."

He turned his head in her direction. "What immediately comes to mind is my standard, brutally frank answer. 'Of course I'm using you. I'm a vampire. That's what I do'. But I didn't want to say that, because it's -"

"What? Too brutal?" Celia stared at him, her cold queasiness intensifying.

"No!" Adin shot back. He abruptly lowered his voice. "No. I didn't want to say that because a different motivation is involved now, something other than those old, base impulses, something...something larger and finer." Looking confounded, he dropped his head again. "My mind is *so* fucking muddled," he said behind his hands. He curled them over the back of his head and tipped forward, briefly touching his forehead to his knees.

Tenderly, Celia touched the back of Adin's neck. His protective cynicism was crumbling—along with, she suspected, some measure of cherished control. Could it be he actually cared for her? Did he think his feelings weakened him?

With a weary sigh, Adin rose far enough to brace his forearms on his thighs. "Celia, my existence up until now has been a kind of...tidy mess. I went through each day knowing what I had to do, even though it might not be pretty. Everything else was secondary and happened as it happened. I've always had one *overriding* goal, which was finding Birkett, but it's proved so elusive my daily actions have rarely been dictated but it. So I just went about the business of sustaining and entertaining myself."

"And now?"

He sighed more heavily. "Now I'm not sure what I need to do, yet everything seems of primary importance. And I care about it all." Finally, Adin turned his head to look at her. "Including you."

K.Z. Snow

At the sound of those two words, Celia felt warmth displacing her earlier chill. This wasn't just so much double-talk. She was certain of that. Adin seemed to be wrestling with issues he hadn't confronted in a long, long time and trying to explain how they were affecting him.

She, on the other hand, was wrestling with issues she'd *never* confronted.

"I'm not sure if you've answered my question or not," Celia murmured.

"About using you?" Adin's shoulders hitched as he breathed a dour laugh. "I haven't. Maybe you should just tell me to hit the road."

"I'm not going to tell you to do anything. Not right now, anyway. Right now, what I need more than your absence is information." Celia got up and moved closer to him. "Tell me, Adin."

He reached over and grabbed her hand. "Oh, Jesus," he said despairingly. "Honey, believe me, you shouldn't be involved in this."

"I'm already involved," Celia reminded him. Her thumb lightly stroked Adin's hand. She looked around the room—at the blinds she'd lowered as soon as they'd come in, at the boxes she'd packed and begun unpacking with so much hope and trepidation—and wondered what unimaginable threats lay in the darkness beyond the walls of her new sanctuary.

Was it even a sanctuary?

She gently pumped Adin's hand to prompt him. "Now tell me." Knowledge, Celia had always believed, was preferable to ignorance.

When he turned his eyes to her face, she knew one thing with absolute certainty – she would never abandon him.

"You mean so much to me," Adin whispered. He lifted Celia's hand and kissed the inside of her wrist before settling against the back of the couch. "The most horrific event in all my long life wasn't the death of Margery. It wasn't the plague." Adin paused. "It was the slaughter of my parents. And the aftermath of that slaughter."

Celia's breath hitched in shock. Her fingers tightened around his hand. "Does this relate to -?"

"Yes. He's the one responsible. Birkett killed my mother and father."

Adin abruptly rose and wandered around the room, idly lifting box lids. Celia's heart ached for him. How hard it must be to talk about this! Powerless, she watched Adin, wishing desperately there was something she could say or do to assuage his almost palpable pain.

He stopped at one of the windows. Pulling the blinds back, he peered outside. Celia flinched, as if Birkett, summoned by Adin's memories, would come crashing through the windowpane.

Adin let the blinds drop back into place. His gaze moved to Celia. "Birkett is a vampire," he said dully, without preface, "only slightly older than I. He began his mortal existence in 1306 in the south of England. In life he was the sexton of a small

parish in Surrey, where he would toll the bell and dig graves for the dead—including victims of the plague. But he refused to go near them. He felt nothing but revulsion for them—and, ultimately, contempt for all clergy and even for God."

Adin shoved his hands in his pockets and, head down turned, continued to amble around the room. "As the scourge spread and his duties became more distasteful and dangerous, he displayed his contempt for the Church by fornicating with every healthy girl and woman in the parish he could manage to trick or seduce or even rape. I know he killed at least one suspicious husband whose wife he wanted to keep enjoying. He sliced open the man's arm with a dagger and flung the poor wretch on top of a fresh corpse covered in buboes that were still excreting blood and pus. That way, he couldn't be charged with murder. He could claim he'd only been defending himself, and, as he struggled with the husband, the man had accidentally fallen onto the infected body."

"Oh *God*," Celia said in disgust. She'd placed her fingers over her mouth during Adin's story, and only now did she lower them. "But how do you know these things? You were in London, weren't you?"

Adin nodded. "I never knew Birkett in life. But from the moment I became determined to find him, I learned everything I could about him. I'm familiar with his temperament and behavioral patterns, his needs and preferences and aversions. I know what he looks like. I know when he was birthed—at the very end of 1348, by a Wallachian gypsy, a *strigoi mort*, posing as a beggar. Birkett is a more or less typical member of the Plague Breed, but with all their unsavory traits compounded and amplified by that Black strain with which the gypsy infected him."

Celia struggled to connect these pieces. She already suspected what the final picture would be. "And your parents...they were in London, too, weren't they?"

"Yes."

"So how –?"

"After he was birthed, Birkett drifted north...where, obviously, there was more food and where he could operate under the cloak of anonymity. My parents were, uh...something of a local oddity. I suspect Birkett heard about them from some local fishwife."

"But...what was so 'odd' about them that they'd be the subject of gossip?"

Celia detected a shimmer of perspiration on Adin's face. His handsome features look strained. She began to feel guilty – because it was her questions, after all, that had forced Adin to go over the one chapter of Birkett's vile existence he certainly didn't want to go over again. Even though he'd been trying to keep his recitation mechanical, Celia could tell his control – or, perhaps, his numbness – was crumbling.

When Adin spoke again, centuries of bitter resentment and hatred roughened his voice. "Birkett believed, as many Europeans did, that the world of Jewry was responsible for visiting the plague on the world of Christianity...even though Jew and Mohammedan, Hindu and Buddhist and pagan were struck down every bit as mercilessly as any Christian ever was." Adin swiped the back of his hand across his

forehead. I know for a fact Birkett murdered my parents because my mother was a Jew and, worse yet, had married a Christian."

"Oh, Adin..." Celia began to rise but sank back onto the couch. She knew he was far beyond comforting. "And you're sure your parents died? You're sure he didn't turn them—"

"I'm sure," he said curtly. "Birkett fed off them until they were weakened. He raped them and fed again until they were nearly senseless. Afterward, he lifted each by the ankles and swung them, one after another, against a wall, bashing their heads in. Because the mark of the vampire was found on their necks, they were violated even further after death."

Celia could only stare at Adin, her eyes wide and face drawn in horror and grief. "How?" she whispered.

He'd been staring at the floor. Still without fully facing Celia, Adin took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "Their heads were severed and placed between their feet. It's a Kashubian practice, just one of many that people in the Black Sea region borrowed from Slavs near the Baltic. Their bodies were tightly wrapped, weighted and thrown into the river under cover of darkness." He uttered a single, sour, nearly silent laugh. "I suppose they weren't burned because it would've turned into a public spectacle everyone in the area soon knew about the attack—and any gathering of a crowd would've hastened the spread of the plague."

Celia sat quietly for a moment, trying to absorb the implications of all Adin had told her. Every unfamiliar sound—the creaking of her old house as the evening's cool air settled over it, the rustlings of tree branches outside, even the sudden hum of the refrigerator—made her want to jump out of her skin. When she spoke again, it was as much to break the silence as to get answers.

"So it was this...heinous act that drove you to become a vampire?"

"Yes. I knew that was the only course I could take if I were to have any hope of avenging my parents' murder." Adin stared unblinking at nothing.

"But how did you discover the murderer's identity?"

It seemed a physical struggle for Adin to shake himself out of his dark reverie. "The gypsy who'd birthed him had followed him to London. She's the one who told me Birkett was responsible—something he not only admitted but boasted about, many years later."

"Was the gypsy in on it too?" Celia asked.

Adin shrugged. "I don't believe so. But I do know it was her sister who instructed the authorities on how to...dispose of my parents."

The tale just kept getting more and more grisly. Celia tightened her arms around her midsection. "Was she a vampire too?"

"No." Adin glanced at Celia. "Vampires who are strictly nocturnal often have mortal 'watchers' – people who aid and abet them by serving as their daytime lookouts

and errand runners. In return for their service, they're ultimately rewarded with immortality."

"Like Renfield," Celia whispered, thinking of the character from *Dracula* who served such a purpose.

Adin responded with a weak chuckle. "Yeah, like Renfield."

"But why would the gypsy vampire snitch on Birkett? Wasn't he almost like...her son?"

This time, Adin's laughter was more sardonic. "I'm afraid you're crediting vampires with an altruism they rarely feel. The gypsy told me because she suspected I'd want to go after Birkett. She simply saw it as a way to secure another victim."

"You."

"Yes. She convinced me that I'd best be able to avenge my parents' murder by becoming a vampire myself. And of course she was more than willing to birth me." Adin slowly shook his head. Celia read disgust in the movement – disgust over the cold self-interest of so many of his kind. Adin confirmed this by saying, "So her motives in telling me were hardly commendable. She felt no moral outrage over what Birkett had done. And she sure as hell felt no allegiance to Birkett."

"What difference would her motives make," Celia asked, confused, "as long as it got done? Your...conversion, I mean."

"I found everything about her repugnant," Adin said flatly. "Besides, I couldn't stand the thought of sharing the same birth mistress with the creature who'd killed my parents. So I simply bided my time. I didn't have to wait *too* long before I encountered Rahenna. Many of the vampyrii in the British Isles had converged on London."

To feed, Celia thought with a shiver. It was the largest feeding-ground in Britain.

Adin looked at Celia and gave her a weary smile as he touched the side of her face. "You should get some sleep. I'm sure this whole day has wrung you out, physically and mentally."

Celia couldn't deny that, although she doubted sleep would come easily tonight. What was uppermost in her mind, though, was not her own rest but Adin's astonishing selflessness. Despite having to dredge up the most soul-stabbing memories, despite facing the prospect of confronting his worst enemy, he was concerned about *her* wellbeing.

Hesitantly Celia said, "I don't think I can even *consider* sleep until I get a better fix on this situation. Do you mind? If you do, honestly, I'll just shut up and go the bedroom."

Adin's smile, still wan, returned briefly. "Celia, I can't fault you for trying to find out as much as you can. You *do* need to know. Hey," he reached out and lightly grazed her arm with his fingertips, "there's no turning back now."

Celia didn't know what he meant. She almost let herself feel encouraged by the statement...then realized she should perhaps feel just the opposite. Maybe Adin had

just admitted he'd pulled her into his nightmare. Hesitantly she asked, "Why has it taken you so long to find this man? Does he know who you are? Does he know you've been looking for him?"

Adin didn't hesitate in answering. "Yes, he knows. That's why you saw his image in the gazing ball today. He put it there to let me know he knows. He's taunting me. Birkett has always had a stronger sense of my presence than I've had of his – a sense he acquired by feeding on my parents – and that's what has allowed him to stay one step ahead of me." Again, guilt crept into his face. "Well, that, and my own self-indulgence. I've tended to get bogged down in, uh…pleasure-seeking. Some of my promiscuity was necessary. But a lot wasn't."

He tried to smile, but this admission of weakness must have galled him far more than it amused him. Especially now.

Still, Celia didn't care about the wanton ways of Adin's past. She only cared about his – and, by association, her own – current circumstances. "Does that mean Birkett will flee again? I mean, now that he knows you're so near?"

There was unmistakable hope in the question. Celia wanted to be with Adin Swift – beyond any doubt, she wanted to spend more time with this entrancing man, peer into his mind and heart, learn whatever he could teach her...and share more of the intimacy that had brought them both such incomparable fulfillment. But she could hardly welcome some lurking, terrifying presence into their lives.

Adin obviously read the subtext of her question. Celia saw the dismay in his face.

"Maybe Birkett will flee," he said, "but..."

"What?" Celia whispered, feeling a frigid twist of fear in her stomach. Why was he balking?

"I don't want to alarm you unnecessarily, but I don't want to minimize the danger, either."

"At least give me the possibilities." It seemed like an appropriate suggestion, although Celia was no longer sure of the right things to say in response to her lover's strange history.

"Depending on their priorities and affinities," Adin began, "vampires often develop strong attachments to certain places. That *could* be the case with Birkett and that rock pile next door."

Celia took a deep breath to calm herself. She turned down her eyes and put a hand over her mouth. *He said that* could *be the case. And even if it is, Birkett can't be that dangerous. After all, he hasn't decimated this town.* Her mind raced along on its track of reason and reassurance. *Hell, Adin's probably mistaken. Period. There's no evidence for a Browning-Birkett link. That "image" in the gazing ball was nothing more than an optical illusion strengthened by the power of suggestion. Besides, how could a vampire stay in one place for well over a century and not be discovered? Maybe Adin himself isn't –*

"But what troubles me the most," Adin said, breaking into Celia's thoughts, "is what I think Birkett's master plan might be."

"And what's that?" Celia asked, trying for skepticism. Now that she'd thought about Adin's claim rather than just reacted to it, she'd pretty much convinced herself this was much ado about nothing. He hadn't posed any truly alarming possibilities, and he hadn't given her any certainties at all.

"I know Birkett must have learned a great deal during his time on earth," Adin said. "As I have. As all vampires have. He might feel fortified by his knowledge, which could've led to an expansion of his abilities. So, he might have decided some time ago to stop globe-trotting just for the sake of eluding me."

Celia stared at him. She didn't want to grasp the implications of what he'd said. She sure as hell didn't want to give them any credence.

"Celia," Adin's look was disconcertingly direct, "I do believe Birkett has been *waiting* for me to find him. I just have to figure out why."

Chapter Ten

Adin stood on the landing just inside the house's back door and gazed down into the wad of blackness that was the cellar. Leaning forward, he grasped the top of each handrail and stared more intently. Like all vampires, he could see quite well in the dark, although the *way* he saw things had taken some getting used to at first. Forms were discernible enough, but they were gray suffused with a red haze.

From his vantage point, Adin could make out fieldstone outer walls, a concrete floor, the bottom of the water heater a bit farther on, and a portion of rough-framed doorway near the base of the stairs on the left. The floor of the space beyond this door, Adin knew, was dirt. Not only could he see it, he could smell it.

He hoped Celia had fallen asleep quickly and soundly. She desperately needed the rest. The last thing she'd wanted to know before finally going to bed was what he planned on doing, if Birkett were in fact still in Woodbine. Adin told her he hadn't worked that out yet, which was the truth. There were many things he had yet to determine.

Again, he envisioned Birkett—hadn't really stopped envisioning him, except to think about Celia. Given his enemy's current or at least recent proximity, Adin knew he could soon be engaged in personal warfare. Innocent people didn't need to be victimized. But he had become so accustomed to failure in his search for Birkett, and so addicted to his own pursuit of pleasure, it had never occurred to him he might be putting one of his paramours in harm's way. And it sure as hell had never occurred to him he could become emotionally attached to one of his paramours.

It seemed both his sense of purpose and his conscience had been flexing their muscles lately.

There were some things he didn't tell Celia. Her questions hadn't called for their revelation. Besides, they were things she was better off not knowing. Adin didn't tell her Birkett – thus far his nemesis, a dire enemy he had not been able to best – wanted to kill him as much as he wanted to kill that vile embodiment of the Plague Breed. Still, Celia would soon be able to deduce that, if she hadn't already. Adin didn't tell her they'd had close encounters on three previous occasions, and he never fully understood how he'd managed to escape with his life. Of the two of them, Adin was by far the more intelligent, but Birkett had brute strength and sheer viciousness on his side. Adin's diurnal nature hadn't been much help to him, either. Strictly nocturnal vampires like Birkett were forced to develop a high degree of cunning to make up for their handicap.

After touching his pockets to check for the comforting feel of the withered mullein, Adin began descending the stairs. The words of Archie Grumbach, whose role in all this was still uncertain, echoed through his mind. *You shouldn't spend much time in the cellar* *or go near that well in back*. The old fuck knew more than he was saying. Adin was sure he'd be talking with the man again.

Hyperalert, he stepped silently onto the damp concrete floor. There was little in this part of the cellar except rows of shelves along the right wall, a fairly new furnace in one corner, and the water heater he'd glimpsed earlier against the left wall. Perhaps sensing Adin's presence, a spotted salamander crawled behind the cylinder and cowered there.

Adin regarded the doorway on his near left. It led into the unfinished portion of the cellar, its floor nothing more than low, uneven hillocks of stone-pocked soil. As smoothly as quicksilver, he stepped through the portal.

The air changed, became heavy with an oppressive, dank chill.

Rising a few millimeters off the floor, Adin drifted slowly along the fieldstone walls, his long fingers trailing receptively across the moist yet gritty surfaces of the rocks. His gaze roamed over the space, from floor to ceiling and wall to wall. *Yes, in here...*

Abruptly, he stopped. With a slight shudder and delicate release of vapor, his whole body contracted and shrank. Adin felt his belly connect with the dirt. He quickly slithered through it—under other circumstances, would have relished the feel of each granule against his flexing muscles—and sought shelter behind a half-buried rock.

A soft grating sound came from the rear wall of the chamber. Bits of mortar and flakes of stone peppered the floor. The sound grew louder, accompanied by a spill of sand. Rock ground harshly against rock.

Adin's sleek other-body tensed. He remained absolutely still, even willing his tongue, his greatest sensory organ, not to flick into the air. He wanted to avoid detection, at least for a while.

With a sudden, dull rustle and thud, a large stone tumbled to the floor. Two red points of light glowed from the pocket of blackness where the rock had been. Adin felt a rush of even cooler, damper air against his skin. *A burrow. There's a burrow behind the wall.* Adin peered more intently at the hole. *No, it's a* –

His alarming realization was cut short when a pointed snout appeared, twitching. Rodent feet emerged from the hole and curled over its lower edge. An aggressive snuffling, sharp and purposeful, pierced the gloom.

A rat the size of a medium dog thrust its head into the room. Its nose lifted, exposing long, yellow incisors sharp as stilettos. Slowly, its head turned to the right, to the left...then froze in place.

Adin heard a coarse *whoosh* as the rat launched its body from the wall and landed with a sickening thud on the floor. It immediately sprang upright, its forelegs poised before its bloated body, the little handlike digits of its forefeet jerking restlessly. Its face actually had expression – one of malice, Adin fancied.

"Fee fi fo fum," a high, raspy voice pronounced. "I smell the blood of an Englishman." Something like a sneer distorted the rat's mouth, showing more of its foul, discolored teeth. Its nose lifted higher into the air. "And the blood of a woman."

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With terrifying speed the rat shot toward the doorway. Its intent was obvious. Adin instinctively shifted again and flew at it, legs thrust before him. Without landing he grabbed the creature in his talons and flung it, shrieking, against the wall. It scrabbled at the fieldstone for a moment, then leapt back into the opening it had made. The dislodged rock seemed to jump back into place.

But it hadn't moved by itself, Adin realized as he shifted yet again and lunged at the spot. The monstrosity had snatched the rock with its hind feet as it leapt upward, once more sealing its point of entry. Adin scrabbled at the wall. The large stone shifted but couldn't be freed.

Because the rat was still behind it, holding it in place. Adin could smell the thing, its stench a vile mixture of filthy pelt and rotten meat. His assumption was confirmed when he again heard that unnatural voice.

"Now you're mine, Swift. Now and forever, you *and* your bitch are mine!" A vicious hiss followed, then splintered into manic cackling. Soon, the sound began to recede and become more muffled...until Adin could hear it no more.

With a furious growl he threw himself at the wall, flinging aside fieldstones as if they were marbles. His hands met solidly packed earth.

Birkett, certainly by now back at the mansion, had filled in his tunnel as he retreated. But he could obviously make more tunnels – and perhaps already had.

Adin fell to his knees, his shoulders sagging. He needed to replenish his life force. In a very short period he'd assumed three shapes, exercised near-maximum strength, and been emotionally exhausted by his concern for Celia, his hatred of Birkett, and a final eruption of rage and frustration. He could do nothing further without renewing his power.

He had to feed.

* * * * *

Dimly aware she hadn't been sleeping soundly, Celia again changed position, this time turning onto her side. No moonlight glazed the darkness. It was as if she were lying at the bottom of a well.

Where is Adin? she wondered. Searching for his enemy? Sleeping outside somewhere? Celia smiled. Thinking of him like this—reclining peacefully beneath the sky, nestled in the fragrant grass, his cheek kissed by dew—made her miss him. She sighed and closed her eyes, sealing the image behind them.

But a troubling thought followed. Given his obsession with finding Birkett, was it possible Adin would, without warning, begin following the vampire if his trail led out of Woodbine? Might he just slip away without so much as a goodbye?

"Please, no," Celia whispered.

To banish the thought, she tried planning tomorrow's activities. *Have to pull this house together. Have to get back to writing by next week.* Lulled by these mundane thoughts, she again drifted off...

And was awakened, at least partially, by a light, gliding touch along her cheek and neck. When Celia opened her eyes, or thought she did, she saw something that should have made her scream—a thin, brilliant green snake with brilliant blue eyes. It was coiled on the pillow next to hers, its scales glimmering like abalone shell. But she felt no desire to scream. Instead, she smiled.

"Adin?" Her voice was little more than a weak croak. Again, her heavy eyelids fell.

In her dream, the pretty snake smiled back at Celia. She stroked its sleek head. Then it dissolved into the surrounding darkness. Just as she began to wish it would return, she felt a light, excited throb in her cunt, quickly followed by another.

A tongue flicked delicately, rapidly over her clit. Responsive pulsations rippled through Celia from stomach to legs. An unexpected, tiny sting to one of her pussy lips suddenly sharpened her arousal. Her hips reflexively arched forward. She felt a finger explore her pussy, slipping up along the inner side of one lip and down along the other. It made a leisurely pass across her clit, gently pressing against it. Then a firmer, circular rotation, and Celia cried out in pleasure and squirmed on the mattress.

The finger glided away from her cunt, pulling her back from the brink of orgasm. Now several fingers circled her upraised thighs, slid along her hips, slowly and sinuously crossed her belly. Celia could feel a trail of moisture on her skin, the moisture that had been coaxed out of her body. She soon felt another mild sting, like a quick and shallow pinch, then a tender sucking and lapping. Contentedly, she sighed.

Those delectable sensations—the crawling warmth of the caress, like a solid whisper against her flesh, and her own quivering response—seemed to intensify her delicious drowsiness. She wanted to sink into her own nerves as if they were a featherbed. She wanted to be enfolded by physical pleasure.

The gliding touch continued, unaccompanied by either words or kisses, and made a languorous figure eight around her breasts. Celia bowed her spine, thrusting her breasts farther into the air. Whatever was imparting this bliss seemed to be both on and above her body. The figure eight loops separated. Fingers closed around her breasts, tightening and relaxing, over and over again, massaging her, sliding up toward the peaks. Celia felt her nipples tingle and stiffen. She wanted to touch them, pinch them, twist them – but she didn't want to disrupt the movements of her lover. She was afraid if she tried to participate, she would cause her wonderful dream to dissolve.

And it must be a dream.

Fingertips closed snugly around her erect nipples and squeezed them. "Yes, more," Celia whimpered, grasping at the sheets. The squeezing continued, rhythmically, urging her once more to the brink of climax. But just before she came, the squeezing stopped. Breathlessly, Celia struggled to raise her head.

"Hi," he whispered.

"Adin..."

He seemed to be straddling her, *must* be straddling her. And yet he seemed to be hovering slightly above the bed rather than resting on it. No wonder she hadn't felt the weight of his body. His tongue lanced out and flicked against her nipple. Gasping, Celia dropped her head to the pillow. The airy glide of his fingers, his lips, his tongue continued, moving back down her body.

But where was *his* body? She couldn't feel it.

Again, his tongue teased her clit, almost painfully swollen now with arousal. Celia's fingers spasmodically gathered up the sheet beneath her writhing body. Her legs thrashed as her weightless lover delivered more small stings and lapped at the insides of her thighs. Finally, when her nipples and clit felt as achingly tight as her limbs, a stiff, unyielding cock seemed to plunge out of the air into her vagina and instantly fill her.

Celia wailed, the pleasure was so excruciating. Her body throbbed into an orgasm that seemed to pivot on the shaft that filled her. Luscious waves spread out from it, jerking her uncontrollably. She felt faint from hyperventilation.

As her breathing slowed, Celia sluggishly lifted an arm and dropped it over her eyes. She was awake, definitely was awake—at least now. But she still couldn't determine if she'd dreamt or experienced this unique session of lovemaking. She'd had wet dreams before, many of which had resulted in orgasm, but none had ever been as vivid or detailed as this. *Had* it been Adin?

"Where are you?" Celia whispered.

She felt the mattress sink a little on her left, felt the top sheet and blanket being lowered and drawn up again. A warm hand curled over her shoulder. Soft lips touched her ear.

"I hope you liked that." Adin lightly pulled her earlobe with his teeth.

Turning toward him, Celia uttered a limp chuckle of disbelief. "That *was* you? I really wasn't dreaming?"

"Yes, that was me. You weren't dreaming."

"But you...you seemed to be floating over me."

"I wanted to pleasure you without waking you."

Celia smiled. There seemed to be no end to the wonder of him. "And I dreamt about a lovely, shimmering green snake..."

"With blue eyes?"

"Yes! It was curled right beside me, where —" Astonished, Celia pushed herself to a sit and leaned against the pillows. "I don't believe it. Show me." Her voice sounded the way it must have sounded when she watched the magician who performed at her tenth birthday party.

Adin sighed. "Always the doubter," he said in a good-natured way. He got out from beneath the covers and knelt on top of them.

Celia's admiring gaze flowed down and up his naked body. Even flaccid, his cock was fetching—somewhat thick and long, with a gentle arch near the base that caused it to stand out slightly from his hips. It seemed ready to spring into rigidity at the slightest provocation. Celia was tempted to draw it into her mouth.

"Shame on you," Adin said, his voice deep and rich. "You look like a cannibal queen eyeing up her tribe's latest catch." Easing back on his haunches, he curled his hands over his taut thighs, his elbows angled outward. "Okay, ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

"You won't be able to see the change take place. You'll only see its outcome."

Before Celia could respond, a filament of mist appeared where Adin had been. Her gaze scoured the covers. The jade green snake with sapphire eyes was coiled beside her. Just as it smiled, or seemed to, its tail made a graceful pirouette in the air, stood poised for a second...and darted toward the back of Celia's wrist. Reflexively she squealed. The snake lazily slid up to Celia's still-covered legs and nuzzled—actually, sweetly nuzzled, like a pet kitten—the side of Celia's hip. *He's apologizing*, she thought, smiling. With her forefinger she stroked the snake's head, just as she wanted to earlier. She ran her finger down the sleek length of its body, smooth as polished granite. The Adin snake flexed its way onto her lap and let its tongue dance, like a tiny soft fork, over the minuscule hole in her skin. The sensation sent a pleasant shiver up Celia's arm.

Unbelievable, she kept thinking. She sounded a muted giggle. *Even as a reptile he's irresistible…and I've known plenty of reptiles.*

The snake glided away from Celia and slipped under the covers near the pillow. They ballooned up and down and to the sides as the mattress sank. Once more, Adin was lying beside her.

Celia clapped in delight. Scooting down to be near him, her hand drifted up to find Adin's face. She could barely make out his features in the darkness, so she let her hands appreciate his beauty. They trailed along his forehead, eyelashes, nose, cheekbones, mouth. His lips pressed against her fingertips.

Despite all the bizarre turns her life had taken since Adin Swift became part of it, Celia couldn't rein in her happiness at having him so close to her. She leaned forward to kiss him—to relish again those cushiony lips, that expressive tongue. By the time she pulled back, she was wallowing in joy.

"So, another mystery is solved," she said, trying to sound very matter-of-fact about it.

"What mystery is that?"

Adin swept one hand over Celia's rib cage and down her hips. It came to rest between her moisture-slicked thighs. His eyelids were heavy – in fact, he almost looked drugged – but those startling irises glimmered with energy.

Celia couldn't help but smile. Whatever manner of man Adin was, he would never be boring. "Now I know what other shape you can assume."

Adin returned her smile, although his was more teasing. "You know *one* of them."

Celia lifted her eyebrows.

His smile still in place, Adin touched her lips. "But you never answered my question. Did you enjoy that?"

Celia shifted her thighs, between which Adin's left hand was wetly sandwiched. "I think you already have your answer, Mr. Swift." She closed what little space was left between them. "Magic man," she murmured, snuggling against Adin's warm, hard chest.

"Magic has nothing to do with it." Tenderly, he stroked her hair. "Those sorts of things just come with the territory."

"And a wild, strange territory it is." Celia moved her right hand to his silky cock and idly fondled it. Although Adin was likely past arousal, she simply loved its feel. "Are you going to tell me where you've been?"

"I'll tell you, but I'm afraid it's going to kill your high."

"A person can't stay high forever, Adin."

He remained silent. Celia could virtually feel him thinking. She lifted her head slightly and gazed into his face. He looked troubled.

"Go ahead," she quietly urged. "Tell me."

"I've seen Birkett."

Stunned, Celia pulled back and propped herself on one elbow. "He's still around? And you already found him?"

Adin didn't look at her. "Yes, he's still around. But it's more like he found me."

"Oh God, Adin...where? Was there a confrontation?" Celia's heart raced at the thought – a reaction that surprised her.

She hadn't really taken Adin's claims about Birkett too seriously, just as she'd fought against acceptance of his vampirism. In both cases, reason demanded skepticism. But also in both cases, her own fear had contributed to her incredulity. She was as reluctant to believe Adin could be in danger as she was to believe Adin could really be a vampire.

But now, as Celia stared into his face, she could almost feel his churning, anxious thoughts drumming against her. This was no melodrama born in Adin's imagination, this story of centuries-old adversaries seeking to destroy each other. This was a fact of his life.

And it could result in his death.

Finally, Adin looked at Celia. The intensity of his gaze intensified her anxiety. "I have a theory," he said. "But I'm going to keep it to myself until I can confirm it. In the meantime, you must follow any instructions I give you."

Celia nodded. Her throat felt very dry.

"I've placed sprigs of mullein on every windowsill and tacked them to the front and back doors. Don't remove them. If you ever leave the house after dark, keep some on you. You'll also see a row of onions at the head of the basement stairs. It's perfectly all right to move them and go down there during daylight hours, but as soon as the sun sets, those onions must be in place and you cannot under any circumstances cross that line. Do you understand?"

"Birkett's nocturnal, and those plants repel him while he's out and about."

"Yes. If you have a crucifix or rosary or other religious artifacts, it wouldn't hurt to put those around the house too. Or wear a cross around your neck."

Celia couldn't remember if she had any such things. If she did, they would've been her grandmother's, and she'd likely stashed them in her jewelry box or cedar chest years ago. She would look tomorrow.

"These sound like temporary solutions, Adin."

He rolled onto his back and rubbed his face, then dropped his arms to his sides. "You're right. That's all they are."

"So what more –"

"For starters, I have to break into the Browning mansion. Tomorrow."

Chapter Eleven

When the satellite-TV installer arrived just before eleven, Celia took a break from arranging and decorating while Adin hauled yet another tower of empty boxes outside. He pulled discarded wads of newspaper from each one and stuffed the paper in the burn-barrel, tore apart and flattened the boxes. Three knee-high stacks of cardboard, ready for recycling, already sat in the garage.

It was mindless work, just as washing the breakfast dishes had been, but Adin appreciated such simple activities when his mind was engaged with other concerns. Because he'd fed well lately—had even downed two raw eggs in a glass of V8 this morning—and gotten a bit of sleep, he felt alert and vigorous. He wished he could cut the lawn with an old, rotary-blade mower. He wished he could split firewood. The more strenuous and repetitive the labor, the more it would ease his tension. But Celia had neither a lawn mower nor a woodstove. Adin would have to find other chores with which to busy himself.

As he exited the garage through its side door, he saw a telephone company van rocking up the driveway. Soon, Celia would likely be focused on getting her computer up and running. Adin realized there wouldn't be much for him to do in the house—not for a while, anyway.

Aware of his pulse accelerating, he headed for the backyard.

The long grass swished against his boots and painted them with moisture. A variety of birds—sparrows and wrens and finches, nuthatches and chickadees, cardinals and blue jays—chittered from the surrounding trees, occasionally flying from one crown to another. In the distance, a woodpecker thrummed. Thin cirrus clouds streaked the cerulean sky and, much closer to the nourishing earth, insects dotted the air.

Adin smiled pensively as he realized it was too early in the season for mosquitoes. He recalled another vampire once telling him—perhaps a hundred years ago or longer—not to swat or even shun the creatures. *What was his name? Santiago, yes, that was it.* "They're our cousins," the man had said. "They survive as we do, but only for a very short time. Pity them. Indulge them." Still smiling, Adin shoved his hands in his pockets and kicked at a leafy twig lying in the grass. Santiago's empathetic philosophy wasn't likely to find favor among most mortals.

Adin walked up to the gazing ball, sitting like an overlarge Christmas ornament on its concrete pedestal. There was nothing in it but a fun-house reflection of the yard. Could Celia have been mistaken about what she'd seen? Adin immediately knew that was wishful thinking on his part. Birkett had shown himself, all right. What Adin found most troubling about the appearance was that Celia had been the one who witnessed it – which meant Birkett had had a chance to scrutinize *her*.

Adin looked around the yard, uncertain what to do next. He suddenly felt restless. *I have to get into that mansion well before sunset. I have to.* But he couldn't do it now. He couldn't take off without telling Celia, leaving her to fret over his whereabouts.

The deeper woods at the rear of the yard beckoned Adin. Yes, there was something else he had to check out. He moved toward the shadowed tangle of undergrowth beneath the taller trees.

As he scanned the ragged edge of this untended area, Adin noticed several clearer spaces that might indicate the presence of a path. He studied each one more carefully then struck out through the most promising break in the vegetation. At least this season's growth wasn't yet too high or too thick.

A fairly straight trail of depressed earth, with a soggy floor of decaying leaves and brown pine needles, arrowed through the close-pressing trees and vertical, in-tucked spirals of emerging ferns. Adin's footsteps flushed out two toads and sent them hopping for new cover. Occasionally, from above, a twig or pinecone fell, probably dislodged by a scurrying squirrel. Patches of sunlight were fewer and farther between the deeper Adin plunged into this wild acreage, and its organic redolence grew stronger—reminding him, unnervingly, of the smell released by the freshly turned dirt of graves.

The branches blocking his way multiplied. Adin kept his arms raised to push them aside and shield his face from their recoil. A single caw from a nearby crow startled him, sending a flashing chill through his solar plexus.

Within seconds he spied it—a cylindrical wall of fieldstone, somewhat more than waist-high, hugged all around by the delicate, thorny arms of wild roses. A hazy shaft of sunlight sluiced through the small clearing where the old well sat. Carefully, Adin circled the structure. Its north-facing stones were covered in a patchwork of dead brown and fresh green moss.

Adin didn't know whether or not he was still on Celia's property. The well could have served a different homestead or even a hermit's small cabin, long since torn down or fallen to ruin. Or it could've been a source of water for outbuildings—a cow barn, a sheepcote, a horse stable, a pig or chicken pen.

Not that it mattered. The well's original owner and intended use were irrelevant. Recently, Adin feared, this simple, utilitarian structure had a much more nefarious purpose.

Leaning over the gnarled branches, he flattened his hands on the well's rough rim. The muscles in his arms immediately went rigid with shock. Gulping air, Adin pulled himself closer to the pit and peered over its wall. Even *his* sight had difficulty mining the dense blackness. But he both smelled and sensed the presence of things that did not bode well...for him or for Celia.

There was a tunnel entrance somewhere in the well shaft. Adin stared more intently. Yes, he was sure, it was in the western arc of the interior wall. He raised his head to get his bearings. As he suspected, the entrance faced the Browning mansion.

Adin pulled back and took a few cleansing breaths. Lifting his hands, he studied them, stroking his palms with his fingers. Slowly, his face twisted.

Whether real or imagined, traces of Birkett's essence seemed to taint his skin. The vampire, Adin was certain, had slithered over this wall many times, in a number of different forms. But why, *why* were there conduits between this property and the mansion's? Adin already thought he knew – this was the theory he'd earlier refused to divulge – but he wanted to verify his assumption before sharing it with Celia. For the moment, she had more than enough issues to deal with.

"Shit," Adin whispered, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. He leaned against a tree as he gazed at the well. He knew he had to approach it one more time.

A cloud passed over the sun, steeping the small clearing in gloom. Adin again stepped up to the well, again leaned over its edge. He closed his eyes and inhaled.

The odors were unmistakable. First, stagnant water, the depth of which was unclear. Second – and certainly not obvious to anybody with normal human senses – death.

There was at least one corpse or skeleton at the bottom of that pit and perhaps more. Adin was sure of it.

Resting his elbows on the wall, he dropped his head to his hands. How many victims had that filthy bastard disposed of in this area? And where, in addition to here, were they?

Aside from these discoveries, which were sickening enough, it nearly drove Adin to the brink of despair when he realized he was only an orgasm away from becoming too much like this creature he so thoroughly despised. Without the sexual release that accompanied his feeds, many ugly aspects of his Plague Breed heritage would claw their way out of his blood...

As he opened the back door, Adin immediately smelled the damp, earthy odor of the cellar. He glanced at its closed door. *Are there more human remains down there?*

There wasn't time to delve into that right now.

"Celia?" he called out, walking across the small mudroom and bounding up the several steps that led into the spacious country kitchen. It was empty of boxes now— she'd apparently gotten everything put away—but it still needed the homey touches added through decorating. "Celia?" He strode toward the living room.

She was standing on a small, folding step-ladder, measuring a window. Adin guessed she wanted to soften the room by hanging curtains. "Hey, where've you been?" she asked, looking over her shoulder.

The satellite guy was standing at the entertainment center, fiddling with connections. Adin went up to Celia and ran his hands over her hips, letting them come to rest on her thighs. "I took a walk through the woods."

She jotted down measurements on a notepad and began descending the ladder. Adin kept his hands on Celia's body, sliding them up and around her waist to help steady her. She immediately smiled at him and curled a hand around the back of his head.

"Did you find the well?" Her question was punctuated by a kiss.

"Uh...yeah, I found it. I'm not even sure it's on your property. It *is* dangerous, though. Hasn't been filled in."

Celia's eyebrows dipped. "Adin, you look – "

He put a finger over her lips then grabbed her hand. After leading Celia into the kitchen, he said quietly. "I have to go out again, if that's all right. Do you need me for anything right now?"

She smiled slyly.

"God, you have a huge appetite." Adin slipped his hands into Celia's slightly tousled hair and delivered a savoring kiss, which she eagerly returned. "But that will come later."

"You mean *we* will," she said with the same arch look, running her fingers over his cheeks. "You know, you don't need to ask my permission to leave, Adin. I love it that you're so considerate, but I also realize you have some...pressing business to attend to."

He nodded, feeling grateful to have found this woman. "Thank you. I have to do this before sunset. I want to give myself enough time."

Her expression sobered. "Go. Now." Obviously opting for discretion, Celia said nothing more. She certainly knew Adin's intent—that he was striking out for the Browning mansion.

Flashing a nervous smile, Adin quickly cupped the side of her face before he turned and hurried toward the back door. He heard Celia call out, "Please be careful, sweetheart."

Adin chuffed incredulously. *Sweetheart.* When was the last time he was anybody's sweetheart?

"Guess I am now," he murmured. And he realized he liked it.

A hawk rose out of the woods behind Celia's house and swept over the treetops to the Browning mansion. After alighting on the roof's decorative central ridge, it fluttered up to one of the squat chimneys and eyed the surrounding landscape. Soon, the hawk lifted its broad wings and sailed gracefully toward the back of the house, where it did one spiral over the yard before swooping into the tall grass and snatching up a meal of field mouse.

Once it had finished dining, the hawk flew a short distance to the spiked, wrought iron fence that surrounded the property's formal yard. From this perch, seven feet off the ground, it surveyed one of the mansion's robust stone walls with its deeply set, perfectly aligned windows. Fluttering up and over the ragged ribbon of shrubbery planted just inside the fence, the hawk once again landed in the yard, close to a small basement window.

Although the window was covered with close-set bars, it wasn't difficult for a thin snake to slip between them, or to slip through a small hole in the window glass. The snake slithered down the interior wall until it reached the damp, flagstone floor.

Adin stretched, cracked his neck, and looked around. Of course it was darker than hell in this subterranean warren. Whatever weak light the small windows admitted only made the space gloomier. It didn't matter, though. Adin didn't need light.

The cavernous basement, cased in brick, had a central hall off which arched passageways ran. Similarly arched vaults, shorter both in height and length than the corridors, were sunk into the walls at either end of the room – three in the west wall and two in the east. The hall had a massive fireplace and iron sconces placed at regular intervals along the walls. Apparently, any electrical wiring that may have been installed in the mansion's upper floors was never brought down here. Ghostly white humps were scattered about like icebergs.

Adin rose off the floor and drifted over to each one in turn. The whiteness was sheets, the humps, furniture and other bits of decor that sat beneath them, covered for protection. It was obviously being stored down here.

No coffin was secreted in any of the piles. But Adin did notice one antique, stationed beside a massive library table heaped with God-knows-what, that made his heart flutter—a perfect suit of medieval armor. Nostalgia must have driven Simon Browning to purchase the thing. A shield and halberd leaned against it.

Adin stared at it a moment, mesmerized. He gingerly touched one of the arm plates. Shutting down his thoughts, he replaced its sheet.

Soundlessly, Adin glided down the first passageway. It contained nothing more than a large, empty, wooden wine-rack built into one wall. A recessed space opposite had probably been used for storing barrels. Brushing aside cobwebs, Adin gave the areas a cursory examination before he retreated.

He went down the second passageway. Something scurried ahead of him—a rat, probably. Just a normal rat. He didn't bother to look. He could smell it. A door at the end of this corridor opened into a utility room. It housed a Medusan cast-iron furnace, with heating ducts branching out from its rotund bulk, and a sturdy bin large enough to hold the coal that once fueled it. A chute led into the bin from a sliding metal delivery window, now secured with a padlock. Adin examined the room—looking in the coal bin, behind the furnace, even *in* the furnace—before leaving. The smell of coal, still tainting the air, clung to his nostrils.

The third corridor had three doors in one wall and a fourth at the end. The three doors led into storage rooms all lined with shelves. Aside from that, they were empty. The fourth door, which was locked, likely led into the house – to the kitchen or pantry, perhaps.

Turning his attention to the vaults, Adin approached the west-wall group without much enthusiasm. These niches provided the most obvious accommodations for coffins...but that was the problem. They were *too* obvious. Birkett wouldn't have put his "bed" anywhere so noticeable and accessible. Might as well hang a signboard on the wall above—*Beware, Vampire Sleeping Within*. Nevertheless, Adin felt obligated to explore every possibility. He did notice that the vaults' orientation, at least, was appropriate for Birkett. Having been a fourteenth-century sexton, chances were good he'd adhere to the east-west inhumation tradition.

They contained, however, nothing but old barrels and crates.

Adin crossed the length of the central hall to study the two eastern vaults. Each one, strangely enough, seemed to be fitted with some sort of slide-down door or gate, just a couple of feet inside the entrance. Adin could see the ceiling trenches into which such a barrier would have slid. He worked his hands into one of the slots...and his fingers met cold metal. The barriers were still up there. Some hidden activating mechanism, likely recessed into the vaults' walls or floors, must have raised and lowered the gates.

Stooping, Adin moved deeper into the right vault. Portions of small skeletons were strewn over the floor. He lowered himself to his knees and very carefully patted the flagstones. They bore dust and rodent droppings but no evidence of soil. He went into the left vault. More animal bones...and, yes, dirt. A distinct scattering of dirt. Trying to calm his breathing, Adin lifted his fingertips and sniffed. He almost let out a triumphant shout.

Birkett had slept here. There was no doubt.

A thought came to Adin. He rose off the floor and drifted to the rear wall of the chamber. Touching the bricks, he noticed many were loose as well as inordinately moist. Delicately, Adin eased one out of the wall. The foundation stones behind it seemed to loll insecurely in their casing of earth.

So, prick, this was one of your tunnels. It could very well have been the one Birkett, in rat form, had used last night – and maybe used countless times before.

Adin backed out of the vault and hovered, thinking. Two looming questions remained unanswered. If this was where Birkett slept, where the fuck was he now? It was early afternoon. Adin knew, based on the creature's breed, he couldn't possibly be skulking about during daylight hours.

Suspecting Adin would come looking for him, Birkett must have moved to other quarters. He only needed, after all, a sprinkling of Surrey soil to make himself at home. As Simon Browning he probably had some deluxe casket in which to bed down. Since then...

He's been forced to tote around a pocketful of dirt. Shit, he probably has a stash somewhere. In one of these barrels?

Adin blazed around the basement, searching for some container that might hold earth from Birkett's homeland. But they were all empty. Even the capacious coal bin

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was empty of anything except its residue of dust. Adin shifted into snake form and crawled under the door he believed led up into the mansion. It did.

He flew through the building—first floor, second floor, attic floor. The mansion's high-ceilinged public and residential rooms, empty now of their ostentatious furnishings, still clung pitiably to their old grandeur through flaking crown-molding and ridiculously deep windowsills. Adin could almost hear Birkett's voice in the echoing silence.

But evidence of Birkett himself, there was none. Adin had never expected to find the vampire's sleeping quarters on the upper floors, but he'd hoped at least to find a stockpile of English soil in some old chest or jardinière.

Nothing.

Returning to the basement, Adin followed another hunch. He again checked the western vaults. He'd seen some boxy shape far back in the center chamber, but, because it wasn't nearly long enough to hold a body, he'd paid little attention to it. Now he examined it more closely.

"Fuck!" he whispered. He felt the ceiling just inside the vault's archway. Sure enough, there was a recessed gate here too.

The "boxy" structure turned out to be a ponderous old safe, securely locked.

Adin grasped his head and sighed in resignation. "Fuck," he repeated forlornly.

If the safe did in fact contain Birkett's stash of dirt, Adin couldn't get to it without setting off an explosion. He'd never in all his years had to learn safecracking. Conceding defeat, at least in this regard, he drifted back toward his point of entry, passing the sorry, neglected heaps of furniture.

Something just barely poking out from beneath one of those sheets suddenly caught Adin's eye. His heart began to hammer. Breathing spasmodically, he slowly leaned toward it. Sweat already misted his upper lip. He lifted the edge of the sheet with one trembling hand.

There, lying atop the library table at which the suit of armor stood sentry, was a sprawling assortment of medieval weaponry. Adin's stomach felt wormy with terror. Absently wiping the sweat from his face, he lifted the sheet farther.

The thing he feared most in the world lay inertly on top of the swords and axes, the flails and maces.

An arbalest-one that looked like it had been made by the finest atilliator in England.

Now Adin *knew* what that safe contained. And it was infinitely less innocuous than dirt.

Chapter Twelve

Once Adin was back on Celia's property, he dawdled indecisively at the edge of the backyard just inside the woods. How was he going to deal with this turn of events? He'd considered destroying the arbalest but realized it would be a dismal exercise in futility. The thing was far too easy to replace. In fact, Birkett probably had another one or two or three hidden away as back-ups.

Besides, it wasn't the arbalest in and of itself that posed the threat, it was the custom-made bolts that would be discharged by it. Unless Adin could find and destroy those, he would remain in constant danger.

He sat on a log and peered at the back of Celia's house. Tonight... What was he going to do about tonight? Adin's immediate concern was keeping Celia safe, especially now that he'd seen further evidence of Birkett's murderous tendencies. But she shouldn't be in any danger. The onions and mullein at each of the house's entry points would keep Birkett away. Adin had even put some of the weed on and inside the chimney. Sly as he was, Birkett was essentially a base and simple creature very much at the mercy of his breed's limitations. He couldn't possibly breach those barriers.

Adin got up and walked to the rear of the house. He decided to sleep outside for an hour or two, near the back door. If Birkett did tunnel into the basement again, Adin would immediately be aware of his presence.

He lowered himself to the grass. Luxuriating in the smell and feel of it, he stretched out on his stomach. The tender shoots cushioned his cheek and pressed against his palms. Like a lover, the earth seemed to welcome the weight of his body.

He thought of Celia. Later, he would slip into bed and make love to her again. His weight would settle onto *her* welcoming body—her soft breasts and belly and thighs. Adin's cock thickened a little, pressing against the ground. Smiling, he closed his eyes.

Two words Celia had spoken echoed in Adin's mind just before he drifted off -like *Renfield*. He needed to corner Archie Grumbach and find out what connection, if any, the caretaker had to Birkett...

* * * * *

A high, piping sound infiltrated Celia's dream. Overcome by vertigo, she teetered on a creaking dock that jutted into a dark river. The river had a dank, putrescent smell. Terror gripped her. She didn't want to fall into the inky water. The fact that she couldn't see it but could hear it—lapping at the dock like a great, black tongue—heightened her anxiety. She wanted to turn and run but couldn't seem to move. If she fell in, she would have to join the pair of white forms that floated out there in the water, pitching slightly

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as low waves rolled beneath them. They were so white, Celia thought, so impossibly white they almost seemed to glow against the backdrop of night...

Something brushing against Celia's cheek jolted her awake. The dream dissipated. But not the smell...and not that eerie chirping. Celia swiped a hand through the air over her face as she forced her eyes open. They widened in disbelief as a primal fear twisted through her rib cage.

A bat was in the room, careening and diving over the bed. Celia could've sworn she saw its tiny eyes glowing like phosphorescent drops of blood. She shifted awkwardly, trying to get up and at the same time stay clear of the bat's erratic path. The covers slid down her body. And, at that moment, the bat plunged out of the air and landed between her bare breasts.

With the back of her hand, Celia reflexively swept the animal off her body as she rolled toward the edge of the bed. She felt a thud on the other side of the mattress. *I didn't hit it* that *hard and it wasn't* that *heavy*, she thought, and began turning over again to check –

Before Celia's mind could register what was happening, before she could even scream, a cold hand clamped over her mouth and her body was bracketed by the arms and legs of someone kneeling over her on the bed.

It was a man. A very powerful man. And it wasn't Adin.

He could only be Birkett.

At that instant a scream did rise in Celia's throat, but the sound came out as a thin mewl. The frigid, stifling hand still sealed her lips. Celia's face pinched in revulsion as a fetid stench infiltrated the air around her – the unmistakable smell of decay.

Instinct told her to lie still. With the full force of her will, she tried sending a telepathic message – *I need you*, *Adin. Come right now. Help me*.

The grizzled face that loomed over Celia lowered by a few inches. As soon as the man opened his mouth, she saw the sharp points of his dully glistening, yellow fangs. She squeezed her eyes shut and braced herself. *Help*, *Adin*, *help*...

But Birkett didn't attack her. He'd opened his mouth to speak. "I've been wanting to meet you, my dear. You're the first delicious piece Master Adin seems to have grown attached to. But Master Adin doesn't take care of you very well. It appears he didn't foresee you opening windows while you cleaned." His voice was coarse and raspy, like sandpaper drawn over rough wood. "You know, my dear, a dried weed is easily nudged by a breeze. It can be sitting on a windowsill one moment and out that window the next." The creature grinned, revealing his fangs in all their deadly glory. The rest of his teeth were blackened with rot. "How fortunate for me," he concluded in a lascivious whisper.

With his free hand, Birkett gripped one of Celia's breasts. She felt sharp fingernails digging with sadistic relish into her flesh. Scream after scream balled in her throat, unable to escape her lips...

And suddenly Adin was there. Or rather a large bird of prey was there – a hawk, it looked to be. Birkett sprang backward with a monstrous howl as the bird's talons dug into either side of his neck. Black blood trickled onto his shoulders. His arms shot up and back as he tried to grab the hawk. But it either anticipated this move or was possessed of supernormal reflexes, because it was already well beyond Birkett's grasp by the time his hands reached behind him.

Celia slipped from beneath the intruder and tumbled off the bed. Scrambling to a corner of the room, she hunkered down, her knees drawn up to her chest and arms wrapped around her legs. The hawk wheeled around the room and again dove at Birkett, this time clutching his temples and delivering vicious pecks to his eyes. The vampire bellowed in pain and rage as he lurched toward the window.

"You are going to die, Swift! When you least expect it, I will pin you to the wall with seven arrows and make you watch while I fuck and feed off and finally gut your goddamned bitch. I *vow* that will be the last thing you see as the life drains out of you!"

With that, Birkett pitched forward. His foul bulk crashed through the window and disappeared into the night.

Celia felt nauseous. She trembled so violently her shoulders were knocking against the walls. With wide and terrified eyes she watched the hawk, now perched on the windowsill, rapidly haze over. In an instant the haze elongated...and Adin stood before her.

Panting, he strode over to the corner where Celia still cowered. They reached out for each other. As Adin dropped to his knees and gathered Celia in his arms, she broke into sobs.

"He...he came in as a bat," she forced out, her breath hitching. "I didn't know what was happening. He got on the bed and...and turned into himself. And he was so...he was so..." Celia's voice broke. More tears came. She saw the fangs poised above her and shuddered.

Adin's arms tightened around her. "I'm sorry," he whispered, kissing and stroking her. "I'm so, so sorry. Please forgive me." He pulled back slightly. "Did he hurt you?"

When Celia saw Adin's frantic look, her first impulse was to comfort *him*. She had to pull herself together. "No, not really. Thanks to you." Still trembling a bit, she gently grasped Adin's face and kissed him.

"I don't understand how –"

"It was my fault," Celia said. God, she couldn't stand the distress in his eyes – those entrancing, beautiful eyes she so loved. She wanted them to be dreamy and seductive again, not full of self-recrimination. "I opened some windows today while I was working. When I closed them later I didn't think to make sure the mullein was still in place. Some of it must have blown away." She touched the side of Adin's face. "Please, don't blame yourself."

Their arms twined around each other again.

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"How can I *not* blame myself?" Adin murmured into her hair. "I'm the one who's put you at risk."

"No you haven't." It was all very clear to Celia now. "I put myself at risk as soon as I bought this house. Birkett's been in this area for a long time. He could've paid me a visit whether or not you were here. It was your intervention that saved me, Adin. Without you..." Celia couldn't bring herself to finish the thought.

Adin rose from the floor, helped Celia up and led her to the bed. They both sat on the edge of the mattress. As he reached for the blanket and pulled it up around her shoulders, his brow contracted. She noticed him studying her breast, the one Birkett had clutched so brutally. Adin leaned forward and kissed it with consummate tenderness.

"He's going to pay. For this and every other atrocity he's committed, that bastard is going to pay with his life."

Celia's gaze was riveted to Adin. The vow he'd just uttered in such a low, even voice seemed to carry infinitely more weight than Birkett's threats. And it was underscored by the grim determination in his face.

"But how?"

"I have to find him where and while he sleeps. Or somehow capture him when he's awake. *Damn it!*" Adin slammed a hand against the headboard. "I should've followed him tonight."

"He isn't at the Browning mansion?" Celia pulled the blanket more snugly around herself. She couldn't seem to quiet her nerves. It was as if the creature were still hovering outside—watching them, listening to them.

"I'm sure he's moved from the mansion. He wouldn't dare stay there now."

"Did you get into it?"

"Yes. I scoured the place. He's been staying there, up until quite recently. Now...now I don't know *where* he's chosen to sleep. Tomorrow I have one more avenue to pursue."

Wind gusted through the shattered window. Adin got up and secured the fallen mullein beneath the sill, where it wouldn't be disturbed. "I'll have this glass replaced tomorrow," he murmured, sounding distracted. He continued to stand there and gaze into the darkness. Finally, he turned back to Celia. "You *must* start wearing a cross."

She nodded, more than willing to do what Adin thought best. "Okay." There was obviously no more room for skepticism.

"I should check all the other windows and doors too. I'm sure as hell not going to leave you alone anymore, but it doesn't hurt to err on the side of caution."

"I'm coming with you." Celia rose from the bed and hastily slipped on her robe.

"Damned right you're coming with me."

Together they went through the house, making sure every door and window had repellant on or in front of it. Celia saw two windows through which Birkett could have

entered. Just as he'd said, the mullein had blown off the sills. Adin assured her he would gather more and nail it, glue it, tape it—whatever was necessary—to keep it in place. And he assured her again he would never leave her alone at night.

They pulled out the sofa bed. After making it up, Celia brought a bottle of wine and two glasses from the kitchen. Once they settled themselves, naked, beneath the covers and drank some wine, it almost began to seem like they were spending a normal, pleasantly cozy night together.

"I want to help you in any way I can," Celia said, gathering her resolve. She snuggled against the warm solidity of Adin's chest. Somehow, it made her feel safe.

"Thank you. But you shouldn't have to get any more involved in this battle." He raised the glass to his lips and drank.

"I said, I *want* to help you. If we work together on this—"

"Celia, you don't know what you're saying."

"I'm well aware of what I'm saying. And I mean it." She took one more drink before setting her wineglass on the end table and sliding beneath the covers.

It was warm and dark as a nest and smelled deliciously of Adin Swift. Celia felt like a little girl again, hiding beneath her quilt from whatever boogeyman might inhabit her closet or the space beneath her bed. Except that the long, hard legs stretched out beside her and the luscious cock at their apex filled her with distinctly adult urges.

Adin shifted so he was lying at an angle, his cock resting against his thigh. Celia loved the insouciant droop of it, as if it were challenging her to make it hard. She felt Adin's hand rubbing her back through the blanket. Her face inched forward.

Without putting her hands on it, she drew the taunting cock into her mouth as if it were a particularly thick length of pasta *al dente*. She could accommodate it fairly easily at first...but that didn't last. With the base tightened securely within the circle of her lips and the shaft pressed between her palate and tongue, she gave this delicious erection a series of long and lazy sucks...as if every draw were bringing nourishment into her body. But she coaxed no cream out of it. Not yet.

Adin squirmed a little as his cock grew. Still, Celia wouldn't wrap her hand around it. She opened her throat to the galvanized rod as her lips and tongue alone continued to hug it, to stimulate it in a tight, sliding embrace. Although he seemed to be straining not to thrust, Adin let Celia have his hard-on *her* way – and she rewarded him for his control by performing an intricate, teasing dance around the head with her tongue. After giving it a strong, concluding suck, she once more took in the entire length of it.

Adin let out a long, weak, wavering moan as his body stiffened and began to jerk. Celia matched her sucking to the rhythm of his ejaculation, pulling the hot cum into her mouth and swallowing it as his cock shot it out.

When she finally emerged from the covers, Adin looked nearly insensate. "That was...great," he said on two separate exhalations. "If that's the kind of help you're going to give me, I sure as hell won't turn it down."

Lying on her side and facing him, Celia grabbed his hand and put it against her slippery cunt. "Now it's *your* turn to help *me*."

"My pleasure," Adin whispered.

Within seconds—with Adin's thumb playing her clit while two of his long, deft fingers slipped inside her—she convulsed into orgasm, her hand crushing his hand against her shuddering body.

"I'd say we make a damned good team," Celia gasped.

Chapter Thirteen

"Well, here we go." Celia slapped and rubbed her hands together. "The dauntless vampire hunters." Amazing, she thought, how her mood improved when it was daylight and she was doing something with or for Adin. "So, you root out Archie and I'll pry whatever I can out of Betty Summerfield." She *did* feel dauntless. Celia could've sworn she'd started mining reserves of courage she didn't know she had.

And it was all because of Adin Swift.

What it meant was becoming more and more obvious to her by the hour. She was, purely and simply, falling in love. Only it wasn't all that pure and it certainly wasn't simple.

When she lifted her face to kiss him, he returned the press of her lips with a passionate fervor that had become as essential to Celia's well being as air and food. She couldn't imagine ever making love with another man. Let him have her blood. It seemed a small price to pay for the bliss she felt.

"I'm running out of words," Adin whispered when their kiss ended.

"That's not possible." Celia touched his lips. "Not with all those languages you have at your disposal."

He hugged her tighter and rested his chin on the top of her head. "Some feelings defy language."

His implication gave Celia a little thrill...but it was two-edged. Apprehension accompanied the joy. What in God's name were they to do if they *did* fall hopelessly in love with each other?

Slowly, as if reluctant to do so, Adin pulled away from her. "Well, I'd better get going. I'm hoping I can intercept Archie before he heads for the Tip Top Tap. I'd rather not have this conversation in public."

Celia nodded. "That's why I invited Betty over here."

They kissed again, lightly, before Adin headed for the door.

"Good luck!" Celia called out, and Adin responded with "Ditto."

Celia didn't move for a moment. She looked around, vacantly wondering if there was anything she could do, aside from making coffee, to prepare for Betty's visit. *Nope*. For the time being, the house looked as good as it *could* look.

One thought continued to dominate all others. What in the hell am I going to say to her?

* * * * *

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The ramshackle blue house on Buck Run Road looked too small for the land on which it sat. It also looked deserted. Solitary, dwarfed by the surrounding woods, it hunkered in a sea of tall, weedy grass that grew around—and through—a haphazard junkyard of battered vehicles and rusting equipment.

The rutted driveway abruptly terminated at the back of the house. There was no garage. A little farther on, a weathered lean-to spilled over with more piles of castoffs. Adin saw a dented blue pickup truck parked off the driveway near what must have been the back door. It didn't necessarily mean Archie was home—the guy probably couldn't drive anyway, given the number of drunk-driving charges he must have accumulated—but it gave Adin hope.

He checked his watch. It was close to eleven – not early by most people's standards. But if Archie caught a big fat buzz last night, he could very well still be sleeping it off.

Adin got out of the car, opened one of the rear doors, and pulled out a twelve-pack of Archie's favorite beer. He'd brought it as a sign his good will as well an inducement. Making his way to the back door, he warily eyed the rickety steps before mounting them. There seemed to be an inner door beyond this outer one, which led into a small mudroom heaped with bags of garbage. The smell instantly struck Adin. He paused briefly, seized by a disturbing flashback. The odor was one thread in the foul tapestry of odors that characterized London in the fourteenth century. For a moment he was tempted to turn around and leave.

But he couldn't. This visit was far too important.

The inner door—solid wood, with a curtained pane of glass set in the top half—suddenly swung open. Archie stood there, glowering and reeking of alcohol.

Adin decided to bypass niceties. "I'd like to talk to you." He handed Archie the twelve-pack.

The grizzled man took it without hesitation and without any thanks. He squinted at his visitor. "Didn't I see you at -"

"Yes. With my girlfriend."

Archie either smiled or sneered. It was difficult to tell. "Yeah. Bought the Everley house. You're the asshole who wanted to know about Woodbine's history." He put a snide edge on the last word.

"I'm not an asshole," Adin said, his tone as level as if he were reciting a phone number. He looked directly into Archie's face, his gaze just as unwavering. "Are you going to let me in?"

The gray man glanced down at the twelve-pack. His eyebrows rose a fraction. "Since I accepted this bribe, I s'pose I have to." He turned around without issuing any further invitation and shambled into his kitchen.

Adin followed, closing the door behind him. Archie stuffed the twelve-pack into a refrigerator redolent of spoilage. When he turned, he held two cans.

"None for me, thanks," Adin said.

Archie shrugged. Instead of ushering Adin farther into his house, he simply walked to the kitchen table, grabbed up an armful of the papers sprawled there, unceremoniously dropped them to the floor and pulled out a chair. He cracked open the beer can. Rather than return the second can to the refrigerator, he kept it in readiness on the table.

Adin, too, pulled out a chair, one of its legs catching on the peeling linoleum. As soon as he was seated he got to the point. "So tell me what you know. I mean the story *behind* the stories."

Archie slid him a veiled glance. "Who are you, anyway?"

"A man with a problem. And it relates to Browning and Everley."

Raising his eyebrows, Archie blew air through his lips and said, "I would never guessed." He punctuated his drollery with a swig of beer.

Two cats appeared out of nowhere and began snuffling through the junk on the floor. Archie ignored them. One of the cats pulled up short when it spotted Adin. Arching its back, it hissed. Alerted by this, the other one immediately bolted from the room. Its companion quickly followed suit.

Eyes widening, Archie looked from Adin to the living room and back to Adin again. He unsteadily set his beer can on the table. "You *can't* be one of them," he whispered. Horror had replaced the cool disdain in his face. Inching his chair back from the table, he almost toppled over. "You *can't* be. It's daylight."

Adin didn't bother explaining. He simply leaned forward, fixing his gaze on Archie. "You have nothing to fear from me," he said in a soft, low voice, "as long as you keep your mouth shut."

Eyes still wide, Archie nodded spasmodically.

"I'm one of the good guys," Adin added with a smile.

* * * * *

Betty Summerfield beamed above the explosion of flowers she held in one hand. Celia couldn't help returning her smile. She genuinely liked this woman, who immediately curled her free arm around Celia's shoulders.

"I'm so glad you invited me over," Betty effused, offering the bouquet. "Here, these are for your new house. I've been meaning to stop by, but I've been so god-awful busy lately."

Assuring Betty she understood and thanking her for the flowers, Celia ushered her guest into the living room. As she went to the kitchen to find a vase, she kept thinking how odd it was that Betty had come to the front door. Realtors, forever playing the humble-servant game, invariably came to a side or back door.

Returning to the living room, Celia set the vase on the coffee table. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Yes, dear, that would be lovely. Black, please."

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Betty began wandering about, exclaiming over the progress Celia had made with the house. She finally sat on the couch when her coffee was delivered. Celia sat in her favorite chair. After several minutes of idle chitchat, Betty finally said, "Now what was it you wanted to ask me?"

Celia shifted in the chair. "I'm not sure how to begin," she said with a nervous smile.

Betty tossed up her hands. "Just jump right in. I'm not one for beating around the bush."

"Well, Adin and I–"

"Adin? Oh your boyfriend!" Betty lifted her eyebrows. "That is one *gorgeous* man. Very nice too." She sipped at her coffee. "You must be *crazy* about him."

Celia felt her cheeks warm. "Yes, I am." She realized with a start this was the first time she'd admitted it to anybody.

"Any marriage plans?" Betty asked, her tone insinuating.

The warmth in Celia's face became a pulsing heat.

"Gosh, look at you blush!" Gleefully, Betty rubbed her hands together. "We haven't had a wedding in this town in months."

"Uh, Betty..." Celia set her mug on the coffee table. "I'm afraid you're rushing things."

She assumed a contrite look. "I'm sorry. It's just that you're such a lovely couple."

It's just that one of us is a vampire. Celia gave her a wan smile. "Anyway, as I was saying, Adin and I both have a...a kind of strange feeling about this house. It's not that we're superstitious people or believe in ghosts or anything. But we can't help but believe there's...well, maybe some aspect of this property's history that's sort of, you know, left an imprint."

Celia wanted to hide her face in her hands. *Oh God, I sound like an inarticulate wacko!* She hazarded a glance at her guest, expecting to see a look of utter bewilderment. But that wasn't what she saw.

Forehead furrowed, Betty stared down into her coffee. She sighed heavily. "I'm sorry you both feel that way." She looked at Celia. "I truly am."

Celia was the one who ended up feeling confused. Was Betty disappointed because she was the broker who'd sold the place, and her client had expressed dissatisfaction with it? Did she think that client was being irrational and unfair?

"Well," Celia asked uncertainly, "do you think our reaction is unjustified?"

"No, that's not the problem." Betty's whole mood had changed. The ebullience was gone. With a trace of guilt she said, "Your reaction might be *perfectly* justified."

* * * * *

"What do you want from me?" Archie whispered, tense as a clock spring.

"I told you. I want to know what *you* know. About the Browning mansion. And the Everley place. And their owners."

"Owner," Archie said, emphasizing the singular.

Sitting back, Adin let out a breath and blinked at him. His suspicion had been confirmed. "So Browning and Everley are the same man."

Archie's gaze darted around the room as if he were worried about eavesdroppers. Either that, Adin thought, or he couldn't decide how much it was safe for him to divulge.

"Those ain't his names." Archie took a long slurp of beer. "Neither one of 'em."

"I know that. Just tell me how and why it came to be that Birkett left as Simon Browning and returned as William Everley."

When Adin uttered the vampire's name, Archie winced in shock. "Oh my nuts... You *know* him?"

Slowly, Adin nodded.

"Uh..." Archie fingered his beer can. He lifted and lightly shook it, obviously determining how much or little it contained, and abruptly raised it to his mouth again. After draining it, he set it down. His hand shook.

"Don't be afraid," Adin whispered.

"Why shouldn't I be?" Archie cried. "Maybe *you* ain't no threat to me but *he* sure the fuck is!" His eyes looked like those of a horse in a burning barn. "I'm supposed to keep his secrets – don't you get it? I ain't supposed to be running my mouth!"

"We'll get to that part later," Adin said. He felt quite calm, now that he was finally getting some answers. "And you'll be all right. It's daylight. He doesn't have a clue what's going on in the world—including here. You can bet *I* sure as hell won't fill him in."

Archie stared at him. "I still don't know who or what you are. The cats..."

"It doesn't matter. Just start talking." Adin popped open the second can of beer for Archie and placed it before him. "Believe me, you'll be doing it for your own good."

* * * * *

"I don't know anything for absolute sure," Betty said. "I don't think anybody does...except that wife he had. And I'm afraid she won't be doing any talking."

Betty was referring to William Everley, and she didn't seem very comfortable with the subject. Celia paid close attention. So there *was* something to the unease she'd felt since buying this house. Rather than urge Betty to continue, she decided to let the realtor set her own pace.

"The only time I really had anything to do with him," Betty finally said, "was when he put this house up for sale. And even then I didn't have any contact with the man. I worked with his attorney. Everley himself had flown the coop." "How long had he been gone by that time?"

Betty sipped at her coffee. Judging by the look on her face, she was trolling through her memory. "Gosh, I guess it was maybe two, three months. I remember it was right around the time the county terminated its renovation of the Browning property."

Celia frowned. This fact seemed to have some significance...but she wasn't sure why. She couldn't let herself think about it, though. She had to focus on Betty's words.

"And nobody knows where Everley went?" Celia asked.

Betty shook her head. "From the time he moved in, nobody knew much of *anything* about William Everley. And he must've given his lawyer a gag order. Because when I asked where he'd gone, the only answer I got was, 'Mr. Everley chooses not to divulge that information'."

Celia uttered a thoughtful "hm." Again, something about this mystery nagged at her.

"So anyway," Betty went on, "when Everley signed with me to sell this place—or rather, when his lawyer did—I of course came over to check it out. I brought along my father-in-law. That's something I often do. He's in his eighties now but still sharp as a tack. Used to be a contractor, so he knows construction inside out. I just wanted to make sure the place had been maintained." Betty paused. She seemed to be considering what to say next—or *how* to say it. "I don't know how familiar you are with Native American cultures, but virtually every tribe has at least one elder with a sort of...mystical bent."

Celia leaned forward. This new turn had definitely sharpened her attention. "And that would be your father-in-law?"

"Yes." Betty flapped a hand. "Oh I always took that stuff less than seriously," she laughed lightly, "modern Indian that I am. I figured it was possible to respect my elders without buying everything they said." Gradually, her face took on a solemn cast. "But I know in my heart—I've *always* known—it can't easily be dismissed."

"What did he sense here?" Celia whispered.

Betty swallowed hard and turned down her eyes. "Unnatural death. And evil."

* * * * *

"He ain't never left," Archie said in a constricted voice. "Not for long, anyway. Once he came here as Simon Browning, he stayed. And he didn't build that house. His business partner—some guy named Ruggles—had it built. But Bir…I mean, Browning made him disappear as soon as it was finished, and *he* took it over."

Adin narrowed his eyes. "Made him disappear?"

"Killed him." Archie's gaze jigged over the littered tabletop. "Just like he killed that wife he had. And her son. And lots of other people in between."

"So the legend is grounded in fact. The one Enid Humphreys recorded."

Archie nodded. He swallowed more beer. "And Browning *did* do it at one of his sawmills. Cut off their heads and then...and then..." Archie had begun quaking so hard he could barely set his beer can on the table. He cast it a dismal look, as if he already missed having it in his hand. "He used buckets to catch their blood. Let 'em both drain out like slaughtered hogs. Ground up the heads and bodies and buried 'em in a pile of chips and sawdust, where they eventually got burned up."

"And he fed off that blood for days, maybe even weeks," Adin murmured.

"Yeah," Archie gasped out. "There was so much, it made him drunk."

The story sickened Adin. He'd heard of such things happening...but only to the most base and debauched vampires with the grossest of appetites. "So when did he leave? When did he abandon the mansion?"

"Shortly after that," Archie said. "There was just too much talk. So much that it got the law breathing down his neck. He decided it was a good time to travel the world and 'resume the hunt'. I don't know what that means, cuz the hunting seemed to be plenty good for him around here."

Adin knew what it meant. Birkett was looking for *him*. Allowing himself a wry, private smile, he realized how far afield his enemy had gone. Hearing Birkett was in North America, Adin came to Montreal in 1849 and made his way to the United States by the end of the Civil War. He roamed the eastern seaboard before meandering into the South. But the heat plagued him and he found that part of the country depressing—it hadn't recovered yet from the ravages of war—so he headed toward the northwest. He was probably within a few hundred miles of "Simon Browning" when the murderer fled the area.

"How did he maintain possession of the property?" Adin asked. "And when did he return?" The answers were fairly easily inferred, but Adin wanted confirmation.

Archie had gotten enough of a grip on himself, and his beer can, to take another drink. "He kept up with the tax payments – or had some law firm or accountant do it – while he traveled. He drew up a will bequeathing the property to a certain descendant. About twenty, thirty years later, he showed up *as* that descendant and took up residence again. He did that a coupla times, I guess. But he kept a lot lower profile."

That's what Adin had surmised. "So why did he ultimately lose the property, if he'd managed to hang onto it so long?"

Archie shrugged. "Ain't really sure. Pissed all his money away, I guess. Spent it faster than he could steal it. Married and knocked off some rich broads, but he still came up short."

"And that's when the county took it over."

"Yup." Archie got up and went to the refrigerator. He extracted two more cans of beer.

Vacantly, Adin watched him. "I guess the next logical question is when and how you got hooked up with him...and what the nature of your, um, 'relationship' is." He was tempted to add *Mr. Renfield*. But Archie probably wouldn't have understood the reference.

* * * * *

Betty's glassy stare was not directed at anything in particular...except, perhaps, her memories. "As soon as we walked in the back door—I'll never forget this—my fatherin-law froze. Right at the head of the basement stairs. He just peered into that black space. Then he said, 'This is an ill dwelling. You can't pass it on to an unsuspecting innocent.' When I told him I didn't have a choice in the matter because it was my job, he gave me the iciest look I've ever seen. He turned and walked out, refused to set foot in the place again."

Her throat bone-dry, Celia grabbed her coffee and took a drink. "Did you ever ask him for an explanation?"

It seemed an effort for Betty to concentrate on answering. "Yes. But he refused to talk about it, just kept telling me not to sell the house." She, too, reached for her coffee. "It was my mother-in-law who later filled me in. I guess he believed William Everley was possessed of an evil spirit."

"Possessed *of* or possessed *by*?" Celia asked.

Betty's gaze moved to Celia's face. "I don't know. Maybe both. And the old Indian is convinced it still stalks this place."

* * * * *

"I met Browning through William Everley," Archie said, resuming his place at the table. His mood settled into an introspective glumness.

Adin knew immediately what he meant, now that he knew Browning and Everley were one and the same. He shifted position, trying to get more comfortable, and waited patiently for Archie to continue.

"Once the county took over the mansion, Browning knew he couldn't stay there. Too many people around during the day, when he has to rest. Too much activity. He didn't have no more privacy. So he got the next best thing."

"The house next door," Adin said.

Archie nodded. "Soon as it went up for sale, he bought it. At night when nobody was there, he'd just move back and forth as he pleased. Browning can't seem to give that place up."

"Why do you keep calling him Browning? Why don't you use his real name?"

Terror flickered in Archie's yellowy eyes. "I ain't supposed to," he hissed. "I ain't *ever* supposed to speak his real name. And you shouldn't neither!"

"Don't worry about me," Adin said, unruffled. "So he had easy access to his old homestead by living where my girlfriend lives now."

"Yeah, you bet." Archie craned his upper body toward Adin. "And you should both get the hell out of there," he said in an ominous tone. "Browning can travel by land and by air," his arm shot out, startling Adin, "faster than lightning. And he can travel *through the earth*." Archie sat back. "Didn't I tell you to stay away from that old well and that cellar?"

Thoughtfully rubbing his forefinger over his upper lip, Adin nodded. "So I assume you...met him after you were hired by the county to act as caretaker."

Archie fortified himself with more beer. "That's right. I had to check on the place at night, make sure vandals or thieves hadn't tried to get in, make sure nothin' was boosted." He began trembling and again lowered his voice. "That's when I run into *him*, skulking around. He would probably heard me coming if he hadn't been concentrating so hard."

Adin felt his forehead dip. He dropped his hand to the table. "Concentrating on what?"

When Archie answered, his voice was intense but barely audible. "On what he was doing."

"And that was?"

"Feeding."

"Ah."

"I begged for my life," Archie said in a rushed voice, as if he were reliving the encounter. "I told him I'd keep my mouth shut...do anything."

Adin could almost write the rest of it. "So he struck a deal, told you he'd spare you if you looked out for him, if you made sure the place was secure and nobody could get in there."

Archie jerked out some nods. "After the county pulled out and William Everley 'disappeared', Browning moved back to the mansion and wanted me to look out for him during the day. *Especially* during the day. Because that's when he sleeps." Archie's mouth twisted. "And he sleeps like the dead."

Something about this meeting was beginning to make Adin's skin crawl. He wanted to be gone. "So he himself told you all these things about his nature, his background?"

"Most of 'em." Archie took a hefty drink. "Others I witnessed with my own eyes." He swiped a soiled sleeve across his mouth.

Normally, Adin would find this degree of openness very strange indeed...for a vampire, anyway. But he knew Birkett was an inveterate braggart, so he wasn't particularly surprised. "Everley supposedly had a wife," Adin said. "What happened to her?"

"What do you *think*?" Archie spat out.

All Adin could think was how much he hated having *any* Plague Breed in his bloodline. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He wondered how risky it could

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be for him to ask the question now poised in his mind, but he figured he had nothing to lose. "What do you know about the medieval weapons in the basement?"

Narrowing his eyes, Archie pulled back by a few inches. "How did you find out about those?"

"That doesn't concern you. Just answer me."

"Browning collected 'em. Or whoever he was before he became Browning. I don't know why. I only know there's one in particular that's really important to him." Archie paused, apparently waiting for Adin to speak. When Adin didn't, he said, "I suppose you want to know which one."

"I already know," Adin murmured, feeling a shiver in his gut. *Don't think about it now*, he admonished himself. "So what were you promised in return for your loyal service? Just that he'd spare your life?"

"Nooo," Archie breathed, shaking his head, his eyes round and glimmering. "That he'd give me life everlasting. *His* kind of life. And I'll never again have to feel like shit warmed over."

Dismayed, Adin shook his head. He pushed up from the table. "Just one more thing. Where is he now?" He tried to make the inquiry sound as casual as possible, perhaps catch this inebriated guardian off guard. "Where does he stay during the day?"

"I don't know," Archie muttered. "He left the mansion. I do know that. Not too long ago, neither. But he refused to tell me where he relocated to. He did say he'd be back, though. Just had to take care of some 'old business' first." Archie slumped in the chair. "I'm sure he'll be in touch."

"I'm sure he will," Adin said. "Thank you for taking the time to talk to me." *Damn it all*, he thought. Finding out Birkett's daytime hideout was his primary purpose in paying this visit. It made sense, though, that Birkett wouldn't share his secret with anyone—not while his most dire enemy was living in the same town.

Feeling defeated, Adin walked to the door.

Archie suddenly pitched forward and grasped his arm. "Hey, I still don't know anything about you."

With a swell of compassion, Adin studied him. He had nothing against this man. Archie was a down-and-out guy, like so many others, who'd been trying to bring in a paycheck. Unlike so many others, he happened to land a job that put him in the wrong place at the wrong time and almost guaranteed he would meet a bad end. It was possible he once had a decent life...and Adin mourned its loss.

With all his being, he hated having to say what he was about to say. But it was necessary. He looked into Archie's clouded eyes as he spoke. "All you need to know about me is that I'll come back—in a far less friendly mood and when you least expect it—if you breathe a word about me or this conversation to anybody... especially to the creature you call Browning."

Archie's look turned pathetically beseeching. "And will you promise me the same thing? Can I trust *you* to keep quiet?"

Gently, Adin uncurled the man's fingers from his arm. He grasped Archie's hand. "I give you my word on it, Mr. Grumbach. Shalom."

Chapter Fourteen

When Adin returned from the house on Buck Run Road, a man was upstairs replacing the broken bedroom window. He and Celia exchanged what information they'd come up with. Celia was stunned to find out that William Everley, the former owner of her house, was in fact Simon Browning—a connection she confessed to suspecting, although she couldn't quite bring herself to believe it. Both she and Adin expressed some surprise that Archie as well as Betty had been so forthright.

"I suppose it isn't *too* much of a mystery why Grumbach opened up," Adin said, resting his butt against the edge of the kitchen counter.

"Because he was loaded?" Smiling, Celia glanced at him. She sat at the table, rifling through her handbag.

"Actually, he wasn't 'loaded'. A little buzzed up, maybe, but not drunk enough to cough up *all* his secrets. I think he did it because I obviously had some connection to Birkett. And because he sensed I was...no ordinary man."

Celia's hands stilled. A look of concern came over her face. "Do you think he knew?"

Adin crossed his arms over his chest and considered this. "I can't say he *knew*. He certainly suspected it. But my being out and about in the daytime is what threw him off. All that matters, though, is that he keeps his mouth shut. And I think he will."

"I hope so." Closing her handbag, Celia got up and lifted her jacket from the back of the chair. "Well, I'm guessing Betty opened up just because she's a fundamentally good person who cares about others. She could tell I took the matter too seriously to be blown off."

"Sounds like *she* takes it pretty seriously, as well."

Celia nodded and slipped on her jacket.

"Hey, how long are you going to be gone, anyway?" She'd told Adin shortly after he came in that she needed to do some shopping.

Celia pulled her hair out from beneath her jacket collar. "Boy, I don't know. There's so much I need to get—food, curtains, maybe some decorative items, maybe houseplants. I'm not sure yet. I'll see what strikes my fancy."

Adin walked up to her and ran his hands down her arms. "I'd feel a whole lot better if I knew you'd be home before dark."

"Don't worry." Smiling slightly, Celia reached inside the top of her shirt and pulled out a thin silver chain. A sterling cross done in delicate filigree dangled from the end of it.

Adin lifted it with the side of his forefinger. It was quite beautiful and obviously an antique. "Good girl," he said, pleased she'd taken his advice.

He stared into Celia's eyes for a moment. It was enough incentive to kiss her. She immediately intensified the kiss—sliding one hand into his hair, sensuously moving her mouth against his. Adin felt blood charge into his cock. He also realized he was hungry. He'd had three raw eggs and a very rare rib eye steak for breakfast, but they weren't the same as—

"Why don't you get some nourishment before I leave," Celia purred, as if she sensed his need. She pulled down one side of the shirt's neckline to expose her throat.

Adin's nail immediately sharpened. Breathing more heavily, he plunged it into the base of her neck, just above the collarbone. As he closed his lips over the puncture, he heard Celia's weak moan of pleasure, felt her body quiver beneath his hands.

"You're making me wet," she whispered, her breasts pressing against Adin's chest.

His cock throbbed in response. Reluctantly, he lifted his head. His eyelids felt heavy. "I need to fuck you. I'm right on the brink of -"

Footsteps thudded in the near distance, moving down the stairs and through the living room. Muttering "Shit," Adin pulled away from Celia. He had to have her. He *had* to. There would be dire consequences if he didn't.

The window installer shuffled into the kitchen. "Almost finished," he mumbled, and immediately turned down his eyes. He obviously realized he'd intruded on an intimate moment.

"I have to get going, anyway," Celia said with a resigned smile and shrug.

"No. Not yet." Adin lifted her off the floor and into the cradle of his arms. With a speed that clearly startled Celia, he carried her into the bathroom and shut the door. The scent of her moist pussy and the strain of blood filling his cock had sent him into a frenzy of arousal.

She looked stunned by his fervor. "Adin, what—"

"Shh. Just bare your ass."

Celia's mortal hands moved too slowly. Adin pulled her jeans open and shoved them down her legs. After doing the same to his, he turned her around, put a hand on her back and forced her to lean over the porcelain pedestal sink. As Celia clutched its sides, urgency completely overtook him. Adin lifted her hips, pulling her feet off the floor, and rammed his stiff, thick shaft into her still-moist vagina. He rolled his head back and closed his eyes, giving himself over to his release, ravished by it. Over and over he yanked her ass against his pubic bone, thrusting his cock as deep as he could get it, reveling in the sleek tightness that gripped his rod. His weighted balls felt like rocks swinging between his legs.

And finally, cum burst from his cock, the orgasm rolling through him like a miraculous healing.

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Gasping for air, his head reeling, Adin gently eased Celia to the floor. "I'm sorry I had to do it that way," he murmured into her ear as she turned to face him.

She caressed the back of his head, his neck. "I didn't mind. I just wish I'd been a little more prepared and it had lasted longer."

Adin knew what he had to do and *wanted* to do. He glided his lips from Celia's ear to her mouth. Kissing her deeply, he fondled her breasts, feeling her nipples strain against his fingers even through two layers of clothing. He burrowed one hand between her damp, parted thighs. She was still ready for him.

"Do you want me to keep touching you?" Adin asked against her mouth. "Do you want me to keep kissing you and feeling you?" His fingers slid over her cunt, caressing it but not invading it. He wanted Celia to feel a luscious, mounting excitement.

She answered by crushing his lips against hers, sucking at them, thrusting her tongue into his mouth. "Never stop touching me," she breathed. "Never stop kissing me. I *always* crave you, Adin."

His fingers deftly parted her pussy lips and began tripping over and around the ripe berry of her clit. Celia groaned and writhed. With a gentle but firm pressure, Adin rhythmically massaged her into a climax that made her whole body tighten and vibrate. He had a fanciful image of beautiful, finely crafted harp responding to his touch. It was amazing and gratifying, this gift of profound satisfaction they kept exchanging.

And it wasn't just a physical gift...

"I wish we could spend the whole day in bed together," Celia said, breaking Adin's reverie. She touched his lips and smiled. "But I do have to get going so I can be back at a reasonable hour. And maybe you should get some rest." Her tongue darted out and playfully tagged the tip of his nose. "Dream about me."

Adin didn't tell her he couldn't. Vampires didn't dream.

* * * * *

Restless, Adin caught up on his email correspondence then worked around the house and yard. His growing intimacy with Celia nagged at him. Not since his marriage had he felt a bond so deep and multifaceted...with anyone. He feared for her, much more so than for himself. And it was the fear that made him refuse to put words to his feelings. The way things stood, it was a foregone conclusion that their options as a couple were fraught with serious dangers as well as severe limitations.

And Birkett... Adin felt so stymied by his enemy's elusiveness that he had to caution himself against doing something rash. Any misdirected desperation on his part could imperil both him and Celia. Considering Birkett was deep in hiding now – at least during the day, when he was most vulnerable – Adin's only course of action was to be near him close to dawn and follow him to his sanctuary.

He knew Birkett couldn't, wouldn't stay away from him and Celia. The vampire was certainly obsessed with both of them now. His last threat had been especially unsettling.

Adin knew he had to act. He had to act soon.

Late that afternoon he did lie down for a rest – outside, behind the small equipment shed. The sun was setting by the time he awoke. Sprinting to the driveway, Adin saw only his car there. Celia hadn't yet returned. As daylight drained away, he gathered up more mullein and scattered it over her parking place as well as the path she'd likely take in walking to the house. The cross was Celia's best protection, but extra insurance wouldn't hurt. After placing more of the weed and setting more onions inside the house, including the cellar, Adin went back outdoors.

He would wait. Darkness was minutes away.

Sitting just inside the open door of the equipment shed, Adin kept his keen senses trained on his environment. Nearly an hour passed. He heard a whippoorwill's poignant call—three notes, repeated over and over again. Suddenly, with a pang, he felt an affinity for this solitary night creature. It seemed so lonely, so needful. *You'll find her*, Adin thought. *Just keep trying and eventually you'll find her*...

The call stopped before it was completed, abruptly shorn off after two notes. Adin's body tensed. He heard a very soft rustle come from the rear of the yard. The sound was continuous, as if a sheet were being slowly swept over the tall grass. Whatever made the sound was nearly weightless. Or floating just above the ground.

As a vampire could do.

Silently, Adin slipped from the shed.

He saw Birkett glide like a phantom out of the dark woods. But there was something odd about his form. Adin strained his vision. Birkett wasn't shifting shape, he was fairly certain of that, but—

Before Adin could either alter himself or dive for cover—before he could even let himself believe what he was seeing—Birkett had raised and loaded the arbalest. Adin felt searing heat flash across his upper left arm. With a sharp intake of breath he reeled slightly. Pain shot through his body. He felt himself weakening—skin to muscle, muscle to nerve, nerve to bone. With every scrap of physical and mental power he had left, he compressed himself into his snake form and forced his limp body to move toward the house.

"I hit you, didn't I?" Birkett's voice was a sharp, prolonged hiss, like a straight razor dragged across a strop...but there was unmistakable jubilation in it.

Adin dragged himself over the ground.

"You can't escape me!" Birkett advanced through the yard, the grass stirring more frenetically as he moved with greater speed, obviously spurred by his excitement.

Adin approached the back door, knowing he would have to resume his normal shape to get inside. He felt no terror, only a grim determination. Birkett lusted for his

blood. Adin wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing it. Even if he died, he wouldn't let Birkett witness it, exult in it...and violate *his* body.

"You can't escape me, motherfucker!"

Like the point of the Grim Reaper's scythe, a deadly bolt buried itself in the ground close to Adin's snake body. He had to change now, *now* before Birkett had a chance to reload and fire the arbalest. With a directed force of will that made him lightheaded, Adin struggled to assume his own form. He actually felt it taking shape—something he couldn't remember ever happening before—and that didn't bode well. It was an indication of how long the process was taking. And that was an indication of how debilitated he was.

Just as Adin felt his hand connect with the doorknob, from which a bunch of mullein hung, he dimly heard Birkett load the arbalest. He fixed Celia's face in his mind – especially those large brown eyes, softened by...

Throwing all his waning strength into executing this simple task, Adin wrenched open the door as another bolt thudded into the frame, just inches from his neck. He collapsed in the entry, sending an onion bouncing down the basement stairs. The smell comforted him.

Outside, Birkett's animal growl of rage and frustration tore through the night. Adin's mouth slipped into a limp smile.

Just before he lost consciousness, Celia's face shimmered once more in his mind. Her large brown eyes were softened by...love.

* * * * *

"Adin? Come on, honey, wake up. Please wake up."

He felt a cool hand on his forehead, warm lips on his cheek. He didn't want to open his eyes. Not just yet. He simply wanted to lie there, reveling in Celia's touch, reveling in the fact he was alive.

Birkett hadn't triumphed.

"I don't think I'm up for fucking...not just yet," Adin murmured. He managed to smile.

Celia's face pressed against his. Adin felt moisture on his skin. "Thank God, thank God," she said in a tearful whisper. She kissed him as she skimmed a hand over his hair.

Adin opened his eyes. He felt far better than he would've thought. "I've never seen a woman so happy because I wouldn't make love to her." He lifted his hand to stroke Celia' s back.

She didn't even upbraid him for teasing her. "Are you all right now?" she asked, sitting up. Her worried gaze scoured Adin's face.

Only then did he realize he was lying on the couch. His left arm was bare, the upper portion wrapped in gauze. It still burned like hell but at least he didn't feel sapped of all

vitality. "How did I get here? To the couch, I mean." Adin touched Celia's face. She'd been crying.

"Oh Adin, honey, you had me scared half to death. When I came home you were lying inside the back door moaning. You were so pale. I didn't know what happened. I didn't know what to do. I would've called an ambulance if -"

"Shit, don't ever do that. It wouldn't be good thing to have medical professionals examining me." Adin slid up to more of a sitting position. He still felt a little woozy but his head was clearing by the minute. "Either I live or I die, Celia. There's no middle ground. Medical treatment is simply irrelevant to my existence."

Looking down, she nodded. "I hadn't thought of that. I just felt so frantic and helpless..."

Smiling, Adin lifted her hand and kissed it. "Thank you for caring."

Celia breathed a laugh. "I don't seem to have much choice in the matter." She looked away for a moment, lost to some thought, then turned her eyes back to his face. "Anyway, um...I finally managed to rouse you enough to get you into the house and on the couch. Damn it, Adin, what happened? Did you have some kind of accident?"

"I had a run-in with Birkett." Gingerly, Adin touched his bandaged arm. He rotated it so he could study it. A hazy blot of red discolored the gauze. But it was small and very light in color.

Celia's eyes widened in shock. "Oh no." She put her hands over her mouth.

"Well, I obviously got out of it alive." Adin cocked his head toward his left arm. "What kind of injury did you find?"

"Just a...a sort of abrasion. It looks pretty raw and there's some bruising around it, but it isn't deep."

"No penetration of the flesh?"

Celia shook her head.

He'd only been grazed. But as minor as the injury was, its effect had still been devastating. Adin knew he wouldn't make it if one of those bolts sank into his body. He needed another plan. And he needed it fast.

"I'm sorry I ruined your shirt." Celia slipped a finger beneath the left sleeve...or what remained of it. "When I saw that spot of blood on the fabric, you were still unconscious. I didn't want to try moving you. So I just cut off the sleeve. I dabbed the abrasion with peroxide, and I..." She looked embarrassed. "You'll probably think I'm crazy, but I poked my finger with a needle and let my blood drip onto the spot. It was shortly after that I was able to get you to the couch."

Smiling, Adin drew Celia to his chest. "I don't think you're crazy. I think you may have saved my life."

Celia jerked backward. That statement clearly terrified her. "Okay, that's it. We have to do something. If that...that monster can put you down with an injury most

children wouldn't even cry over, we have a serious problem here, Adin Swift. Even if I have to sell this godforsaken house - "

"Stop." He sat forward and took Celia in his arms. "I believe I have a friend who can help us out."

"A friend? You mean, like a *real* vampire hunter?" Even muffled by his shoulder, Celia's voice conveyed a decidedly dubious attitude.

"Better," Adin said. He hadn't bothered to ask what time it was, but now he could see faint light creating pallid haloes around the window blinds. It was dawn.

Celia drew back. Now she looked both dubious and confused. "Better? How, why?"

Hanging his head, Adin let out a nearly inaudible chuckle. He looked at Celia and cradled her face in his hands. "I won't even try to explain it. You're still getting used to having vampires in your life. And if I strain your belief," Adin raised his eyebrows and sighed, "this man is going to make you think you've entered another dimension."

"Man?" Celia echoed. "As in ordinary mortal?"

"He's a man and he's mortal," Adin said, smiling at his memories. "But he sure as hell ain't ordinary."

Chapter Fifteen

It was a glorious morning.

When the man he hadn't seen or spoken to in over a year answered the phone, Adin uttered a statement that served both as greeting and identification—"*Eppur si muove.*" According to legend, it was what Galileo had asserted after he was forced by the Inquisition to swear the earth stood still. *Nevertheless, it does move.*

The quote meant a great deal to the men connected by the phone, both of whom knew of things most people refused to acknowledge as real. Like vampires...and magick.

Nevertheless, they do exist.

"Swift? Is that really you?" The voice at the other end of the line tipped toward incredulous, delighted laughter.

"Hey, Jackson."

"I'll be damned...well, *I* won't, but *you* might be. Shit, Adin, you're still sucking air? And blood? You haven't run into any stakes or silver bullets?"

Adin couldn't suppress a smile. "You know it wouldn't harm a single hair on my chinny-chin if I *did* run into a stake or a silver bullet."

"Sorry, I'm confusing breeds again. My IQ must be slipping. Aging mortals are prone to that kind of degradation."

"Degradation, my ass. Your IQ hasn't gone anywhere and you haven't even hit forty yet, by my calculations." With a surge of emotion that was fast becoming routine for him, Adin realized how much he loved and respected and missed this man. In fact, realized how he yearned to *do* him. Savoring Jackson Spey's life force – could there be more of a rush than that, more mind-shattering ecstasy?

The blood of a fucking wizard...

The thought had already begun to arouse him—his restless cock and sweat-clotted pores bore testimony to that—and Adin knew he had to switch mental tracks before Spey sensed his longing. The last thing he needed to do right now was repulse this potentially powerful ally.

"What are you thinking, Adin?" Spey asked quietly.

"You don't know?" The hope-tinctured question was posed just as quietly, and somewhat breathlessly.

There was a pause, its silence broken only by the dull thudding of Adin's heart. Then Spey simply said, "No." "Oh I forgot," Adin said on a nervous laugh. "You're a stronger transmitter than receiver. So I suppose I'd better tell you why I'm calling."

"Okay, let's go on to that."

Even if Spey did feel the pulse of his friend's hunger, he didn't let on. Adin took a mind-clearing breath and gathered his thoughts. "Jackson, I'm on his trail again. I've even had some confrontations with him." No other description was necessary. Spey was quite familiar with Adin Swift's *raison d'être*.

"The one known as Birkett," he said, obviously to verify his assumption.

"Yes. And he definitely has the upper hand this time."

"Is this just a news bulletin," Spey asked warily, "or do you expect me to become involved somehow?"

Adin chuffed and shook his head. *He always was a perceptive son of a bitch.* "Shit, man, I'm not even sure why we need you. I'm not even sure *if* we need you—"

"Wait. We?"

"I guess I didn't get to that part. I'm with a woman. It's in and around her house I've detected Birkett's presence. In this whole town, in fact. It seems to have been his base of operations for a long time. Now that he knows we're here, he's hell-bent on getting to us."

"And this woman you're with, is she –"

Adin knew what the question was going to be, so he immediately said, "No, she isn't a vampire."

"Are you going to make her one?"

"I hadn't planned on it."

"Hm. So, uh, why haven't you birthed her? I do remember your little speech about scruples..."

Was he being snide? Adin knew that, friendship aside, Jackson Spey still didn't much trust the vampyrii any more than he trusted most necromancers. He was a practitioner of High Magick, and his standards of conduct matched his considerable abilities.

So Adin told him the truth. Except when it came to confessing his secret desire, he always told Jackson Spey the truth. "She hasn't asked. And I haven't suggested it because I care about her."

"Wow. That's a new one."

"It isn't new. You know I've never birthed anybody."

"Don't fly into a snit. I was referring to the love. That's what's new."

"I didn't say I was in love with her."

"Yes, Adin, you pretty much did. So, you still haven't answered my original question. Do you need my services?"

Adin could barely concentrate on the question. He was still hung up on Spey's conviction that he loved Celia. Coming from almost anyone else, he could at least try to brush the assertion aside. But coming from *that* man...

"Well?" Spey prompted.

"I'd sure as hell feel better if you were here."

"Where are you, anyway?"

"A town called Woodbine – for you, maybe a four-hour drive. It shouldn't be hard to find. I'm guessing you'd just take forty-three north to forty-one and go west on some state or county highway. I'll have to check a map to see which one. Unless you have a GPS."

"I'd be taking the Harley. It would be a nice trip too."

"On that bike? Hell yeah, it would be."

"So, uh...how soon do you need me?"

"The sooner the better," Adin said.

"Birkett's become that grave a threat?"

"I'm afraid so. He almost did me in last night."

There was a pause. "Okay. I'll tie up some business here and see you tonight. Anything you want me to bring?"

Adin's grin was so broad it almost made his face hurt. "Just your own bad self," he said, "and a big dose of mojo."

* * * * *

The back door blew open. With a start, Celia turned from the kitchen counter, where she'd set out smoked salmon, deviled eggs, sour dough bread, butter and a bowl of grapes.

"Am I in the right place?" a deep and very seductive voice asked.

And then, he appeared.

Celia gaped at the man who stood just inside her kitchen.

He smiled a bit uncertainly and turned up his hands. "Well, am I?"

Celia swallowed. The man, perhaps a shade taller than Adin, was clad in black leather from shoulders to feet. And he was absolutely, bone-meltingly gorgeous. He had long, tied-back hair and a down-curving mustache that merged with a small chinbeard. His eyes were absolutely hypnotic—hazel dominated by smoky jade, with distinct bright flecks of gold. The gold actually seemed to scintillate as she looked at him. His facial bone structure was perfect...and all the more alluring because of its touch of severity, which made him look overwhelmingly masculine, even dominant. If she hadn't been so hung up on Adin, Celia knew she would've creamed her jeans on the spot.

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"Uh, you must be..." Celia began to approach him just as Adin bounded into the kitchen.

"Jackson!" he cried. He immediately strode up to the man. Their hands slapped into a tight grip before they embraced each other.

Spey pulled back. "Hey, Adin." Smiling, the man gave him a light, fraternal slap on the cheek. "Just as pretty as ever...which isn't surprising."

They stood for a moment, warmly regarding each other. Adin turned. "Celia, this is Jackson Spey. Jackson, Celia Quill."

"That's 'spy' spelled S-P-E-Y," he said with a genial smile, striding across the kitchen. "But I expect you to call me Jackson." Celia extended her hand. As soon as Spey grasped it she felt an electric tremor wind up her arm, tickling her nerves. The gold in his eyes seemed to shimmer.

"It's – " Celia's voice came out cracked. She swallowed and tried again. "It's nice to meet you. I think."

Adin and Spey began laughing. Celia briefly put her hands over her face and slowly shook her head. She felt an arm come around her shoulders. Dropping her hands, she cupped one over Adin's wrist and leaned her head against his.

"I should've warned you," Adin said in a low voice still tinctured with amusement.

Celia's gaze returned to Jackson. "Who *are* you?" she asked, flustered.

"A friend helping a friend in need." He pulled out a chair. "May I sit down?"

Celia extended an arm. "I'm sorry. Yes, please do." She turned to the counter and began transferring the food to the kitchen table, along with silverware and several small plates. "Help yourself," she said to Jackson, who watched her with a musing smile.

Adin slid a hand over her butt before he, too, sat at the table. "I'll be dicked if that old black magic isn't still working," he said to his friend.

Silently, Jackson chuckled. "I'm afraid it isn't as useful as the old white magick."

"Bollocks. You've probably been laid more than I have."

This time, Jackson chuckled aloud. "Shit, Adin, I'd be dead."

"Can I get you some wine?"

"Yeah, thanks...if you don't mind." Spey popped a few grapes in his mouth and leaned back, stretching out his legs and linking his hands over his stomach.

Celia couldn't seem to keep her eyes off him. The man nearly steamed, he was so freaking sexy. She pulled out a chair and sat down, noticing his hair was longer than she'd thought.

"Red?" Adin asked.

"When I'm with you," Spey said, "I'll only drink wine in your favorite color." Tossing a teasing glance at his host, he leaned forward and grabbed a deviled egg. "Thank you for the food, by the way," he said to Celia. "I'm famished."

"You're very welcome. It was no problem at all." Only when Jackson looked directly at her could Celia *not* look at him. Damn, this was turning into one strange evening. Who was this man?

"How was the ride?" Adin asked, depositing a carafe of wine and three goblets on the table. He immediately filled a glass and asked Celia if she'd like some. When she declined, he slid it toward Spey.

"Smooth," Jackson answered, "aside from having to dodge a couple of deer." He lifted the goblet and drank. "I feel like I'm home when I'm on that bike."

Adin joined them at the table.

"When and where did the two of you meet?" Celia asked, looking from one man to the other.

"On an island in the Caribbean. Years ago." Leaning forward, Spey lifted a plate and filled it with a slab of salmon, another deviled egg and a hunk of buttered bread. "Although to Adin it must seem like the blink of an eye." Resting his forearms on the table, he began to eat in earnest.

Adin shrugged, watching him with obvious pleasure.

"We got drunk together on the best fucking rum in the cosmos," Jackson continued. "I did this little trick, and when Adin asked how I did it -"

Adin sat forward. "Jackson just blurted out, 'I'm a wizard, bud. And I don't mean stage magician.' So I said, 'Well, fuck you. I'm a six hundred fifty-year-old vampire'."

Nodding and smiling, Jackson chewed, swallowed. "And we just started in with all this ball-banging shit, boasting about our respective wondrousness. Of course, neither one of us believed a word the other was saying."

"Not until we put the pudding on the table," Adin added.

"Yup." Jackson finished his salmon. He quickly reached for more. "Not until we dished up some proof."

Celia was hung up on the word *wizard*. Was this man some kind of occultist? Did he cast spells? "So, how *did* you prove your 'respective wondrousness'?" she asked, hoping to find some answers in their answers.

Adin poured himself some wine and rested his arms on the table. "First we started yammering at each other in a half-dozen languages—Latin, French, Hebrew..." He turned to Spey. "What else?"

"German, maybe. But you busted my nuts in *that* contest."

Adin laughed. "Yeah, your Hebrew pretty much sucked."

"It's gotten better," Spey said, wiping his mouth with a napkin. "But it wasn't that so much as the fact you knew about a bazillion more languages than I did."

"I'm sure it wasn't more than eighteen or twenty, Jackson. And you weren't all that awestruck at the time, as I recall. When I laid some Middle English on you, you said, 'Big fucking deal. Any grad student in English can piss out a few lines of *Sir Gawain.*'" Spey lifted his eyebrows and glanced at Celia. "Actually, I was pretty proud of myself for even recognizing Middle English."

She couldn't help but smile. These men obviously shared a colorful past enriched by mutual affection. "So cut to the chase already! What finally made you believe each other?"

"Your turn," Spey said to Adin. "I want to concentrate on stoking my furnace." He grabbed more bread and another egg.

"Oh, Jackson conjured some little snot string of an imp and trapped it in the empty rum bottle. I didn't appear in some photos I should've been in. Jackson banished the imp. I showed him the amazing hypodermic fingernail..."

Laughing, Spey rocked back in his chair. "Yeah, typical 'vampires and wizards gone wild' kind of shit."

"But we got down to some serious conversation after we sobered up," Adin said, "and that's what ultimately broke down our skepticism."

Celia realized her mouth had fallen open. She quickly closed it. Wizards and imps, conjuring and banishment... "Jackson," she said tentatively, "what exactly is your, uh...area of expertise?"

He looked at Adin. "You didn't explain it to her?"

Adin looked at his lap. "Well, you know, Celia's been having to deal with enough alternate realities lately." He turned his gaze to her. "Haven't you figured it out yet?"

One by one, everything except the wine carafe and goblets rose from the table and floated over to the counter, where they gently set themselves down. Celia gaped at her guest. "So...you *are* a wizard?"

Jackson smiled most enchantingly. "In the flesh."

Chapter Sixteen

It was late – at least late by mortal standards – when Adin showed Jackson to the first floor guestroom. Still spare, it contained nothing more than a single bed, nightstand, and lamp, all of which Celia had bought shortly before she moved.

"Now I can tell you what I saw as I pulled up," Spey said, dropping his saddlebags to the floor.

"I assume it's something you didn't want Celia to hear."

"You assume correctly." Jackson dropped to the bed and stretched out on his side. "I saw a shadow. A slithering, semitransparent form crawling up the side of the house. It was like an inkblot, like a watery, spreading inkblot. And it seemed to be moving toward a particular window."

"Birkett," Adin said, sinking to the floor. He rested his elbows on his bent knees. "Which window?"

"Does this place have an attic?"

"A small one, not much more than a crawl space."

"That's where he was headed."

Adin briefly dropped his forehead to his hands. "At least I secured it." He looked up again. "This is getting old, Jackson. I have to do something."

"Yes, you do. We'll all talk about it tomorrow. At least Birkett won't try coming back tonight. I'm certain he knows I'm here."

Adin nodded. "You know, man, I can't tell you how grateful I am that you *are* here. I was really at my wits' end. Protecting myself is one thing, but protecting myself as well as Celia..."

"I understand."

Adin knew he did. "I want to repay you somehow. If there's anything, *anything* that's within my power to do-"

"There is." Spey's answer was abrupt and definite. "Actually, seeing you live happily ever after is payment enough. But there is something you could do, something quite simple. For a vampire, anyway."

Adin tossed up his hands. "Name it. Consider it done."

"I want you to pierce me." Jackson was completely serene as he said this. "I want you to drink from me."

Adin's heartbeat and respiration seemed to stop. He stared at the man on the bed, unable to believe what he'd just heard. "You can't mean it," he whispered.

Spey sat up, crossing his legs like a yogi. "I do mean it. I've heard for years it's a one-of-a-kind experience. I want to go through it."

Jesus, Adin thought, averting his eyes. He could already feel his nail growing, feel his cock bumping against his zipper. "Maybe I should clue you in about a few things..."

"Just do it, Adin. I don't want to go into this with any preconceptions. I don't want my reaction colored in any way."

"Shall we do it now?"

"Celia's turned in, hasn't she? It seems as good a time as any."

"And you're absolutely certain?"

"Yes. As long as you can assure me this won't have any adverse effects."

Adin got up and moved to the side of the bed, where he lowered himself to a oneknee crouch. "I promise you, Jackson, my feeding won't harm you in any way. It won't make you a vampire or pollute your blood or diminish your powers. In fact, it might even enhance them."

Spey raised his eyebrows. "What makes you say that?"

"A sixteenth-century mage let me feed on him for three years running – begged me to, actually. He claimed it made his magick more potent."

Brow furrowed, Spey regarded Adin. "Who was he?"

"I'm sorry, I can't tell you that. I swore never to divulge his identity."

The statement seemed to take Spey aback. "That's very admirable."

"A vampire without ethics is nothing more than a common parasite," Adin said with a smile.

Spey guffawed. "You're okay, Swift. I knew I liked you for a reason."

Adin got to his feet and stood over the bed. "So, do you want me to feed in my own form or one of the alternates?"

"Your own. The hawk would remind me too much of Prometheus. The snake is just too damned —"

"Freudian?" Adin suggested with a smile.

Spey snickered as he peeled off his shirt. "I just don't relish the idea of being bitten by a goddamned snake." He cavalierly tossed his shirt aside, then got off the bed and began undoing his jeans.

Adin's breathing quickened. "I take it you want to do this naked."

Jackson glanced up. "Skyclad. Of course. It's supposed to be a very intimate, very sensual experience of brutal beauty. I want to be in a natural state. Do you object?"

Adin hitched up his eyebrows. Well, this was an interesting turn. "Me? Object? Not at all." Feeling more excitement than Jackson likely felt, Adin too began to strip.

As soon as he pulled off his shirt and threw it onto the bed, Spey's gaze fixed on the arm wound. He reached out and touched the edge of it with his fingertips. Adin flinched slightly. Jackson's eyebrows rose.

"I've never seen you injured, Adin. Did this come from your tussle with Birkett?"

"Yeah." Adin glanced at the abrasion. Thanks to Celia's prompt ministrations, it was healing quickly. He'd removed the gauze bandage when he'd showered earlier that day. But given the nature of the injury, it would be a while before all traces of it were gone. Had Adin been hurt through a common accident or by a mortal attacker, he would have healed almost instantaneously. "But we don't need to talk about that now." Adin started removing his shoes and socks.

"I hope we're not being too methodical about this," Spey murmured. He leaned, nude and casually magnificent, against the high bedpost. "You should have crept up to me in a dark and narrow alley. You should have engulfed me in your voluminous black cape and overpowered me. Aren't vampires supposed to stalk around on foggy nights, trailing mystique and imparting sudden terror?" Crossing his arms over his chest, Jackson smirked.

Adin shook his head and rolled his eyes. "I don't know what's worse – the exile and mutilation we've been threatened with for centuries, or all this Varney-Dracula-Nosferatu horseshit we've had to endure." Adin slipped off his jeans and briefs and kicked them across the room as Spey chuckled through his nose. "By the way, I want you to wear your conical cap and sprinkle me with fairy dust while I drain you down to a poor semblance of an anorexic runway model."

Spey laughed, obviously trying to mute the sound because Celia was sleeping. "I never could figure out how to stuff that fucking cap in my saddlebags without crushing its peak."

Adin smiled. Although he realized how ridiculous they must look and sound – two grown men standing naked in a room, arguing about stereotypes – he railed on. He was enjoying himself. "I owned a black cape for maybe five years out of the last six hundred plus, and I hated the unwieldy thing. Narrow alleys disgust me because they remind me of old London. Fog fucks up my sinuses."

"You have sinuses?"

"What do you think? I'm a vampire, not a goldfish."

Spey again erupted into laughter.

Through his peripheral vision, much broader and clearer than a mortal's, Adin could see Jackson's cock. It looked as gorgeous as the rest of him. His body was very much like Adin's own—long and lean and banded with muscle. Adin refocused on his face.

"And you know damned well," Adin said, his voice rougher, "I couldn't overpower you...black cape or no black cape."

Jackson's eerie eyes subtly changed color, the grayish green glimmering now with gold streaks that radiated out from his pupils. He hadn't moved at all except to smile...and he did so again, in a suggestive way, before he spoke. "Yes you could. If I let you."

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Heart galloping in anticipation, Adin held the wizard's spellbinding gaze. "We'll see."

He strode up to Jackson and grasped his forearms. He felt a refusal to be dominated in the hard, bunching muscles—instinctively, Spey was battling him—but it took a great deal of physical force to wear Adin down. Only if Jackson resorted to metaphysical force could he prevail.

But he didn't resort to it. He apparently wanted to be an ordinary man pitting his strength and will against those of a would-be attacker. And he had a great deal of both.

Spey's resistance excited Adin. In his late teens and early twenties Jackson had been, Adin knew, a barroom brawler and street fighter, and that background combined powerfully with the discipline he'd since acquired as an adept. It was obvious. With or without the benefit of magick, he was a force to be reckoned with.

Energized by his excitement, Adin gripped both of Spey's wrists in one hand. Within the space of a second, his hand shot upward, pinning the wizard's arms to the tall bedpost that loomed over their heads. Adin wanted him...badly. The hunger he'd been harboring for over a decade had sharpened to a keen, desperate craving. As he pressed his sweat-glazed body against Jackson's, he felt his engorged cock straining against the other man's abdomen.

With a growl of passion and victory, Adin plunged his nail into the wizard's corded neck and simultaneously crushed his lips against the puncture wound. He felt Spey shudder, felt Spey's cock throb and swell until it became as hard as his own. As Adin sucked and lapped, he heard the wizard make a provocative, throaty sound of blissful abandon.

Whatever flowed onto Adin's tongue was far different from the rich, sweet, comforting blood he was accustomed to. It was like an effervescing laser beam, a force drawn from the very center of the universe—and intensely, indescribably transporting. If ecstasy could be distilled, Adin thought, this is how its essence would taste, would feel. It didn't just merge with his bloodstream. It zinged up and down his spine, trilled through his nerves, mined his marrow. He even felt the current in his balls. He wanted to explode with cum and laughter.

"Jesus," Adin gasped.

He slid his lips down Jackson's neck to his chest, relishing the man's scent – a heady mix of fresh sweat with lingering traces of incense and *oleum magicale*. After indulging his lust for a moment – he swept his hand over Jackson's pectoral muscles and rubbed the beaded nipples with thumb and little finger – Adin again pierced the man's firm, slick flesh.

Spey jerked this time, all his muscles briefly flexing. He relaxed into a weak tremble and let out a series of vocalized sighs, as if he'd just climaxed. But he hadn't—at least not by ejaculating—because Adin could still feel Jackson's rock-solid erection nuzzling against his own.

The feel of it was an increasingly maddening distraction. As Adin got closer to sating his blood hunger, his sexual hunger grew.

Finally, he lifted his head. His eyelids and limbs felt weighted. Despite his mental haze and physical lethargy, he was surprised to see both himself and Jackson kneeling on the floor, facing each other. At what point they'd succumbed to gravity, Adin had no idea.

Jackson put a hand on Adin's shoulder. "Incredible. Just incredible," he said a bit breathlessly, shaking his head. "It was like having orgasms under my skin. Everything inside me was just...convulsing and blossoming. Man, I could get addicted to that."

"So could I." Adin pulled his hands through his hair. "I don't think you have blood in your veins, Jackson. I think it's some kind of cosmic cocaine."

Spey responded with a limp chuckle. "I'd find more humor in that if I didn't need to get off. My wood is aching. My balls are aching."

Smiling wanly, Adin nodded. "I feel your pain, believe me. But I did try to warn you."

"Too late now. I have to get to the bathroom and give myself some relief." Spey looked around. He grabbed his jeans then hopelessly dropped them. "Shit, I don't think I can even get my pants on."

Adin looked into his startling eyes. "Why don't you take care of that right here? And I don't mean by masturbating."

Spey studied Adin's face. His own expression was unreadable. "I'm not sure I catch your drift."

"I could call Celia down here."

"Hey, I'm not going to fuck your girlfriend, Adin."

"Damned right you're not. Shit, Jackson, she'd probably chain herself to the Harley and wait for you to leave."

Spey looked away. "Stop it."

"What I meant was," Adin said, "I need to get off too. And I have to do it soon. So you might as well use me to get relief while I find relief in Celia."

A lift of the eyebrows was Spey's only reaction. "I don't want to hurt you, Adin."

Laughing, Adin said, "You won't. Remember, I spent a good portion of my existence being a shameless libertine. Besides," he lightly touched Spey's rigid cock, it twitched in response, "what's a little bum sex between friends?"

"I don't believe I'm actually considering this," Spey murmured. He reached for his saddlebags. "I think I have some condoms and lubricant..."

Adin got up and moved to the door, where he switched off the light. "Forget the condom. I don't catch diseases. Therefore, I don't transmit diseases."

"Makes sense."

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As Spey rummaged through his bags, Adin hurried upstairs to the bedroom. He kissed Celia to wake her, then took her hand. "Celia, honey, I need you. Come with me to the guestroom. Please."

Groggily, she sat up and pushed the hair from her forehead. "The guestroom? But isn't Jackson—"

"Yes. I just fed off him because he wanted me to. Now we both need a release. All you need to do is lie down on the bed and let me make love to you."

Shocked into wakefulness, Celia didn't seem to know how to respond.

"Believe me," Adin said, "you needn't let modesty stand in the way. Jackson won't touch you. He won't even see you. The room's dark."

"But how...?"

"Come on." Adin gave her hand a gentle tug, urging her off the bed. She wore a short, diaphanous nightie that made him even hotter. No, he definitely didn't want Jackson to see her or touch her...any more than he wanted Celia to see or touch the wizard.

Together, they padded back downstairs to the guestroom.

Adin's vision allowed him to catch a glimpse of Jackson sitting on the edge of the bed, his cock still erect as an ax handle. The man had amazing control.

"I tried taking care of this myself," Spey said. "It didn't work. I don't know what you did to me, Swift, but the effects have been...tenacious. Uh, hi, Celia. Thanks for helping us out. Try not to be embarrassed."

"Are you naked?" came her voice out of the darkness.

"As the day I was born."

"Are you hard?"

"Painfully."

Curiously, Adin looked at her. Celia was aroused by this scenario. He could sense her excitement, could smell it. Her desire fueled his own.

He saw a tube of lubricant on the covers and picked it up. "Let me do the honors," he said to Spey.

Kneeling beside the bed, he squeezed some of the slick gel into his palms while trying to keep his hands from shaking. With meticulous pressure, he curled his fingers around Spey's stiff rod. Just the feel of it — hard and dense, mapped with veins beneath its taut and satiny skin — almost made Adin lose control. Taxing him even further, Celia knelt behind him and began rubbing his chest, his thighs. Her hands slipped between his legs and teased the base of his cock, the root of his balls.

In languorous slow motion, Adin drew his hands down the length of Spey's shaft. He briefly massaged the soft, distended head with his thumbs. The feel of it, and of Celia fondling him, was pushing him to the brink. Adin felt a little crazed. Barbarity seemed to surfacing on the spike of his acute and unsatisfied desire.

Impulsively Adin dipped down, slipped the head Jackson's cock between his lips and gave it a quick, forceful suck. Spey groaned, his hips thrusting forward. Adin felt a drop of pre-cum on his tongue. It, and Celia's wandering hands, coaxed his own cock into leaking. He removed his mouth and swept his hands back up the length of Spey's large, stiff rod.

"You better hurry," Jackson gasped, his breath ragged.

Celia got onto the bed and lay on her back. Adin knelt over her, his fevered hands playing with her plump breasts and distended nipples. The feel of that thin, slippery fabric seemed to make her flesh all the more tantalizing. Moving quickly, Jackson stood behind Adin. Almost simultaneously, Adin felt a strong arm curl securely around his waist, a large hand splay across his back. He also felt Spey's tense restraint. It was obvious the man wanted to plunge his cock, fast and forcefully, into Adin's body. Just the thought of such an assault made Adin's own restraint crumble. He slid his cock into Celia's wet cunt just as Jackson eased his rod into Adin's ass, one hot, hard inch at a time. The tease, although unintentional, made Adin quiver from head to feet. He closed his eyes, giving himself over to the male flesh that filled him and the female flesh *he* filled. A luxurious rhythm caught up the three pleasure seekers, linking them in lust.

Spey began to thrust—carefully at first, soon more assertively. Within seconds he let out a prolonged, guttural groan. Adin felt the tough shaft pulse within him, so strongly that the spasms sent shock waves throughout his body. He felt a torrent of hot cum. It was more like an explosion of energy than fluid. The deep throbbing of that cock depositing its rare cream nearly made Adin swoon.

As he felt Jackson's weakened body begin to wilt onto his back, Adin's own pumping accelerated. He felt buried in Celia, lost in her. As she pulled his head down to give him an impassioned kiss, cum seemed to spurt like liquid fire out of his cock...and it continued to, even after he'd collapsed onto Celia's damp, shuddering torso. His whole body twitched with a pleasure so intense he didn't want it to stop.

Spey dropped onto the bed, crooking one leg and throwing an arm over his eyes. He said nothing. He was obviously still catching his breath.

"Was it good for both of you?" Adin asked, his spent body still cushioned by Celia's soft breasts.

They all began to titter. The whole bed shook as their laughter intensified. Adin's eyes teared as he dropped his head to Celia's shoulder.

"Are you...are you a satyr, Swift, or are you just glad to see me?" Jackson asked through his giggles.

"You stole my question."

"Fuck you."

"Uh...I think that's already been done."

Celia slid out from under Adin's body and sat up, leaning against the wall. "You know, I really would've liked to watch."

"Shameless little minx," Adin muttered, lying on his belly. He couldn't believe his cock was still pulsing slightly, still dripping. Lifting his head, he nipped at her thigh.

Celia delivered a sharp slap to his ass. As Adin flinched and cried "Ouch!" a new round of laughter began.

She kissed and lightly rubbed the spot she'd slapped, then got off the bed. "Well, if I can trust you rambunctious boys to behave yourselves, I'm going back upstairs. I'm really tuckered out now."

Adin heard her move to the door. He lifted himself on his arms. "Good night, my lovely, and thank you. I'll be there shortly."

"You're welcome. See you in the morning, Jackson." Celia paused before opening the door. "I assume you'll be dressed."

"Yes, I'll be dressed," Spey said.

"Damn it," Celia murmured as she slipped out of the room.

"See? I told you!" Adin cried. "She wants you, man."

"She doesn't want me, Adin, except in some fantasy kind of way. That lady is crazy about you." Spey snickered again, then let out a long *Ahhh*. "I feel like I'm half at a summer camp, half at a Roman orgy." He sat up, leaning against the headboard. "We need popcorn and wine, Adin."

"I don't think I can get up. I'm stuck to the bed."

This elicited more snickering. Adin finally roused himself and sat back on his haunches. He was glad to see he'd dripped on his own t-shirt, not on the bedspread.

"Ever done this before?" Adin asked, growing more pensive. "I don't mean the vampire thing -"

"I know what you mean," Jackson said. "Yeah, a couple of times. During rituals. Since I'm straight, I've never done it just to...you know...get off. But this was an exceptional circumstance. Have to admit, though, it felt damned good." He gave Adin a light swat on the back. "You were there when I needed you."

Adin nodded. His gaze shifted in Spey's direction. "I've never experienced anything quite like it. I can't deny you turn me on, Jackson."

Spey rolled his head back and chuckled. "I seem to have that effect on a lot of people." The statement contained not the slightest trace of vanity. "When I began practicing magick, I had no idea what some of the results would be."

"So how's your love life?"

The wizard's expression became more somber. "Nonexistent. A one-night stand or brief fling here and there. Some sex during ritual. But those things don't constitute a love life."

"The magick still comes first, huh."

"The magick still comes first," Jackson affirmed. "You and I are a lot alike, Adin. Or we were...until you found your special woman. I envy you."

"Me?" Adin lowered his head. "You can't imagine what it's like," he murmured, "being what I am and...caring about someone like Celia."

"It's changed you, hasn't it?"

"Yes." Adin's voice was flat. He hadn't let himself explore his feelings, didn't want to explore them. He had one kind of existence, she, another. "Let me tell you something, Jackson. If you don't think a vampire can become bloody well sick of his endless life, think again."

"Have you told her you love her?" Spey asked quietly.

And with that simple question, Adin realized an exploration of his feelings was unnecessary. He already knew what they came down to. Surrendering, he simply said, "No."

Spey, eyes softening, reached out and grasped his wrist. "You're a good man, Adin Swift, and I swear I'll bust my ass to help you have a decent future." He withdrew his hand. "If you want to find fulfillment, stay with Celia. I'll try to help clear the path to your happiness."

Chapter Seventeen

As they cleaned up after breakfast, Celia could tell something weighed on Adin's mind. She walked up behind him and put her hands on his shoulders. "Tell me what's bothering you."

He glanced over his shoulder, then turned and gave her a wan half-smile. "All kinds of things, I guess. I'm just hoping they sort themselves out by the time Jackson leaves."

Celia trailed her fingertips down the side of his face. Damn, how she loved that face – those sincere and expressive eyes, that handsome mouth. "You've changed a lot since the night we met. For the better, I think."

"Do you?" Adin grabbed her hands and led her over to the table. He pulled out a chair for Celia and another for himself. After they were seated he said, "Would you say we're...committed to each other?"

Celia felt a squirming in her stomach. "I'm not sure how to answer that. Obviously I can't speak for you, only myself." She swept a few stray crumbs off the tablecloth, acutely aware they'd never said anything to each other about love. And she didn't know if they ever would. "Actually, I can't even speak for myself, since a commitment that isn't mutual isn't a commitment." Uncertainly, she looked at Adin. "Am I making any sense?"

Smiling softly, he watched her. "Yes. A one-sided commitment falls more within the realm of infatuation. Or obsession."

Celia felt increasingly edgy. Was he suggesting that's how *their* relationship could be defined? Did he already sense an imbalance of feeling? Maybe Adin was paving the way for his departure. If Jackson Spey could help eliminate the threat posed by Birkett, Adin would have no reason to stick around.

He grasped her hand. "Celia, I don't want you to think – "

"We'd better have our powwow." Freshly showered, Spey strode into the kitchen. He pulled up short when he saw them sitting at the table, holding hands. "I'm sorry. Am I interrupting something?"

"We can pick it up later." Adin pushed his chair back. "Come on, lady," he said to Celia. "We need you to be in on this."

She got up, too, resolved to put personal interests aside. Adin's well being was far more important than her own romantic yearning. It was *infinitely* more important...

They went to the living room. Spey sat in the recliner, Adin on the couch, Celia on the floor at his feet.

Jackson began. "First off, you need to tell me something, Adin. How did Birkett manage to injure you?"

Adin stared into his eyes. "You know I can't tell you that. Just like you won't divulge your magickal name."

"This is *necessary*." Spey's tone left no room for argument. "In order to decide on a course of action, I need all the facts. Now I know goddamned well Birkett has some sort of weapon that's very harmful to you. That injury to your arm...it would've healed spontaneously under normal circumstances. Correct?"

"Yes," Adin said reluctantly. He glanced at Celia. She looked horrified. Of course she wouldn't know about a vampire's physical responses to injuries.

Spey leaned forward. "How can you be killed, Adin?"

Wondering whether or not to answer, he turned his eyes down and curled a hand around the lower half of his face. Did he or didn't he trust Jackson Spey implicitly? Of course he did. The man's character was sterling.

Adin lifted his head and sighed. "With an arbalest. The bolt must have an ash shaft. The blade, leaf-shaped and forged from iron, must be dipped in another vampire's blood." He gave Jackson a wry smile. "Needless to say, Birkett has no shortage of that."

"I don't understand some of those words," Celia whispered. The subject clearly disturbed her.

Grim faced, Spey explained. "An arbalest is a very powerful crossbow. The bolt is the arrow." He looked back at Adin. "So the night before last, he obviously had the weapon with him. He shot at you and grazed your arm."

Adin lowered his head. He didn't like remembering this, certainly didn't like pondering its implications. "Yes. He actually fired three bolts, as I recall. He must've retrieved them after I got inside the house, because I couldn't find them yesterday when I went out looking for them."

"It wouldn't have mattered if you *had* found them," Spey said.

"No, it wouldn't have mattered." Adin's voice carried his feeling of hopelessness. "I just didn't want Celia to see them."

"I suspect you're thinking what I am—that Birkett has accumulated a quiver full of those bolts. Probably more."

Silently, Adin nodded. "I'm almost certain he keeps the majority of them in a safe. I saw it in the basement of the mansion. It's impenetrable."

"That's not the problem," Spey said. "I could easily get into any safe. The problem is -"

"How many other stockpiles he has," Adin concluded, "and where they are."

"That's right." Spey rubbed his forehead. "And with these bolts, he'd be able to kill you in any of your forms, correct?"

"Correct."

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"I've heard enough," Celia said, slapping the top of the coffee table. She did a half turn and knelt in front of Adin. Taking his hand, she looked up into his face. "By staying with me, you're nothing more than a sitting duck. You *must leave*, Adin." Tears rose in her eyes. Furiously, she swiped them away. "I'm *not* going to stand by and watch you hunted down and feel responsible for it!"

Smiling sadly, he touched Celia's face. "I can't leave you alone. I won't. Birkett's after you now too. If I flee, he'll set his sights on you—if for no other reason than to spite me. He could capture and molest you, feed on you, maybe even kill you. Or he could turn you into his mate, which is virtually the same thing only worse."

"Then I'll leave too." She was all but pleading with him.

"Mortals are very easy for vampires to track, Celia. And vampires have all the time in the world to do their tracking."

Obviously frustrated and frightened, Celia wagged her head. She could no longer stanch the flow of tears. "Then, goddammit, we have to *find* him!"

"I'm afraid it isn't possible," Adin said. This bleak fact had become increasingly clear to him. "We can only dispatch him where and when he sleeps. That's it. All Birkett needs is a hiding place sprinkled with Surrey soil. Doesn't matter if it's a coffin or vault or some crude trench. There must be dozens and dozens of places like that in a twenty-or thirty-mile radius of here. We can't explore every cave and grave and mausoleum and cellar. And we sure as shit can't go knocking on doors and asking people if they're *intentionally* harboring a vampire."

"No, we can't," Spey murmured. He'd been staring into some middle distance unconnected to his surroundings.

"Maybe you could cloak me, Jackson, and I could try following him," Adin suggested, although he had little faith in such a plan.

Spey of course knew why. "He has too strong a sense of you. Even if you were invisible to him, he'd know precisely where you were."

"So why over all this time," Celia asked Adin, "hasn't he been able to find you until now?"

Spey watched his friend. From the look in his eyes, it seemed he knew the answer. Adin glanced at him before speaking.

"For one thing, distance greatly dilutes one vampire's sense of another's presence. We haven't often been within 'sensing distance' of each other. But more to the point, I think he's been biding his time."

"I wouldn't be surprised if he absorbed a certain degree of precognition from that gypsy," Spey murmured. "Either that, or he's consulted a very astute practitioner of the occult arts. A necromancer, most likely."

Celia threw up her hands in utter confusion. "What?"

Adin put a hand on her shoulder. "What Jackson is suggesting is that Birkett's been able to...look into the future. He somehow determined when the best time to come after me would be. He's been planning for it."

Struggling to comprehend all this, Celia stared at him, the strain etched in her face. "But...what made him decide to come after you *now*? What's so special about *this* particular point in time?"

Once again, Adin's gaze slid over to Jackson.

"Tell her the truth," Spey quietly prodded.

Adin took a deep breath. They'd touched on this subject last night—why Birkett had suddenly become so fiercely determined to stalk and kill him. "I think he's been waiting—"

"To get the biggest bang for his buck," Jackson murmured.

This drew a grudging smile from Adin. "Yeah, that's what it comes down to." He found it difficult to look at Celia, especially since she was staring at him so tensely, so expectantly. "I think Birkett decided some time ago that he would wait until I..."

Dramatically, Spey threw his upper body against the back of the chair and rolled up his eyes. "Jesus, you're exasperating! Just fucking *say* it, Adin."

Adin swallowed. "Sadistic prick that he is, he wanted to wait until I really had something significant to lose. He wanted to wait until I...fell in love."

Celia gaped at him. Her chin began to quiver as her eyes blinked rapidly. Like a crab, she scuttled backward, away from Adin and toward the middle of the room. But her next reaction was totally unexpected—even to Jackson Spey, apparently, whose brows shot up in surprise.

"Fuck you, Adin Swift!" she shrilled in a quavering voice, firing a forefinger at him. "Don't even *imply* you love me, goddammit! I don't *want* you to love me, any more than I want to love you! I just want..." Her voice hitched, then broke. "I just want...you...to go away." She dropped her face to her hands and began sobbing. "And live."

Adin bolted up from the couch and went to Celia. He sank beside her on the floor and pulled her into his arms. She pressed against him, her fingers clawing up handfuls of his shirt, and cried against his chest until he could feel the moisture from her tears on his skin.

"I love you, Adin," she mumbled. "Please save yourself. Please, Adin, save yourself. I love you."

Adin hadn't felt so helpless since the deaths of his family members. His heart ached, literally *ached*. All he could do was kiss and stroke Celia's hair and hold her.

"Um, excuse me," Jackson said gently. "Do you know how Birkett can be killed?"

Falteringly, Adin turned his head to look at Spey. "Yes, but so what? That's not the problem. The problem is getting to him while he sleeps." Adin could feel the imploring expression on his face. He could feel his features rumple. "Can't you do it, Jackson? Can't you come up with a way?"

Celia sniffled and caught her breath. She, too, turned her face to the wizard who was supposed to deliver them. "Better yet," she said, "can't you just...work some magick that will take him out?"

Adin immediately knew she was way off base on *that* one.

Spey confirmed this with his grim expression and his answer. "I can't turn my art to that use. I can't use it to kill."

"But shit, Jackson," Adin said, "you still have unimaginable power..."

His friend was starting to look frustrated. "Yeah, okay, all adepts have access to power. We can go far in advancing our own spiritual quests, we can do much to improve the lives of our fellow creatures or effect other changes in the material world. Some of us can enter the astral spheres and interact with the entities there, or control those entities. A handful of us have even achieved a certain mastery over time and space. But all power takes a while to acquire and fine-tune, and all power has its limits. I'm not God, Adin."

"But Birkett's just a lowly fucking vampire who can't be far from here. You're talking as though you'd have to split open the planet to find him." Adin chuffed in disgust. He helped Celia off the floor and led her back to the couch, where they sat close together. "Maybe I've given you credit for more cunning than you actually have," he muttered.

It was obviously the wrong thing to say. Spey, glowering like a cloud of volcanic ash, sprang out of the chair. Leaning over Adin, he caged the vampire with his body, one hand gripping the couch arm and the other its back. His eyes sparked. When he spoke, his voice was unnaturally low. "I suggest you keep your uninformed opinions to yourself. You'd better hear me out before you begin questioning my abilities."

Meeting the wizard's gaze under the friendliest of circumstances wasn't an easy thing to do. When he was incensed, it was nearly impossible. Still, Adin did so. It was a matter of both male pride and common courtesy, but the effort was physically draining.

"I'm sorry, Jackson," Adin said, realizing he'd overstepped his bounds. "That was desperation talking. You know how much I respect you."

Sighing, Spey hung his head for a moment. "I know." He lightly cupped Adin's shoulder before turning away and resuming his seat in the chair. "The problem for me is this. I've never incorporated 'vampire studies' into my magickal training. Your kind seems to steer clear of me, and I sure as hell don't seek them out."

Celia gave him a look of bafflement. "But you and Adin..."

"It was pretty much a fluke that we met and became friends. The alcohol certainly diminished our natural wariness. Besides," Spey gave Adin a small, conciliatory smile, "Mr. Swift is a *gentleman* vampire, temperate and honorable. I know I can trust him."

Adin smiled back, but without cheer. "So why do suppose Birkett wants to avoid you, Jackson?"

"Because in some rudimentary way he senses what I am. That doesn't mean he *understands* what I am—he just has an instinctive fear of me. And it's somewhat justified. I might not be able to kill him, but I could fuck him up pretty good if he got too close to me."

"Cripple him?" Celia asked hopefully.

Spey nodded. "Yeah, I don't doubt I could put him out of commission for a while. But it would only be temporary. And once I'm gone-"

"We're vulnerable again," Adin said.

"Yes. So he needs to be found and destroyed. And no magick at my disposal will give me any kind of edge in finding him. Vampires are strange creatures to me, Adin. They don't belong to any realm I'm familiar with. That's why I'm ill prepared to root out one who's determined to lay low."

"I understand." Adin dropped his head to his hands. "There has to be *something* we can do."

Spey rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, there is a kind of last resort. I'd pretty much rejected the idea when it first came to me—it's drastic and it's risky—but now..." He turned up his hands and let them fall to his thighs. "Shit, I can't sit by and do nothing. You both deserve a chance at happiness."

Adin realized he'd been holding his breath. He drew in some air. "What is that chance?"

"First, do you know exactly when that asshole was birthed?"

"Of course I do," Adin said. "I've spent over six centuries finding out every last, stinking, sordid detail of his miserable life."

"And?"

"Christmas Eve, 1348. I guess the symbolism appealed to him."

"Where would he most likely be found?"

"Surrey. The church in Hebblemount. Or his cottage, not more than a hundred rods from the churchyard. Or the Black Boar tavern, where he did his drinking and whoring."

"And that gypsy who birthed him, she didn't live in Hebblemount, did she?"

"Fuck, no. Outlanders didn't take up residence in villages. They gravitated to the cities. And a Wallachian vampire sure as hell would need a large population to melt into if she didn't want to end up roasting on a bonfire." Adin couldn't repress a dour smile. "Which, I guess, is how she ended up anyway, a few hundred years later."

Briefly, Spey shared Adin's smile. "So how long did she hang out in the village?"

"She didn't hang out. She was only passing through. Saw Birkett in the churchyard, I guess, and approached him." A deep gully formed between Adin's eyebrows. "Why do you want to know?"

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Spey ran both hands over his hair. He heavily inhaled, exhaled. "Guess we're all taking a not-so-little trip." He got up and headed for the bathroom.

"He wants us to go to England?" Celia asked in a strained whisper, grasping Adin's arm.

"Uh...yeah, I believe he does." Adin continued to stare at the space Jackson had vacated. He felt thunderstruck.

"What good would *that* do?"

"Celia, honey..." Adin glanced at her. "I'm pretty sure Jackson means something other than hopping on a jet. Remember, he's a wizard – a *phenomenal* wizard, regardless of his limitations where vampires are concerned." Adin muttered an addendum, more to convince himself than clarify matters for Celia. "He wouldn't offer to do something if he didn't think he could pull it off."

"I don't understand – "

Spey sauntered back into the room, rubbing his hands together. He seemed to exude energy. He stopped in front of Celia and Adin, standing with his legs apart. "Here's my rationale," he said, crossing his arms over his chest. "The one person who'd know for sure how to track Birkett is that gypsy, his birth mother."

Adin didn't get it. "But she was – "

"Burnt to a crisp centuries ago," Spey said. "Nevertheless, she was still alive on Christmas Eve of 1348. And we know where she was on that day. So I'll just have to put *us* in Hebblemount on that day. You, Adin, will then have an opportunity to question her."

Celia turned to Adin, her eyes large with bewilderment.

There was nothing Adin could say to her. He wasn't the one with answers. "So you do mean," he said to Spey, "you're going to take us back in time."

"Yeah." Spey answered with a small shrug, as if there were nothing at all remarkable about this feat, as if it were the most logical course of action. "How else can you find out what you need to know? You don't have the time to keep dicking around with this, Adin...not after what's happened lately."

"What!" Celia almost sprang off the couch cushion.

"Uh, Jackson..." Eyes averted, Adin breathed a disbelieving laugh and scratched his head. He finally turned his gaze up to Spey. "I've seen a lot of things in my life, but this is, you know, sci-fi stuff."

"No it isn't." Spey leaned toward Adin and whispered. "It's magick." Straightening again, he smiled. "*Eppur se muove*, my friend."

"Bollocks," Adin murmured. He glanced at Celia. She'd dropped against the back of the couch, a hand over her forehead. All she did was gape at Jackson.

Suddenly she sat forward. "But the plague," she said anxiously. "Jackson, won't we be at risk? I mean, assuming you can do this."

"No, I don't believe so."

"You don't believe so?"

"Listen, Celia, I know this requires a huge leap of faith on your part, but please try to make it. First, I'll trace a talismanic pattern on the back of your neck—a sort of safeguard. Second, we won't be in a populous area, so it shouldn't be too difficult to avoid interaction with the natives. We'll keep to ourselves."

"I won't let anybody get near you," Adin told Celia, giving her hand a squeeze. "I suppose it wouldn't hurt to spray ourselves with flea repellant." He wasn't being entirely facetious.

Celia's smile was less than confident. "What about clothing? Language?"

"I can get us in the right clothing," Jackson said, "if Adin lets me tap into his memory. I could get us speaking the language, too, but that's more complicated and would take considerably longer. It's neither worth it nor necessary." He smiled. "I know Adin is fluent in Late Middle English."

Adin inclined his head. "Actually, if a modern speaker pays close attention, he can understand quite a bit of it. But I'll obviously be the one doing the talking."

"I was hoping we wouldn't all have to participate in this," Jackson said, "but it seems inevitable. I have to go with you, Adin, to sort of look over you and make sure we have a...well, a safe return. And that means you, Celia, must come with us, since it's far too dangerous for you to be left alone here. Besides, your presence will give Adin strength."

Adin's face heated. He looked at his lap. Damned if he didn't feel like a schoolboy again.

"It's a guy thing," Spey said to Celia.

She looked at Adin and affectionately ran a hand over his hair.

"Well, Swift, aren't you gonna say, 'Aw, shucks'?"

"Shut up, Jackson."

Shaking his head, Spey laughed. "A fucking vampire in love. Now I've seen it all."

Adin seamed his lips and glanced at his friend. "But that's likely going to change. If I succeed in finding Birkett, that is."

"What do you mean?" Celia asked, turning to him.

Adin drew a long breath and let it out. Although he'd been facing this prospect for a long time, it still felt strange and a bit unsettling. "If I manage to find and kill Birkett, I won't be a vampire anymore. That's what happens when one of my particular breed destroys another vampire...no matter *what* the reason."

Spey gaped at Adin. "No shit," he breathed. "You'll lose all your powers and begin to age at a normal rate?"

"Exactly."

"Hm." Spey couldn't seem to stop staring at him, as if he were trying to imagine Adin in this new state. "So you'll be mortal again."

"That I will." Adin glanced at Celia. He saw her swallow. Her eyes were focused on the floor. "What do you think of that?" he asked her.

She swallowed again. "It doesn't matter what I think. Because I've never been a vampire." Celia's gaze flickered up to him. "I want you to do whatever feels right for you, Adin. I want you to be happy."

He could tell she meant it. What he *wasn't* sure of was that "whatever feels right for you" part. Adin had been a vampire so long he could barely remember what it felt like to be mortal. He enjoyed his powers, but he didn't enjoy the incessant hunting, the essential loneliness. He didn't enjoy preying on others. He sure as hell didn't enjoy the unrelenting pressure of keeping his Plague Breed nature in recession. And he was tired of enduring the continual loss of people he grew close to.

There was his ultimate answer.

"I don't really know what feels right for me," he murmured, "except one thing."

"What's that?" Celia whispered.

"I tried to tell you earlier." Adin smiled warmly as he brushed a loose lock of hair from her forehead. "Being with you."

Chapter Eighteen

Shortly after their conversation, Jackson asked Celia for some candles before locking himself in the guestroom for four hours. He told his hosts very little—just gave them a broad explanation of what he would be doing and insisted they be as quiet as possible and not disturb him. From what Adin could gather, Jackson first meditated and then conducted whatever ritual of High Magick was needed to effect his plan.

Adin and Celia caught whiffs of incense. Occasionally, sounds issued from the room - a soft knock or thud, a phrase spoken in Latin.

Celia was visibly nervous. When the wizard finally emerged from the room, Adin could've sworn his body was outlined by a faint glow. In fact, his whole appearance had subtly changed. Jackson looked taller, his demeanor more commanding. And his eyes, always a little witchy, had an eerie, golden translucence.

The wizard immediately walked up to Celia, where she sat with Adin on the couch. "Turn so your back is toward me," he said...and Adin realized that even his voice sounded different.

Spey moved Celia's hair to expose the back of her neck. Using both the ball and nail of his right forefinger, he inscribed some elaborate, invisible pattern on the skin overlaying her spine. She quivered slightly as he did this, her eyelids fluttering, and made a strange little sound far down in her throat. Adin often heard the same dainty mew when he pierced her. He found it erotic...and had a flash-fantasy of watching Celia and Jackson having sex. If Adin hadn't been so preoccupied with their current mission, he would've had a raging hard-on.

Finished with Celia, the wizard turned to Adin. "I'll have to cloak you," he said, "so the gypsy can't discern your nature."

"Shit, that's right." Adin understood the rationale. If the old woman knew she was facing another vampire, either an ugly tussle would ensue or she'd try to flee. Better if he presented himself as a mortal interested in the Blood Birth.

Jackson put a hand on either side of Adin's head, but without touching him. Softly murmuring a spell, he drew his hands down the length of Adin's body, following its contours. He moved to one side of Adin and did the same thing, front and back. Then he asked, "Have you done the drawings?"

Adin held out two pieces of paper bearing his annotated and colored-in sketches of mid-fourteenth-century clothing, the type commonly worn by country folk. He was far from being an artist, but he thought he'd done an adequate job.

Jackson took the papers and stared at them intently for a couple of minutes. He walked to the middle of the living room and sank to the floor, sitting cross-legged. "All right, now come here."

Adin joined him and assumed the same position.

Leaning forward, Jackson put his hands firmly on either side of Adin's face. "When you touch your head to mine," he said, "you must concentrate on forming a detailed and vivid mental image of this clothing as you remember having seen it. Once you've conjured that memory picture, put the three of us in the clothing. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I've practiced visualization before."

As soon as their foreheads touched, Adin did as he was told. Within a minute Jackson eased backward, breaking their contact. He sighed and smiled.

"You're good."

"I've had plenty of time to perfect it," Adin said, still tingling from Spey's pulsing energy. "Well, are we ready?" He glanced at Celia, who was on the couch watching them with keen interest.

"We're ready," Spey said, getting to his feet. "Celia?"

She came over to them as Adin, too, rose from the floor. "How close will we be to this town?" she asked the wizard in a tremulous voice. "Right in it, or..."

"Not right in it. That wouldn't be wise. I tried to place us far enough outside Hebblemount so we won't, uh...be noticed when we appear."

She turned to Adin. "Does Hebblemount still exist?"

Celia seemed to be stalling, but he indulged her. Jackson would surely let them know if they were eating up too much time. The working of magick, Adin knew, could often be very time sensitive.

"No, I think the village was largely abandoned by the early fifteenth century. I'm not sure if the English Heritage investigators have found the site or not. But I don't believe it yet has DMV status. So even if it has been discovered, it probably hasn't been excavated."

"What's DMV status?"

Yes, she was jittery. Adin held Celia's hand, hoping that might help calm her. "Deserted Medieval Village. They're sites of historical and archeological importance—obviously. And there are thousands of them..." Adin's voice trailed off as he glanced at the wizard. Spey had been listening, but most of his attention seemed to be elsewhere.

"We have to go," Spey said. "You'll be wearing your new couture when we arrive, so don't be startled by it. Now we have to stand in a circle with our feet touching and our arms around each other. I'll be saying some things you won't understand but you don't have to listen. Oh and you might feel a little less disoriented if you close your eyes..."

* * * * *

Adin felt lightheaded. Celia, on his right and still within the circle of his arm, teetered a bit. He blinked and stretched his eyes, trying to focus and get his bearings. Jackson was already a few steps away from him. As if heralding their arrival, a church bell rang. It didn't seem far away.

Adin realized the bell wasn't ringing, it was tolling. It wasn't heralding an arrival but signaling a departure. His throat tightened. Someone had died. A requiem mass must be taking place.

Adin thought his body felt different somehow. He looked down at himself, looked at Jackson and Celia. The wizard had indeed managed to clothe them in a style befitting the time. Celia wore a rough linen underdress and a brown, coarse wool overdress. And the wool, Adin could tell, was blended with hemp...as it was supposed to be. Her clothing was rather baggy and shapeless. Thick black hose covered her legs, and low, moccasin-type shoes, tied on top with leather thongs, were on her feet. He and Jackson wore knee-length tunics, belted at the waist, as well as woolen cloaks with hoods. They, too, had on black stockings, as well as drawstring boots with cowhide soles and calfskin uppers.

The three of them did look like ordinary peasant folk. But it would help if they were dirtier. Almost numbly, Adin drew the hood up over his hair.

"That was a close call," he heard Spey whisper. The wizard, a bit ahead and on his left, pointed at something.

Adin followed the line of his arm. They all stood near a large tree at the edge of a muddy, rutted road. Not too far ahead, a crude wooden cart pulled by two oxen rumbled and creaked toward a village, perhaps a half mile distant. The village was nestled in a shallow valley.

Adin looked around. They were alone.

"Imagine if we'd materialized as that wagon was passing," Spey said. "We would've been pegged as witches for sure."

Distractedly, Adin nodded. He glanced at Celia. She, too, looked dazed. "I can't believe we're really here," she said, her voice nearly inaudible. Her whole body shivered against the damp, chilly air.

Adin surveyed his surroundings. *Really here*... He breathed open-mouthed as his heartbeat picked up speed. *Really here*...

Thin patches of snow skirted each tree and lay in some of the wagon ruts. Dreary as the day was, the countryside was lush and lovely. The English countryside had always been lovely...but especially so before the advent of highways and shopping centers and all the other destructive consequences of population growth and spreading urbanization. In this age, the low hills were still heavily wooded, the meadows dotted with grazing sheep. Some of the land appeared to be sectioned off into farm fields, probably for growing wheat and oats and barley. A river glimmered dully in the distance. The River Mole, Adin thought, although he just wasn't sure. His mind felt sluggish, his thoughts, fragmented and diffuse. "We'd better head toward the village." Spey pulled the hood of his cloak farther over his head. "I'm almost certain it's Hebblemount, but we have to confirm that."

"If someone else passes us," Adin said, "I'll ask." Looking at Celia again, he squeezed her hand. "Are you holding up okay?"

Her eyes were glassy. "I'm just...I don't know. In a fog. I feel like I'm dreaming." Looking down, she gingerly lifted the crude dress. Her fingers explored its weave.

"I do too," Adin said. He started walking.

They trudged along at the edge of the road, where the grass made the going a bit easier. The thin-soled shoes felt strange on Adin's feet...and yet strangely familiar. Another cart approached, rolling in the opposite direction, after they'd made it about halfway to the village. Adin waved the driver to a halt.

For a moment it stunned him speechless to look into the man's face – a fourteenthcentury English face. It was grizzled and unwashed and bore the scars of smallpox. The man looked to be fifty years old but was probably half that age.

Without feeling his legs beneath him, Adin stepped up to the wagon. "Is that Hebblemount ahead of us?" he asked in his native tongue.

The man narrowed his watery blue eyes as he regarded the stranger who'd stopped him. Adin realized his manner of speaking must sound odd to this villager, who was certainly quite provincial. In his narrow world, people used the same inflections and idioms and sentence constructions. It was possible they spoke in some hybrid dialect – a mixture of French and English, perhaps, or of current and earlier forms of English. One could never tell.

"You go on foot?" the man asked with suspicion.

His *was* a somewhat quirky dialect, peppered with remnants of both French and Old English, but at least he and Adin understood each other.

"Yes, now we do," Adin answered. "My...wife and her brother and I had been sharing a horse, but it bolted and ran off."

The man's gaze slid over to Jackson and Celia. "That is Hebblemount ahead," he confirmed. "Pass it by if you can. Did you not hear the bell? You won't make merry in *that* village. Find another place to celebrate your Christmas tomorrow."

A cold finger of fear trailed down Adin's spine. "The pestilence has made its way here?"

"The black flag flies," the man said, his tone dour. "Pass it by or pass through quickly. Godspeed." He urged his team into lumbering forward.

Adin called out a thanks. He motioned for Celia and Jackson to join him. "The good news is, we *are* approaching Hebblemount...as well as Christmas Day. The bad news is, the village is infested with plague. But I already knew that would be the case." At the moment, it still didn't seem quite real to him.

"Well, let's focus on the good news," Jackson said. "Come on. We have to find that gypsy."

They resumed their progress toward the cursed village.

Celia linked an arm through Adin's. She seemed more alert and composed. "Your old language is beautiful," she said. "Did it feel strange to be speaking it again?"

"It didn't feel strange to speak the language—I do it a lot, just to myself—but conversing in it made me a little uncomfortable." Trying to lighten their moods, Adin rubbed his arm against the cushioned swell of Celia's breast. "I'm so glad you're with me. I don't know if I could do this without you."

Putting on a brave face, she smiled at him and pressed his arm more closely to her body. "That's all I needed to hear."

Stopping briefly, Adin stepped in front of her. "I do love you, Celia." He kissed her, wanting desperately for her to believe in him.

"I love you too, Adin." Her smile became radiant, as if his words were a blessing. "Very much."

They hurried to catch up with Jackson.

"That must be the parish church," Celia said. She pointed toward a structure that was taller than the others in the village and, unlike the cottages, was built from stone, although its main roof was heavily thatched. It had peaked Gothic-style windows and a square front tower topped by battlements. Celia could tell that aisles ran along either side of the nave, because the building had two narrow side-sections that were lower than the central part of the structure.

The church was at the end of the village—the end from which they approached. Thatched cottages arrayed on either side of the road stretched beyond the church. Smoke wound from the center of each roof, although none had a chimney. There looked to be thirty or forty dwellings...if that's in fact what they were.

Little by little, Celia became entranced by this bizarre journey. Adin's statement of love seemed to have brought her to her senses. She felt more grounded, more focused. Her mind brimmed with questions, but she didn't think Adin was in the mood to play tour guide. Despite how well he'd been conducting himself, his shell of self-control seemed thin and brittle.

Confirming her assumption, Adin stopped. Looking indecisive, he walked up a small rise on one side of the road. He knelt on his haunches in the damp grass and stared at the village.

"You okay?" Spey asked, bending over him and putting a hand on his back.

Celia knelt beside Adin and studied his face. He was pale and perspiring. She could almost feel the build-up of pressure within him, could almost see the fine network of cracks in the veneer of his composure, like the crazing of old glaze.

Celia covered his hands with her own.

"I just need a minute to let this sink in," Adin said.

Jackson dropped to one knee. After a moment he quietly asked, "What are the houses made of?"

"Wattle and daub. Thatch and daub." The words came out flat, lusterless.

"I know what thatch is," Spey said, "but not that other stuff."

Celia looked at Jackson. He shot her a quick glance that seemed to convey some message. She thought she understood. He was trying to draw Adin out of himself, keep him from brooding about being back in a time that had drenched his life in such misery.

"Wattle is basically branches stacked between the building's uprights, its main support beams. Daub is the material they're covered with." Adin's gaze roamed over the village now, as if he were studying it.

Celia began to feel relieved. At least Jackson's questions were pulling Adin out of his private well of dark memories. What a wrenching experience this must be for him, she thought. And the worst was yet to come.

"What's daub made of?" Spey asked.

"Mud, clay, animal hair, dung. All mixed together."

"Doesn't sound real nose-friendly," Spey said. "Or weatherproof."

Adin finally looked at him. "Actually, it *is* fairly weatherproof. The overhanging roofs help. But the daub doesn't keep in much warmth or keep out much cold, and it sure as hell isn't an effective barrier against burglars or varmints. A rat can chew right through it."

"Well, it's a right proper little village," Jackson said. "The cottages even have their own yards."

Again, Adin regarded it. "Tofts," he said.

Jackson leaned toward him. "Beg pardon?"

"The small yards are called tofts. The larger gardens behind them are called crofts. The residents probably grow legumes, root crops..."

The trio sat in silence for a few more minutes. A small number of people moved along the village's sloppy thoroughfare, in addition to a variety of animals and rustic conveyances. Adin sighed deeply, concluding his pensive absorption of the scene. He rose. "I've contemplated the 'right proper little village' of Hebblemount long enough." He extended a hand to Celia to help her up.

Chapter Nineteen

They clambered down the rise and back onto the side of the road. In another ten minutes they neared the village churchyard, which was spread out below them. Celia noticed a small, seemingly manmade hill slightly ahead and to their right, possibly at the very edge of the church property. A rough-hewn wooden door was set into the side of it. Trees encircled the mound and shrubby growth fanned out from both sides of the doorway.

"I wonder what that's for," she whispered.

Before she got an answer, Spey's arm shot out like a turnstile, causing Adin and Celia to stop in their tracks. "Look," he said in a low voice. "There's someone in the churchyard..."

Hurrying ahead, they ducked behind the bushes flanking the mound's entrance and peered through them.

A dark, hunched figure stood alone amidst the humble graves. With a small leap, it partially disappeared into the earth. Celia heard Adin's breath saw through the air.

"It's Birkett," he said. His throat seemed constricted.

Spey craned toward him. "You're sure?"

"Yes. He's the sexton, so he'd be the only one digging a grave. There must be a funeral going on in the church." Adin's large eyes shifted in Spey's direction. "I could take him out right here, Jackson. Before he's even birthed and becomes a vampire. Before he has a chance to -"

Spey abruptly grabbed Adin's arms. "*No*," he hissed, his gaze boring into his companion. "Listen and listen hard. I know this seems like a golden opportunity, but it isn't. Believe me. Killing Birkett now would set in motion a chain reaction that would ripple throughout history. We'd all feel the consequences of it. We can't change anything while we're here. Not *anything*."

Visibly wilting, Adin dropped his head. "God damn it," he murmured.

A flurry of goose bumps rose along Celia's arms. She knew exactly what Spey meant. "Jackson's right," she said, putting a hand on Adin's shoulder. "Think about it."

Adin nodded. "I was just hoping...I could save my parents."

"I know, honey." Celia tenderly ran a hand over the hair at his temple. "I know. But what's already happened can't be changed. Not without generating all kinds of other unforeseen consequences."

"If there's a funeral going on," Spey said, "we'll have to wait until the mourners are gone before we start following Birkett. Remember, we want as little contact with the locals as possible. Not just because we can't afford to arouse their curiosity, but because many of them could be infected."

"We may not have to follow him," Adin said. "The gypsy could have birthed him in the churchyard. We might just have to wait until nightfall. And it's close to dusk already."

"But *where* do we wait?" Celia asked in a strained whisper.

She glanced in the direction of the churchyard and saw Birkett—or the man Adin felt sure was Birkett—toss a long-handled implement out of the hole in which he stood. He climbed out and stood beside the grave, staring into it as he leaned on his spade.

"Maybe this mound," Jackson said, jerking a thumb in its direction. "There's a door in it."

Celia looked at him. "Yes, I saw it too. Do you think we'll be safe there, Adin? Do you know what it's for?"

Still staring at the sexton, he shook his head. "I'm not sure." He turned to face his companions. "I'll go check."

Leading them, Adin crouched toward the doorway. Motioning Celia and Jackson to stay behind, he eased open the crude door, slipped through it and was immediately swallowed by the dim hollow within the hill. Celia glanced nervously at Spey. Perhaps ten or fifteen seconds passed.

Adin stumbled out of the chamber looking stricken. He quaked visibly. "Get back, get away from here," he choked out, nearly shoving Celia into Jackson. He moved stiffly around the base of the mound until he was behind it. Gasping repeatedly, as if he couldn't get enough air, he finally sank to his knees. He fisted his hands against his mouth. Behind them, he seemed to be suppressing sobs.

"Oh Jesus," he said on an exhalation.

"What did you see?" Celia immediately dropped beside him and wrapped her arms around him. "Adin?"

He waved away her question. His veneer had finally shattered.

She held Adin and gently rocked him and petted his hair. Something had triggered this reaction, something he couldn't bring himself to name. Maybe it had freshened an old grief or old horror. He would need some moments of release...and afterward he would be all right. Of that Celia was certain. The recomposition that followed this breakdown would be solid, unshakable. She glanced up at Spey, who watched Adin with deep, empathetic sorrow.

Celia began murmuring in Adin's ear. "You must be strong. Think of *why* we're here. Think of saving us from Birkett. Think of us living happily together once this is over and done with. I love you, Adin. With all my heart, I love you. Remember that."

Weakly, Spey smiled at her, indicating his approval. He, too, leaned toward the suffering man. "Adin, the last time you were in this century, you were a victim of circumstance. Now you're the master of it. Don't let this opportunity escape you."

Gradually, Celia felt his quaking subside. Taking deep breaths, Adin raised his head and regarded each of them in turn. "Yes," he said, nodding. "Yes. I can't help these people and I can't help my parents but I can at least help us." He lifted Celia's hand and fervently pressed his lips to it. "She's in there," he whispered.

Spey crouched down beside him. "You mean the gypsy?"

Adin nodded. "She's in there, sleeping. "I don't know if she's targeted Birkett yet or not. But she'll rise just after dusk. I do know that." He glanced at the screen of bushes. "What's going on at the church?"

Spey scuttled over to their concealed vantage point, where he stayed for maybe ten minutes. He came back and told them in a hushed voice, "A priest, I think, came out. He was followed by a group of people carrying the coffin. Someone else followed behind. Maybe a parent or spouse. They set the coffin down next to the grave—on ropes, I guess, because the pallbearers, or whatever they're called here, lowered it into the ground. After the priest made the sign of the cross, everybody started wandering away." He paused, curling a hand over Adin's arm. "Birkett's still out there."

"He has to be," Adin said. "It's part of his job to fill in the grave." His gaze swept vacantly over the ground, as if he were gathering his thoughts. "Jackson, are you ready to take us home as soon as I'm finished here?"

"In a heartbeat. All we have to do is stand together, touching."

"You and Celia get behind this mound and stay there," Adin instructed. "Conceal yourselves as best you can – from the village *and* the road. I'll rejoin you when I get my answers."

Celia reached for him. "Are you going back in there?"

Adin's gaze was cold and fierce. "Yes. It's where I have to go."

With a renewed sense of purpose – *Thank God for Celia* – Adin walked around the base of the small hill. He paused briefly before its door and gazed down into the churchyard. One small, sloping acre separated him from the very mortal Birkett, who hadn't yet begun to fill in the fresh grave.

I hope he gets that done, Adin thought. For the sake of whoever rests there, I hope the bastard finishes the job before this foul bitch reaches him.

Right now, Birkett sat at the edge of the grave, eating what might have been an apple. His legs dangled into the hole. After tossing the core onto the coffin, he lifted his outer garments up to his belly.

"Don't do it," Adin whispered.

Although he couldn't see Birkett's genitals, he did see the stream of urine that poured into the grave. And he did see the motherfucker smirk as he pissed. Adin felt his reaction to this despicable scene, a reaction as physical as it was emotional. He felt it in his gut, in his facial muscles. Contempt and loathing twisted through both.

Birkett stood, grabbed his spade, and lackadaisically threw some earth into the hole. He stopped and leaned on the handle. Hawking up a gob of spit, which also flew into the grave, he gave a desultory kick to the pile of dirt. Adin heard the distant clatter of pebbles as they rained on the lid of the wood coffin.

The sun was lowering. He had but a short time to wait. Drawing a deep breath, he slipped into the chamber within the hill.

Sweat again beaded on Adin's face as soon as he stepped inside. The stench was nearly overwhelming. This time, though, he didn't fall apart.

The mound was an earthen mortuary. Seven bodies lay inside, six of which had unceremoniously been dumped off – probably by whomever had hauled them here. All six bore signs of the plague. Based on what he knew about Birkett, Adin assumed the sexton had refused to handle them...which explained why they hadn't yet been interred. He was probably waiting for the parish priest to urge donations of coffins.

These must be the bodies of poor people, perhaps without relatives or perhaps with enemies. Maybe a stranger lay here, as well—a traveler too ill to complete his passage through Hebblemount. In any case, they hadn't been treated well.

Four of the corpses were in winding cloths, but rough handling combined with the foraging of rats had disturbed all of them. An older woman lay against the wall, her head arched backward, one arm out flung and the other angled stiffly over her chest, clutching a copper-alloy disc. In life she must have had joint pain – many adults of this time suffered from arthritis – and the copper that was supposed to ease it was certainly meant to be buried with her. But her cherished copper plate couldn't fend off the pestilence. The pneumonic form had claimed her, Adin guessed, since it was the strain that flourished in winter. She was still in a state of rigor mortis, so she couldn't have been deceased more than three days.

Adin turned. Death and decay were all around him. A second woman, nearly sitting upright, had large, egg-shaped buboes on her neck and arms, all encrusted with dried blood and pus. A man lay on his side, facing the wall. "God's tokens" covered his back – dark purple hemorrhagic bruises. The corpse of another, younger man grimaced up at the ceiling, his eyes flat, his mouth distended by the stones that had been packed within it to ward off evil spirits. He had clearly died of the pneumonic form of the plague – dried blood and vomit still clung to his hair. Still another man had been there so long, putrefaction had begun overtaking his body. At least, thank God, he was mostly covered – not by a shroud, but by a ragged cloth fouled with bodily fluids – but Adin could still see greenish black discoloration of his bloated body. He, too, had the telltale, tumorlike swelling of bubonic plague. The hump of a bubo was still visible on his groin.

The withered gypsy, waiting for the enlivening shroud of darkness to descend, lay on her back in the center of the floor. She obviously felt perfectly at ease here, but her presence seemed to taint the space more than death by plague already had.

Adin closed his eyes. He almost felt paralyzed, standing in this nightmarish storage vault, as if the dead that surrounded him had begun to claim him as one of their own. Moving stiffly toward the door, he was about to lurch outside and hungrily fill his lungs with fresh air.

And then he heard a deep, gurgling groan and a rustle on the damp dirt. Whirling around, his heart pattering wildly, he stared into the cave's dense gloom. Hunched over, the gypsy rolled up her filmy eyes and stared back at him. Her upper lip curled slightly, showing the tips of her discolored fangs. Slowly, her gnarled and livid hands began to rise.

Adin, his whole body frigidly cold, had a vivid flashback of her approaching him after the murder of his parents. She'd seemed less intimidating then, more inclined to persuade than to pounce.

"I must speak with you, Mother," he said abruptly, addressing her as he would any old woman of that time. He prayed Spey's cloak was working.

The vampire, her eyes glowing red with blood lust, seemed taken aback by the statement. "How did you find me?"

Her accent was thick, as Adin remembered it. But he didn't recall her voice sounding the way it did now—like the desiccated flesh of the corpses that surrounded them. "I saw you enter the hill yesterday eve," he said. "I watched out of curiosity. When you didn't emerge, I thought you might be...the kind of savior I've been seeking."

The gypsy smiled, fully displaying her fangs. "Ahhh. Another seeker."

Adin held up his hands, indicating he didn't want her to approach him. "Before I request your form of salvation, I need truthful answers to some questions."

Narrowing her eyes, the hag regarded him. "You could have had me destroyed," she said thoughtfully, "but you chose not to. For that I will reward you by answering your questions and letting you choose when you want to be taken." Bowing slightly, she ingratiatingly added, "Most kind and handsome sire."

Adin could sense her craving, could even see the red-tinged saliva that coated her vile fangs. He certainly looked far more vigorous and succulent to her than other potential victims. But since the gypsy clearly felt she'd have him soon if not right now, she seemed willing to bide her time. "I need to know how safe I will be," he said, "if I become one of your kind. I need to know I cannot easily be hunted down, like an animal in the forest."

She uttered a dry laugh and flipped a clawed hand toward the village beyond the mound. "By those?" she asked, apparently indicating the mortals who inhabited Hebblemount...and the world. Her tone was disdainful. "No, no, no. Just make certain they know not where you sleep. Stealth and secrets, dear sire—our safe passage through the world is all about stealth and secrets. And finding mortal guardians, if we can."

"But *you* don't seem to have one." Adin had been wondering where her twin sister was.

"Ah, but I do," the hag said. "I told her to find lodging in the village. I knew she wouldn't need to keep watch at *this* place." Her arm swept over the jumble of reeking, rotting, plague-infected corpses. Then her look turned shrewd. "No person would want to enter it." She flashed an ugly approximation of a smile. "Except someone like you, desperate to escape the kind of death we see around us."

Adin didn't look around him. He'd seen enough. "But what if I make an enemy among the vampyrii? What if one of *them* wishes to stalk me?"

"Most other *strigoi mort* will not be able to find you if you wrap yourself in the shroud of stillness." The gypsy sidled up to him. Adin felt a wave of nausea. "If *I* became your mother," she said, her tone insinuating, "you would receive such a gift."

"And this 'shroud of stillness' would keep me concealed from other vampyrii?"

"All...except those born during the pestilence. The ability to conjure up the shroud of stillness is passed through our strain, and only others of the same bloodline can penetrate it and sense the hidden one's presence. But if you mind your own business you will not make enemies. The *strigoi mort* rarely have reason to hunt each other. The *other* hunt is far more important."

"You yourself came into being during this time?" Adin tried not to betray his shock. He'd thought she was far older and a purely Black Sea Breed, not a mix of Black and Plague.

The gypsy nodded. "To escape the Great Mortality...as you wish to do." Apparently with the "other hunt" still uppermost in her mind, she glided to the doorway of the mortuary and surveyed the village below. Then she turned to face Adin. "My courtesy wears thin along with my patience," she said. "I have answered enough questions for now. There is someone in yon village, I believe, who may want my favors. When and where do you wish me to come to you?"

"Look for me later at the Black Boar Tavern."

"Do not disappoint me," the gypsy said. Immediately after this ominous statement, she disappeared.

A bat sailed toward the churchyard.

Adin hurried outside and jogged around to the back of the hill. Spey and Celia, who'd certainly heard him charging through the bushes, stepped forward.

"Come on," Adin said, "let's go home."

He knew they needn't have made this trip. He'd had the ability to find Birkett all along.

* * * * *

"I was never aware of it," Adin told Jackson and Celia.

They were all back in her living room and back in their own clothing. Spey, sitting on the couch with Adin, had quite easily made the transition back to the present. Adin and Celia, however, were drinking wine to make their readjustment easier. Spey drank with them just to be sociable.

No time seemed to have passed while they were gone.

"You never had so much as an inkling?" Celia asked. She was curled up on the recliner, grounding herself in its cozy, familiar form. When they'd first returned, she was relieved their bizarre journey had gone smoothly. She felt a bit disoriented by the abrupt shifts in time and place, but was still glad they were back safely and Adin had found out what he needed to know. Now though, the ramifications of his discovery had begun to bother her.

"I never explored the Plague Breed side of my nature," Adin explained. "I was so revolted and embarrassed by it, I've spent my whole existence suppressing it. *Diligently* suppressing it. I didn't want to become like the creature who murdered my parents. Not even for a day."

"So feeding accompanied by sexual release has been the only way to keep your Plague Breed characteristics from taking over?" Jackson asked.

"Yes, the only way," Adin said, casting an anxious glance at Celia.

It seemed he didn't want her to start thinking, again, that he'd only been using her. Celia knew he *had* used her, at first, but now truly loved her as much as she loved him. It was other aspects of this seeming solution that worried her.

"My mixed lineage doesn't pose a problem when I'm not feeding," Adin went on. I'm like a pressure cooker sitting on a cold stove. The contents are inert until heat is applied to the pot."

Jackson poured himself more wine. "And ingestion of blood provides the heat, in your case."

"Yes."

"And your Plague Breed nature is like the steam that builds up in the pot, and sex is like the valve that releases it."

With a wry smile, Adin looked down and swirled the wine in his glass. "Well, now that we've reduced my internal landscape to a cooking metaphor—"

"With a few similes thrown in for good measure," Celia murmured.

Adin gave her a quick, wan smile. Celia was grateful they both still had some sense of humor left. She reached over the arm of the recliner to grab his hand.

"I think we all know what I need to do in order to find Birkett," he said.

Gravely, Jackson nodded. "You have to build up enough steam to blow the lid off the fucking pot – which translates into feeding while keeping your pants zipped."

"That about sums it up," Adin said. "A big, fat feed *sans* a big, fat orgasm, and – *voila* – my dark nature will start to surface on the steam of sexual frustration."

Celia had pretty much come out of her time-travel fugue. But the more she gathered her wits, the more troubled she felt. "Won't you be walking a fine line, Adin?"

"Yeah," Spey said, "this is going to be tricky. If too *much* Plague Breed takes over, you won't be able to function during daylight hours. And you could get ruthless...maybe enough to attack Celia and me."

"I'm well aware of the risks," Adin said quietly. "As nasty as I might become, I still wouldn't be foolish enough to attack *you*, Jackson. Or Celia, as long as she's around you. But becoming predominantly nocturnal—yes, that concerns me. I need to be able to penetrate Birkett's so-called shroud of stillness while he's asleep and helpless. Which obviously means I have to be fully alert and ambulatory."

"And you have the right weapon?" Celia asked. Just the thought of it sent a tight chill through her body.

Adin cast her a strange look that made her nerves tighten even further. "I never go anywhere without it. Although a wooden stake would do."

Jackson raised his eyebrows. "No shit. So there's some truth to the legends."

"There's almost always some truth to legends." Adin finished his wine and set the glass on the coffee table. "But a stake is crude and unwieldy and must penetrate the heart. I have something more versatile and elegant. It should make the experience...quite satisfying."

Celia shivered.

"Excuse me a moment." Adin got up and walked into the kitchen. Celia heard some rustling. He quickly rejoined them.

"We'd better get on with this," Jackson said, "while there's still enough daylight left." He glanced at Celia, then at Adin. "So which one of us is the designated donor?"

Chapter Twenty

It would have to be Celia. Adin knew he couldn't feed off Spey. The wizard's blood was simply too potent and volatile. Adin would end up either trying to rape them both or, if he were denied a sexual outlet, would be so overtaken by his Plague Breed nature he wouldn't be able to function in the daytime.

As he explained this to them, he saw Celia's face blanch. "Do you know exactly how much you'll need...to maintain the right balance?" she asked, obviously apprehensive. Of course she was referring to his intake of blood.

"Yes, I think so." Adin smiled, hoping to reassure and comfort her. "I've been feeding for a long, long time. I know how different amounts from different sources affect me." He took Celia's anxious face in his hands and kissed her. "I love you. I won't hurt you."

She smiled.

Adin turned to Spey. "Uh, Jackson, maybe you can help solve one last, little problem."

The wizard sat forward. "I'll sure as hell try. What is it?"

"Once I find Birkett and finish him off, I'm not sure where I'll be. It could be miles and miles from here. And since I'll no longer be a vampire -"

Spey grinned. "You'll need a ride home. Yeah, I can do something about that." He slapped Adin's thigh. "You haven't been on my bike for a while, anyway. It'll be a nice way to make your passage back to mortal life."

"I was thinking the same thing. But how are you going to find me?"

"Simple. I'll mark you. Come here and kneel in front of me."

Adin rose from his end of the couch. "You're not going to piss on me, are you?"

Spey laughed heartily. Even Celia tittered. "I'm not into golden showers. Just kneel in front of me."

When Adin did so, Jackson curled his fingers over the top of Adin's head and pressed both thumbs against his brow. In Latin he murmured, "I shall be guided without error to the place where this man is. I shall know his need without delay and be guided to him." He concluded with, "*Ateh malkuth ve-Geburah ve-Gedulah l'olam*" as, simultaneously, he made a variation of the sign of the cross. Briefly folding his hands, he murmured, "Amen."

Even after the wizard withdrew his hands, Adin could feel a lingering pressure in the center of his forehead. He rose. Looking at Celia, he extended his hand. "May I taste you?"

With an uncertain smile, she got up and went to him. "Will it be the last time?"

Staring into her eyes, Adin nodded. "Do you mind?"

"I don't mind anything that's going to save your life. I just want to be with you."

Tenderly, Adin kissed her. "Don't be alarmed," he said to her and Jackson, "if I just book out of here after I drink. Don't say anything or ask me anything. And by all means, don't follow me."

"The Plague Breed won't surface *that* fast, will it?" Spey asked.

"No. It might take a while. But I'll be aroused, and I don't need to be surrounded by temptation. So I'll just wander into the woods until frustration starts making me...turn." Adin gave them a wan smile. "Besides, I don't need any distractions. I want to train all my attention on Birkett, concentrate on every despicable thing he's ever done. I want to visualize him. I want to *feel* him."

"Where do you want to insert the nail?" Celia asked, obviously trying to be brave.

Adin couldn't do it in his favorite spot, near one of her nipples, because Jackson was in the room. And he couldn't take her out of the room, because Jackson was her guardian. The wizard would ensure Celia's safety.

"Your neck," he whispered.

His cock had already begun to stir.

Celia tilted her head to one side. As if he were holding the finest Tiffany vase, Adin gently cupped her neck. His little finger rose, then plunged. Inhaling sharply, Celia ground her breasts against his chest as his lips closed securely over the puncture. Every drop of her blood that fell on his tongue seemed amplified by the blood that stiffened his cock. He ground his hips against Celia's body. Her hips thrust back, rubbing his thickening erection. Adin kept sucking, fueling his desire further by gliding his fingers over her taut nipples, pinching them and pulling them until excitement made her soft moans spiral into cries of unbearable arousal.

He needed to stop feeding. His cock was unyielding now, and clamoring for relief. With a monumental exercise of will, Adin whispered, "I love you," and pulled himself away. Turning abruptly, trying not to look at Celia, he dashed into the kitchen, grabbed his weapon off the table and left the house.

He'd really pushed himself to the edge. Gulping air, he paced around the yard. It was impossible for him not to notice how hard his cock was, how full his balls felt. Shit, he needed to fuck. All he could think about was that moisture-flooded pussy back in the house. Licking his lips, he tasted the last, sparse slick of blood there and thought it would drive him mad. His hand fell to his crotch. Even his own erection excited him, but he couldn't do anything to quench his desire...not on his own.

Adin lurched toward the woods. He had no direction. He just moved restlessly, aimlessly, unable to ignore the equally purposeless throbbing in his loins.

He hungered, oh how he hungered. And damn all the powers of heaven if he couldn't sate that hunger. He wanted to suck and bite into the wizard's cock and suck

and bite into the woman's tits and feed until he was drunk on blood. And then he wanted to fuck them, fuck them both and fuck them hard, until his cock exploded like the energy-replete pinpoint that became the universe.

Panting, growling, he undid his jeans and freed the pillar that should be spewing galaxies, not pulsing with the excruciating pain of denial. It was that filthy, fucking vampire's fault. It was that foul, worthless parasite who'd reduced him to this state.

Like a videotape on ultra-fast forward, every atrocity Birkett ever committed ran through Adin's fevered mind. He'd never witnessed these acts in life, but somehow he was seeing them now. His enemy's savagery fueled his own savagery until it blazed through his veins and branded his heart.

Suddenly, spontaneously, he shifted into some hybrid creature that seemed to embody his focused, driven rage. He wasn't aware of his form – except to realize he had four muscular legs as well as broad wings – but he *was* aware, thrillingly aware, of his speed and strength and the sheathed, antique silver dagger clutched between his sharp teeth. The landscape unrolled with blinding speed beneath him. Birkett's very essence seemed to pull him along, as if Adin were a powerful fish, a swordfish perhaps, eager to be reeled in. Nothing could be finer than this feeling. Nothing. It was different from the ooze of blood onto his tongue...even the wizard's blood. It was different from his cock being coaxed into a paradise of relief by a woman's cunt. This was a homed-in rocket of vengeance he rode.

He felt like a mad, dark Valkyrie, coming to usher a soul not to Valhalla but to hell.

When he reached his destination, which he sensed throughout his body, he firmly planted his feet on the ground and assumed his own shape. It seemed to happen without any exercise of will on his part. Birkett's essence stopped him, enveloped him, then drew him on. The dagger had somehow moved from his mouth to his fist.

The vile one had burrowed into an Indian mound—another desecration, like ignoring those pathetic plague victims in Hebblemount, like pissing into a grave, like torturing a loving couple in London and countless other innocents.

Adin's fury flared.

He silently asked for the forgiveness of those resting within this sacred place, then tunneled into the earth until he came to a subterranean, bone-strewn cavern his enemy had obviously made. He relished the spirit-rich scent of the earth...but not the sight that greeted him. The carcasses of raccoons and 'possums, muskrats and foxes lay scattered around a supine, corpselike figure. Both hands lay on its chest. Clutched in one hand was the antique arbalest, clutched in the other, five custom-made bolts.

With a roar of outrage, Adin dropped to his knees. He grabbed the crossbow and arrows, raised his arms over his head and snapped them all in two. Grabbing Birkett's cold ankles, he pulled the insensate vampire out of the sacred hill. The tunnel closed behind them.

Adin rested on one knee, as if he were genuflecting. The sun was about to set. Eyes narrowed murderously, he stared down at his enemy. It was a ridiculous risk...but, ah,

the satisfaction it gave him to wait until this creature of the night began to stir in response to the creeping darkness! Adin rose, looming over Birkett, and continued to study him.

Hardly the storybook vampire. No porcelain skin, slicked-back hair and impeccable clothing. No shimmering coffin-satin to frame the dapper figure. Instead, Birkett was coarse and bedraggled. Blood was caked on and around his mouth. His skin, a nearly translucent, very pale blue, reminded Adin of the underbelly of a dead fish. The smell emanating from his bloated body was in keeping with the appearance of his flesh.

The sun slipped below the horizon. Every nerve and muscle in Adin's body tensed.

Birkett's eyes sprang open. Still straight, his body tilted upward until he was on his feet. Immediately, he spun to face Adin.

After six hundred fifty-eight years, the time had arrived.

"Fee fi fo fum, I smell the rancid blood of an Englishman...and I want retribution." A soft hiss sliced through the air as Adin unsheathed the dagger. His hand shot forward.

Before Birkett could react, the silver blade was sunk deep in his belly. He let out an unearthly howl. "No, not you, Swift!"

"Oh yes. And that's for my parents."

Eyes leaking blood, the vampire stiffened. Adin forcefully shoved and rotated the dagger. Birkett grunted, trying to reach for his attacker's neck. "And that's for Simon Browning's wife and stepson." Adin angled the blade upward and twisted it again. "And that's for William Everley's wife."

Leaving the weapon in its pocket of filthy flesh, Adin stepped to one side. He'd never felt so serene. All his vicious Plague Breed ferocity had been buried in his enemy's body. Dispassionately, he watched Birkett stumble blindly through the undergrowth, choking and gasping. He flailed one arm. His other hand groped for the hilt of the dagger. With a gurgling sound he dropped heavily to his knees.

Adin calmly lifted one foot and applied it to Birkett's back. "And this is for all the others," he said, pushing the vampire forward.

Birkett first landed on his thick, hairy forearms but they soon gave way beneath his deadening weight. He collapsed onto his stomach, driving the blade to its final resting place.

"And that's for Celia and me." Adin watched the vilest creature he'd ever known twitch into eternal lifelessness. "Merry Christmas."

Birkett's dark blood seeped into the dirt. Soon it, and he, rapidly decomposed, leaving no tainted trace of the marauder.

It was done.

Adin's body quivered. Pain shot through every fiber of him from the ground up. He struggled to remain upright. After stalling briefly, the pain seemed to burst from the top of his head.

He was released.

In the distance, the unmistakable thunder of Jackson Spey's shovelhead chopper grew ever louder, bringing Adin's final deliverance of the day.

Epilogue

Shielding her eyes against the summer sun, Celia got up from the chaise and lazily walked to the deck's railing. She felt sexy and a bit decadent, standing completely naked before the world. But that was one of the advantages of having an isolated home in the country. With a smile of contentment, she gazed over her flower and vegetable gardens to the woods that thickened beyond them. A red-tailed hawk sailed patiently over the treetops, waiting to spy its next meal.

Celia's smile broadened for a moment.

She turned away from the pastoral scene. Tiptoeing up to the other chaise on the deck, she knelt down beside it. *What a beautiful, beautiful man,* she thought, covetously running her hand across his bare chest and down his taut stomach to the pubic hair that crowned his cock. Even soft, it looked thick and inviting. Celia knew the slightest touch would make it rise. How could a man be so damned tempting without even trying? His body, misted with sweat, glistened softly in the sunshine. That rich tan looked *so* good on him. So very, very good...

"Get up and fuck me, Jackson," she whispered. Her tongue traced the outline of his ear.

"Cut the crap." Pulling off his dark glasses, Adin sat up. He was smiling. At least he hadn't lost his sense of humor. Leaning over the arm of the chaise, he kissed the top of Celia's breast. "I miss my fingernail," he murmured against her skin.

Celia lifted his head and gave him a long, savoring kiss. "I kind of do too. But you still have more than enough tricks in your bag."

"You sure you're not confusing me with that damned wizard again?"

"Quite sure."

Celia bowed her back, thrusting her breasts toward her lover. His eyes smoldered. Just the way he looked at her made her nipples tighten. Turning toward her, he eagerly kissed and fondled her offering, drawing one nipple into his mouth while teasing the other with his deft fingers. Warm moisture slicked her cunt.

Her hand, still lingering near his crotch, reached for the source of so much of her pleasure. Oh yes...it had indeed sprung to attention.

"See what you've gone and done?" Adin held her face and kissed her with greater intensity, his lips moving more aggressively, his tongue gliding against and tangling with hers.

Celia broke the kiss only so she could feel his cock in her mouth. She moved down the chaise and leaned over his rod, which seemed to be pointing to the top of the tallest tree in the surrounding forest. At first she clutched it in her hand, giving it a quick, firm

squeeze, then removed her hand and closed her mouth over the entire solid shaft. She felt it bump against the back of her throat. Very slowly, with one prolonged suck, she drew her lips and tongue from the hard base to the soft head. Adin groaned.

Suddenly standing, Celia said, "Catch me if you can."

Flashing Adin a smile, she dashed into the house. The feel of her heavy breasts bouncing as she ran heightened her arousal, the nipples pinching into a tingling tightness. Giggling, she flew through the bedroom, down the stairs, and finally out the back door. Adin was right behind her.

As he caught her around the waist, Celia let out a little scream of surprise and delight. They tumbled into a bed of lavender and marigolds.

Straddling her, Adin pinned her shoulders against the fragrant blanket. "You're very naughty," he said, his voice coarsened from desire. "Do you know what happens to naughty girls?"

"No." Celia stared into his eyes, her cunt beginning to throb from wanting him. "You'll have to show me."

Adin inched forward on her reclining body and began slapping the solid column of his cock against her breasts, her peaked and exquisitely sensitive nipples. Hot desire charged through Celia, forcing still more moisture to flow through and from her pussy. Adin dragged his cock down her body, leaving glittering drops of pre-cum on her sunwarmed skin. He began teasing her clit with its head—thrusting against the swollen nub, gliding around it, over it...again and again.

"Jesus, you're wet," he breathed.

"Does that make me naughty too?"

"No. But it makes *me* naughty." Adin's turgid cock slipped inside her.

Moaning, Celia let her muscles grip the solid pillar of flesh that filled her, wall to soft slick wall. Adin lowered himself until their bodies connected, his sleek, tough chest crushing her round, soft breasts. Their mouths met hungrily as the breath of lavender and marigolds drifted around them, enveloping them in a sweet yet pungent cocoon of scent that seemed the perfect aromatic complement to their lovemaking. The more Adin pumped and the more Celia met his thrusts, the stronger the scent became. When Celia finally felt the luscious waves of climax roll through her tensing body, it seemed she was bobbing through paradise. Adin's strong spasms of release only heightened that heavenly illusion.

Panting, he more slid than rolled off her. Every square inch of their skin was dampened with sweat. Celia dreamily closed her eyes as she felt the sluggish drip of his cum from her vagina. She felt Adin's fingers gently sweep over her cunt. Opening her eyes, she saw him glide his fingertips over his parted lips. He leaned over her. Celia grasped the back of his head. Tenderly, their mouths met, savoring the mingled product of their passion.

Sighing, Adin lay on his back. His hand found Celia's. They stayed that way for some moments, basking in the filtered sunlight and in the warmth of their love.

"I'm really glad you sold the other house," Adin said.

Celia sat up. Smiling, she let her gaze caress the naked man who lolled amidst the herbs and flowers. The spill of his hair blended beautifully with the color of the marigolds. He looked like some woodland god.

"I am too. It would've conjured too many ugly memories. I don't think I would've ever felt fully at ease there."

Celia drew her legs up to her chest and rested her chin on her knees. She'd never known such pure happiness. She and Adin had bought this house, *their* house, together and were fully settled in. They loved it. And they loved Woodbine, now that the shadow hovering over the town had been lifted.

But most important, they loved each other and the life they'd made together.

Adin, too, sat up. He lightly brushed the garden remnants from Celia's back. Looking around, he said, "Archie did a good job landscaping. A damned good job."

"Yes, he did. He has a real talent for it." Celia knew Adin was particularly pleased by this turn. Archie Grumbach, no longer under Birkett's insidious influence, was doing quite well. He worked hard and drank only moderately. He'd become a capable, dependable jack-of-all-trades.

Thinking of Archie made Celia think of something else. She turned to Adin. "Hey, you want to go to the Tip Top for their Golden Anniversary party? It starts later this afternoon."

"That's right. Yeah, I'd like to go. Red's doing a corn and pig roast. Free drinks from four to eight." Eyes glimmering, Adin dipped to the side and kissed her. "We can have sloppy-drunk sex when we get back."

Smiling wistfully, Celia touched his lips. "You know, your birthday's coming up."

Adin looked down and nodded. "I'll actually be turning thirty."

It would be his first real birthday in a long, long time. Celia planned on throwing a surprise party. She'd invite all the people they knew in town and all her friends from Madison. She'd invite Jackson Spey and his companion, Angelina Funmaker, whom Celia was dying to meet. And she'd invite her parents...so they could finally meet the man she adored.

"Does it bother you?" Celia asked quietly.

Adin's response was immediate and quite definite. "No, not at all. It's a genuine cause for celebration." He took up her hands and kissed each one in turn. "We're going to grow old together."

Celia felt tears rise. "I saw a hawk today, gliding over the treetops."

Adin gave her a soft and slightly mysterious smile. "I felt it. I was with it."

"Another sensory memory?" Celia knew he still had them, like an amputee who feels a missing limb.

"In part." He helped Celia rise from the garden bed and took her in his arms. Embracing, they stood naked beneath the sun like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. "But mostly, I think it was my spirit that soared."

About the Author

K.Z. Snow (formerly writing as Kate Snow) is the daughter of Milwaukee tavernkeepers and learned her first words off a Wurlitzer jukebox. Nine years of higher education, resulting in two and a half English degrees and a stint as a teacher, did not dampen her enthusiasm for beer, Green Bay Packers football, classic R&B, and various forms of political incorrectness.

She's been many things in her life, including a varsity debater, a Catholic, a hippie, Girl junker, fag hag, gardener, editor, а Scout. а а а an а saxophone/bassoon/tambourine player (not all at once), a damned good dancer, and a companion to most species of domesticated animals, including men.

One thing she has never been is a Republican. One thing she will always be is a writer.

She now lives in rural Wisconsin, not far from the birthplace of surrealism, a.k.a. "The Dells". Her imagination and her hips continue to grow unchecked.

K.Z. welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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