

Kathryn R. Blake

*Mortal
Illusions*

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by

Kathryn R. Blake

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New Concepts Publishing

4729 Humphreys Rd.

Lake Park, GA 31636

www.newconceptspublishing.com

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my mother, who never really understood vampires, but supported me in whatever I did. I wish she had lived long enough to read this.

This is also for my closest friends and critique group who had faith in me, even when I had none. You know who you are, Kathleen and Pam. You are very special to me.

For my editor, Tiffany Ayers, who did understand vampires and happened to like mine enough to help me share them with others.

And most of all, for my husband, who supported my writing by doing everything else while I created characters and worlds that I now share with you.

Thank you all.

KRB

PROLOGUE

“Wishing you were somehow here again . . .

Knowing we must say good-bye....”

A woman's dulcet tones floated from the stage to Germaine St. Justine in a sweet but hollow entreaty that made his teeth ache and stomach churn as if he'd ingested a giant cone of cotton candy.

Germaine knew better than to fault the woman. Her voice was technically perfect and she was quite pretty, in a plastic, theatrical sort of way. But she wasn't Lucy. At least not his Lucy.

As the last notes of Christine's lament trebled into silence, Germaine spoke into the mike that amplified his voice on stage. “Thank you, Ms. Lacey, that was very nice. We'll be in touch.”

The moment he flipped off the mike, William Hailey, his director, turned to him. “Well, what was it this time? Was her nose too long, her mouth too wide, or her legs too short?”

“None of the above,” Germaine answered evenly as he picked up the next resume in his stack. “She just wasn't right for the role.”

Hailey sighed as if he was being persecuted. “Why do you insist on pursuing this folly?”

Pretending not to hear, Germaine gazed at the picture he held without really looking at it. This would be the ninetieth hopeful they'd auditioned that week and, though he loathed admitting it, Germaine had the sinking feeling his stage director might be right. Maybe it was a folly.

“Serena Williams is hot right now,” Hailey continued, keeping his voice low although they sat too far back in the darkened theater for anyone on stage to see or hear them.

“And she's expressed a keen interest in working with us. She'd be perfect for the role, Germaine. She's young, talented, a box office draw, and she's worked with Nick before. She'd make an excellent Lucy to his Dracula.”

Keeping his unkind thoughts about Serena Williams to himself, Germaine turned over the picture and scanned the next actress's resume beneath the lighted, desk-like ledge clamped to the seats in front of them. Not because he needed the light to see, but because disdaining it would only attract the kind of attention he preferred to avoid.

This next aspirant had a couple of major roles in college to her credit, but only a few bit parts and some chorus work Off-Broadway since then. Not very promising, but Germaine wasn't interested in experience. He sought something else. A unique quality that couldn't be taught.

“Please, Germaine, do us all a favor. Call an end to the auditions tonight, and let me phone Serena's agent tomorrow. They're so eager to discuss terms that I bet she'll even audition for you. Give her that much, at least. If you're still not satisfied, we can continue this torture next week.”

Germaine flipped the tiny red switch on his headset that connected him to his stage manager, John Percy, working backstage. Reading from the resume, he said, “Call Ms. Daniels in next, John.”

William Hailey groaned out loud. “Why won't you even give Serena a chance?”

“Because she's not right for the role. Lucy is an innocent whose love and spiritual strength shine forth so brightly that even the Prince of Darkness can't extinguish them. Serena Williams is an accomplished, young femme fatale who lost her innocence long before she knew she had any.”

“So she's been in the tabloids a few times,” Hailey murmured a little defensively. “She can still act, Germaine. She could give Lucy all the innocence you want.”

“You can't act innocence, Bill,” Germaine insisted as he watched the auditioning actress walk on stage. Her step was light, but confident as she moved across the boards with a grace more inherent than studied. She had the look he was after--a youthful visage with large, guileless blue eyes and long, lustrous dark-brown hair that cascaded like a waterfall of soft curls to her shoulders in a style that reminded him of the nineteenth century. Watching her, he had the distinct feeling they had already met. He glanced at her resume again. Claire Daniels. An attractive name, but not one that held any special significance for him. She lived in Manhattan. No surprise there. She'd studied at Julliard and Yale. Again, nothing remarkable. Putting his impression down to one too many auditions, he watched Hailey scribble notes over her sparse resume with his tooth-worried pen.

“As I was saying,” Germaine continued, “you either possess an aura of innocence or you don't. Once lost, it can never be regained, and Serena Williams never had any to begin with.”

“What about this one?” Hailey inquired, indicating the young woman on stage with a jab of his pen. “She certainly doesn't have any experience. Has she got this elusive quality of innocence you're looking for?” he asked, his frustration edged with sarcasm.

“Possibly. That's what we're here to find out.” Switching off his headphone to avoid the earsplitting feedback, Germaine leaned forward and spoke into the mike. “Before you begin, Ms. Daniels, I'd like you to tell us a little about yourself and why you want to play Lucy Seward?”

He could hear her softly in-drawn breath and see her blue eyes widen slightly, but even Germaine's extraordinary faculties couldn't determine whether it was surprise or stage-fright that prompted the reaction. Stepping forward, she peered out into the darkened

house with her right hand shading her eyes from the spotlight and asked, "What would you like to know about me, sir?" Her voice was clear and perfectly modulated. His interest heightened, Germaine wanted to hear more.

"Tell us a little about your interests and what brings you here tonight," he suggested helpfully.

"Well, I like to study dance and I'm currently taking singing and acting classes at NYU. As to why I'm here...." she paused, looking uncertain for a moment. "Bram Stoker's tale has always fascinated me, and I feel I have a special understanding of Lucy Seward's attraction for Dracula."

"And what special understanding is that, Ms. Daniels?" Germaine asked, his insides tightening with apprehension as if he were the one auditioning rather than she.

"I think that Lucy loved Dracula more than she did her fiancé, her father and her own life, yet she feared the power he held over her." She paused and swallowed as if to gather her courage, then added, "I think she loved him not because he was a vampire, but in spite of it."

Germaine hadn't expected her answer would affect him so strongly, but it had, and he wasn't sure he cared for the implication. He couldn't shake the foreboding feeling that his fate was inextricably intertwined with this woman's. The notion made him want to thank and dismiss her before it was too late for him to escape unscathed. Instead he said, "Thank you, Ms. Daniels. You may continue with the audition now if you wish."

She'd also selected "Wishing You Were Somehow Here Again," from Webber's Phantom. After ninety auditions, Germaine was well-acquainted with Christine Daea's lament before her dead father's grave. Wishing these young hopefuls possessed a little more variety, if not imagination, Germaine sat back in his seat and resigned himself to another poignant interlude. But the moment Claire started to sing, Germaine forgot to breathe. Psychic awareness flowed through him as if an unseen hand caressed the back of his neck. Every nerve in his body tingled with awakened sensitivity. The sensation was both exquisitely beautiful and excruciatingly painful. She sang with such depth of emotion, such feeling, that he experienced the grief of her loss as if they were joined. Barraged by unwanted memories, Germaine fought to bury his resurfacing emotions beneath a barricade of indifference. Whenever he opened himself to the moods and feelings of mortals, he became vulnerable to their wants, needs and desires until his subliminal bond with them forged a forbidden longing for more within him. A longing that could never be fulfilled.

Although it took more willpower than he imagined possible, Germaine managed to master his emotions and view the actress on stage through objective eyes. Technically, her voice had the range, depth and control he sought, and its sweet, lyrical quality pleased him greatly. But the emotional resonance, the naked feeling of longing she imparted to the words, took his breath away as it filled him with an aching need to ease

her despair. The deep feeling of grief he sensed stemmed not from an excellent performance, but from personal experience. Personal pain.

Aware that he hadn't gained as much control over his own emotions as he'd believed, Germaine was reluctant to commit himself by declaring her his final choice. Claire Daniels was his ideal image of Lucy in every way. If she could act, he'd have no alternative but to give her the role. She was singing the last verse when he switched on his headphones again. "Is Nick here yet, John?" he asked gruffly, hoping to hide the telltale huskiness in his voice.

"He just arrived," John reported. "Should I put him on?"

"No. Just tell him that I'd like him to read with Ms. Daniels in a few minutes."

John murmured his acknowledgment as Claire's last note faded away and Germaine spoke into the mike. "Thank you very much, Ms. Daniels. That was most enjoyable. Would you go with Mr. Percy to the green room for a few minutes? I'd like to hear you read for the role as well." At her stunned nod, John stepped forward to escort her offstage and Germaine turned to face his director.

"She hasn't even acted legit before," Hailey pointed out with a trace of exasperation. "That makes her an unknown quantity. Do you really want to risk everything on an unknown?"

"What I want has little to do with this, Bill. She's Lucy in every way. Her voice, her face, the way she walks, even the way she gestures with her hands. Unless her acting skills rival a high school prom queen trying out for the senior play, I think she deserves this chance."

"May I remind you that we open in nine weeks. If she doesn't work out, we'll have a hell of a time trying to replace her."

"True...." Germaine concurred, but the idea that she might not work out didn't concern him. His inner conviction that she would succeed in undoing him in a way that no one else ever had--did. Germaine was just as certain that Claire Daniels would be the archangel of his personal Armageddon as he was convinced that he would be her death, if he permitted any further contact between them. He felt it in every sinewy fiber of his preternatural being.

Still, he'd never been one to shirk his responsibilities, and the vagaries of his personal life weren't his primary concern right now--casting Dracula was. He would simply keep his distance from all the actors once rehearsals began and occupy his time with the countless other aspects of the production. There was no reason, earthly or otherwise, for him to have any interaction with Ms. Daniels. Whatever it took, the show came first.

"...but it is my money, Bill," he finished with a grim half-smile.

"So it is," William Hailey conceded. "I guess I'm willing to risk my livelihood on Ms. Daniels if you are. However, I'll leave it to you to convince the others."

Germaine nodded as he prayed he wasn't risking a great deal more than money and reputations by allowing his artistic vision to override his centuries-old intuition. Lost money could be regained and reputations remade. Lost lives required a funeral.

CHAPTER ONE

Nine Weeks Later

She wasn't dead--yet.

Germaine took cold comfort from that reassurance as he strode swiftly past the occasional huddled pedestrian prowling Manhattan's sleepless streets--heedless of the instinctive, sometimes painful hunger that prowled his insides like a stalking beast. The beast was with him always, but tonight the man's need predominated.

Moving silently among the shadows, like the creature of the night he was, Germaine clamped his lips together and pressed on. Nothing would deter him from his purpose this night.

Nothing.

His tread soundless yet sure upon the litter-strewn pavement, he kept to his chosen path, oblivious to even the biting wind that grabbed at his long, black coat like the small chilblained hands of starving street urchins begging for his attention.

Germaine had learned long ago that not every cold hand signified a warm heart. And tonight, with the temperature hovering near freezing, Lady Winter's grasp was lethal. But winter's frigid fingers merely passed through him, leaving him aware--but untouched. The worst of nature's fitful tantrums no longer affected him. Nothing natural did.

He closed his eyes and reached out again with his mind. The swaddling haze of a drug-induced sleep had muzzled the gnawing pain he'd felt from her earlier. Even so, she waited for him. She hadn't tried to reach him, nor had he sought any contact with her for more than ten years. Nonetheless, Marguerite Danielson knew he would seek her out tonight. Modern medicine had done all it could, it was his turn now--just as it had been so many times before.

The moment he stepped beneath the unnatural glare of the life-draining fluorescent tubes inside the treatment center, Germaine shielded his eyes behind the high-standing collar of his coat. The special contacts he wore enabled him to see in light that would normally blind him, but they didn't eliminate the pain.

He hated hospitals. Hated their bare, white-tiled walls made even more sterile by their color-leeching lights and cotton-swathed staff. No wonder everyone looked near death within these hallowed institutions that reeked of alcohol and iodine, ammonia and--blood.

The distinctive coppery scent taunted and teased his senses the moment he stepped through the sliding doors. Gritting his teeth against the wolfish hunger the heady lure

evoked, he forced his thoughts back to his task and continued toward the elevator. A nearby orderly cast a wary glance in his direction. Having neither the time nor the patience to rebut a volley of bothersome inquiries, Germaine merely caught and held his stare. Seconds later the bewildered attendant turned back to the perky nurse's aide he'd been talking to--completely and blissfully unaware of Germaine's presence.

On the seventh floor the lighting had been dimmed to help promote whatever rest its troubled residents might find. Long, white tubes recessed behind partitioned rectangles of opaque plastic gave off little more illumination than a night light. Germaine's eyes instantly adjusted, allowing him to see clearly and without pain. The corridor was empty, but he knew the room number by heart--713. As he silently traversed the narrow gray and white tiled hallway, he could hear the soft moans of distress punctuating the uneasy sleep of the patients.

The seventh floor was the terminal floor.

He gave the handleless door a push. It swung open without a sound. Slipping inside, he kept a steadying hand upon it while it closed. His tread as silent as the mist, he approached the softly lit bed and gazed down at the figure tautly curved in a pain-filled slumber. Though she was turned away from him, Germaine saw at once how this illness had robbed her. Her glorious brown hair, which once curled softly about her neck and shoulders, was now gray and less than an inch long. Her figure, once slender but sweetly curved was now all bones and sharp angles. Her body, which once challenged and nearly won a game of night tennis from him, was now too weak for anything but sleep.

Like a thief in the night, the cancer had taken everything of value from her but her life, leaving little more than an emaciated body, unable to eat or breathe without the aid of the thin plastic umbilical lines that sustained it. He knew all this and more, yet she'd never told him of it.

She hadn't needed to.

He stood for a moment watching her sleep, allowing his senses to absorb the many changes in her that his mind alone could not detect--such as her scent. Even the hospital's acrid antiseptics couldn't mask the essence of death's perfume from his preternatural senses. A bittersweet fragrance that painfully confirmed what his probing mind had already surmised.

Wishing he had the power to grant her another half-century of life, he closed his senses to all but her and concentrated on forcing air in and out of his lungs until his breathing matched hers and his heart mimicked the shallow but steady beat of her own. Fully attuned, he leaned over and brushed a kiss upon her temple. Her lips curved into a half-smile, half-grimace, but she did not awaken. Placing a trail of kisses along her jaw, he stopped at the pulsing beat just below her ear.

Although her eyes remained shut, her smile widened and he knew she was awake.

"It can't be time to take my temperature again, John," she murmured in a voice so husky it made him wonder if she enjoyed John's nightly visitations.

Pressing his lips to her ear, Germaine whispered, "I fear you are to be sorely disappointed, madam, for I am not--John."

"Oh." She exhaled slowly, and Germaine could feel the effort it took for her to talk.

"Then it must be Michael, here for my nightly back rub."

"You mistake me, still," he replied, smiling inwardly at her teasing even as he longed to bring her ease. "I should be honored, however, to perform such a gallant service in that tardy gentleman's stead." His fingers sought the area between her shoulders and gently kneaded the muscles inclined to stiffen and cramp due to their enforced idleness.

Her moan of pleasure was so sweet that Germaine felt his body respond with a piercing need. It had been a long time since he'd been with a woman. Nearly a quarter century, but he wasn't there to romance her. Placing a firm restraint upon himself, he asked almost casually, "Tell me, who comes nightly to take a sample of your blood?"

"Peter," she replied with a grimace that was nearly audible. "I don't care much for his visits though, as he's nearly out of uncharted territory." She stretched out her bone-thin arms and Germaine could see the IV needle embedded beneath the bruised and mottled skin of her left hand. His gaze traveled the length of both arms, noting similar testaments to the countless other small invasions her doctors had made to defeat the deadly enemy that had retaken her body.

Attuned as they were, her pain had become his own. He would obliterate all her pain and suffering if he could, but a miracle like that was beyond even his powers.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, knowing his response was inadequate, but she went on as if he hadn't spoken.

"I do hope you haven't come to replace Peter. He's visited me once this evening already, and I don't think he's left me anything to spare."

Germaine trailed a finger from her ear to the hollow of her throat. "Would you begrudge me a small sample of what you give so freely to Peter?"

Her answering sigh ended in a throaty purr. "I suppose not," she finally managed to answer. "That is, if you really must--" Her teasing protest ended in a soft gasp of sensuality that trailed off into a moan of blatant disappointment when he carefully withdrew after extracting only a few seconds worth of her blood.

Stepping around the bed, he noticed her narrowed blue eyes and arched one eyebrow in inquiry as he shrugged out of his coat.

"You always did end things far too quickly," she admonished him weakly as she watched him remove his jacket and roll up his sleeve.

He retrieved a thin, black box from his coat pocket and placed it on the small tray table

stationed near her waist. "Are you accusing me of leaving you unsatisfied?"

"No," she conceded, her gaze fixed on the hypodermic syringe he lifted from the box. "Merely reminding you that I wasn't the one who wanted you to stop. In fact--" She drew a sharp breath and winced when he stabbed the long needle into his arm. A bright crimson fluid flowed into the syringe, reflecting light in the way that rubies might, if they were reduced to liquid form. "In fact," she repeated a little unevenly, "I wasn't the one against prolonging our lovemaking to its natural conclusion."

He smiled then, but his expression contained more self-recrimination than humor. "Consider it an overzealous attack of scruples on my part," he replied, laying the filled hypodermic on the tray table and reaching for the insulated juice pitcher seated on the cabinet near the head of her bed.

Her gaze remained riveted on the softly glowing syringe. "What would happen if you were to inject that directly into someone's vein?"

"That would depend upon who that someone was," he answered, setting a glass of room-temperature orange juice near the needle.

"Say, me, for example. How would I feel afterwards?"

"Are we talking about before or after I put you over my knee?"

She wrinkled her nose at him even as her frail fingers encircled the syringe. "Is this enough to do it?" she asked, her eyes alight with so much hope it pained him to meet her gaze, knowing that he would be the one to extinguish her hopes of tomorrow--forever.

"No, Marguerite. Even if it were, an existence such as mine could never be what I would willingly choose for you."

With a resigned sigh, Marguerite Danielson returned the hypodermic to his outstretched hand. "Have you come to watch me die then, André?" she demanded in a tone that insisted there be no illusions between them--only honesty.

He injected his blood into the juice and stirred the mixture until the liquid turned the color of summer-ripened strawberries. "It's Germaine now," he advised, easing her into a sitting position. With her head propped within the curve of his arm, he held the glass to her lips. "Drink this first, then we'll discuss my plans for you."

She made a disgruntled face, but did as he asked--just as he knew she would. He watched her cheeks regain the bloom of health with every swallow. Joined as they were, he could feel her heart grow stronger as the heat of her low-grade fever broke. The pain that had lain in waiting just beneath the surface of her consciousness receded into nothingness, and for a moment she was well again. Lowering his arm from its supportive hold, he fluffed her pillow and raised the electric bed into a more comfortable position for her.

"How long will it last?" she asked, her question making it clear she had no

misconceptions regarding her recovery.

Germaine watched her carefully for a moment, wanting to be assured she suffered no ill-effects before he answered her. She had demanded honesty, so he would be honest. The words he'd use would be as perfunctory as the swift efficiency with which he put away his supplies, but even proficiency with a task did not negate the regret for its necessity. And Germaine's response, though honest and direct, was also filled with deep regret.

"Eighteen hours. Possibly twenty-four."

"I don't wish to sound ungrateful ... Germaine," Marguerite added, as if his changed name was a meaningless ruse rather than an unfortunate but necessary condition to being immortal. "But haven't you got anything that lasts a little longer--say twenty years?"

"If I did, you would have received it ten years ago, when you were first diagnosed," he assured her, turning his attention to the painless removal of the two small marks he'd left on her throat. "I thought my visit then had cured you, but it seems even the immortal are fallible."

She turned away, but he put his hand under her chin, turning her toward him. "You insisted we be honest with each other, Marguerite," he reminded, gently squeezing her chin before he reached up to remove the oxygen line she no longer needed. Adjusting the control until the soft hissing finally ceased, he asked. "Why didn't you call me? Why did you wait for me to come to you on my own?"

A thoughtful smile curved her lips as she entwined her fingers with his. "I remembered how much you detested hospitals," she admitted, gazing at him. "I knew you'd come for me tonight. Only I'd hoped it would be to take me with you." Her smile faltering, she quietly drew her hand back.

Marguerite's disappointment filled Germaine with an aching remorse. He knew what his refusal cost her, but nothing could make him change his mind. Not about this.

Longing to ease her, he lifted a hand to her hair, but she jerked away from his touch.

"Don't. It's ugly, and I know it. It's the poison they've been feeding me to kill the cancer. Except it's killed my hair, and now it's killing me."

With the press of a finger, he gently tipped her face back. "I don't think it's ugly," he replied, pretending to assess her through critical eyes. "A bit short, perhaps...."

Marguerite laughed, but the sound was hollow and strained. "It's hideous, and you're a terrible liar, André. You always were."

When he didn't refute her, she asked casually, "So, how's Dracula coming?"

Not wanting to jinx the show, he hesitated briefly before admitting, "The previews have been promising, and opening night is just twenty-four hours away."

"You're pleased with the cast, then? No problems or concerns?"

"I assume the cast is doing fine, since no one has stormed my door down with complaints, but I haven't attended any rehearsals or previews. I plan to go tomorrow night."

A brief look of disappointment creased Marguerite's forehead. Germaine presumed it was because he couldn't give her any details about the show when she said, "I don't think you know just how much I'd like to be able to go with you tomorrow night, André ... Sorry, Germaine."

A tidal wave of regret washed over Germaine as he recalled how she'd urged him to do this musical nearly twenty years ago, when he'd started investing in Broadway productions again. But he couldn't grant her wish, no matter how deeply it hurt him to deny her. Feeling his conscience war with his guilt, he said teasingly, "If you continue to call me André, your family will begin to doubt your sanity. André would have to be about fifty-five now I think."

"Fifty-three, the same age as me, but who's counting?" She glanced down at his strong hand that remained, like the rest of him, at the permanent age of thirty. She had been that young when they parted. "I'm dying, André," she admitted, her fingers gripping his in an unspoken plea. "We both knew this time would come eventually, but I'm not ready for it--not now, not yet."

"Marguerite--"

"Don't. There's nothing you can say. There is something you could do--only you, damn your golden eyes, refuse to do it." She blinked back her tears. "Not all of us have eternity to live out our lives, André. And some of us feel cheated when our time is cut short."

"Don't do this, Magpie," he pleaded, gathering her into his arms. "Don't cry." Then, before she could say more, he kissed her deeply, much in the same way he used to kiss her twenty-three years ago. For him, the time span was no longer than an eye blink, and her impassioned response made it seem even shorter. They were both so engrossed in the moment that neither cared nor drew apart when the door opened. At the sound of an enraged gasp, however, Germaine started to tactfully withdraw when a furious female verbally accosted him.

"Who the hell are you, and what are you doing to my...."

Germaine turned in time to see the young woman's luminous blue eyes grow wide with astonishment. "Mother?" she asked, then blinked as if she didn't quite trust her vision.

"Yes, dear, it's me." Marguerite Danielson responded quietly and Germaine knew without being told that the livid young woman was Marguerite's daughter, Clarissa.

"You look surprised. Were you expecting someone else in my bed, dear?" Marguerite asked with a slight rise of her brows.

The daughter flushed a shade of pink that Germaine thought becoming and vaguely

familiar until the lovely creature said, "Certainly not in there with you. Or more accurately on top of you!"

Feeling a little like a confirmed priest being labeled as a French Romeo, Germaine retreated into polite aloofness. "Pleased to meet you, too," he murmured smoothly before whispering to Marguerite, "Should I salute her or will a mere bow suffice?"

"She's just worried about me," Marguerite insisted, but Germaine sensed a sudden quickening in her pulse rate and reached for her wrist in an overly protective and unnecessary gesture.

Your pulse is racing, he cautioned her silently. Calm down.

I'm trying, but I don't want her to think badly of you . . . Her response came to him slowly while her mind stretched muscles it hadn't exercised for many years. He recognized the effort it took for her to reuse a skill she'd long forgotten she possessed, but what bothered him more was the energy she was expending to rectify her daughter's impression of him.

To his mind, he'd done nothing that warranted a defense. Although he was honest enough to admit that the daughter might not view things exactly from his perspective. Even so . . .

"Clarissa," Marguerite began in a reasonable tone, "this is--Germaine. André's son. You remember me telling you about André, don't you? He's French. He was merely greeting me in the usual way of his countrymen when they renew long lost acquaintances--no more."

Clarissa Danielson's brows raised in open skepticism. "Is that so?" Blue eyes glared at him with hot suspicion. "I saw you take my mother's pulse. Was that another French custom, or do you profess to be a doctor as well?"

Despite his growing annoyance, Germaine's senses caught a trace of uneasiness beneath the young woman's belligerence. An uneasiness that was steadily developing into an unreasonable and inexplicable fear. Her fear surprised him. Anger he expected, but why would she be afraid?

"Clarissa, please!" Marguerite protested. "You're being rude. Germaine is a family friend and he has come a long way to see me. It wouldn't hurt you to be gracious."

"I'd be a lot more gracious if I hadn't just witnessed his attempt to perform a tonsillectomy on you with his tongue."

Marguerite's eyes widened and she laughed in a way Germaine had thought lost to her forever. Despite his irritation, he couldn't help smiling in response. Marguerite's lightened spirits did much to ease his own heavy heart. Turning, he was about to ask the younger woman if she spoke from personal experience when he noticed a sullen young man lurking near the doorway. The scowling youth looked to be about nineteen, certainly no older than twenty. He was thin, almost to the point of being gaunt, and from

his agitated gestures Germaine suspected they were about to come face-to-face with one of New York's junkies out prowling hospitals for an easy mark. Germaine stepped forward to stave off the potential thief when Marguerite motioned the young man forward.

“Robert, come in, please. I want you to meet Germaine. Germaine, this is my son, Robert.”

The other man's gaze flicked uneasily over the three of them. Then with a final look of apology to his mother, he slipped back into the shadowed hallway. Marguerite tightened her lips in frustration, but didn't call him back. She gazed over at her daughter again.

“Where's Harry?” she asked, her voice tight with disappointment.

“He's paying the cab driver,” Clarissa answered, dragging her regret-filled gaze from the empty doorway to her mother. Germaine caught the fleeting sense that she really wanted to run after her brother, but had restrained herself due to the futility of the exercise. The feelings she had for her brother were strong, almost maternal, but her heartfelt concern for her mother was nearly palpable. Although it was unusual for Germaine to register feelings from a virtual stranger with such intensity, he was neither surprised nor alarmed by his responsiveness given his strong link with Clarissa's mother.

Yet, the heart-pounding fear he sensed in her when she stepped over to fluff her mother's pillow still puzzled him. “He should be here any minute,” she added with a reassuring smile.

Her lips curving slightly, Marguerite gave her daughter a knowing look, then cast a sideways glance at Germaine. “That means Harry's interrogating the staff on my condition again. It's become his daily ritual ever since Clarissa suspected the doctors weren't telling her the truth. She's set herself up as my personal watchdog--wanting to know what kind of treatments they're giving me, along with all the other gory details about my care here.”

“Well, somebody's got to do it,” Clarissa murmured begrudgingly as she leaned over to kiss her mother's cheek. Sitting close enough to touch her, Germaine noticed beneath the young woman's admonishing pose that she was actually trembling. She was scared, all right, but of what? She straightened and moved away as if his nearness bothered her, but spared him only the briefest glance before she smiled warmly at her mother. That smile nagged at him, too. It was familiar somehow, yet he couldn't quite place it.

“You're looking much better this evening,” Clarissa said with the false brightness mortals reserved for the very old and the very sick--conditions for which recovery was neither expected nor possible. “I think your fever's finally broken.” She retrieved an old-fashioned glass thermometer, definitely not hospital-issue, from the nearby chest and shook it down. “Let's see what your temperature is tonight, shall we?”

Marguerite averted her head. “Germaine's already taken it. It's normal. Isn't it, Germaine?”

He smiled at the reminder of her earlier playacting. "Perfectly."

"Do you mind if I confirm that?" the daughter snapped at him.

"Not at all." He appropriated the thermometer from the young woman and held Marguerite's chin. "As your daughter seems reluctant to accept our word, I suggest we humor her."

Marguerite accepted the thermometer without protest, but her eyes remained fixed on Germaine's. Well? she asked him silently.

Germaine could hear the frustration in Clarissa's sigh as she turned away from them in a pointed show of disapproval.

I begin to wonder if George wasn't just a little too lenient with both his children, Germaine answered her.

George believed in solid reasoning and praise, she responded in quick defense.

Spare the rod . . . Germaine intoned. Retrieving the thermometer, he extended it toward Clarissa without looking at it. "Miss Danielson, you requested this I believe?"

She practically snatched the glass tube from his fingers, then skirted around him to read the tiny numbers by the room's only light, a chrome-based lamp with a sixty watt bulb. "This is no better than candlelight," she grumbled, her face nearly pressed to the plastic shade. While she was preoccupied with deciphering the tiny numerals, Germaine conducted a longer, more thorough appraisal of Marguerite's daughter. She was taller and thinner than he liked, as most young women of her generation tended to be, yet not too thin. She had a delicately boned face capped by a fluff of wind-combed hair that was short by his standards, but not unattractively so. And though he much preferred petite, soft-spoken women with long, silken curls a man could wrap his hand in, something about this female appealed to him in a strangely familiar way.

Perhaps it was the softer side he sensed in her. A vulnerable side she kept buried beneath her sharp tongue and brusque manner, the same way she sought to conceal her more feminine curves beneath the bulk of her fisherman's knit sweater and heavy wool jacket. A jacket that she had yet to remove despite the warmth of the room. Her slender fingers, gripped around the thin glass tube, bespoke a worried frustration that he suspected would never be voiced. And her blue eyes, now narrowed in concentration, gave hint to a deeply sensitive and caring soul. None of these things would be obvious to the casual observer. But to him, they were silent beacons luring him toward dangerous, if not fatal, shores.

He could see a lot that was her mother in her, and a lot that was not. Though he was certain they had never met before, he couldn't quite shake the feeling he knew her somehow.

"Ninety-eight point six," she announced, giving the thermometer a vigorous shake. Even beneath that outwardly casual movement, Germaine's senses caught a subtle trembling.

Whatever was bothering Clarissa Danielson, she intended to keep it from her mother. She returned the thermometer to its place on the chest, then scowled at the nearby lamp. "Really, Mother, I don't see why you're suddenly against turning on the overhead lights." "Some eyes are sensitive to bright lights, dear, and I prefer a soft glow to the harsh glare of fluorescence."

The gentle warmth in Marguerite's eyes told Germaine she had made the mandate for him. Thank you, he replied mutely.

"Well, it makes it difficult for the people here to tend you properly, and Harry's been receiving complaints all day from--"

"Harry Collins is Clarissa's perennial tag-along beau," Marguerite interrupted, as if that simple statement explained everything. "He's a financial consultant, which means he tells people where to put their money."

"A most noble profession," Germaine responded. "I have used a financial consultant myself from time-to-time."

"Just what is it you do, Mr. . . ."

"St. Justine," he supplied graciously.

The young woman turned slowly to face him, her soft blue eyes wide with dismay. "Germaine St. Justine? The backer for the new Broadway musical, *Dracula*?"

"Yes," Germaine answered, his own eyes narrowing. By necessity, very few outsiders knew of his theatrical connections. He was speculating how this contradictory female had learned of his involvement when he saw her stare accusingly at her mother. His eyes, less reproachful, made the same route as a niggling suspicion wormed a path through his mind.

Marguerite clapped her hands together in obvious delight. "It looks like you two have something in common after all."

Feeling as if someone had just slammed the lid on his coffin and nailed it shut, Germaine gazed again at Marguerite's daughter. She couldn't be that sweet-voiced, silken-haired brunette who'd auditioned for him nearly two months ago. He would have recognized her. If not her, then at least her voice. Then again, he certainly wasn't expecting to meet her at his former love's bedside. While a part of him still denied the worm-like suspicion that became a writhing mass in his mind, he rose to his feet. "Stand here, please," he ordered, pointing to a spot just before him.

Though she bristled at his abrupt command, the young woman did as he asked, which was fortunate for Germaine would not have tolerated an argument just then. She stood tense and wary with her arms folded before her like a shield, until he reached for her chin. His fingers were less than an inch from her jaw when she averted her face with a tiny shudder. A small but telling detail that put his defenses on immediate alert. The blue

eyes that had sparked with indignation mere moments ago, now avoided his gaze. Like a light cutting through the fog, the reason for her newfound complaisance and his own feelings of vague familiarity were suddenly clear.

“I should have recognized you from the moment you strode in here tonight, Ms. Daniels,” he admitted, stressing her stage name. “Undoubtedly, I would have, had you been wearing your makeup and that wig you sported during your audition. I thought it was your real hair.”

Her eyes remained downcast, but her chin retained its stubborn tilt. Although he could still sense her recoiling internally, it gratified him to note she neither cowered nor attacked. They both knew that landing the role of Lucy Seward had been her biggest break, and Claire Daniels had spent the last five minutes insulting one of the few men who could have her replaced with very little opposition. What she didn't know was that Germaine St. Justine was responsible for her getting cast to begin with--despite his own, personal misgivings. Misgivings that had suddenly taken a drastic turn for the worse.

“I won't apologize,” she informed him stiffly, but her eyes reflected her trepidation.

Despite Germaine's belief that he now understood the cause for her uneasiness, he didn't particularly care for its implications. If Marguerite had told her daughter about him, Claire Daniels could prove an even greater danger to him than he first suspected.

He sat back down beside her mother. “I haven't asked you to,” he replied evenly.

Claire's lower lip twitched slightly as she thrust her hands into the pockets of her slacks. “Should I start checking the trades tomorrow?”

“No. At least, not yet,” he answered, wanting to see if she would respond to his lightly veiled threat with one of her own.

“Stop teasing her, Germaine,” Marguerite scolded. “You know she spoke out of concern for me. Tell her there are no hard feelings between you.”

“Why? I've no intention of having your daughter removed from the cast, if only because I happen to feel she is perfect for the role. A feeling that has in no way diminished since the night she auditioned for me. The first and only time I ever really watched her perform.” He watched Claire's eyes widen slightly before he added, “It was an inspiring performance, by the way.” She flushed and looked away. Unable to tell whether it was guilt or embarrassment that brushed a wash of pink across her cheeks, Germaine added a little more softly, but no less intently, “As to any personal differences there may be between us, they play no part in the matter. Do they, Ms. Daniels?”

“No,” Claire answered softly despite the angry quiver in her chin.

Surprised and more than a bit unnerved by his unexpected and disturbing urge to smooth away that small tremor of anger and fear, Germaine wrested his attention from the woman back to the possible threat she posed.

It was no mere coincidence that the daughter of his former love was now his leading lady. And if Claire Daniels knew he was a vampire, Germaine could be faced with a serious dilemma.

He had purposely kept his business and personal life separate to protect his immortal colleagues from an unnecessary risk of exposure. Too many lives were at stake for him to simply dismiss the threat Ms. Daniels posed should she use her knowledge against him. He wasn't without enemies, both mortal and immortal, and a few of them would like nothing better than to force him and his allies to their knees. The more he thought about it, the less he liked the odds.

It was like solving a puzzle where all the pieces fit, but contradictions obscured the design.

He never would have suspected Claire had learned the truth about him if she hadn't tensed and trembled like a trapped rabbit every time she got near him. Since he'd given her no other cause to fear him, she had to have known what he was from the moment Marguerite introduced them--the moment he first sensed her fear. Which also meant she had to have already known who he was. Therefore, her dismay when she confirmed his identity was merely an act. Her prior insults--meant to keep him off track. And her contradictory display of trepidation and pride the moment he started to put two and two together--a stroke of pure genius. But to what purpose?

What could she possibly gain by making him think she feared him?

He admired women with spirit, but found it almost impossible to deny a woman in distress. The notion that women were to be protected was too deeply ingrained in him for even the equal rights mentality of the current decade to undo. Only conniving and deceit could do that.

So why did Marguerite look so pleased and her daughter so wary? The next move was clearly his. If only he knew whether he faced a true innocent, or an actress beyond compare.

CHAPTER TWO

Germaine's inbred wariness kept his attention focused on Claire when he caught her flashing Marguerite a reproachful glare. Although he suspected the accusatory look resulted more from frustration than anger, when Marguerite merely shrugged and laid back against her pillow, Germaine concluded they had taxed her limited strength enough for one day.

Leaning forward, he pressed a kiss to Marguerite's cheek. "It's late, cherie. I'd better go." Her satisfied smile died as a shadow of deep dismay clouded her eyes. "But--"

"Later," he promised firmly, then gently cupped her cheek. "Tomorrow's soon enough."

He rose from the bed, aware that Claire's watchful eyes stalked every move. He sensed her suspiciousness the same way a wolf scents its prey. She distrusted him, yet he wasn't the one guilty of deceit. Tempted to snarl at her like the ravening beast she silently accused him of being, he waited until he reached the door before he met her wary blue gaze with a smile that wasn't intended to be reassuring. "Until tomorrow night, Ms. Daniels," he vowed quietly.

Her jaw tightened almost imperceptibly, giving him the impression she'd like nothing better than to tell him to go to hell. Since, by his way of thinking, he'd already been there, Germaine offered the young woman a curt nod of farewell and made his way to the hospital exit.

He wasn't angry, precisely, but he was irritated. He was also intrigued and more than a little aroused. A complication he neither expected nor sought.

For an abstaining vampire, few things were worth the torment of remaining in a closet-sized room overflowing with warm, sweet-blooded mortals, whatever their motives. Enticed as he was to loosen Claire Daniels' sharp little tongue, he was not foolish enough to risk unmasking himself on the off-chance he was mistaken. If Ms. Daniels really had no inkling what he was, or of the threat that one of his kind represented, he wasn't going to enlighten her. And he'd make sure Marguerite kept her promise on that score as well.

The last thing Germaine needed was Dracula's female lead running around saying that vampires were real, and he was proof.

Correction. That was the second to last thing he needed. The last thing he needed was to become involved with another mortal woman.

But there was absolutely no risk of that. Never again.

So what was it about Claire Daniels that gave him the feeling she would inevitably betray him? Assuming he was right, the next question was why? Could it be because he had once been intimate with her mother? Surely she couldn't be that vindictive. There had to be some other reason. A reason directly connected to the unaccountable fear he

sensed in her earlier.

Germaine forced himself to put off his concerns until he saw the lady again. He'd done what he'd intended for tonight and was content that Marguerite would sleep easier, although he still felt a nearly overwhelming urge to sink his teeth into something soft, warm and willing. Controlling his baser instincts, Germaine headed back to Illusions: a place where he could sit in a secluded alcove and think out his plans in solitude like any other patron who preferred to drink alone. Except Germaine wasn't any other patron any more than Illusions was just any other bar.

To the casual tourist, the teeming night spot was little more than a perpetual Halloween party for the affluent, if somewhat jaded, New Yorker.

Its medieval ambiance offered a skillful blend of Gothic decor, muted lighting and imagery that gave one the impression of stepping into Dracula's lair. Along the outer walls, a catacomb of darkly lit alcoves permitted patrons a sense of privacy with a view of the sunken fireplace set in the center of the main room. A collection of richly upholstered sofas, couches and wing chairs, offset by coffee and side tables, surrounded the circular pit that crackled hotly throughout the fall and winter months for mortal comfort. Discreetly situated in the darkest corners, stately black marble columns provided a sulfurous glow from the eyes of the gargoyles seated atop them. Along the farthest wall, the serving bar, with its mahogany front, brass railing, and slightly raised top gave the suggestion of a coffin, while directly behind the bar, bottles of imported liquor sat in recessed holes before their own stone markers. The array created the image of an elaborate graveyard set in the foreground of the distant castle that had been painstakingly etched within the finely webbed cracks of the mirror dominating the bar's wall.

Illusions had no flapping bats with blinking red eyes swooping at its customers, nor did the sound of howling wolves greet them when they walked through the door. Illusions was a place of understatement and suggestion. Even the music, which was more sensed than heard, had been selected for its haunting simplicity. The effect was one of classic elegance, offering almost any drink imaginable, along with a few creatively-styled hors d'oeuvres for those who also craved a bite of food. For customers who preferred to do their drinking and dining in seclusion, Illusions provided a select number of private rooms. And for those guests who'd been placed on a more restricted diet, Illusions maintained a catalogued and dated supply of the obligatory vintage within the refrigerated compartments of the bar itself.

Illusions was like a Chinese puzzle with each piece integral to the whole yet separate from it. And Germaine knew each piece intimately since he was the true, if not the state-listed, proprietor of the exclusive club. He walked into the crowded night spot, and with a discreet signal to the maitre d' headed toward a secluded alcove.

Germaine considered Illusions a success, even though a public place that invited mortals

and blood-drinkers to sit side-by-side was still viewed with great trepidation by certain venerable members within their elite consortium. Mixing vampires and humans along with their various consumables had produced some rather unpleasant consequences in the past. Nevertheless, Germaine was convinced the venture could work under vigilant management, and it had. So much so, other groups were daring similar undertakings in their own neighborhoods. To date, eleven had popped up within the varying boroughs of New York alone. If they were careful . . .

Germaine's solitude came to an abrupt end when a curvaceous blond bound from neck to heel in an outfit of black leather and chains slid into the chair across from him.

"Mind if I join you?" she asked, her coy smile curving carmine-tinted lips.

Several responses sprang to mind, but Germaine restrained himself. "If you're out trolling, I suggest you solicit patrons at the biker bar down the street. You'll have more success there," he advised, spearing his intruder with an icy glare.

Ignoring him, she picked up his glass, took a sip, then quickly set it back down with a grimace. "How can you drink that? It's terrible." She raised an elegantly manicured hand and signaled the bartender. "Sam, fix me a Don Juan. Thirty-forty, straight, please." Edging Germaine's glass back toward him, she asked, "What is that anyway, a Virgin Mary?"

"A Mary definitely, the virgin part is suspect. What do you want, Phillipa?"

Momentarily distracted, Phillipa smiled appreciatively at the blond, muscle-bound waiter ogling her with lustful brown eyes as he approached with her Don Juan. Germaine watched her reward her admirer by playfully blowing him a kiss of thanks which the waiter caught and pressed to his lips while his puppy dog eyes begged her to make him her slave. Her low, husky laugh a sensuous invitation, she winked and sent her adoring Adonis off with an intimate pat. Then with a toast to Germaine, she savored her drink. Eyes closed, she let out a deep-throated purr before admitting confidentially, "I think Hugo is interested in a little extracurricular activity."

"Good for Hugo," Germaine replied blandly.

"I may be dead, but I'm not impervious to pain, and I'd rather not face the prospect of--"

"Talk to Phillip, he's your husband," he snapped, ending the discussion with an abrupt change of subject. "What's with the dog collar and chains?"

She wriggled suggestively, causing the delicate chains to jingle like tiny bells, then plucked at the silver studded collar encircling her neck. "Like it?" At his raised eyebrow, she lowered her hands and murmured, "Really, Germaine, sometimes you are incredibly old-fashioned. My clients happen to adore this ensemble."

He shot her a twisted smile. "Just how is the undertaking business doing these days?"

"It's a beauty parlor, not a funeral parlor," she corrected.

“With your clientele, sweet, I believe it's all one and the same.”

She drew back from him with a soft inhalation of air. “You're in a particularly nasty mood tonight. What's wrong?”

“I didn't invite you, Phillipa,” he reminded her, picking up his glass. “You could leave.”

She crossed her arms on the table and leaned toward him. “You went to see Marguerite tonight, didn't you?” When he merely stared into his glass, she asked, “How is she?”

“She's dying, Phillipa. How do you think she is?”

Phillipa instinctively reached for his hand, and for once he didn't try to pull it back.

“Her doctor doesn't expect her to last the week,” he admitted after a moment.

“Does she want to be immortal?”

“She wants to live, but I doubt she wants to spend eternity drinking blood at night or spend her days sleeping like a corpse.”

“That's not all there is to being immortal, Germaine....” At his cautionary glare, she prudently changed the subject. “Speaking of corpses, I think you need to have another talk with Phillip.”

“Why? What's he done now?”

“He hasn't done anything, yet, but he's talking about buying a double coffin.”

“A coffin? What in earth does he want with a coffin?”

“He says he thinks it'd be kinky, but I think he's hoping our sleeping together beneath a lining of satin will make me less--restless.”

“Have him buy you one of those battery-charged feminine stress-relievers instead. It's cheaper.”

“It's not that! Well, not entirely that,” she amended softly before glancing about to make sure no one overheard them. “He's worried about his ability to satisfy me the other way--as a vampire. I think he's hoping a coffin might make me more amenable to his--couplings.”

“Then buy one, by all means.”

“Germaine....”

“Look, Phillipa, you both knew there would be consequences for your actions. Sixteen more years, and Phillip will be exactly as he once was, until then--adapt. If he thinks a coffin will help, then get one and try it out for a week. If it doesn't work, let me know. I'd like to see the salesman's face when you tell him you're sorry, but a coffin doesn't quite meet your needs at this time.”

Chuckling in spite of herself, Phillipa leaned over and pressed a quick kiss on Germaine's cheek before he could advise her against it, then stood. “I made a mistake,”

she admitted quietly. "One I'll live with for eternity, but you're the one keeping us apart, not me. I think Phillip would be relieved if we had an affair." When Germaine refused to answer her, she let out a soft sigh of resignation. "Very well, I'll let him get the coffin. But if you change your mind, you'll know where to find me. Only you might want to knock before you raise the lid. Phillip is a little touchy about who sees him without his prosthetic fang. And when the sun rises--it comes out."

* * *

Six o'clock the next evening, Germaine held Marguerite's hand until his elixir took effect. The pain was worse, taking two syringes to pacify it this time. Even still, she appeared greatly improved. Her breathing was no longer labored and she'd begun eating again, so her doctor had ordered the IV removed--temporarily. Without all the tubing, she looked almost normal. Almost.

She lay against her pillow, her eyes closed in soft serenity, and for the moment she was at peace. Hovering between total wakefulness and a drowsy contentment, she began talking about their brief time together.

Germaine said nothing, allowing her to reminisce as she wished while he sat beside her, occasionally stroking her fingers.

"You were always there when I needed you," she remarked with a trace of wistfulness. "Whenever I was hurt or in pain, even when the time of day wasn't--convenient." Her fingers curled around his. "Do you remember the morning Claire was born?"

"As mornings go, that has to be one of my worst," he recalled candidly.

"I was scared, in pain, and refused to listen to anyone."

"You were too busy screaming to listen to anyone."

"And you looked like the wrath of God, pushing your way into the delivery room despite the nurses' and attendants' protests. I think if George hadn't given into my wishes and told them we'd invited you, they wouldn't have allowed you in."

"Then they would've undergone a sudden change of mind," he assured her. "Nothing could have kept me from you that day--not even the noon day sun."

"George was never very good in a crisis. He hated to see anyone in pain, but you were magnificent."

"I was desperate to get you to stop screaming. You awoke me from a very sound sleep, my love, and I knew I'd get no peace until you settled down to the task at hand." When she avoided looking at him, he tipped her chin toward him. "The nurse confided to me later that they'd offered you an anesthetic, but you refused it. Why?"

She shrugged, but her gaze remained pinned on their clasped hands. "You'll only treat me to one of your patronizing lectures if I tell you."

“Risk it, tell me anyway.”

“I knew you could never father a child, and though I agreed to marry George when you insisted, I was still very much in love with you. I always have been,” she confessed, wandering off the subject into dangerous territory.

“The pain reliever?” Germaine reminded her gently.

“Yes, well, when I discovered I was pregnant, I wanted to find some way to share my happiness with you and decided the best way was to have you with me when the baby was born. I always sensed a sadness in you whenever the subject of children came up, and I thought . . . “ She shook her head as if she decided she was wrong. She wasn't wrong. Germaine did regret he wasn't able to raise a family like a normal man, but he saw little need to tell her that now. “Anyway,” she continued with an apologetic smile, “I knew you wouldn't come to the hospital unless I really needed you--even if I called you. So, I made certain you'd be there.”

“I see,” he replied, his voice and expression purposefully neutral.

“Are you terribly angry with me?”

“No man likes hearing that he's been manipulated, Marguerite.”

“I suppose you're now going to ask me how both you and Claire, as she calls herself now, happened to be involved in Dracula together.”

“I think I've already figured that out. I haven't forgotten that you were the one who wanted me to make a musical out of Stoker's story long before Les Mis or Phantom lit the boards.”

“If it could be done, I knew you had some of the best qualifications.”

“I may have had a greater interest in debunking some of the myths and fallacies, but my qualifications were no better than several other individuals I could name,” he corrected gently. “You might be surprised to learn just how thoroughly my immortal brethren pervade the theatrical profession. Since we tend not to photograph well, acting is a bit difficult, but possible with some dark contact lenses and a bit of forethought. I am curious, however, as to why you neglected to advise me of Claire's interest, or that she'd taken up acting as a career. It wouldn't have been that difficult, you know, and it might have saved us both a great deal of embarrassment.”

Marguerite shrugged as if the oversight had been unintentional. “Claire has always been fascinated with acting. As a child she would dress-up and act out scenes from the plays or movies she'd seen.” Germaine could feel Marguerite's strength and enthusiasm build as she talked about her daughter. “She loved drama and pathos--the more tragic the role, the better. Othello, Hamlet, King Lear, Joan of Arc . . . I think she learned her love of dramatics from my stories about you.”

He immediately straightened. “I sincerely hope you don't mean you told Claire about

me.”

“Of course I did!” she informed him with a hint of exasperation. “You were an important part of my life. Was I simply supposed to forget you ever existed?”

“That’s not what I meant,” he replied quietly.

“I know what you meant, and you can stop glowering at me. I’ve kept my promise and divulged your terrible secret to no one, although I doubt Claire would be greatly taken aback if she were to learn the truth.”

“That’s not a theory I’d like put to the test,” Germaine warned, not entirely convinced Marguerite was telling him the truth. Even if she hadn’t told Claire he was a vampire, Claire knew about André and Marguerite, and, from her reaction to their kiss, she clearly suspected his affection for Marguerite exceeded that of a dutiful son for his father’s former love. Added to that was the possibility she’d overheard some rumors about him. Whatever it was, something had spooked her last night. No doubt finding her mother locked in a passionate embrace with a stranger could arouse a few misgivings, or worse, and if she also suspected the stranger was a vampire . . . except Germaine believed Claire’s fear sprang from a source that dwelled deeper than mere supposition or concern. Whatever she feared, presented a solid, living danger to her, and quite possibly to him as well.

The next time he saw Ms. Daniels, he had a feeling she’d want to talk to him privately, which coincided with his own purposes quite nicely. With a few subtle questions, he’d be able to determine the extent of what she knew about him, and proceed accordingly. He wasn’t above altering a mortal’s memory, if he deemed it necessary. He didn’t particularly enjoy the task, since it made him feel like an intruder, but as his subject never knew the difference, and suffered no real damage in the process, he would do whatever was necessary to protect his order from the perils of a terrified mortal.

Catching Marguerite’s worried look, he added, “Thinking something might be true and knowing it for a fact are two entirely different things, Maggie, my love. Your daughter was upset enough when she discovered us kissing. I shudder to think what she might have done if she came in while I was--”

“André!” Marguerite protested, her color high.

“Behave yourself,” he scolded, giving her fingers an admonishing squeeze. “I was merely going to say biting your neck.”

“Oh. Well, her reaction to a little neck nuzzling would hardly have been any different to your kissing me. Truth is, I’m surprised she noticed you at all. Claire works much too hard, and that director of yours is a slave driver. Being on Broadway is Claire’s whole life right now, and she refuses to consider anything that might interfere with her career--including love, marriage, and children. And given the sort of man Harry is, I’m not certain I blame her.”

“Claire is what, twenty-three now?” When Marguerite nodded, Germaine added softly, “She's an adult, Maggie, and she most definitely has a mind of her own. She'll do just fine.”

“You don't know her, André. Claire is an idealist. She puts on a tough front, but only because she has to. She'd fall apart otherwise. My illness has been hard on her, but she's been my rock though it all--insuring I get the best care, the best nurses, and the best medicine. She's struggling to keep me alive, although she knows her task is impossible. When I die, she's going to blame herself. I know she will. I've seen her do it before.”

Marguerite placed a pleading hand on Germaine's arm. “She's going to need a lot of love and understanding. Understanding that Harry Collins will not know how to give her.”

“Robert will help her,” he reassured, giving her fingers another gentle squeeze. “They'll help each other. That's what families do.”

She drew back in tired resignation. “Robert can't help anyone. Last night was the first time he's come to the hospital since I was admitted a week ago, and he wouldn't even step into the room. First he lost his father, then he . . . I mean, now he's having difficulty accepting that I'm going to die as well. Claire accepts it, but she's also shouldering all the responsibility.”

“I get the feeling you aren't telling me this merely to express your concerns.”

“No.” She took a deep breath, then asked, “Will you reconsider and make me one of your own?”

Germaine hesitated momentarily as regret pierced through his heart more keenly than a wooden stake before he firmly shook his head.

“I won't bother asking why, since I know you'll only tell me it's not the life you'd choose for me, but I'd like to ask a favor in return.”

The feeling that she was maneuvering him into promising something he would later live to regret triggered all of Germaine's internal alarms. Even so, he couldn't deny her again. “If I can grant it, I will,” he answered levelly.

Reaching out, she gripped both his hands as if she feared he would pull away. “I want you to promise me you'll look after Claire when I'm gone. Robert won't accept your help, so there's little point in offering it to him, but Claire will need someone strong, someone she respects, someone sympathetic who will help her cope--if only for a few days. Will you do that for me?”

He caught Marguerite's gaze and held it. “I won't desert your daughter or your son, Marguerite, if they truly need my help. But I sincerely doubt Claire will want or accept my assistance any more than Robert would. She seems the sort who....” He cut his sentence short when the lady under discussion sauntered breezily into the room. Her warm smile chilled several degrees the moment she spotted him.

"Mr. St. Justine," she murmured civilly, thrusting her hands deep into her pockets. "I thought you'd be home dressing by now. I believe there's a party being held in your honor tonight."

"I'll be there." Rising from Marguerite's bedside, he glanced at his watch. "Speaking of dressing, Ms. Daniels, it's after six. Shouldn't you be at the theater by now?"

"My call's not until seven, I've plenty of time," she advised him, leaning over to kiss her mother. Stepping back, Claire critically eyed Marguerite's appearance. "You look even better than you did last night," she admitted, shrugging out of her coat. "I'd like to credit it to Dr. Willis's efforts, only...." Her voice trailed off and she closed her eyes. Claire's inner battle to overcome her despair chafed at Germaine's guilty conscience like a hair shirt.

"Only Harry told you I've been classified 'D.N.R.'--Do Not Resuscitate if patient goes into arrest. I know, Claire, I told Dr. Willis that I wanted it that way."

Claire started to protest when Robert came to the doorway.

"Robert!" Marguerite called out in delight, her arms outstretched. "I'm fine, see. No tubing, no machinery."

He stepped cautiously into the room, moving as if age had stiffened his joints and it hurt him to walk. Bending down, he gave his mother a kiss, then gazed at her flushed cheeks with surprise.

"Claire told me...." he stopped, his voice hoarse and choked. Then with a gladdened cry, he hugged his mother. "I didn't believe her, but I do now. I guess we haven't run out of miracles after all." He pressed Marguerite's hand to his cheek. Heedless of the tears sliding down his cheeks, the frail young man released his mother and hugged his sister. In that instant, Germaine knew exactly why Marguerite's recovery was so important to this tortured youth, and why Marguerite had insisted he promise to look after Claire. He estimated Robert had about six months left, nine if he was lucky. Seeing the expression of overwhelming relief that spread across the young man's face and the desolation on Claire's, Germaine felt the words of his vow trap him more surely than an iron cage.

"This isn't just another false remission, Claire, you'll see," Robert insisted. "Look at her. She's cured, so it has to be only a matter of time before...." Robert stopped mid-sentence. His brow wrinkled with puzzlement, he drew back to gaze at his sister. She subtly shook her head while silent rivulets of grief streamed down her cheeks.

Germaine, overcome by a sudden need to get away, walked over and opened the door, but Marguerite halted his departure with a pleading gesture while her eyes remained riveted on her son. Robert's expression grew slowly shuttered, and he started to back away. Murmuring an apology, he fled blindly from the room only to collide with a well-dressed man standing in the hall.

"Hold it right there, young man," the gentleman ordered as he grabbed Robert's arm to

detain him. "Running away is both pointless and unseemly. So, I suggest you march right back--"

"Let go, Harry!" Robert demanded, desperately pushing free of the other man's grip.

His mouth set in an angry frown, Harry Collins stood in the lighted hall watching Robert run the length of the tiled corridor as if he feared for his life. Germaine, still feeling like someone had punched him in the stomach, surreptitiously assessed the man in Claire's life. What he saw didn't impress him.

Collins typified the popular image of an affluently successful man, but beyond that Germaine found little about the scowling man to like or admire. It wasn't compassion or worry that creased the gentleman's immaculately groomed features, it was annoyance. And Germaine suspected that beneath the stylish Sassoon cut, Brooks Brothers suit, Italian leather shoes and cultured manner of speech, there dwelled a cold-hearted, blue-blooded snob. A man so concerned with appearances that he dismissed everything else as inconsequential. Even human suffering.

His thin lips pursed in severe disapproval, Harry Collins stepped into the room. "That brother of yours could use a good talking to," he decreed in a low mutter as he removed his coat. Stepping across to Marguerite, he draped the precisely folded camel's hair across the foot of her bed and offered her a pat smile. "You're looking much better, Marge. How are you feeling?"

"Fine," Marguerite answered curtly, "in view of the rampant spread of poor manners abounding this evening."

Harry finally turned to Germaine. His hazel eyes faintly hostile, he extended a manicured hand. "Harry Collins," he announced, introducing himself. "And you must be St. Justine. Clarissa told me that her mother and your father were once quite close. Still, I question the seemliness of your behavior last night."

"And I question your right to do so," Marguerite snapped, her temper rising.

"Don't get upset, Mother," Claire soothed, "we're merely looking after your welfare."

"I don't need--" Marguerite stopped when Germaine stepped toward her.

"It would seem my presence is causing more ill-will than good. I'd best leave."

"I think that would be best," Harry concurred, placing a possessive hand at Claire's waist.

"Don't," Marguerite protested, but Claire left Harry's side to stand by the door.

"I'll walk you to the elevator," she offered stiffly.

Germaine nodded, then bent over Marguerite's hand. "I'll drop by again, later tonight, cherie, I promise," he vowed, not caring if others heard him. He released Marguerite's fingers with a gentle press, then followed her daughter into the brightly-lit hallway.

Gritting his teeth against the pain in his eyes, he suppressed the urge to put on his sunglasses and motioned Claire to precede him.

When they neared the nurses' station, he said, "Would you prefer we go down to the cafeteria to talk, or--"

"What I have to say won't take long," she announced, her tone clipped and formal. "I want you to stop seeing my mother."

"Did you decide that before or after you discovered what I am?"

"What you are, St. Justine, isn't the least bit important to me right now!" she snapped, but Germaine detected the falseness in her avowal more accurately than a lie detector.

"My mother is dying," she continued in an equally bitter, but softer tone, "and I won't have her last few days turned upside down simply because you happen to have a thing for older women."

He let his gaze sweep over her--from her flushed complexion, to her rigidly crossed arms in the bulky knit sweater, followed by legs encased in fashionably-worn denim down to her firmly planted feet in their expensive leather boots. Then he met her eyes. Though they fairly gleamed with obstinacy and determination, the fear in them was obvious--at least to him. And she was doing her damndest not to let him see it. He knew that look well. At times he'd even inspired it, but not this time. At least not intentionally. He tilted his head to one side.

"Out of curiosity, Ms. Daniels, just what do you think my intentions are?"

She drew back, as if his question surprised her. "I haven't figured that out, yet," she admitted reluctantly, "which is the only reason I haven't had you barred from Mother's room." Her eyes grew accusatory, almost challenging. "Can't you see that your lover-like behavior is only hastening her decline? She's begun calling you André and talking about you as if you were your father. Don't you think she has enough problems right now without you adding mental instability to the list?"

He ignored her question for one of his own. "Is that all that worries you, Ms. Daniels? That your mother has mistaken me for my father?"

"Isn't that enough?" she retorted, her exasperation growing.

"Perhaps," he answered noncommittally. "Then again, have you considered that my presence might actually be bringing your mother ease?"

"I don't object to your presence as much as I do your conduct. From what I've heard, my mother loved your father very much, but for reasons of his own André St. Justine refused to marry her--going so far as to insist she marry my father instead. I think she loved my father in her own way, but never fell out of love with your father. And for you to march back into her life only to kiss her as if you were long parted lovers--" Her voice caught and she took a deep breath. "No matter what you say, sir, fostering this delusion

can only make my mother's final days more difficult.”

“Do you really believe she'd do any better if I stayed away?” he asked, not unkindly.

“I think she'd certainly be more peaceful.”

“What of you, Ms. Daniels? Would you be more peaceful if I stayed away?”

Claire hesitated, and Germaine felt her unease growing in proportion to the length of time she remained in his presence. “I have no idea what you mean.”

“Don't you?” He took a single step forward and fought to suppress a knowing smile when she hurriedly took two back. “Why are you afraid of me, Ms. Daniels?”

“I'm not afraid,” she insisted, looking around as if she hoped someone might be watching them. No one was. Germaine had made sure of that. But it didn't take any supernatural powers for him to guess where she'd heard about him, if indeed she had.

“Surely you aren't a woman who subscribes to superstitious theater gossip, are you?”

“No!” she blurted, physically bracing herself to keep from retreating again when he took another step closer. “I mean, I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about.”

“No,” he concurred, smiling slightly at her obvious lie. “I can see that you don't.” He reached out with one hand and lightly touched her chin. “Look at me, Claire,” he ordered softly. Keeping his voice low and steady, and his touch light, he gently searched her mind. All he discovered there was a vague uneasiness layered with uncertainty. No grand plan to destroy him. No overwhelming hatred or desire for vindication. Just worry over her mother, a protective concern for her brother, and strong distrust of him. She didn't know anything, she merely suspected the rumors she'd heard about him being a vampire might be true.

“They are only rumors, Claire. Nothing more than that,” he reassured her. “No more than backstage gossip directed at a man who prefers a different lifestyle. Do you understand?”

“Yesss.” Her sleepy-sounding reply sounded more like someone under deep hypnosis than the spirited, almost defiant, young woman he'd come to reluctantly admire, but he could feel her suspicions lessening. He might have gone so far as to find out exactly which rumors she'd heard, and from whom, if he hadn't found her trance-like state more distasteful than he'd thought possible. Placing a steadying hand beneath her elbow, he released his hold on her mind. She staggered a little, then her chin jerked up. She impaled him with accusing blue eyes.

He met her glare with an even smile. “You looked as if you were about to faint. Are you all right?”

She nodded uncertainly, then pulled her arm free from his loosened grasp. “You may order me removed from the cast, if you like, Mr. St. Justine, but I meant what I said. I want you to stop seeing my mother.”

He inclined his head, only slightly. "I do not fault you for your concerns, Ms. Daniels. Nor would I ever hold them against you, but I cannot condone them either." He pressed the elevator button. "I will, however, give some thought to all you've said, although I hope you won't think too unkindly of me should I choose to disregard your preference in this matter."

She swallowed uneasily and rubbed her arms as if she were suddenly chilled. "I might not be able to have you barred from the hospital, but I can have the staff discourage your visits. And, if you make it necessary, I will hire a guard to protect my mother."

He had to admire her courage and persistence. She was a fighter all right, but she'd yet to realize she was sorely outmatched. "We each must do what we believe is necessary, Ms. Daniels, no matter how much pain it costs us or others." Stepping into the waiting elevator, he turned and offered her a gentlemanly bow, letting the door close between them before he straightened.

CHAPTER THREE

When Claire stepped back into the room she was surprised and a little unnerved to find both Harry and her mother regarding her with a questioning gaze.

“Harry, would you mind going downstairs and reserving a taxi for us? I'd like to have a few minutes alone with Mother.”

“Certainly,” Harry replied a little stiffly as he retrieved his coat and gave Marguerite a perfunctory peck on the cheek.

“Well?” Marguerite inquired the moment Harry stepped out of the door. “Did you give him the third degree? Did he pass?”

“I asked him to stay away, and he agreed to consider my request.”

Marguerite closed her eyes. “If you succeed in driving that man away, I can guarantee it will be the worst mistake you have ever made,” she answered simply.

Claire stepped forward and clasped her mother's hand in her own. “He's not helping you, Mom, he's only making matters worse.”

“Don't you think I should be the judge of that? Open your eyes, Claire. How can you look at me and say that he hasn't helped? Germaine St. Justine is not only a man of great wealth and influence, he is capable of performing miracles that defy explanation. Even if that miracle is no more than an illusion that lasts a day, or an hour, would you deny me that time?”

Struggling to swallow past the aching lump in her throat, Claire shook her head. “Of course not. You know how much I want you to get better.”

Marguerite placed her hand against Claire's cheek. “Yes, except we both know that isn't going to happen. Is it?” Her throat tight and her eyes burning, Claire simply shook her head.

“You need to prepare for the future, Claire. Robert's going to need you more than ever after I'm gone, and Harry's not going to be able to help you. Not this time. Not in the way you and Robert will need most. I know it won't be easy for you, but I want you to trust Germaine. He can make things happen for you and Robert in ways that no one else can, and I want you to let him do that. Promise me you'll give him a chance, for me and for Robert. All right?”

At that moment, Claire would have promised anything. She loved her mother and brother more than she could express in words, and she was determined to do everything she could to help them--even if it meant seeking out the devil himself.

Later, from his private box, Germaine watched the charmingly naive Lucy Seward awaken to the realization that the elegant Transylvanian nobleman paying her court

meant to claim her for his own. Only Germaine's interest centered more on the actress than the character she played.

In many ways, Claire Daniels was an enigma to him, and in many ways she was very much like him. Both of them presented an image to the outside world that was vastly different from their true identities. Claire's public persona was that of a poised, self-assured actress whose sole concern in life was her career. In reality, however, she was a woman who would sacrifice everything, including that all-important career, for the sake of her family. Her stand against him was ample proof of that.

What intrigued Germaine most about Claire was the fear she valiantly sought to hide. A fear that seemed to manifest itself whenever he was near her, yet he was fairly certain now that he wasn't its cause. From what he'd been able to discern, she had nothing more to go on than a vague suspicion that he was anything but a wealthy, young eccentric who invested heavily in the theater. Given that, she had no cause to fear him, yet she didn't trust him either. His brief foray into her mind had confirmed that. But then, trust traveled two ways.

Despite his promise to Marguerite, Germaine hesitated to involve himself further in Claire's or her brother's life. He was too involved with Claire already, both through his relationship with Marguerite and the play. Regrettably, Robert was beyond his help. Germaine's stomach clenched, fighting to expel that distasteful reality. Claire was about to lose the two people closest to her, and no one could do anything to prevent it.

Germaine steeled himself against the swift stab of remorse that realization evoked in him. He had to find a way to disassociate himself. The longer he stayed in her company, the harder it would be for him to eventually walk away. And to stay would only increase the risk of discovery for him and those allied with him. He'd sensed the danger she posed the night of her audition, and he'd ignored it. More fool he. She had already managed to get under his guard in a way no other woman ever had. That tripled her danger, making her a threat to him, to his group, and to herself. Threats too costly for him to ignore any longer.

He would honor his promise to Marguerite by offering whatever support Claire and Robert required to get through the funeral, then his obligation would end. It would be better that way--for all of them. Him, especially. He longed for a taste of sweetness, and Claire Daniels was forbidden fruit personified. One small sip of her nectar and they would both be damned.

Germaine shivered as the psychic awareness he'd experienced at Claire's audition returned to haunt him. Giving himself a mental nudge, he forced his attention back to the show.

During these preview performances, Germaine became like most other theater lovers--the participator, not the creator. Although he'd maintained a vocal, if not visual, partnership throughout the play's initial stages both in London and New York, once

auditions were over and rehearsals began, Germaine preferred to keep himself scarce. This time more so than with the London opening.

Now, like those around him, he gave himself over to the fantasy. Entranced by the rays of moonlight streaming through the floor-length, open windows, the undulating fog rippling at the lovers' feet, and the soft, eerie music building toward its crescendo, he watched Lucy Seward gaze at her distinguished suitor with trepidation, her lips parted in an unspoken invitation.

The Transylvanian count stepped closer and reached for her. His hands light upon her arms, he drew her slowly into his embrace. "I desire but a single kiss, Miss Seward. Surely even your most disapproving father would not discountenance such a harmless gesture," he insisted, his voice a low, seductive murmur.

"I...." Her lips captured by his, the beguiled miss could say no more. Dracula turned her, so that her back was to the audience and he faced front. His lips curving into a predatory smile, he opened his mouth so that just the tips of his fangs caught the glow of the footlights before he lowered his head to the curve of Lucy's neck. Lucy clutched his shoulders and stiffened, then her soprano voice glissanded into a cry that was part ecstasy and part torment before she crumbled, insentient, into the count's vampiric embrace. The music struck its final chord and the curtain came down, signaling the end of Act I.

The dark-haired gentleman seated beside Germaine applauded slowly. "After that, I may just have to go on the prowl," he remarked with a wry smile.

"Dine first, Marcus," Germaine advised. "A hungry vampire can be a lethal lover."

"I say," the dapper gentleman seated behind them muttered. "Never happened to me before--a lady going all soft and warm like that. Ever happen to either of you?"

Marcus exchanged a knowing glance with Germaine. "I've known it to happen on occasion, Freddie," he murmured. "At least the writer was kind enough not to have rivulets of blood pouring down the lady's neck while his debonair vampire feasted."

Germaine grimaced at the thought. "I much prefer my vampires to be neat."

"Glad to see you removed that horrid creature Renfield along with that interfering Harker chap, Miss Seward's suitor. Only hope you changed the ending as well," Sir Frederick Compton added with a disdainful sniff. "Horrid thing that, turning to dust in sunlight. S'not even accurate."

"Nonetheless, I doubt the American public is ready for a blood-drinking Casanova to triumph over the well-intentioned, if slightly misinformed, Dr. Van Helsing, any more than I wished to send a vampire up in flames. Still, I think you will find the ending satisfactory."

"All that matters to me is that he gets to keep the girl."

Grinning openly, Germaine turned to face his beleaguered friend. No matter how grim the mortal world around him, Sir Freddie never quite lost his charmingly naive air. Untouched by time, he persisted in clinging to his Edwardian ideals, and remained a hopeless romantic. He refused to acknowledge the darker side of their existence, preferring to believe that all relationships ended with the couples living happily and eternally--united in love. Except two centuries of experience had taught Germaine that nothing could be further from the truth.

"Sorry, Freddie, but even Lucy has to stay mortal."

Sir Freddie looked positively glum. "Not much point in staying then," he muttered.

"What you neglect to consider, dear Freddie, is that as long as the count and his mortal have their bond--anything is possible."

Freddie shrugged. "S'not the same, though."

"No, it's not," Germaine agreed quietly, his thoughts slipping back to Marguerite when a young woman carrying a refreshment tray parted the curtain to his private box. He expected her to enter, instead she remained in the aisle, staring at them as if she feared something unspeakable would happen if she were to step inside. She looked at each of them, her white fingers clutching her laden tray like a protective barrier.

"Would anyone care for a soft drink or wine?" she asked, her voice wavering slightly.

His suspicions aroused, Germaine eyed her warily. "You're new, aren't you?"

Gathering her courage, she took two steps forward. "Yes, sir. Please don't be angry with Polly, sir. I begged her to give me this chance, Mr. St. Justine. You see, I really want to be an actress, and...." Marcus rose smoothly to his feet and she let out a small yelp of fear. Marcus, a former Roman gladiator, presented an intimidating figure even in formal attire.

Germaine raised his hand in a silent command. "Go on," he urged her kindly.

"I heard you were casting for a new play," she began, doing everything she could to avoid looking at the large, fierce gentleman glaring down at her. "A musical version of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and I was wondering. . ." she hesitated, then swallowed uncertainly, "if you might allow me to read for one of the roles?" She lowered her eyes and her voice softened to a whisper. "It could even be a private reading, sir, if you'd prefer."

Shifting his position to a level even with hers, Germaine perched on the arm of his seat and crooked his finger to motion her closer. When she stood near enough so that their knees almost touched, he asked, "What's your name?"

"Sally, sir, but my stage name is Jeannette."

He smiled, but refrained from pointing out how premature it was to claim a stage name when one had yet to appear on stage. "Well--Sally, what I'd prefer and what I need are

two separate things.”

When she gazed at him uncomprehendingly, he added, “I fear someone has been pulling your leg. I'm not considering a musical based on Frankenstein, therefore, I've no need to cast for it. The notion is not without merit, however. Have you a résumé prepared?” At her uncertain nod, he said, “If you don't have it with you, you may give it to my Stage Manager later. His name's John Percy. Tell him I asked you for it.”

“Oh, but I...” She struggled with her tray of refreshments and pulled out a folded square of paper from her apron. The bright orange circle staining it served as testament to her skills as an usherette. Her cheeks reddening with embarrassed dismay, Sally valiantly blinked back her tears as she struggled again with her unwieldy tray. She started to stuff the limp form back into her pocket when Germaine placed a staying hand upon her arm.

“Tell you what. I'll take that one, and you get a fresh one to Mr. Percy, all right?” She nodded hesitantly, but handed it to him and watched with anxious eyes while he scanned it. He looked up and smiled. “If I ever decide to do a musical of Frankenstein, I'll be sure to call you.” She beamed, then rushed forward to hug him, only her tray preceded her, hitting him in the chest. Germaine managed to catch her and the tray before any damage was done. Soothing her with a few quiet words, he guided her to their curtained entryway without encouraging any more shows of gratitude. Then, just before she stepped through the red velvet draperies, he said, “Tell Polly, if she has any other friends who want auditions that she makes certain they get the right tray.”

Sally looked stricken. “You get a special tray?”

“Polly knows about it. Just tell her what I said.”

“I could come back,” she suggested, her eyes bright with eagerness.

Germaine glanced at his companions. “Would either of you care for refreshment?”

“Not for anything they serve on a tray,” Marcus admitted with an intense look at Sally. She inhaled sharply and took a step back. Germaine thanked and dismissed her before he turned back to Marcus.

“I wasn't aware your tastes ran to aspiring actresses.”

Marcus shrugged. “I'm adaptable, and little Sally was tempting enough.” The house lights flickered and Marcus took his seat next to Germaine. “Speaking of tempting actresses, that number you've got playing Lucy Seward is quite the appetizing little piece.”

Jealousy, primal and instinctual, drew Germaine's fangs to a menacing point. “That certain little piece is off limits,” he warned quietly, careful to keep his elongated canines hidden.

Marcus raised an eyebrow. “That's not like you, St. Justine. What's going on?”

Not sure himself why he'd reacted as intensely as he had, Germaine retracted his fangs

and shrugged. However, the gesture wasn't as offhanded as he would have liked. "Let's just say it's personal, Marcus, and leave it at that."

"How personal?"

Realizing neither his feelings nor his friend's curiosity could be dismissed that easily, Germaine met Marcus's inquiring gaze with a forbidding glower. "Personal enough that if I discover anyone in our group has made advances to her, he will meet my displeasure directly."

"That smitten, eh?"

"Not at all. To me, Claire Daniels is out and out poison."

* * *

After the house lights came up for the final time and Freddie had uttered his complaints about how even fictional vampires never get the girl, Marcus gave Germaine a slanted look.

"You attending that black tie affair they're hosting for you tonight at Wellington's?"

Germaine rose to retrieve his coat. "Later." He paused and grimaced. Marguerite's pain was growing worse, but she still hadn't rung for a nurse. "I need to see someone first."

Stretching unconcernedly, Marcus deliberately stuck his long legs out. "So, will you tell me the story behind Claire Daniels, or must I research this intriguing little mystery on my own?"

Germaine met his friend's quietly challenging gaze. "You may do as you will, Marcus," he replied, stepping over his guardsman's small blockade with ease. "My relationship with Ms. Daniels is purely professional--nothing more."

Fifteen minutes later, Germaine didn't care if Marcus pursued Claire himself. All that mattered to him was the sobbing woman he held in his arms. She'd been doubled up with such severe pain that her entire body had begun convulsing in reaction. Germaine gently scolded Marguerite for not calling the nurse, even though he knew why she hadn't. His way offered her a brief pretense of normalcy. Their way was a death sentence chained down by tubes and life-supporting machinery.

Wanting to give her all the relief he could in the short time that remained her, Germaine gently lifted her nightgown. "This will hurt," he warned.

Marguerite clamped her lips and nodded. "Just do it quickly," she added, then nearly bit through her lip to keep from screaming out when he injected thirty ccs of his blood directly into her abdomen. Afterwards, Germaine held her as tightly as he could without hurting her. Doing his best to ignore her pain-racked pleas to end the torment, he mentally counted the seconds it took for the triple dose to take effect. Once it was working, the infusion of his blood, in addition to the shot of morphine he would have the nurse administer after he left, should last Marguerite until morning. At least her death

would be without pain.

When her trembling eased, Germaine gently laid her back against her pillow, but she clutched his hand. "Don't leave me yet!"

"I won't go anywhere until you're fast asleep," he promised. "Now relax."

"I so wanted to see Claire in her moment of triumph," she said tearfully, weakness and exhaustion slurring her words. "She's magnificent, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is." He kept his fingers on Marguerite's pulse, knowing the precautionary measure wasn't necessary. Linked as they were, his preternatural senses would alert him if she were in any danger, but his touch seemed to soothe her, granting him a measure of comfort in return.

"I know you two didn't exactly hit it off," she confessed, "but Claire has become extremely protective of me ever since George died."

"It's all right, Marguerite, now sleep," he commanded verbally before employing his subliminal bond with her to guarantee her obedience.

Her eyelids fluttered shut, but she fought to stay awake with her last ounce of will. "No, not yet. Please. I need to talk with you first. There are things I have to say."

"They aren't necessary, Marguerite," he insisted, his instincts warning him against letting her tire herself out over things that couldn't be changed.

"Yes. Yes, they are. Please!"

"Go on, then. I won't interfere," he promised with quiet resignation.

Her breathing grew labored with her body's efforts to fight the numbing fatigue that had set in. "I want you to understand about Claire," she managed with some difficulty.

Germaine drew the oxygen tube around her head. "I believe I already do, but tell me what you think I need to know." He eased the tube into place and adjusted the valve.

She took several deep breaths, then closed her eyes. "This role means everything to her. It's what all her years of work and study have led up to."

"I won't have her removed, Marguerite, so you can stop worrying."

"It isn't that. I know you'd never be so spiteful. I couldn't have loved you for so long if I believed you to be a cruel and petty man. In fact, I know just the opposite is true." She paused for another breath. "You're a concerned, giving individual who would do anything for a person you loved, as long as it did not undermine your moral principles. Claire is very much like you, except her career and family come first, morality second."

That drew him up short. "What exactly is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that Claire lives with blinders on. Although her goals are exceptionally single-minded, she doesn't consider all the consequences before she acts. Whereas, you take

into account every conceivable reaction to your deed.” Taking another deep breath, Marguerite relaxed as her strength slowly returned to her. “Although Claire is very methodical in her pursuits, she isn't nearly as worldly or as broad-minded as you.

“To her, happiness is working in the theater, taking care of her family, and spending an occasional platonic evening with the same staid and proper gentleman she's dated since high school.”

“Harry Collins? I thought he and Claire were lovers.”

“No. At least not yet, and I hope never. However, Claire is highly vulnerable right now, and Harry is a sure, steady thing. He's made himself nearly indispensable looking after our family's finances, and she feels indebted to him for his help in looking after me. Claire always pays her debts. But whatever they are, they are not lovers.”

Germaine digested that. Surprised and unnerved by the relief he felt, he sought an error in Marguerite's logic. “Perhaps you're mistaken. From all appearances, Mr. Collins has staked a proprietary claim upon your daughter. A man doesn't usually do that unless the lady has shown some willingness to be claimed.”

“Oh, Harry would like nothing better than to get Claire into bed with him, the problem is I'm not at all sure he'd know what to do with her once he got her there.”

Germaine gave her a gently chiding look. “We speak of your daughter, Marguerite.”

“I know. That's what concerns me. Claire undoubtedly refuses to acknowledge it, but if she's at all like her mother, she's got a very passionate side to her.”

“I've no complaints,” he assured her with a thoroughly masculine smile.

“But, if she stays with Harry, she'll become a frustrated, overworked nag. She's already beginning to show some bossy tendencies that worry me.”

“And I think you worry too much,” Germaine retorted, the image of Harry Collins intimately entwined with Claire making his response a bit sharper than he'd intended.

“Look how well you and George turned out,” he added, trying to change the focus of their discussion. “As I recall, you had more than a few misgivings about that as well.”

“The only reason George and I managed to have any children at all, André, was because of what you'd taught me,” Marguerite informed him with some asperity. “When George discovered I was still a virgin at age thirty, he nearly panicked.”

“I never considered he'd be upset. I thought he would be pleased.”

“He was pleased, and extremely disconcerted as he'd always assumed you and I had been lovers in the mortal sense. But that's irrelevant. It's Claire's happiness I'm concerned about. She'd be miserable with Harry, and I don't want to die with Claire's future so uncertain.”

His own uncertainty deepening, he asked, “Do you want me to speak with Harry?”

"No...." She gazed at him, her soft blue eyes uneasy, but resolved. "Have you given any thought to what you'll do once I'm gone?"

He winced inwardly at that question, but managed to keep his tone and expression nonchalant. "I imagine I'll go on pretty much the same as I have been."

"I see. I didn't think . . . That is, I had no idea you'd found someone already."

Believing he finally understood, Germaine gave the backs of her fingers a light kiss.

"There is no one else, Marguerite, and there never will be. The love we shared is enough to last me forever and always," he vowed, ending his amorous declaration with a slightly roguish grin.

She blushed. "I'm not such a fool as to believe that. You're far too passionate a man to spend eternity cuddled up to a blood bag."

"It's all I require to survive."

"But not to live. You can't seriously mean to avoid all women forever, André!"

"I don't intend to avoid them, I merely plan not to make love to them." He gazed down at their entwined fingers, noting how frail and fragile hers looked. Mortality was like a bright flame that burned itself out far too quickly. "I find the pain of inevitable separation overwhelms the pleasure--as sweet as that is," he admitted with quiet honesty.

Marguerite looked distraught, and Germaine promptly sought to reassure her she wasn't at fault. "I wouldn't trade one moment of our time together for anything, chérie. I'm just not looking to become involved again."

"That's what worries me," Marguerite confessed.

Lightly clasping both her hands in his, he bent toward her. "I'll be fine, Marguerite, and so will your daughter. I will see to it that she meets a young man worthy of her mother's passion."

"That's not exactly what I had in mind," she muttered dryly.

He drew one fragile-boned wrist to his lips and kissed its blue-veined back with gentle tenderness. "Then tell me what I must do to ease your mind so you will rest."

Her eyes rose to meet his with an unflinching gaze. "I want Claire to experience a love so consuming, so breathtaking, that she can no longer deny her own passion. I want her to be swept off her feet, and cared for so tenderly that she'll weep with joy and pleasure. I want my daughter to experience life the way I did." She covered Germaine's hands with her own. "In short, I want you to become Claire's lover."

* * *

The bewitching hour had struck nearly an hour past by the time Germaine stood in a darkened corner of Wellington's watching Marguerite's daughter soak up the limelight. Even so, he was no less bewitched. He envied her naturalness. The lady was a gifted

actress. Her laugh was light, airy and amazingly genuine for the heavy burdens that anchored it.

After two hundred years of watching those he'd cherished and protected come to wage their final battle with death and lose, he was well acquainted with such burdens. Time did not heal the wounds of grief, it merely shelved them. With each loss he relived the suffering of those who had died before and experienced the pain of his bereavement all over again. Only this time would be the last. He refused to open himself to such heartache ever again.

Accepting a glass of red wine from a passing waiter, he lifted it to his lips but refrained from taking any into his mouth. He'd discovered the motions of drinking were all that mortals required. Everyone overlooked the fact that the level in his glass never changed except the occasional overzealous waiter who sought a larger tip.

Unable to consume anything but the crimson elixir of life, Germaine was obliged to resort to charades whenever he socialized in a place that did not cater specifically to one of his kind. Unfortunately, Wellington's was one of those places. A fact which was even more unfortunate as Marguerite's entreaty had awakened a sleeping hunger within his veins. A craving which a bag of warmed blood would do little to quench.

Despite his firm rejection of Marguerite's request, Germaine was not unaffected by it. Every immortal inch of him was acutely aware of Claire Daniels. The soft, silky sound of her voice, the tantalizing but subtle call of her natural perfume, and the innocent invitation in her smile made even more tempting by the sensual promise in her laugh. The longer he remained in her presence, the more difficult it was for Germaine to keep his telltale fangs retracted. If he didn't get himself under control soon, he'd be obliged to seek out his host and mumble out an excuse about a severe toothache. A painfully real excuse at that.

He tried blocking the sound of Claire's voice from his mind, knowing the effort was useless before he even attempted it. Had he suddenly been struck deaf and blind, he would have recognized her, if only by the way she softly stirred the air when she moved. Regrettably, however, Germaine's hearing surpassed exceptional, a fact he acknowledged with a mental groan when Claire's sultry laugh floated over to him from across the room.

His lips stretched into a tight line, Germaine placed his still full glass on a nearby tray table and sought out his host, William Hailey, to offer his thanks and make his excuses.

He was within ten steps of his goal when his personal siren called out to him. Her clear voice coiled about him like a silken rope, holding him where he stood while she and her ever-present escort closed the distance between them.

"Mr. St. Justine, how good of you to finally make it to your own party. We were about to give up on you." Claire extended her arm with the same graceful motion her mother often used. Yet from that simple gesture, Germaine unerringly ascertained that the glass

of champagne she held aloft in a mock salute was more likely her third than her first.

“You've met most everyone here, haven't you?” she asked, the purr in her voice not unlike the throaty growl of a cat before it pounces. “Or would you prefer having the many little people who work for you be presented, so they can make their proper obeisance?”

The cat's sharp little claws cut into the rope, nearly freeing him.

He smiled then, and while she regarded him with a superior look, he deftly removed the fluted goblet from her loosened grasp and handed it to Harry. “She's had enough, don't you think?”

Claire promptly snatched it back. “I am perfectly capable of deciding such things for myself, Mr. St. Justine.” Her eyes speared his with an accusatory glare. “Mother insists that you, like your father, have an extraordinary talent for loving women. Given the way she extolled your prowess, I'm surprised to find you without an adoring female latched onto your arm. What did you do, leave some poor lady fair behind, languishing alone in her bed?”

Germaine's slightly amused expression gave no hint to the inner turmoil seething beneath its facade. He didn't blame Claire. Not entirely. He should have known Marguerite would attempt a similar talk with her daughter, as tenacity was another quality the two seemed to share. And had he not been battling with his own conscience that evening, he might have let the insult pass without comment. But not tonight. Not after what he'd just been through.

His smile held firmly in place, he tilted his head toward her. “Considering your mother's condition, it wouldn't be wise for her to be anyplace else, would it?”

Claire jerked as if he'd slapped her. “I can't believe you said that,” she hissed, her color rising along with her voice. “If you've done anything to upset her again, so help me I'll--”

Germaine heard the sound of cracking glass. Whipping out his handkerchief, he held it beneath her hand. “Remove the glass, Harry,” he ordered, but Harry was already backing away. The sight of Claire's blood intermingling with the sparkling wine and pooling into a bright red stain on the white linen had him stumbling for the nearest chair.

Muttering a soft curse, Germaine gripped Claire's wrist. She hadn't made a sound, but the shock of her injury would soon wear off. “Let go,” he commanded, pulling gently. Claire winced and inhaled sharply when Germaine eased the largest shard out of her palm. He stopped a passing waiter with a sharp command. “You there! We need a large bowl of clean water, quickly!”

“No,” Claire protested weakly. “I'll be fine.” But the waiter had wisely run off to do as Germaine instructed.

Placing a supporting arm about Claire's waist, Germaine sat her down in the nearest

chair without releasing her bleeding hand. The waiter reappeared at his side with almost magical swiftness, setting the bowl on the oval-shaped cocktail table beside them.

Germaine kept his grip firm. "This is going to sting," he warned, then plunged her hand into the water. Carefully, he picked out the remaining slivers of glass. She stiffened and hissed softly through her teeth, but offered no actual resistance to his doctoring.

The mishap soon drew a crowd, and a few of the cast members approached to ask Claire if she was all right. Her lips clamped, she gave her friends a tight nod.

The whole incident took less than a minute, but to Germaine it was one, very long, torturous, minute. He was already aroused, and the heady fragrance of Claire's blood created a craving in him that was primitive and visceral. His every instinct urged him to make her his, to take what her body offered and give her pleasure in return. His fangs, fully extended and hidden only by his lips, throbbed, and his eyes burned with an unearthly light that would send everyone but Claire screaming from the room. He suffered no misgivings that Claire would remain, but only because he would render her powerless to do otherwise.

His jaw and lips pressed tightly together, he lifted her hand from the bloodied water and wrapped it in the clean linen towel the waiter provided. He could hear a murmur of concerned questions, but ignored them. His gaze fixed on his makeshift bandaging, he said, "You'll need stitches. You should see to it before your hand swells. I'm confident all the glass is out, but--"

Offering another tight nod, she drew her hand back and protectively cradled it in the crook of her other arm. He sensed she was still distraught, but couldn't tell whether it was his earlier ill-spoken comment or her injury that upset her. Painfully mastering his own need into submission, he gazed at her inquiringly.

"Tomorrow is our VIP premiere," she reminded him with a trembling lip. "The New York press and most of society's elite will be there."

"Your wound is slight, Claire. It won't interfere with your performance," he offered, still unsure as to exactly what bothered her as he mentally willed his fangs to remain retracted.

"But if I go to the hospital, they will insist upon wrapping my hand in some bulky bandage. And since vampires are driven into a lustful frenzy by the scent of blood, my injury would need to be written into the script. So, wouldn't it be better if I--"

William Hailey placed a fatherly hand on her shoulder. "If it's necessary, I'm certain we could add a few lines to explain your bandaged hand. What do you think, St. Justine?"

Germaine didn't think Claire's distress had anything to do with the script, Lucy, or Dracula's blood lust, but he answered the question. "I think we can handle the whole thing with a small flesh-colored bandage. And if our Count Dracula has any manners at all, he'll refrain from mentioning it." When Claire continued to protest that she was fine,

Germaine merely helped her to her feet. "Harry, why don't you take Ms. Daniels to the hospital where they can see to her injury properly?"

"Right," Harry agreed, eager to make up for his earlier disgrace. "Come along, Clarissa. No arguments, now." He grasped Claire's elbow, but she jerked free of his hold.

Hearing the faint edge of terror in Claire's voice as she persisted in her protests, Germaine tilted up her chin and commanded her to meet his gaze. One look was all he needed. "There is no reason to be afraid. Now, go," he insisted quietly, lowering his hand as the unreasoning fear and tension that gripped her mind and body slowly dissipated like smoke from scattered ashes. Although her blue eyes remained clouded by uncertainty, this time Claire allowed Harry to take her arm and lead her away.

After murmuring his excuses to Hailey, Germaine headed for the restaurant's entrance where Marcus intercepted him.

"Poison, eh? I believe poison like that could send a vampire to heaven."

"Or to hell," Germaine replied curtly as he swept past his amused friend out into the bone-chilling night where death hovered in the frozen stillness--waiting to claim its due.

CHAPTER FOUR

Four a.m., Germaine received the call he'd been expecting from Marguerite's doctor. An unnecessary precaution, but one he'd requested once his visits had become a matter of dispute. Five minutes later, he stood at Marguerite's side watching her gasp for each breath she took.

Careful not to dislodge the IV in her arm or the various electrodes and respiratory equipment that had been attached during the night, Germaine lowered the guardrail and sat on the edge of her bed. Then, with the fervent wish he could have done more, he reached out and took her hand in his. Her eyes fluttered open. He could see her struggling to penetrate the fog of pain numbing drugs they'd given her, then her lips curved in a strained but pleased smile.

"You came." Her voice sounded hoarse and weak beneath the oxygen mask.

Unable to speak past the knot of grief lodged in his throat, he offered her a reassuring smile.

She gasped for another breath and her fingers clutched his. "Hold me," she whispered, her grasp weakening as her strength slowly deserted her.

Germaine hesitated, but the notion that his touch might bring her more ease than any of the hospital's methods of providing comfort persuaded him to lie down beside her. Handling her frail body with all the gentleness he would offer a newborn babe, he drew her into his arms and cradled her head in the crook of his elbow.

She gazed at him with longing and lifted a bruised, brittle-boned hand to his jaw. "I love you," she confessed. Her gentle declaration flayed his conscience with a thousand invisible cuts that would never heal. If only he'd been older, stronger . . . If only . . . Fighting his own emotions, Germaine tried to smile again. Failing miserably at that, he tenderly stroked Marguerite's brow, then covered her hand with his own. Their fingers entwined, she closed her eyes and exhaled.

Germaine sensed the unsteady beat of her heart waiver and felt a slight pain in his own. Then all he felt was the deep emptiness of loss as her spirit quietly slipped away taking a part of him with her. Bending forward, he kissed her one last time as the intricately sophisticated machines announced the moment of her death.

By the time a nurse entered to switch off the strident buzzer, Germaine was standing again at Marguerite's side, their fingers still joined. He watched the monitor's heart-shaped blip narrow to a tiny white dot, then go black.

Dr. Willis walked in. He briefly examined Marguerite, then took the medical chart the nurse patiently held out for him. Registering her death at 4:10 a.m., Willis scribbled a note then handed the chart back to the nurse who'd turned off the IV drip and oxygen while she waited. When the nurse left, Tom Willis turned to Germaine with a cordial but guarded expression.

"I'm not sure exactly what it was you did for her, Mr. St. Justine, and after our brief conversation, I'm not sure I want to know. But even her test results showed that you managed to make her last few days much more peaceful." He extended his hand, which Germaine accepted, not certain the good doctor's estimation was correct.

"Thank you, Doctor, for allowing me to see her despite the family's objections."

"I've always maintained it's the patient's feelings that counted. However,...."

"I know, they'll be here soon. I just want a moment more with her, then I'll go."

Tom Willis nodded, then casting a regret-filled look at Marguerite, he left.

Germaine lowered Marguerite's hand with gentle finality. Carefully withdrawing the IV needle, he placed her second arm so that her wrists lay crossed over her stomach. He hated to leave, but knew it would be best for everyone if he did. He leaned forward to press a farewell kiss to Marguerite's forehead just as Claire rushed breathlessly into the room.

Her hair mussed and her clothing awry, she gazed first at him, then at her mother's classic pose and her throat started to convulse with the effort it took to hold back her tears. For Germaine, her pain was much more intense because it mirrored his own.

Moving closer until her thighs touched the metal guardrails, Claire reached for her mother's hand and held it reverently within her own bandaged palm.

Germaine glanced down at the oxygen mask still covering Marguerite's face. "Do you mind if I remove this?" he asked.

Claire numbly shook her head. Germaine grasped the mask and started to pull it off when Robert ran at him from the hall.

"Get away from her!" the young man demanded, frantically pushing Germaine's hands away from Marguerite. "What're you trying to do? Suffocate her?"

Claire stared at her brother through pain-glazed eyes. "Robert, Mother doesn't need the mask anymore."

He turned on Claire with a desperate fury. "What do you know? You're never ill. She needs the oxygen, I tell you. She's better, but she still needs help to breathe." He laid an unsteady hand on Marguerite's forehead. "She's resting peacefully now. See, her breathing's no longer labored."

"She's not breathing at all, Robert," Claire pointed out, her voice tight with suppressed tears.

Seeing Claire's fingers were gripping her mother's, Germaine instinctively placed his hand over hers. "Why don't you sit down for a moment? I'll handle this," he offered gently.

Claire promptly vetoed his suggestion. "It's okay. I really need to be here right now."

Robert glowered at Germaine. "Why are you here? Weren't you told to stay away?"

"Your mother asked for me," he replied, simply but honestly.

"Well she's not asking for you now, and we want you to leave. Mother was fine until you came, and now she's steadily getting worse."

Harry walked in, his brow furrowed with vexation. "What's going on? St. Justine, what are you doing here?" Without waiting for an answer, he turned to Claire whose gaze remained fixed upon her mother. "The staff seems most uncommunicative tonight, Clarissa," he began, oblivious to both Claire's grief-ravaged expression and Robert's feral glower. "I couldn't get anyone to tell me of Marguerite's condition. All they'd say was that I should speak to Dr. Willis. Well, I think we should speak to him, and without delay. This sudden taciturnity isn't right. Not right at all."

Ignoring him, Germaine reached again for the oxygen mask when Robert suddenly jumped him. Knowing if he even attempted to resist Robert's attack that he'd severely injure the young man, Germaine allowed himself to be shoved aside and bore Robert's angry, futile blows with a patience he was far from feeling.

"Keep your murdering hands off her!" Robert bellowed.

Claire pushed her way past Harry to reach her brother.

"Robert, don't," she pleaded, trying to grab his flailing arms while he pummeled Germaine.

"I think the two of you ought to be a little more considerate," Harry announced, his tone sharp with annoyance at all the histrionics. "Marguerite doesn't look well at all."

"She's dead!" Claire screamed. "Can't either of you see that?" At her wit's end, she fisted her hand and pressed a knuckle to her mouth to keep from sobbing aloud.

Robert ceased attacking Germaine to hold his sister. "No! No, you're wrong, Claire. It's just a deep sleep. Drugs often do that. Mother's fine, she's just sleeping very soundly."

Claire shook her head just as Dr. Willis entered. He took in the scene with a glance. "Come here, Robert," he directed, crooking his finger. Claire stiffened, but didn't say anything.

Robert shook his head while Harry, who had finally taken a long look at Marguerite, said, "Go with him, Robert. He'll give you something to help you through this."

"No. I need to stay here with Mother until she awakens."

"She's not going to awaken, Robert," Dr. Willis announced kindly but firmly.

"Liar!" Robert returned hotly. "She's getting better. I saw her myself yesterday, and she was fine. Now you expect me to believe she died, just like that?"

When Dr. Willis motioned two orderlies to surround Robert, Claire instantly backed away, stopping only when she accidentally bumped into Germaine. Her gaze darted to

meet his in quick alarm, but she neither apologized nor moved away. If anything, she inched even closer to him.

“You know I wouldn't lie to you, Robert,” the doctor insisted in his professional voice. “Haven't I always told you the truth, even when you didn't want to hear it?”

Robert looked stricken, but he still kept his distance from the orderlies. “No, I have to stay here--with Mother.”

“Why, Robert? Can't you see you're upsetting your sister?”

“You want me to stay, don't you, Claire?” he asked plaintively. Claire hesitated as if she no longer knew what she wanted. Germaine sensed both worry and fear battling inside her, then she gazed up at him. That look was all the invitation he needed. The naked appeal in her eyes outweighed any risk of exposure to himself.

“Look at me, Robert,” he ordered in an ominously quiet voice. When Robert obeyed, Germaine quietly commanded him to accompany Dr. Willis out of the room.

Willis gave Germaine an odd look, but took his curiously acquiescent patient by the arm and escorted him out. Harry looked suddenly uneasy. Demanding a word with the doctor, he strode out in hasty pursuit after Willis.

“Do you think Robert will be all right?” Claire asked, accepting a tissue from Germaine.

“He'll be fine,” he assured her, “but I'm worried about you.”

“Me? Why? I'm sorry I fell apart a moment ago, but....” She wiped her nose and dried her eyes. “I'm fine now, really.” Gazing at her mother, she murmured, “She looks almost peaceful.”

“She is at peace, Claire,” Germaine vouched with a certainty he believed with all the depths of his being.

Claire merely nodded, but Germaine noticed the way she kept rubbing the back of her injured hand. She might appear calm on the outside, but he could feel her grief tearing her apart inside--the same way his own grief was ripping through him with the jagged edge of guilt. Her brow wrinkling in thought, she asked, “Did she tell you she wanted to be cremated?”

“We can discuss the details later,” he advised, feeling more and more like a drowning man being sucked down an emotional whirlpool. “Right now, I think you should go lie down for a while.”

She vehemently shook her head. “I can't. I've got too many things to do. I need to drop her pink peignoir off with the funeral director. I have to contact the crematorium. She has friends I need to notify. I need to call the papers and make an announce--”

Germaine grasped her arms, then waited for her to look at him. “It's only four-thirty in the morning, Claire. Those things can wait.”

"The show opens tonight," she whispered, her eyes filling with tears she quickly blinked back. "That won't wait, will it?"

"You get some sleep, first. We'll talk about it later."

Dr. Willis stuck his head back in. "Robert's resting quietly now, everything okay in here?"

"I don't know," Germaine answered truthfully, releasing his hold on Claire but not his gaze. "I've advised Ms. Danielson she should rest for a bit, but she's resisting the idea."

"Claire," Dr. Willis intoned gently while he stepped into the room with Harry right on his heels. "Why don't you come with me, dear? Nancy can put you in a room close by, and I'll give you something that will help you sleep for a few hours."

Claire took a step closer to Germaine, and he could feel her trembling as clearly as if he still touched her. "No. I'm fine. Really," she answered. "I just want to stay here for a while."

Dr. Willis turned and spoke quietly to Harry for a moment. Harry looked skeptical, but nodded. Starting toward Claire, he murmured, "Dr. Willis is right, Clarissa. You should go with him. They need to clear out this room."

Claire gave the doctor a horrified look. "You can't spare us another twenty minutes?" she asked a little wildly.

"Of course, Claire, of course," he promptly assured her, casting a sidelong scowl at Harry. "You can stay as long as you wish, I just thought you might feel more comfortable in another room."

"No, I want to stay here," she insisted, stepping closer to the bed. She was halfway between him and Marguerite when Germaine heard Claire draw an unsteady breath. Moving with less certainty, she continued until she stood before the chest where she'd kept her thermometer. Germaine guessed that monitoring Marguerite's erratically fluctuating temperature had offered Claire the illusion of control in a situation that was beyond anyone's ability to alter.

She picked up the glass tube, then swallowed as if the futility of her efforts brought a painful lump to her throat. "I was almost certain she was going into another remission," she admitted, gripping the fragile glass instrument in her fist. "She seemed so much more lively, and her fever was down." Her voice grew husky, but she rigidly held her tears in check and dropped the thermometer and its plastic case into a nearby wastebasket.

Feeling the tightness return to his own throat, Germaine crossed over to where she stood and drew her into his arms. "Go ahead and cry, Claire. It's all right."

"Really, St. Justine. Don't you think I should be the one doing that?" Harry demanded, his lips taut with disdain as he stepped forward with one arm outstretched to Claire.

Germaine started to reply when Claire whispered, "I know in reality that she's gone, but I still can't accept it. I so wanted to be with her--to hold her. Only I didn't make it in time. Harry thought it was just another false alarm."

Both Germaine and Dr. Willis glared at Collins accusingly. He took a step back. "Well this wouldn't be the first time we've been called here in the middle of the night because of some hospital screw-up," he muttered defensively.

"I guess I still can't believe it," Claire murmured. "Maybe I don't want to."

"I understand, Claire," Germaine told her, his voice low and reassuring. Her eyes filled with tears, but she resolutely blinked them back. "You aren't alone," he promised her. "I loved her, too. Very much."

She blinked again, and for one, breathless moment, her face held all the vulnerability of a lost and frightened little girl. Then she gave a small shuddering gasp, and the tears she'd struggled so hard to restrain poured forth like scalding rain as grief burst from her in long, wrenching, pain-filled gulps. Her fingers clutched handfuls of Germaine's sweater as she gave vent to all the fear, pain and desperation she'd secreted inside since her mother fell ill. Without a word, Germaine lifted her into his arms. When Harry started to protest, Germaine gave him a quelling look. "You may be an excellent analyst, Collins, but you're a poor excuse for a man."

Leaving Harry sputtering, Germaine carried Claire to the room Dr. Willis indicated. He tried laying her on the bed, but she refused to release him. Instead, he held her on his lap while Willis proceeded to sedate her. But the moment the doctor reached for the band on Claire's sweat pants, she began struggling in protest.

"No!"

"Now, Claire," Dr. Willis murmured as if addressing a recalcitrant child. "It's only a sedative."

"No shots!" she insisted, her fingers digging into Germaine's arms. The moment the doctor drew back Claire eased her grip, then started to shiver as if nothing could make her feel warm again.

Germaine hesitated. He knew he could gain her compliance with his mind, but a part of him recoiled at the notion of subduing her in that manner. It was her spirit he admired most, and yet it was that same spirit that desperately cried out for help now. Giving the doctor a look that indicated he'd like a chance at convincing her, Germaine tilted Claire's chin up.

Tears sparkled in her blue eyes as she silently pleaded with him to take away the pain even as she refused any notion of medication with a shake of her head.

"You know Dr. Willis is right, don't you, Claire?" he asked at the same time his mind touched hers with another question. A question that for all its simplicity could only complicate their already entangled relationship. A question that begged even as it

demanded.

May I kiss you?

“Yes,” she whispered, raising herself to meet his lips. He was surprised and delighted by her passionate response and a little unnerved by his body's quick reaction to it. What began as a kiss of reassurance suddenly changed into a heated desire for something far more intimate--at least for him.

Although Claire gripped his shoulders and pressed herself against him as if she desperately needed someone to remind her she was still alive, he was the one doing all the kissing. Her lips opened readily to his, but her tongue never ventured into his mouth, which was just as well, as his body wasn't immune to her warm willingness. Indeed, had she been a little bolder she would have discovered then that the rumors about him were true. She made a tiny sound in the back of her throat when the doctor finally attained his objective, then she clutched Germaine even tighter.

When Dr. Willis rose, Germaine reluctantly lifted his mouth from Claire's. She gazed at him with a measure of uncertainty tinged with embarrassment, but didn't pull away.

Dr. Willis didn't comment, but the look he gave Germaine spoke volumes, and the tips of Germaine's ears burned with chagrin. He hadn't expected the kiss to be quite so--intense, but he enjoyed it far too much to regret it or make any apologies. Then again, Willis wasn't asking for apologies. He was simply warning Germaine, with one sternly raised eyebrow, that Claire was like a daughter to him, and he didn't want to see her hurt.

When Germaine nodded his understanding of the silent message, Dr. Willis said, “I'll send Nancy in to help Claire undress.” Then giving Claire's shoulder a gentle squeeze, he left, unaware of the panic his simple statement had induced.

“I'm not going to stay here!” Claire insisted, trying to squirm off Germaine's lap.

He held her firm. “You're not thinking clearly--”

“I won't stay!” she shouted, her efforts to escape him growing more frantic by the minute. “No matter what you do to me!”

Afraid she'd hurt herself, Germaine released her just as Nancy walked into the room. “Shall I get the doctor?” the worried nurse asked as Claire scrambled away from the open door to the other side of the room.

Neither Germaine nor the nurse moved a muscle while Claire sank slowly to the floor and wrapped her arms around her knees like a scared child. Claire's grief had exhausted her both emotionally and physically, but Germaine sensed her terror had deeper roots than Marguerite's death. With an intuition sharpened by two centuries of living, he knew the reaction he witnessed today was merely a heightened version of the fear he sensed in her the first day they met. A fear that he could only recall being absent during the party--that is until she'd cut her hand . . .

“Could we have a moment alone?” he asked the nurse. “I’ll call if I need assistance.”

Nancy seemed reluctant to leave, but departed after a moment's hesitation.

Rising from the hospital bed, Germaine went over and knelt beside Claire. When she only tensed slightly at his nearness, he knew the drug had started to take effect.

“Is it the thought of staying in a hospital?” he inquired in a low voice.

Tears spilled from her eyes, but he doubted she was even aware of them.

“Tell me,” he urged gently, using his mind to give her a tiny nudge of encouragement.

She blinked once, as if she was having difficulty collecting her thoughts, but it was the drug, not the suggestion he'd given her that caused the difficulty.

“The first time I was only six,” she admitted slowly. “It was three days before Thanksgiving, and Mother was preoccupied getting things ready for the family gathering, so Dad took us to see Peter Pan. Robert enjoyed the lost boys and the Indians. I was totally captivated by Peter Pan and his battle with Captain Hook. So much so, that by the time we got home I was convinced that if I really wanted to--I could fly.

“I left Robert watching Mickey Mouse on TV and went upstairs to my room. After putting on my dance leotard and tights, I opened my bedroom window. Then calling out a challenge to Captain Hook, I cocked my elbows and with a crow of confidence, stepped out onto a narrow ledge and continued to fly all the way to the ground, breaking my arm.

“Despite the pain, I had no wish to go to the hospital, but my parents insisted. And when X-rays showed I'd also sustained a mild concussion, Dr. Willis thought it best I spend the night under medical supervision. Two days later, on Thanksgiving, my Uncle Jack, who insisted it was only one too many helpings of turkey and sweet potatoes, was also taken to the hospital. He died one hour later from a massive heart attack.”

Germaine gripped her fingers and discovered they were even colder than his. Gently chafing them, he asked, “You're not suggesting that your Uncle Jack's heart attack was in any way related to your broken arm, are you Claire?”

“I'd like to think it wasn't, but six, almost seven, years later, I was again taken to the hospital. This time because I'd fallen off my bike while pretending to be Luke Skywalker riding a sand cruiser. That same week Mom was diagnosed with cancer.

“She didn't like hospitals any more than I did, so she convinced Dr. Willis she'd be better off convalescing at home. I'd like to think we helped in her recovery. Daddy told Rob and me that Mother needed us to be extra-good just then. I did what I could to help by looking after Rob. Amazingly enough, Mom was actually getting better when I accidentally set fire to the kitchen trying to fix Robert's breakfast. Luckily I got the fire out before too much damage was done, but not without suffering second degree burns on my hands and arms. I was still in the hospital when Daddy was admitted later that day

with pains in his chest. Like Uncle Jack, he died of a heart attack less than an hour after being admitted. I wasn't even able to attend his funeral.”

Germaine handed her a box of tissues, which she gratefully accepted.

“It may not be rational, but I can't help feeling as if I were somehow at fault. Every time I've been admitted into the hospital as a patient, a member of my family either sickens or dies.” She looked at him then, her eyes hollow with despair. “I tried to tell you last night why I didn't want to get stitches. My hand wasn't cut all that badly, but you--”

“Stop it, Claire,” he ordered sharply. He had influenced her, but this wasn't the time to enter into that discussion. “Your being here last night had nothing to do with your mother's death.”

Claire shook her head, not really listening to him. “I never wanted her in the hospital,” she confessed tearfully. “I wanted to take care of her at home.”

He gripped her fingers. “And she wanted to see your dream come true.”

“But if she'd stayed at home--”

“--it wouldn't have turned out any differently. You couldn't have saved her, Claire,” Germaine insisted. When she started to argue, he drew her into his arms. “But you would have always wondered if you could have done something more. Some treatment you might have missed, some medicine the hospital might have given her had she been in their care. It was neither your visit to the hospital, nor the nurses and doctors that killed your mother. Cancer did.”

She looked at him for a moment. The drug had slowed her reactions and her speech, but stark fear kept her mind alert. “Are you willing to promise me if I stay here tonight that nothing will happen to Robert? That a month from now he will still be fine?”

His eyes held hers as he searched her mind for trickery or deceit. Finding none, he answered, “If that's what it will take to get you to rest, then yes--I promise that Robert will come to no harm in a month, or even two months from now.” He knew the promise was unwise, and he had no idea how he'd keep it if Robert fell into a sudden decline, but Claire's fear and his own conscience insisted he offer the assurance and worry about the consequences later. When she didn't dispute him, he said, “Besides, you're not spending the night here, you're only staying until the sedative wears off. You're not even being admitted. Nine o'clock, ten at the latest, you'll go home.”

“I'd rather you took me home now,” she confessed sleepily.

Germaine was tempted, and for more than one reason, but it wouldn't help Claire any for him to give in to her paranoia. Instead, he compromised, offering to stay with her until she fell asleep. Claire showed little enthusiasm for his proposal, but she didn't object to it.

Placing her on the bed, Germaine helped her remove her shoes. She agreed to take off

her bulky sweater and sweat pants leaving her in a form fitting tank top, bikini briefs and socks, but she was adamant about not wearing a hospital johnny.

Germaine conceded to her wishes--and more. When her uneasiness didn't dissipate, he even improvised a mock incantation to ward off any demons or evil curses that might be lurking about--wryly wondering if his success could bring an end to his own existence.

He did everything he could to ensure Claire's peace of mind. Everything but crawl in beside her to exorcise the hospital's bed monsters, certain if he did that he would become the very thing she teasingly begged him to expel. Yet behind the sleepy smiles and drug-induced playfulness Germaine sensed a deep, dark anguish that even the ridiculous antics of a vampire couldn't expel for her--let alone for himself.

And he could feel his resolve weakening.

Perhaps it was the way she looked at him: like a frightened, lonely little girl who was too proud to admit her fear. Or perhaps it was the way her grief struck a responsive chord in his own heart. Whatever it was, Germaine begrudgingly conceded to sit beside her until she fell asleep. Keeping as close to the edge of the bed as possible and pressing his shoulders tight against the metal headboard, he lightly stroked Claire's back.

She promptly curled toward him and laid her head upon his thigh. Her eyes closing, she confessed to feeling a little out of sorts and apologized if she'd acted childishly. When Germaine assured her he understood, she asked, "Will you at least tell me if her death was peaceful? Was she in much pain?"

"She didn't suffer, Claire. Now, go to sleep."

"Do you think she forgave me for not being there?"

"There was nothing to forgive. She knew you loved her and that's all that mattered. You were with her in her heart."

Her fingers, which had remained curled in a fist upon his leg, slowly relaxed. "I'm so confused. I feel I should call Mr. Hailey and tell him I can't make the performance tonight, and

yet...." She struggled to raise herself on her elbows and gazed at him through hazy, troubled eyes. "What do you think she would want me to do?"

Groaning inwardly, Germaine did his utmost to ignore the charming view Claire presented and concentrated instead on what she asked. "I'll tell you that she confessed her main regret was not being able to see you on opening night."

Claire let out a shivery sigh and lowered her head back to his leg. "Somehow that trite, tired, old maxim about the show having to go on seems a little disrespectful just now."

"I don't think your mother would see it that way. In fact, I think it would sadden her to hear you say that. But you need to do what feels right for you."

“It's too much,” she confessed wearily. “Everything's happening too fast.”

Germaine merely held her, saying nothing. The closer it got to dawn, the more vulnerable he grew both physically and emotionally. Although he and Claire weren't linked, he could feel her frustration as if it were his own. Perhaps, because in many ways it was. He was, by mortal standards, a most powerful and influential man. Yet he could not save the life of the woman he held most dear without condemning her to an eternity shrouded in secrecy, shadows and blood. A fate that, for some, was worse than mortal death.

Her eyes closing again, Claire said, “Thank you for being here tonight. I know you did all you could to help Mother, and I'm grateful she had someone with her. I'm certain she rests much easier now because of you.” The change in Claire's attitude only made Germaine feel worse. “And you're right,” she added in a sleepy whisper. “She would've been hurt to learn I'd missed opening night because of her. I only wish we could dedicate the performance to her memory.”

His throat tightening painfully, he murmured, “That's an excellent idea. I'll call Hailey and mention it later this morning.”

“She'd like that, I think.” Claire forced her eyes open and gazed at him with uncertainty. He could tell whatever she wanted to say wasn't easy for her, so he gave her a small mental nudge of encouragement. She blinked, then the words rushed out like water through a burst pipe. “Do you think you could also come backstage before the show? I wouldn't ask, except that I might need some moral support, and you're--”

“I'll be there, Claire,” he promised, placing a finger against her lips as he continued his gentle, rhythmic stroking, “but only if you go to sleep, now.”

She pressed a kiss to the tip of his finger with a relieved smile and obediently closed her eyes. Her next words followed in the wake of a yawn. “Mother warned me you were something of a benevolent tyrant. Now, I think I understand what she meant.”

Germaine didn't think she understood the half of it, but refrained from enlightening her. Less than ten minutes later, he was headed back to the peaceful sanctity of Illusions.

* * *

Officially, the club closed at two a.m., but to its members it was always open, and to kindred creatures of blood it remained open until dawn unless the group's private business dictated otherwise.

As it was only minutes from that magical hour when Germaine arrived, the club was empty except for two others. Marcus and Phillipa.

Marcus took one look at Germaine, then clapped him on the shoulder. “Get some rest. I'll talk to you tomorrow.” Directing a warning glance at Phillipa, he left for his quarters.

Germaine stepped behind the bar and poured himself a drink from one of the twelve

specialty coded spigots. He didn't bother warming it, since all he sought was a quick fix for his throbbing canines. It wasn't hunger that ate at him tonight, it was pain. A raw, gut-wrenching pain that made him wish he could cry like a mortal.

Taking the crimson fluid into his mouth, he closed his eyes and silently ingested it through his fangs. Where it went from there, he neither knew nor cared--leaving that knowledge to those more versed in vampire physiology than himself. All he knew was if he attempted to swallow it instead, he got violently ill. A lesson most vampires learned very early in their new life.

He took another sip, then set his glass down. Phillipa's fingers curled around his in silent communication. He looked at her then. Her angelic face had been scrubbed of makeup and her blond hair pulled back into a French braid. She wore a lacy creation that was meant to entice and beguile with a hint of innocence. Technically, Phillipa was an eternal innocent, but Germaine had never met a virgin with more experience.

He knew what she was offering, just as he knew it would be a mistake to accept it. All he wanted was to be left alone, but he didn't remove his hand.

She leaned toward him, her breasts nearly brushing the bar. The floral perfume she'd adopted as her signature fragrance clung heavily in the air, reminding him of a funeral parlor. "I can feel your grief tearing you apart inside," she whispered huskily. "Don't push me away again tonight."

"It's late, Phillipa," he answered in firm dismissal.

"Not that late," she countered quietly. "I can remember a time when the passing hours didn't seem to matter. Dawn came and you were as attentive to me as you were at midnight. Even talking about it makes me hungry for you."

"Then don't talk about it." Instead of answering, she slipped the tips of her fingers between his and slid them with soft suggestion over the ridges of his knuckles until their fingers were fully entwined. Lifting his gaze from their joined hands, he met her plaintive expression and firmly shook his head. "Too much has changed between us since then."

"But those changes could make our reunion even better. You no longer have to worry about hurting me. You could even make love to me the way mortals do. I'd like that." Her fingers gripped his in a silent plea. "Let me help you forget for a time."

A part of him was tempted while another part of him thoroughly rejected her proposition. He took another sip of his drink. "What about Phillip?"

She drew back her hand with an irritated sigh. "He knows. I told him what I intended when I heard you'd left for the hospital."

Germaine gave her a look. "That's terribly understanding of him. I can't say I'd be so generous if you were mine."

Her lips tightened slightly, then she took a deep breath. "Phillip and the others may follow you and even champion your cause, but no one, except you, can live up to that strict moral code of yours, Germaine. Not for eternity." When he said nothing, she walked slender, flirtatious fingers up his arm. "Besides, by my way of thinking, I am still yours."

He immediately pulled away from her. "No, Phillipa, you're not. You relinquished that distinction the moment you took Phillip into your bed."

"You were the one who refused to transform me," she reminded him. "All I wanted was to be near you forever."

"So you disobeyed me and seduced one of my friends behind my back." He made a sound of disgust and turned away from her. She slipped from her chair and wrapped her arms around him from behind.

"I love you."

Hearing Marguerite's dying words echoed on Phillipa's lips was more than Germaine could bear. He flung Phillipa away from him, barely catching himself in time from actually hurting her. "You don't know the meaning of the word, love," he snarled, feeling anger create the same change in him as desire. His eyes burning with eternal fire, he advanced on her. "All you know is lust."

"That's not true," she denied, holding her ground despite his wrath. Her chin high and her eyes wide, she stood ready to accept his angry retaliation if it was the only way she could have him.

When he was only an inch away, Germaine grasped Phillipa's lacy bodice and tugged on it until her breasts sprang free. They were especially round and full, and her skin glowed a pearly pink. She'd obviously fed long and well on the off chance she could convince him to bed her. The knowledge did little to quench his growing fury, but it did add another dimension to it that he chose not to examine too closely.

He cupped one of the firm, pendulous globes in his palm. She uttered a soft murmur of contentment and closed her eyes.

"This is lust, Phillipa. It is the gratification of physical desire without emotional commitment. Love is holding someone you've cared for, someone you've protected for years, and have her die in your arms rather than transform her into the blood-lusting specter you've become."

"You're wrong, Germaine," she whispered in a voice that pleaded for him to understand. "You're the only one I wanted. I couldn't be more committed to you if we'd exchanged vows."

He raised his hand to her chin and grasped it firmly. "At last count, I believe you'd taken more than three hundred and fifty men to your bed. That's over ten a year since you begged Phillip to transform you. Mortals have a word for that kind of behavior, and it

has nothing to do with love.”

Her eyes flashed angrily. “It has everything to do with love. You refused me! You insisted Phillip and I wed when you were the one I wanted all along. I never loved Phillip. What did you expect me to do? Stay home and knit matching shrouds while he prowled the streets at night, then greet him and his single fang with open arms?”

“Finally, we get to the heart of the matter. It's Phillip's punishment for transforming you, isn't it? He's been blindly faithful to you, despite your many transgressions, yet you can't abide his minor, temporary deformity because it hinders your pleasure.”

“Damn you for a hypocrite, Germaine! I never claimed to be perfect, yet nothing I did could measure up to your standard of perfection. And unless a vampire gets sainted, no one ever will. But blaming me doesn't absolve you of responsibility. You're the one who sentenced me to a fifty-year punishment. You're the one who ordered Phillip legally maimed. And tonight, you're the one who held a woman you supposedly loved in your arms and coldly condemned her to death.”

Fury and pain ripped through him with the jagged edge of grief. Consumed by a wounded rage, he gripped Phillipa's throat and squeezed. “I should have killed you the night you were made.”

Pink-tinged plasmic tears flowed from her eyes as she stood unmoving beneath his punishing hold. “Perhaps you should have,” she gasped out. “At least I wouldn't be in this torment.”

He immediately loosened his grasp. “I think you've managed quite well, considering.”

She shook her head, unable to stop crying. Though Phillipa's blood level was high, Germaine knew the approaching dawn made her more susceptible to excess. Between dawn and dusk a vampire could weep himself into a coma-like sleep that could last a century or longer. Still, such an outcome was extreme, and it wasn't fear of dire consequences that prompted Germaine's concern for Phillipa--it was her tears. No matter how angry he was, Germaine simply could not stand to see a woman cry.

Too battle weary from his own grief and regret to fight any longer, he drew Phillipa into his arms. “Stop that, else I shall become really perturbed with you.”

She gave a feeble laugh, but clung to him with a desperate longing. “I'm sorry,” she murmured with real regret. “I shouldn't have said those things.”

“Yes, you should have. But I advise you not to say them very often.”

She drew back a little to look at him. “I suppose you'll insist I return to Phillip now.”

“I should,” he murmured, knowing he wouldn't. If it were dusk instead of dawn, his morals might have held fast. But with the dawn's light, her need for him echoed a deeper need within himself that made his lofty ideals and scruples seem antiquated and pointless.

She slipped her hands beneath his snowy white cardigan, stained with the tiny red testaments of her grief, and trailed her nails along the edge of his rib cage to his collar bone and back--detouring once along the way to lightly graze his nipples. He took a deep breath, but held himself perfectly still for her sensuous exploration. With his six-foot frame putting his lips out of her mouth's reach, Phillipa rose on tiptoe to kiss his chin.

"Take me now, and I won't ask again for another twenty years, I promise."

He gazed down at her upturned face. "If I felt you could keep your promise for only half that time, I'd be tempted to take you up on your offer."

"I'll try. And, because you wish it, I'll also try to stay faithful to Phillip."

"That's irony for you," he remarked with a wry smile, his hands moving from the gentle swell of her hips to just beneath her arms.

"He bought the coffin," she murmured with a sigh.

"And?"

She gave a light shrug, rubbing the tips of her nipples against his thumbs. "It's cozier than I imagined it would be," she admitted, her voice breathy and uncertain. When he didn't reply, she added, "I need you, Germaine. And I'd like to think you need me, too--at least for tonight."

"Quiet," he ordered in a whisper. "Say any more, and I might recall I'm a gentleman and change my mind." Then, as if to seal their dawn pact, he kissed her. Not the seeking, sensual kiss he'd given Claire, but a hard, almost bruising kiss that he could only bestow on another vampire. Then lowering his lips to her bared breast, he eased his needle-like fangs into the pulsing artery just above it.

Her head back, Phillipa let out a soft cry of pure bliss. "Yes. Oh, yes." She moaned in throaty rapture, and he could feel her pleasure build with his own. "Drink. Take all you need."

Germaine did, knowing the amount required for them to couple like living humans would kill a mortal partner, but would be barely noticed by Phillipa. Even the darkest depths of his passion could not hurt her--at least not with any permanent effect.

She pressed his head to her breast, urging him to suckle from her much as a mother coaxes a nursing child, yet there was a distinct difference. For the nourishment he took from her this night would be returned gift-wrapped in a pleasure so intense she might sleep through till the next sunset.

Theirs would not be the sweet, gentle joining of newlywed lovers, theirs was the dance of the Nacht Kinder, the Night Children. A fierce mating of kindred spirits enmeshed within the pagan rites of their kind.

Having consumed all he needed for the moment, Germaine withdrew from Phillipa

gently, because it was his way. Silencing her murmurs of protest with a kiss, he promised her much more as he lifted her into his arms and carried her toward his private chambers, unaware that a pair of narrowed green eyes followed his every move.

Resentment deepening them to a brilliant emerald, the eyes watched the lovers' romantic exit, knowing the immortal duo would reenact their forbidden ritual many times over before they eventually succumbed to the sleep of the dead.

The green eyes watched, and they hated--the male vampire especially. Not for what he was, but for his selfish edict that denied others the gift he so flagrantly wasted on his own kind. Then a pair of soft, full lips curved in contemplation of revenge.

The knowledge that St. Justine had denied his dark blood to one in need, yet squandered it on one of his own, would be of extreme interest to those who stood in open opposition to any mandate that restricted their powers. Such information ought to be well-rewarded by someone like Victor Cummings--a vampire who deemed himself no friend of St. Justine's. A true immortal like Victor would not refuse someone the gift of everlasting life by decreeing the ritualistic mingling of blood a forbidden act. A true immortal would take immeasurable pleasure in bequeathing powers of eternal beauty to one of his choosing. A true immortal would never have denied her.

Long, silken lashes lowered slowly over the eyes, while a silent vow was made to possess the powers of immortality and more. And on that day, Germaine St. Justine would also die. This time, forever.

CHAPTER FIVE

At quarter past seven the next evening, Germaine strode into Illusions dressed in his evening clothes. Late for his promised meeting with Claire, he scanned the room for Phillipa. Spotting her perched on the edge of a barstool, he hurried over to her.

Her smile, when she saw him, was weary, grateful and uncertain. Greeting her with a slightly rueful smile of his own, he withdrew a vial of crystalline red fluid from his pocket and pressed it into her hands. "You're sure you're all right?" he asked, aware that their lovemaking had left her more than a little sore. As an immortal, she would eventually heal on her own, but wounds inflicted by the fangs of an older vampire could take a day or two to disappear. And when the marks were in a lady's more tender area . . . Well, Germaine was never one to let a lady suffer too long.

Phillipa gazed longingly at the fluid for a second, then slipped the vial into her pocket. "I'm fine," she murmured softly, "but I appreciate the gift."

"Apply it liberally," he instructed, giving her a quick kiss on the cheek. Intent upon leaving, he headed for the door, but stopped when he saw Phillip approaching him.

"No hard feelings," Phillip assured him with stoic goodwill, his hand outstretched in fellowship trembled slightly. When Germaine accepted it, Phillip added, "She's always loved you. I'm sure you'll be very happy together."

Germaine promptly drew his distraught friend aside. "You should know me better than that. You made her, she's yours. I'll admit I wasn't thinking too clearly earlier this morning, even still, I would never come between you."

Phillip nodded, but his eyes reflected his inner doubts as they shifted back to Phillipa. Understanding his friend's torment, Germaine gave Phillip's arm an encouraging press.

"I suspect your wife could use a little of your special comforting right now. Go to her, Phillip. I think you'll be pleasantly surprised."

Although his expression remained skeptical, Phillip took a deep breath and drew his shoulders back. With his courage bolstered by Germaine's urging, he crossed the room and stood before his wife. Phillipa kept her head bowed while he spoke. When she finally looked up, she showed him the vial Germaine had given her.

Phillip's expression changed from inquiry to concern, and he bent closer to question her. When she answered him, he pocketed the vial and reached for her hand. She eased herself off the stool with care, but followed him without hesitation.

Confident his former lady would live up to her promise, and be pampered beyond spoiling for her pains, Germaine slipped out the back and into the elegant, black limousine William Hailey had sent for him.

Alone, Germaine relaxed against the creamy leather seat and closed his eyes in deep thought. It wasn't the first time he'd mated with a vampire, but it was the first and only

time he'd been with Phillipa since she'd taken Phillip into her bed. And he wasn't proud of his lapse in judgment. Despite the fact that vampires often coupled together, he'd always viewed it as a kind of inbreeding that was not altogether healthy.

The Nacht Kinder required the blood of mortals to survive. Left solely to themselves, they lost a great deal of their mobility and vigor. Their pale skin hardened to a marble-like consistency and their muscles grew rigid until they became little more than breathing statues. With their immune system weakened by the lack of fresh blood, vampires became extremely susceptible to sunlight--often needing to go underground for a hundred years, or so, to replenish themselves.

Not a pleasant prospect to consider, which was another reason why fidelity was considered an almost impossible concept among members of their kind. In theory, a vampire could exist solely upon the blood packaged in bags, but such an existence could be compared to a mortal woman consummating her marriage with a vibrator. The physical result might be the same, but a great deal was lacking in the achievement of it.

Germaine knew he was different from others of his kind. Most simply took the blood they needed--often without the mortal's knowledge. For Germaine, such an exchange was not satisfying and empty. He needed the love of a woman to feel whole, and the freely given gift of her blood to feel truly alive. Such a dichotomy was the bane of immortality for him. It also accounted for some rather unique relationships, like his and Phillipa's.

The problem, as he saw it, was that he was essentially a monogamist. When Germaine took a woman to bed, he remained faithful to her for as long as she lived. And for the short time he allowed himself to be with his mortal mistress, Germaine expected the same commitment from her in return. Only for Phillipa, such a relationship had been impossible when she was mortal and remained so today. That she loved him, he had no doubt. Even so, she was no more capable of being faithful than the wind could be channeled to blow in only one direction.

Germaine adored her, but she was not the sort of woman most men would seek in a permanent relationship. A search he had never allowed himself to make. For him a permanent relationship was impossible, and another temporary relationship was out of the question. The inevitable loss was just too painful in a temporary relationship, and he absolutely refused to condemn a living, breathing mortal to an eternity of being undead.

* * *

Germaine had barely stepped through the stage door entrance when William Hailey signaled him. "You need to see Claire right away," the worried director advised. "She's been asking for you, and Joan Cambry, her dresser, tells me she's grown quite agitated in the past hour."

"I'm on my way," Germaine promised. "Did you get my message?"

Hailey nodded. "But I still think we're making a mistake with Claire."

Germaine clapped his hand on the fretting director's shoulder. "She'll be fine, Bill. She wants to do this."

"Yeah, well, I'm still having the house physician stay backstage. I don't like taking chances."

"So I've noticed. What about the dedication?"

"I called in a favor with the printer. An announcement of the dedication will be inserted into tonight's Playbill. You intending to give some sort of a tribute before the performance?"

Germaine considered it. Due to his restrictive lifestyle, he preferred to avoid public notice, taking very few people into his confidence. Even William Hailey believed he was merely an eccentric, wealthy man who preferred to work only at night, eat in absolute privacy, and drink from his own private stock. Being in a spotlight presented more than a few difficulties, and yet . . . "I suffer from a rare condition that makes me sensitive to bright lights," he admitted after a moment. "I would need to see someone in makeup first."

"No problem," Hailey assured him. "The condition isn't as rare as you might think. As a matter of fact, I've been told Nigel suffers from something very similar. He has a makeup artist specially trained to deal with the problem. Why don't you visit with Claire while I arrange things with Nigel's assistant?"

Germaine raised his eyebrows in pretended surprise and murmured his thanks, then knocked lightly on Claire's door. Without waiting for a response, he entered and was surprised in truth when the apron clad woman standing at Claire's side cast a hostile, almost malevolent glare in his direction. He presumed she was Joan Cambry. No doubt the grief he had caused Claire with his tardiness had damned him in the woman's eyes.

Germaine offered the woman his most winning smile. "Would you mind leaving us?" he asked, unsure whether he should feign indignation or laugh at her naiveté when the dresser abruptly crossed herself. She was a scrawny thing, weighing less than a hundred pounds, with raven black hair and bright green eyes that glared at him with blatant mistrust. Though he credited her intelligence for fearing him--she was hardly his type.

"I would like a moment to speak with Ms. Daniels alone, after which you may resume your duties," he assured the woman, certain she imagined him there for some dark, malignant purpose. Working in a play about the Vampire King tended to get everyone's imagination going at full whirl.

"Go on, Joan," Claire requested quietly. "I'll be fine."

Granting him a wide berth, Joan left. Germaine took a long look at Claire and frowned. Her eyes were puffy, her nose was red, and whatever makeup had been applied was already hopelessly smeared.

She gazed at him, her expression wary and accusing. "I'm surprised you bothered coming backstage at all," she informed him, reaching for a tissue.

"I told you I'd be here."

She blew her nose. "I can't do it. I thought I could, but now...."

"I understand, " he assured her gently. "Shall I have Bill speak to your understudy?"

Shaking her head, Claire muttered, "I hope she was worth it."

"Who? Your mother?" he asked, having no idea whom else she might be so upset over.

"No! Whoever you were with that smells like a bargain-basement perfumery. I gather she's the reason you're late." Claire reached for another tissue.

Though Germaine inwardly cursed himself, and Phillipa, for extravagances that even soap and water didn't dilute, he remained outwardly composed as he wished like hell that either Hailey or Phillip had noticed the perfume and warned him. Hurting Claire was the last thing he wanted to do--today, especially. She'd asked him to be there, to help her through this difficult time, and barely fifteen minutes before she had to go on stage to give the performance of her life--an opening night performance in honor of her mother--he'd sauntered in smelling like a whorehouse Johnny on dollar day.

Claire felt he had let her down, and he had, in a way, but an even greater danger lay in allowing her to believe anything more could be between them. It was that sobering realization that kept him from pulling her into his arms and comforting her.

Instead, he scrutinized the organized disarray cluttering her dressing table and gathered up a few items. A small paper cup, a pin, a jar of cold cream, Witch Hazel, and a tube of gelled rouge. Taking his selections over to a darkened corner of the room, he mixed the items with one small substitution. That done, he approached her with the small cup of reddish astringent.

Her eyes met his in the mirror and she gasped. Germaine cursed again, this time for not taking the proper precautions. Lighted mirrors, like spotlights, did not reflect him at his best. He required a daily infusion of blood from a living mortal to look fully human. And unless he ingested two ounces of blood or applied a lesser amount externally to his face, his appearance changed under bright lighting. Daylight was especially unkind, lending him a cadaverous aspect with sunken cheeks, a ghostly pale complexion and iridescent eyes. Even with the blood, his eyes could glow unnaturally without the special contacts he wore to darken them. He'd made a mistake, but how he remedied it would depend on Claire.

"Turn away from the mirror and look at me, Claire," he directed, his tone a silken command.

She obeyed him, but the fear in her eyes told him she did so with grave reluctance.

He knelt before her. Dipping one finger into the small cup, he smoothed the pink

emollient over her reddened nose and cheeks. Then instructing her to close her eyes, he treated the swollen flesh surrounding them. She remained compliant, but tense, beneath his fingertips.

“This is an old family recipe that I've been told works miracles on tear-swollen eyes and wrinkles,” he informed her conversationally.

“I gather the women in your family have barrels of it stored in their cellars,” she murmured, her eyes still closed.

Germaine held back his smile. “I suppose they must at that,” he responded with a hint of admiration. Marguerite's daughter did not lack for backbone. Other than ordering her to face him, he'd refrained from influencing her. Most women would be so terrified by his reflection, they would be screaming loud enough to wake the dead as they scrambled to get away from him. Claire was clearly unsettled, but on some deeper level she trusted him. It was that trust that frightened him most. He didn't want to do anything to jeopardize it, yet he knew if he continued to see her he would do exactly that.

“The men in my family weren't known for their fidelity,” he continued, the lie sliding smoothly over his tongue, but lying heavily on his conscience. “As a result, the women in their lives were often unhappy.”

Her eyes opened then. “Is that a warning, or a confession, St. Justine?”

“Perhaps a little of both. I apologize for the perfume. It wasn't intentional. As to the rest--” A brief knock halted the remainder of his explanation. William Hailey stuck his head in.

“All's ready when you are, St. Justine,” he announced, turning a relieved smile on Claire. “You're looking much better. How are you feeling?”

“Better,” she conceded reluctantly, her gaze still fixed on Germaine.

“Good. We only have five minutes,” Hailey cautioned, quietly closing the door again.

Germaine rose to his feet. “I'd best be going. I have a feeling the lady who's been assigned to make me up so I look halfway human under the spotlights is going to need all the time she can get. As you probably noticed, I do not look my best under bright lighting.”

A small wrinkle appeared above Claire's nose. “You look fine now, it was the....”

She started to turn around so she could see him in the mirror, but he grabbed her arms.

“Don't,” he ordered quietly. He could remove the image of his reflection from her memory, if it became necessary, but the notion of manipulating her thoughts in that way held little appeal. “Mirrors tend to be more unkind to me than even bright lights. Lighted mirrors, especially,” he admitted. “It's my skin. It's so pale that my reflection appears almost translucent. That and my eyes, which react to intense illumination so strongly

that they appear to glow from within. Just a couple of the afflictions in a long line of trials visited upon members in my family.”

Claire looked unconvinced, but accepting. “I still don't understand. Why are you going into makeup now?”

“I'm announcing the dedication for tonight's performance. It's one of the reasons I was so late,” he lied, hoping to spare her feelings just a little.

“I see.” Claire stared down at her folded hands. “I'm sorry about what I said earlier. I have no right to criticize your life style. It's just that--”

The rest of her thought remained unvoiced when Harry Collins barged into the room followed by an agitated Joan.

“That's him!” the woman accused, her finger pointing directly at Germaine. Feeling as if he'd been supernaturally catapulted back in time to the French Revolution, Germaine gave an involuntary shudder and faced his accusers.

“How is it you constantly show up where you're not wanted, St. Justine?” Harry asked.

“Actually, I was just leaving.” His expression impassive, Germaine gave a slight bow to Joan, who shrank away from him. Some mortals had an innate sense when it came to the supernatural, and Germaine suspected Joan was not a non-believer. Perhaps it was perversity alone that made him reach for her hand and press his lips to it. He could feel her revulsion course through her as he murmured, “I regret we didn't have more time together to get acquainted, Miss Cambry. Perhaps another day.”

Joan snatched her hand back in horror. Repressing a satisfied grin, Germaine swept out the door and down the hall to Nigel Watkins' dressing room.

* * *

Back in his box, Germaine watched Claire's performance with a discerning if not entirely objective eye. She appeared preoccupied--distracted, prompting him to wonder what the sanctimonious, scrawny little gossip had said to further distress her after he'd left.

Germaine knew better than to play games with someone like Joan, a self-appointed savior, rescuing mankind from an insidious evil that used the promise of immortality to bait and ensnare innocent souls. In truth, her mission was as well-justified as her suspicions, but he liked to think of himself as one of the “good guys,” and it was lowering to have someone regard him as if he possessed cloven hooves and pointed horns.

He hadn't asked to become the creature he was. If anything, he went out of his way to preserve the frail lives of those who fell under his care. People like Joan, who accused without cause, were one of the reasons he was so adamant against making more of his kind. And one of the many reasons he forbade all those who followed him that privilege

as well.

Such mandates, however, tested even the strongest resolve. The desire to take an initiate that one step further, that one step beyond, was almost overwhelming at times. But nothing could induce Germaine to willingly create another of his kind--a blood-tainted aberration that feasted on the living. Except vampires weren't the only creatures known to thirst for blood. Man and beast alike could be overcome by a lust that greedily devoured all nobility, honor and compassion. And Germaine had first hand experience of the horrors incurred when angry, resentful mortals began seeking victims and making accusations.

Accusations which resulted in his own family's execution.

Power, wealth and influence held little sway over a bloodthirsty mob, as the formerly elite members of the French aristocracy quickly learned. Stripped of their titles and luxuries, they begged and bargained for their lives, and those of their loved ones--just as he had. His family was innocent of the charges brought against them, many others were not. But innocence or guilt played no part in the madness and terror that reigned over France back then. Fingers were pointed until even those who'd believed themselves invulnerable were hunted down in daylight like rabid dogs, then dragged to their trials in chains the sun would not permit them to break.

La Guillotine cared not whether the blood that flowed from her bite was tainted or fresh, and mortals sought only revenge. So, as the numbers put to the block mounted, more than a few of those selected to die--were already dead.

Forcing his attention back to the play, Germaine observed a subtle change in Claire's performance. Marcus, stiff at his side, had apparently noticed it as well.

The closing of Act I had always been one of Germaine's favorite scenes, and the simplest in special effects. Other than Dracula's sudden appearance out of the fog swirling through Lucy's bedroom windows, which appear to unlatch and open on their own, the scene was played straight--its intensity resting solely upon the actors' portrayals.

Last night, the mood had been one of sensuality and magnetism overcoming fear, but tonight Lucy's efforts to avoid Dracula's kiss possessed an almost frantic quality. Germaine could see his leading actor struggling to hold the scene together. Keeping in character, Nicholas Ventura gamely improvised lines of dialogue intended to soothe and beguile, as if Lucy's resistance was expected. However, Claire wasn't cooperating, and Nick was rapidly losing patience with her.

Left with little choice, the actor did what he had to in order to finish the scene. Forcing both of Claire's hands behind her, Nick held them captive in one hand while the other gripped her chin.

"I do not wish to force you, Lucy," he murmured regretfully, "but you leave me no

choice. Once we are joined, as we were meant to be, you'll regret my having waited so long to claim you." Then he lowered his mouth to her neck.

Claire's scream of protest was chilling as she stood helpless within Nick's well-staged vampiric embrace. When he drew back from her, she shook her head in denial, and in a horrified whisper announced, "It's true. It's all true!" then, right on cue, she slumped unconscious into her worried co-star's arms. Only this time she wasn't acting.

Germaine was out of his chair before the Act I curtain started to fall, but Marcus's hand on his sleeve momentarily held him back.

"She knows," Marcus warned gravely.

"No, she merely suspects, and I mean to disabuse her of those suspicions tonight."

"Looked frighteningly real to me," Freddie admitted to Germaine's back. "That Dracula chap isn't one of ours, is he?"

"No," Germaine answered, parting the curtains to his box, "Van Helsing is."

* * *

Germaine got on stage with very little difficulty considering the chaos that pervaded the normally well-ordered area. The entire cast and crew stood in a circle around Claire, who groggily resisted the ammonia the stage physician held pressed beneath her nose.

Easing his way through the throng, Germaine had an unobstructed view of Claire when she came to with a gasp. She recognized the doctor, but frantically looked about her. Perceiving she looked for him, he knelt at her side and folded his fingers around her hand.

"I'm here, Claire," he murmured, half-wondering if she would scream and pull away.

Her eyes searched his, looking for answers to questions he prayed she had enough sense not to voice aloud in public.

"It's true, isn't it?" she asked, her voice tight. "This isn't just a horror fantasy, it's someone's life story!"

William Hailey cleared his throat. "Perhaps Ms. Daniels' understudy should finish tonight's performance. I'm certain the audience would understand--under the circumstances." He said the last under his breath as if Claire were suddenly incapable of rational thought or speech.

"No! I just need to rest for a moment." Claire protested, gripping Germaine's fingers.

"Help me to my dressing room. Please."

Germaine lifted Claire into his arms without a moment's hesitation, but he motioned for the doctor to follow them. John Percy, doing what Stage Managers do best, began clearing the stage by ordering everyone to their proper places.

Claire's fingers tightened on Germaine's neck. "Mother wasn't hallucinating, was she?"

You are André, and you were her lover nearly twenty-three years ago.”

“You know that's impossible, Claire,” he murmured with gentle insistence as he glanced back at the doctor. Judging him young enough to still be working his way through medical school, Germaine wasn't surprised by the worried look he received in return. Claire wasn't gaining any points for mental stability with her irrational accusations, and though Germaine was tempted to tell her the truth, such honesty would hardly prove helpful or prudent in her present state. He could simply impose his will on her mind and alter her thoughts. The only problem with that, other than his personal aversion to using such tactics, was that he couldn't successfully condition the minds and thoughts of all the cast and crew members who had overheard Claire's declaration. Even if he could manage a mass mind-alteration, the rumors would continue to surface as long as people gossiped. That made his best defense a logical argument against superstitious beliefs. He didn't need to prove he wasn't André St. Justine, he just needed to plant a seed of reasonable doubt. If logic and persuasion failed, then he'd have to let the physician administer to her like the grief-stricken woman grasping at imaginary straws she appeared to be.

“You're merely overwrought,” he said firmly, hoping she would heed his admonition and let the matter drop. Only Germaine discovered the true meaning of “overwrought” when he opened Claire's dressing room door and suffered the indignity of having a cross thrust directly into his face.

“Get back, you spawn of the devil!” Joan hissed.

Though the insinuation would enrage most any other gentleman in his position, Germaine merely smiled. Joan Cambry reacted with a low cry, as if he had struck her. Realizing the gravity of her error, she fled from the room--her complexion more ghostly than his own reflection.

Fearing an untimely arrival from Mr. Collins, Germaine instructed Joe, the backstage guard, to let no one else into Claire's dressing room. Then urging the doctor to promptly see to the door, he carried Claire over to her couch.

She kept her hands firmly about his neck. Her expression warned him she had no intention of letting him leave without a full admission. “I know Joan told me the truth, St. Justine. At least you could do the same.”

He tightened his arms about her and sat down. “You're asking me to give credence to that madwoman's tale of evil, and I can't do it.” He glanced over at the doctor, and silently damned the man for not being at least thirty years older. Tamping down an irrational surge of jealous possessiveness, he inquired, “Are you a real M.D., or just another theatrical prop?”

“I'm a graduate of Belgrade Medical School,” the young physician replied huffily.

“Then you'll have to do, I guess. I'd like you to view Ms. Daniels as a patient and

prescribe accordingly.”

“I’m not imagining things, St. Justine. I saw your face in the mirror,” Claire reminded him, clearly unwilling to accept any pat explanations this time.

“I’ve seen yours that way as well. What’s your point?”

She glanced nervously at the doctor. “Tell him to go, and I’ll make my point.”

“He stays. And if you continue to press the issue, I’m going to suggest he tranquilize you,” Germaine warned her more pointedly.

At the doctor’s troubled expression, Claire started to sit up, but Germaine held her back.

“Don’t do it, Claire,” he cautioned.

“I thought Mother was losing her mind,” she explained rapidly. “I thought she had confused you with your father. I thought this play was just a fantasy, but then Joan told me she had proof vampires really existed.” Germaine glanced at the doctor to see how he was taking this disclosure--Claire was rapidly losing her young admirer to skepticism.

Claire’s eyes remained fixed on Germaine. “I know what you are,” she informed him in a low voice.

Seeing the doctor’s brow wrinkle with increased concern, Germaine gave the order he’d hoped wouldn’t be necessary. “Go ahead and sedate her. I’ll take full responsibility for any legal repercussions.”

The doctor reluctantly reached into his bag.

“At least hear me out,” Claire demanded, but Germaine turned her so that her weight rested fully on her left hip. “It’s true!” she insisted, struggling, and Germaine tightened his hold. His inner conscience rebelled at what he was doing, only Claire had given him no choice. If the risk had been only to him, he might have chanced it, but other lives were involved.

“You can drug me until I’m senseless, but you can’t hide the facts forever.” The moment the doctor lifted her gown, she tried to kick him, but Germaine was quicker. Grabbing her knees, he held her legs immobile. “No, please,” she begged, “I’ll be quiet, only don’t--” She let out a small cry of pain and frustration.

“I’ll never forgive you for this, St. Justine,” she vowed, both angry and embarrassed.

“Yes, you will,” Germaine assured, his hand gently massaging the injured area.

“No, I won’t. Because of you, I won’t be finishing the performance dedicated to my mother.”

Germaine looked at the doctor. “I assume you gave her the usual dose of ten milligrams of Chlordiazepam--prepackaged?”

“Of course,” the doctor replied, clearly affronted by Germaine's question which was meant solely for clarification, not insult.

“Good,” Germaine concurred with approval as he turned back to Claire. “You may feel a little woozy for the next twenty minutes, or so, but I doubt the audience will notice any difference.”

Gasping in affront, Claire freed a hand from his relaxed grip and slapped him.

Germaine caught her wrist, but held it lightly to keep from hurting her. “I meant,” he explained through tightly set lips, “that since Lucy wavers in and out of consciousness for the next twenty minutes while Dracula persists in his nightly visitations, any lightheadedness you experience will not be noticeable to the audience.”

“Oh,” she murmured with a tinge of regret. This time when Claire struggled to sit up, Germaine did not stop her. “Perhaps you're right. Perhaps I am a bit 'overwrought' after all.” Her hand trembled as she covered her eyes, then she slumped wearily against his chest. “I'd like you to go,” she directed, oblivious to her contradictory position on his lap. “And send Joan back in, please.”

Germaine motioned for the doctor to leave before he protectively encircled Claire with his arms. “I'm not certain that woman should be around you just now.”

She glared at him. “We are mid-performance of our New York debut, Mr. St. Justine. Now is not the time to be breaking in new assistants.”

Forced to agree, Germaine rose and put Claire back on the couch. “Very well, but her contract with this show ends tonight,” he informed her. “Tomorrow, you get a new dresser.”

“Why? Are you afraid I might find out the truth?”

“The truth? No,” he answered honestly. “I'm afraid you'll mistake superstition for fact. Joan Cambry believes in creatures of the night. But the evil she speaks of exists solely in humans, Claire, not monsters.” Having made his point, Germaine quietly took his leave.

CHAPTER SIX

Despite his inner conflict over Claire, Germaine thought he'd navigated everyone through the impending disaster exceedingly well. Claire not only finished the play, but the audience greeted her, Nick and Nigel with a standing ovation. And no one, other than Joan, the vampire stalker, was the least bit suspicious, even after Claire's public declarations.

What Germaine didn't foresee was Claire's refusal to see him afterwards. Though William Hailey relayed her message with deep regret, he remained supportive of his leading lady's request. Germaine accepted Claire's edict with a tight nod, then informed Hailey he wanted Joan Cambry out of there tonight and a new dresser assigned to Claire tomorrow. Hailey swallowed and turned an uneasy shade of green, but Germaine had absolute confidence his directive would be obeyed.

Although he was obliged to attend the requisite opening night party, held at Sorentos instead of the more famous and infinitely more crowded Sardis, Germaine opted to forgo his charade of drinking while he awaited the reviews. Considering all the time, money, and careers that went into creating a show, it was a little maddening to admit that a single negative review from the Times could close it--in weeks, if not days. Still, Germaine wasn't worried. The musical still played to SRO audiences in London after nearly a year, and he expected New York to welcome it with the same enthusiasm.

They had a guaranteed box office draw with the rakishly debonair and talented Nicholas Ventura starring as Dracula, and veteran actor Nigel Watkins, whom the press had recently compared to the late, great Olivier, as Van Helsing. Claire was the only lead without a proven track record. But her clear soprano voice, innocent face, and angelic figure made her an ideal casting choice for Lucy. Germaine had fought for her then, just as he had defended her against Hailey's objections tonight, and now she refused to see him. He hadn't expected her to be grateful, necessarily, but . . .

He spotted her entering Sorentos at the same time twenty other gentlemen took notice of her as well. A man would have to be blind and dead not to pay visual homage to the lady in a sparkling creation of sequined turquoise satin. A vision that brought nineteenth century chanteuses to mind. Even her soft, gold-red hair was swept up into the Gibson girl style.

She smiled gratefully at the standing ovation she received, but continued to cling to Harry's arm. Germaine didn't think that would bother him either, but it did. However, when he saw Harry hand Claire her third glass of champagne, Germaine grew livid. If the woman didn't have enough sense to realize she wasn't supposed to consume alcohol with the drug she'd been given, then the gentleman with her should at least take heed of the warning signs.

He started over to have a word with Harry Collins when Harry abruptly made his excuses and headed straight toward him instead.

Gesturing imperiously for Germaine to follow him, Harry strode toward an empty corner and turned on his heel. He stood with his back to the wall and his arms crossed before him in a stance that was part belligerent and part defensive--his eyes daring Germaine to disregard him.

Germaine slid his hands into his pockets. With a single flick of his wrist he could send his puny mortal challenger flying across the room and out the bank of windows looking down on the Avenue of Americas. Smiling inwardly at the notion, he strolled over to where Harry waited.

"I don't like you, St. Justine," Harry said without preamble, "but for Clarissa's sake I think you'd best talk to her--tonight."

"Why?" Germaine asked, instinctively wary of the other man's motives.

Harry's belligerence softened as his expression grew more uncertain. "Truthfully? I think Marguerite's death has affected her more than even Dr. Willis realizes. She's making accusations that are so absurd I'm concerned for her sanity. She rejects any attempts at reasonable discourse, and she refuses to see a doctor. Frankly, I'm at a loss." His normally rosy cheeks flushing ruby, Harry admitted a little self-consciously, "She's even accused you of being a vampire."

"Really."

Avoiding Germaine's gaze, Harry tugged at the sleeves of his Armani tuxedo. "I no longer know how to talk to her. If I even suggest she's mistaken, she practically bites my head off. Since you and Marguerite were close, I thought you could get through to her--convince her to see reason. If not that, then maybe a doctor. Something. I never imagined she could be so--emotional."

"Grief often has that effect on people."

"Exactly," Harry concurred, his relief over Germaine's statement as obvious as it was misplaced. "Then you'll talk to her?"

Germaine agreed, but it wasn't the idea of talking to Ms. Daniels that appealed to him. It was the prospect of ousting from her lovely head the corruptive notion that vampires really existed. Something he should have done days ago. Bolstering his resolve with a stockpile of rationalizations, Germaine clamped his teeth together and strode across the room to Claire. Offering a curt nod to the group of well-wishers surrounding her, he placed one hand at her trim waist while he deftly plucked the champagne flute from her unsteady fingers with the other.

Gasping in outrage, she tried to twist free of his grasp to retrieve her drink, but he held her firm. "I wasn't done with that," she hissed in protest.

"Yes, you were." He gave a slight bow to her admirers. "Forgive me, but I have some important matters to discuss with my leading lady." His arm still firmly in place, Germaine escorted a furious, red-faced Claire over to the buffet table where he handed

her glass to a nearby waiter, then lightly squeezed her waist in warning when she attempted to snatch it back.

When she dug her nails into his hand, he loosened his grasp and she slipped free. "I have no intention of discussing anything with you--ever again," she informed him in a low growl.

"Good. I didn't feel like talking anyway." He thrust a plate into her hands. "You may pick what you like, but fill your plate. And if you try to walk away again, I'll really embarrass you."

His last comment stopped her where she stood. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because one of us needs to show an ounce of good sense, and it clearly isn't going to be you." He bent slightly toward her. "Now, either you eat on your own, or I feed you."

Whirling back to the table, she glared at the artistically arranged medley of raw vegetables and tossed a few radish florets, two carrot roses and three stuffed mushrooms onto her plate. "Satisfied?"

Germaine didn't answer her, but reclaimed the plate from her hands. Grimly setting his teeth against the unavoidable nausea the sight and aroma of cooked meat aroused in those of his kind, he began adding slices of rare sirloin and filet mignon to her selections.

"First you take away my drink. Then you order me to eat, and now you take my plate away." When he continued to ignore her, she asked, "Don't I even get to choose my own dinner?"

"Not tonight."

"Why not?"

"Because, my sweet simpleton, combining alcohol and Chlordiazepam is like playing blind man's bluff on a high wire. Except your odds of falling flat on your face are even greater. And it will take more than a few nibbles of rabbit fodder to slow your stomach's absorption rate."

"Oh." Certain her chagrin was only momentary, he could almost hear the tiny wheels whirring away in her mind when her lips curved into a suspiciously compliant grin.

"Very well, you choose for me, then. And while you're at it, select some choice pieces for yourself. I wouldn't want you to grow hungry watching me stuff my face."

Her tactics did not fool him, and he let her know it. "Vampires don't eat, remember?"

Her eyes wide, she took a step back. "You're admitting it's true--that you are a vampire?"

Her fear surprised him, but didn't detour him from his purpose. "Of course." He gestured to include the room. "Everyone here is. Didn't they tell you? It's a prerequisite for being in the play."

Her chin promptly raised another three notches. "If you think a little sarcasm can divert me, St. Justine, think again. Joan taught me how to flush a vampire out of his coffin."

"Ah, yes, Joan . . . " He returned his attention to the buffet.

"She appeared to know what she was talking about, and you didn't have to go behind my back and get her fired. I would have told her."

"When?" Pressing the filled plate back into her hands, he guided her over to a small padded bench. "Sometime in the next millennium?"

Instead of verbally ripping into him, as he'd expected, Claire sat and began nibbling absently at his selections. "I think she made you nervous because she discovered what you really are."

Not nervous, he corrected silently. Irritated. And he was growing more irritated by the minute. "Then it's wise of you to be wary," he warned, leaning over to whisper intimately in her ear, "I could just be fattening you up for my next meal."

She drew back with a scowl, then her eyebrows rose in an open challenge. "Go ahead and make fun, but I think Joan Cambry's got you running scared."

He responded with a disparaging sound of disagreement. "Oh, please. Fear and terror come in many forms, Claire, but that scrawny, evil-minded woman isn't one of them."

"She threatened to expose you!"

"Then she would have been finished as a professional dresser in this city," he replied, his retort laden with quiet menace.

Claire held a hand to her throat as she struggled to swallow. Unsure whether she was having difficulty downing his words or the food, he moved to fetch her a glass of water when she asked in a strained voice, "Because of what you'd do to her?"

"No," he answered, tired of defending himself and frustrated because Claire refused to be reasonable. "Because of what she'd be doing to herself. She'd be the laughing stock of her union."

"Would she? I believe her, and I'm not laughing."

"Really?" He sat beside her. "Think about what you're saying, Claire. If I were truly what you accuse me of being, I wouldn't need to fire Joan. I'd just use my powers to ensure she no longer presented a threat to me. Then I'd use those same powers on you."

He watched a myriad of emotions cross her face. For a moment he believed he might have convinced her, then her eyes lifted to his in a silent dare. "All right. Prove to me you aren't everything Joan says you are."

Germaine wanted to shake her. "You can't prove a negative, Claire. Besides, why should I make claims to prove I'm not something, when you have no proof that I am?"

She picked up a stuffed mushroom and held it to his lips. "You could prove me wrong

simply by eating this.”

He could, but the price he'd have to pay when his system eventually rejected the offering caused him to discard the notion, as tempting as it might be to finally win this battle. Perhaps if he truly believed he could dissuade Claire so easily, he'd do it and suffer through the hours of convulsive cramps while his vampiric anatomy ridded itself of the offensive substance. But he feared the young woman confronting him would not abandon her quest until she was confident she'd gotten to the truth. And there were other, less painful ways he could change her mind if she would only be sensible.

Glancing again at the curved fungus cap filled with deviled sea scavenger, he toyed with the notion of planting the idea that he'd actually eaten the damn thing by passing it before his mouth then pocketing it. Disgusted with himself, he rejected the deception even more quickly than he'd rejected the reality as he gently pushed her plate back. “I'm allergic to mushrooms,” he replied quietly.

Her knowing smile grew smug. “I suppose you have either an allergy, an aversion, or a strong dislike for every item that's on this plate.”

“Not necessarily.” When she lifted her plate up for him to make his choice, he said, “It could be I'm just not hungry. I ate before I came.”

Claire returned the plate to her lap. “Joan told me she's known of vampires who drink an occasional glass of wine. Do you?”

Praying for patience, he slowly shook his head. “Sorry. Spirits aren't one of my vices.”

“What about sex?” When he arched a sharply defined eyebrow in question, she added, “Joan said the blood lust removes all desire for vampires to have sex. Do you make love, Mr. St. Justine?”

“Is that a proposition, Ms. Daniels?” he asked, vying to end that particular topic right then.

Avoiding his eyes, Claire toyed with a slice of rare sirloin on her plate. “Perhaps.”

Germaine clamped his lips together and wished that he could drink wine, milk, or anything except what he deeply longed for right then. “Extending invitations you have no intention of honoring, can be a very risky practice.”

“Mother loved you,” she answered simply.

“No. She loved André St. Justine, twenty-three years ago.”

“That's what I thought, only she kept insisting it was you she loved. That you were André. At first I thought the cancer had gone to her brain, but she was so lucid about everything else that her mental dysfunction seemed to center solely around you. You didn't kiss her like a son, Germaine.”

He shifted uneasily in his seat, but didn't contradict her, so she went on.

“It wasn't just that, other things made me suspicious. Those rumors about how you only work at night, you never eat in public and that you'll only drink wine that you've brought from your own cellars. Wine, Germaine.”

His patience dangling by a gossamer thread, Germaine fought a nearly overwhelming urge to use his powers in a way that would end this discussion permanently. “I'm eccentric,” he said tightly. “That doesn't mean I go around biting people's necks.”

“I saw you in the mirror,” she insisted in a low voice. “When I told Joan that you couldn't be a vampire since I saw your reflection, she informed me that only soulless vampires couldn't be seen. Those who still had their souls did cast a reflection, but unless they'd recently fed they looked like wraiths. Neither skeleton nor ghost, but somewhere between, with the unearthly glow of brimstone in their eyes.” Setting her plate aside, Claire grabbed her purse and began rummaging inside it. “That's exactly what I saw,” she informed him, persisting in her search.

Believing she sought a tissue, Germaine reached for his handkerchief only to have her unsheathe and brandish a round, compact mirror in his face. She held it so that she could see him, and he could see her, but neither could see his nor her own reflection.

Her eyes widened in surprise. “I don't get it. Earlier you looked as if you'd been dead for a hundred years or more, yet now....” When she dropped the compact Germaine caught it.

Grateful for both the muted lighting and Nigel's assistant's generosity, he returned the small mirror to Claire. “It's seven years' bad luck if you drop one of these, you know?”

Her hand shaking, Claire shoved the reflective disk back into her purse. “I know what I saw. At least I think I do.” She gripped her small handbag and rose unsteadily to her feet. “You're right. I don't think I'm feeling very well after all. I'd best go home.”

For once, Germaine agreed with her. The sooner they were apart, the sooner he could reclaim his previous life. A life free of all the temptations and longings he was finding more difficult to resist. Yet even as he yearned to be free of her snare, Germaine couldn't take his eyes off her. He stood, silently absorbing her like a plant basking in the rays of the sun. She was light to his darkness. A fragrant sunny morning to his dank and dreary evening. A brightness that threatened to expose him, just as he threatened to extinguish her. Even still, it took all his willpower to remain where he was and let her walk away. Then her knees unexpectedly gave way. Moving faster than a human ever could, Germaine was at her side with a supporting hand at her elbow.

“Are you all right?” he asked more curtly than he intended. She nodded, but Germaine heard the small catches in her breathing and felt something give inside him. “I hope you won't accuse me of pursuing an ulterior motive,” he said quietly, “but I'm going to insist upon seeing you home.” When she didn't answer him, he reluctantly added, “If you'd prefer Harry to escort you, I'll get him, only--”

“No. I'm not too pleased with either of you tonight, but I'm definitely not up to facing another of Harry's lectures right now.”

“Easier to entertain the devil than suffer the preacher, eh?”

Her smile remained strained, but she made no sound when he offered their apologies to William and promised to call later about the reviews. Indeed, she remained silent and agreeable to everything he suggested until the cab turned onto Eighth Avenue.

They were sitting side-by-side, without touching, when she said, “I was convinced I had everything figured out. I even told Harry, but he accused me of having delusions, saying I wanted Mother alive so badly that I'd become irrational. But I was so sure. I thought I even had proof, except....”

She looked at him, her eyes wide and uncertain. “She wanted me to have an affair with you, you know?” When he started to respond, Claire held up her hand. “No, let me finish. I may never have the courage to admit these things to you again, and I think they need to be said.

“She insisted that with you I would learn the true meaning of love lasting through the centuries. I tried to correct her. I told her you were André's son, not André, but she just continued comparing you to Harry. I assumed her mind was wandering and she was confused, but when I was cleaning out her things earlier today, I came across a picture of her and André dancing together. I don't think I need to tell you that the man in that picture bore an uncanny resemblance to you. I thought the similarity was merely a coincidence, until tonight. That's when I realized Mother was quoting two of Dracula's lines from the play when she said, 'He alone can offer you love forever. Love that will endure long after everyone you know has turned to dust.' How could she know those lines when she never saw your version of the play? And why would she say such things about you in the same breath she insisted you were André, if it wasn't true?”

Although his insides twisted with pangs from a guilty conscience, Germaine answered her with a light shrug. “I don't know, Claire. I only know that the idea of a musical version of Dracula had fascinated your mother for years, possibly because the notion of eternal life appealed to her romantically. Maybe she focused on me because I reminded her of my father.”

Releasing an exhausted sigh, Claire pressed back against the seat of the cab. “Then again, maybe you just don't want me to know the truth.”

* * *

When the cab stopped in front of Claire's apartment house, Germaine was torn. He suspected Claire was on the verge of a nervous collapse, but he also knew it wouldn't do either of them any good for him to admit the truth to her. Marguerite was wrong. He wasn't the embodiment of eternal love. He was the embodiment of eternal death.

Germaine paid the driver, then escorted Claire to her apartment. Wishing her a good

night, he turned to leave when she called out to him.

“Do you think you could come in for few minutes? Please? I know I have no right to ask you after all I've said, but you're the only one who understands what I'm feeling right now. Whatever your relationship, I realize that you cared very deeply for my mother, too, and I miss her terribly.”

Unable to refuse her, Germaine stepped inside, closed the door, then took Claire into his arms. Unresisting, she pressed her face to his shoulder and began to cry silently.

“Do you know why a part of me so badly wanted Mother and Joan to be right?” she asked, her voice choked and tight.

“No,” he admitted without asking, not certain he wanted to know. He might as well have saved his breath since Claire was determined to tell him anyway.

“Because if Mother had truly experienced a love like the one she described, then her lover wouldn't have let her die. He would have transformed her and taken her to live with him--forever.” She shifted a little unsteadily in his arms. “And I'd much prefer to believe she was living an endless life with the man she'd loved, than imagine her as a lifeless shell--awaiting incineration.”

“Claire....”

Her tormented eyes gazed into his. “I need to know, Germaine. Is my mother alive or dead?” Her words were sounding more than a little slurred.

“She's at peace,” he assured her.

Claire raised a fist and struck a blow that widely missed his left arm, yet he suspected she'd been aiming for his chest. “That's no answer,” she insisted, weaving slightly.

He circled her clenched fist with his fingers. “Yes, Claire, it is, and it's the best answer I can give you. When she started to protest, he lifted her into his arms. “Where's your bedroom?”

Her expression surprised, and a little unsure, she waved her arm toward a door at the opposite end of her apartment. On one level of his consciousness, Germaine took in the patterned white furniture and plush cream carpeting of her apartment. The decor wasn't as traditional as he'd expected, but the sweet vanilla scent and pristine furnishings seemed to suit her. On another level, his every sense was acutely aware of the warm, pliant female in his arms. The alcohol and the tranquilizer had reduced her inhibitions so much that she not only made no objection to the liberties he was taking, but stared at him wide-eyed and blushing.

Telling himself that the strong attraction he felt was merely an overdue reaction to his spending the past two decades without so much as a taste of another mortal woman, Germaine carried Claire into her cream and azure bedroom. The urge to undress her, to touch her in ways that would make her want him as much as he wanted her before he

delved into her sweetness and made her his--would pass. It had to. If it didn't, he vowed firming his grip, he would simply have to be strong enough to resist it. But at the unspoken invitation he saw in Claire's tremulous expression, Germaine abruptly let her go, only to drag her back against his chest when she started to sway. With tight lips and a bitten back curse, he steadied his tipsy seductress and asked where she kept her nightclothes.

She shrugged. Then in a whisper that could have been heard on any stage, she asked, "Are you sure I'll be needing any?"

Desire flared into burning need as his canines extended. Fighting back the physical urge to bite, Germaine was about to tell her exactly what he thought she needed, when her complexion turned alarmingly pale. He instinctively reached for her again, but all she said was, "Oh," before she fainted right into his arms.

Eat your heart out, Freddie, he thought wryly as he carefully laid Claire's limp form on top of the high, four-poster bed while hot, vampiric blood coursed through his veins like thick, molten lava. A piercing pain lanced his gums, and he groaned. Fighting to keep from doing what his every instinct urged him to do, he looked around, desperate to focus on something less tempting. Something inanimate. He stared at the bed, willing himself to act like a gentleman. The intricately carved four poster was almost identical to one he'd once owned. He'd spent many a pleasurable night locked in Cupid's embrace on that bed, and the thought of renewing a few of those memories by awakening the sleeping beauty with his kiss was more than Germaine could bear. One kiss, he promised himself. Just one. He leaned forward to take a single taste of her lips when she moaned in her sleep. He instantly straightened. What the hell did he think he was doing? Not only was the beauty before him drugged and helpless, but her mother had died less than twenty-four hours ago--in his arms.

Silently berating himself for his lack of control, Germaine retracted his fangs through sheer mental will and reached for Claire's covers when a shimmer of turquoise sequins caught his eye. Only an Egyptian mummy could rest undisturbed in that gown.

Gently rolling Claire over, he searched for buttons and hooks and found a long, plastic seam instead. It took him a few minutes to understand how the nylon slider worked. He'd seen zippers before, but the invisible type was a novelty to him. What was an even greater surprise was the contraption Claire had on beneath it--a cross between a lace-edged teddy and an iron maiden. Under that she wore an item of personal attire that Germaine wished had never been invented--panty hose.

Unlike a child at Christmas, who cared not at all for the pretty wrappings in his eagerness to get to what was secreted beneath them, Germaine took great care to savor the moment, knowing he would never again be permitted such an opportunity.

When his present lay fully unwrapped before him, he appreciated the view as only a man can appreciate a woman.

He admired her soft, but not overly ripe curves, her tiny waist, and her long, supple legs. Had she awakened, he might not have resisted claiming her, but the total vulnerability Claire projected while asleep protected her in ways that religious symbols and pungent smelling herbs never could. He briefly thought about searching her dresser for the sleepwear he'd asked about, but changed his mind. If the lady wanted to play coy, she could do without for a night.

Lifting her with one arm, he raised the covers then slipped her beneath them. She murmured a soft protest at the chill of the sheets against her warm, naked skin. Instinctively glancing at her night table, he spotted the control for her electric blanket and turned it on. Then he went about closing all the blinds in her room so that the early morning light wouldn't wake her.

That done, he walked through her living and dining rooms, repeating the action, this time for himself. Able to see in the darkened apartment without artificial light, he laid his jacket over a chair, unbuttoned his silk vest, removed his tie and loosened the top three buttons of his starched shirt. He wasn't comfortable, exactly, but comfort wasn't his main concern just then. Resigned to keeping an all-night vigil, Germaine strolled over to Claire's white, sectional sofa and sat down. Stretching his arms along the furniture's upholstered edge, he leaned back and awaited the coming dawn.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Morning jarred Claire awake with all the harmony of an orchestra warming up. Her head pounded like a tympani, her eyelids clanged like finger cymbals and her ears rang as if she'd just struck a ten-foot gong with her skull. Worse yet was the ruckus she heard when she tried to sit up. That noise, she quickly realized, was coming from her brain, since her throat was too parched to do much more than croak in the rasping timbre of a jug band washboard.

Cradling her aching head in her hands, the first thing Claire noticed was that her pounding skull felt far worse vertical than it had horizontal. The second was a brief sense of gratitude she had drawn the drapes. Her third realization, however, caused her heart to leap into her throat. She was stark naked. She never slept without a nightgown or a knee-length tee shirt on at least.

Her eyes closed against the morning light, Claire yanked the covers up to her neck and fumbled for the robe she always left folded at the foot of her bed only to discover it was missing, too. Wondering what wild notion had overtaken her last night, she dragged herself and her bed sheet to the edge of the mattress and blinked her eyes. There, neatly folded on the blue and peach chintz chaise lounge by the window, were her evening gown and undergarments. Claire's dry throat convulsed as if she'd just bit into a lemon. Even she wouldn't fling off her clothes in a drunken stupor, then fold them.

Unable to think straight, much less solve unexplainable mysteries, Claire pressed a hand to her churning stomach and bent forward to see if her recalcitrant robe had elected to hide itself beneath the bed. A sudden wave of nausea forced her to abandon that search. Aching, shivering and sick to her stomach, she yanked the sheet free, wrapped it around her, then stumbled blindly toward the bathroom, grateful for the concealing darkness. If she looked at all like she felt, it wasn't a sight she was prepared to confront just then. Groping for the small white bottle in her medicine cabinet, she took two of the tiny caplets and gulped them down with a half tumbler of water. Ten minutes later, with five of them spent scrubbing, brushing and combing, she felt halfway human.

Finally ready to face the day, Claire turned and spotted her elusive pink chenille robe hanging on the bathroom door hook, exactly where she'd left it yesterday morning. Extricating herself from the wrapped sheet, she slipped into her robe's fuzzy warmth and headed for the kitchen and a cup of mind-restoring coffee.

If she'd done anything sensible last night, she'd have set her coffee maker to go off at ten. Only she couldn't remember much of anything about last night. Not even how she got into bed, but that would never happen again. She was taking charge of her life again. Today. First she would check with Robert's doctors to assess his condition. Then, later this afternoon, she would inure her mother. After that . . . after that . . . maybe after that she'd know what to do next.

Securing the sash of her robe into a knot, Claire stepped out of her room into the living

room and halted with a soft gasp. Germaine St. Justine sat on the couch--her couch--watching her the way a cat sizes up a canary perched on the door of its cage. When he said nothing, Claire clutched at her robe's large collar and drew it closed. Her cheeks flamed hot with embarrassment as she realized just how she'd arrived at her revealing condition beneath it.

Frozen where she stood, Claire was mentally questioning whether a woman could indulge in a night of wild, passionate debauchery and not remember a thing about it the next morning, when St. Justine leisurely rose from the couch. "I would have prepared breakfast," he murmured in that sensuous, deep-throated purr of his that caused her body to react as if he were physically stroking her. "Except I had no idea when you'd awaken."

"You spent the night here?" she managed to ask, her fingers gripping the plush material even tighter as if the soft material could protect her from her own desires. At his slow nod, she squeaked, "On the couch?"

He smiled then. "Only because you shattered my ego by collapsing in my arms."

Feeling relieved and disappointed on top of being thoroughly embarrassed, Claire groaned.

"How's your head?" he inquired solicitously.

"It hurts," she admitted, giving herself a mental shake.

"I shouldn't wonder. Next time...."

Claire held up her hand in a gesture of truce. "No lectures until the lady has at least had her first sip of coffee, all right?"

He nodded agreeably, then followed her into the kitchen, chuckling softly when she switched on the overhead light, winced, then switched it off again. All too aware that he was watching her every move, Claire struggled to appear poised and collected despite his scrutiny.

Hands in his pockets, he propped one shoulder against the doorjamb and watched her gather up the necessary ingredients to make coffee. To his credit, he remained at his post until her hands began shaking so badly she nearly dropped the Pyrex decanter. At that point, he stepped in and gently grabbed her arms. "Not that I mean to cast aspersions on your culinary skills," he murmured in her ear, "but if I remember correctly, one of your past efforts at making breakfast had some rather calamitous results. So, on behalf of your local fire department, I think I'd best take over."

Claire slanted him a nasty look, but part of her was grateful for his insistence when he pressed her down into the nearest chair. He finished setting up the automatic machine, then went to work making her a French omelet and toast. She watched him move about her kitchen in his partially unbuttoned shirt, maroon cummerbund and tuxedo pants, and found herself reacting to his nearness at the same time she puzzled over the strangeness

of her response. Normally levelheaded and practical, around him she acted more like a hormone-high teenager than a mature woman. What was it about this particular man that created such mixed and volatile emotions within her?

He fixed the food capably, but carefully, as if he wasn't used to performing such mundane tasks for himself. Even so, it didn't seem right that he prepared her breakfast with far more panache than she ever had. But when he served her and sat down without even pouring a cup of coffee for himself, Claire couldn't quite dismiss the nagging feeling that she'd never seen him eat.

Gripping her coffee cup with two hands, she glanced down at her plate. "This looks delicious. Don't you want any?"

He shook his head. "I'm not hungry. Thank you anyway."

"Not even coffee?" she asked, taking a sip of the dark, steamy brew.

"I've never cared much for coffee, and right now all I need is sleep."

She gaped at him in dumbfounded surprise. "You stayed awake all night? Why?"

His shoulders rose in a dismissive gesture. "I wanted to be sure you were all right. You should never drink champagne when you've been given a tranquilizer, Claire."

So, the brat had over-imbibed and needed a keeper, did she? "Well, if you hadn't drugged me, the issue would never have come up," she murmured dryly, the dull ache in her head just beginning to recede. She took a bite of the fluffy, golden omelet garnished with orange slices and discovered it tasted even more delicious than it looked. Feeling her annoyance ease, Claire conceded that the enigmatic St. Justine was a man of many talents. Appearing to make casual conversation while she ate, Claire asked, "Where did you learn so much about tranquilizers?"

"Chemistry, pharmacology and medicine have always held a special fascination for me, so I've studied them over the years."

She gave him a sharp look. "Years? You can't possibly be that much older than I am."

His mouth curved into a wry smile. "Right now I feel centuries older."

Although his words reminded Claire of her earlier suspicions, his cooking breakfast and sitting at the table with her seemed much too natural for her to believe he was anything other than what he appeared to be--a devastatingly handsome, roguish, wealthy playboy. Looking more closely, Claire noticed that he did look older and very tired. The bones in his cheeks and forehead seemed more prominent, his golden eyes appeared sunken and his lips had almost no color at all.

She rose and extended a hand to him. "You look exhausted. Why don't you lie down on my bed awhile?"

His warmly intimate smile softened the sharpness of his features, lending his face a

youthful charm and quickening her pulse and heart rate. "Thank you, but I'd best take a rain check on that." Standing, he grasped her arms and pushed her gently back into her seat, then pressed a light kiss on her forehead. "If I were to accept your kind offer, I fear I'd get no sleep."

"The bed is quite comfortable," she assured him, wanting him to stay yet uncertain what she'd do if he did.

"It is not the lady's bed, but the desire to have the lady herself share it with me that would keep me awake."

She blushed, but his softly murmured words made her feel warm, womanly and sexy.

"I would ask a favor of you, however," he added, standing straight again.

"Name it."

"I'd like to borrow a pair of sunglasses, if you have a spare pair about. I know the sun isn't all that bright today, but it still hurts my eyes."

Certain she had an extra pair somewhere, Claire went into her bedroom and returned with a set of mirrored aviator-style glasses. "I modeled these in a 'Foster Grant' ad. The shoot producer gave them to me."

"They're perfect," he murmured appreciatively, carefully widening the ear-pieces before he put them on. Standing in his rumpled tuxedo, he seemed every inch the debauched libertine after an all-night orgy--only Claire knew differently. At least she was almost sure she did.

She gazed at him uncertainly. No other man made her feel the way he did, and she had no idea what to do about it. "Thanks for staying," she said lamely, "although it wasn't necessary."

"It was to me," he answered simply.

"I realize you haven't had any sleep, but I hope you'll still...."

"I haven't forgotten the day, Claire," he vowed, clasping her hands. "I'll be at the funeral parlor by four, I promise."

Claire felt her eyes begin to well with tears, but resolutely blinked them back. She was an actress, for Lord's sake. The least she could do was appear somewhat together until the man had stepped out her door. Only instead of leaving, he drew her into his arms.

"It's all right," he crooned softly. "Go ahead and cry if you want. I understand."

Except the moment he held her, Claire no longer felt like crying. It was as if his gentle reassurances reached inside and eased the ache of her loss. Leaning against him, she let herself relax and felt a sense of well-being enfold her. He gave her a small hug, then placing another kiss on her forehead, he led her back to the table.

"Eat your breakfast," he ordered. But before she could even frame a reply, her front door

had opened and closed, and he was gone.

* * *

The winter wind whipped cruelly at the quintet standing atop the small grassy knoll that stood high above the church where Claire's father and mother had been married. As if scoffing at the small ceremony, blustery gusts flung the pastor's laudatory words of tribute back into his face as they snatched and tugged at his gold-embroidered stole.

Claire stood in a dazed silence. Her eyes stinging, her cheeks raw and her body numb, she stared at the brass-plated urn that held her mother's remains. Caught between wanting what couldn't be and accepting what was, she neither encouraged nor protested Harry's supportive hand at her elbow, she simply endured it. Enduring was the best she could do for the moment, she decided, noting the absence of preying paparazzi with a shiver of relief. Her emotional armor wasn't thick enough to deflect the barrage of personal questions such reporters delighted in asking. Not today.

Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust.

As often as she'd heard it, Claire hadn't found much to be grateful for in that, and her gaze momentarily sought out Robert before it instinctively turned to Germaine. She hadn't exchanged more than a few words with him since he'd left her apartment that morning, but he'd remained in her thoughts like a vivid dream that continued to hang on throughout the day. And the more she thought about him, the more certain she became that her earlier suspicions were correct.

Something about Germaine St. Justine put her senses on alert. Though he still wore the sunglasses, he appeared impervious to his surroundings, as if he were untouchable. His face set in a blank mask, he stood with his arms loose at his sides listening to the shouting clergyman, seemingly oblivious to his black cloak rising and falling behind him like a giant pair of wings.

Claire's shudder wasn't entirely from the cold even as she mentally scolded herself for fanciful thinking. It wasn't as if she believed Germaine St. Justine was about to turn into a bat and flap away with the wind. Even bats weren't up this early. And if all she'd read on vampire lore was correct, the nosferatu were obliged to sleep in their coffins until dusk. But then Joan hadn't been terribly impressed by the research Claire had done to prepare herself for the play.

Assisting Claire during a costume change, she'd said, "All the reading in the world won't protect you from Satan's children, only God can. And if you've forsaken Him, you're doomed."

Germaine's soft-spoken warning about a vampire's powers hadn't been all that reassuring, either. Undoubtedly a mere mortal, such as herself, presented about as much threat to a vampire as a buzzing fly might offer a healthy human. Buzz, buzz, splat! Nuisance eliminated.

Claire stared at Germaine, wishing she could see his eyes. Only once, in the mirror, had she glimpsed even a hint of a darker side to him. And for that instant, his eyes had possessed the fiery glow Joan claimed vampires used to lure their victims to a willing death.

Normally, Germaine's eyes weren't predatory, but knowing and wise. And he'd always handled people with gentle forbearance--even the time when Robert attacked him in the hospital. Germaine could have easily flattened her brother with a single blow, yet he never raised an arm in his own self-defense. Hardly the actions of a being who intended harm or evil against others.

Evil, or not, Claire was determined to prove that Germaine St. Justine possessed the ability to grant immortal life. She had to. The alternative was simply unacceptable to her.

Lost in her thoughts, Claire gasped in surprise when Harry suddenly jerked her behind him and marched over to Germaine who held her mother's ashes.

"Hand it to me, St. Justine," Harry demanded, his arms outstretched for the urn.

Germaine obliged without hesitation.

Harry turned on his heel and presented the brass vessel to Claire. She stared at it uncomprehendingly. "Your mother's wishes, Claire," Harry reminded her. "As her eldest child, the disbursal of her remains falls to you."

Claire shook her head in immediate denial, then cast a swift glance across at Robert. He stood next to the minister with his eyes glazed and his expression drawn and haggard. This day had taken more of a toll on his health than she'd thought it would. She longed to help him, but right now she had no idea how to help herself. And she didn't want to be on this grassy knoll facing an urn of their mother's ashes anymore than he did. "Let Germaine do it," she suggested finally, "as his father's representative." Germaine's head swerved sharply and he appeared to stare at her from behind those damned mirrored glasses she'd given him.

"Why him?" Harry protested. "He's not even a member of the family."

"He was for Mother, and that's all that matters to me." Ignoring Harry's displeased scowl, she took the urn and walked it over to Germaine. "Would you do us the honor of seeing Mother's last request carried out?"

He nodded, but laid his fingers over hers. "I think your mother would be happier if we performed this offering together."

Claire blushed, recalling what her mother really wanted them to do together. "You lift the lid," she suggested in a soft whisper despite the roaring wind.

Whether he heard her or simply understood what she wanted, his fingers gripped the urn's deeply set cover. The sound of metal scraping against metal drew Claire's eyes

down to the soft gray dust lying inside. This cramped brass vessel was her mother's tomb, her final resting place, and they were about to release her from it.

“These mortal remnants are no more a part of your mother than I am, Claire. It's the memories of her you hold within your heart that are her true remains, not this.”

Claire nodded to show she understood, but tears still spilled from her eyes. Germaine's hands guided hers.

“We who loved you, Marguerite Danielson, have come to set you free.” He tilted the urn slightly toward the wind, allowing it to take a scoop-full and scatter it wildly. “We release these ashes, so that all we keep of you is the love we shared. Be free and know that we are content.”

Turning the urn into the wind, he tossed out the remainder. The powder-like particles spread out into a graceful swirl, scattering into a fine mist that disappeared with the wind.

Suddenly bereft, Claire gazed at Germaine. He raised a hand to her cheek. “You'll be fine,” he promised, then stepped back to close the urn.

“Stay with me,” she whispered urgently, afraid he would walk out of her life if he left now.

He shook his head. “I can't. I have to go. I'm sorry.”

Harry strolled over to them. Commandeering the urn from Germaine, he placed a possessive arm about Claire's waist. “Too bad you have to run,” he offered, his tone in direct contrast to his words. “Perhaps we'll see you at the theater later.”

“Perhaps,” Germaine replied noncommittally. He gave Claire's fingers a gentle press, then turned to walk away, but stopped when she let out a sharp yelp of pain.

“My ankle!” she cried out, giving the Tony award performance of her life. “I've turned it.”

Harry gave her a dumbfounded look. “How? On what? You barely took a step.”

“I don't know how,” she snapped back. “All I know is I turned it and it hurts!”

Germaine pushed his sunglasses to the end of his nose and gave Claire a look that made her uneasy with her small deceit, but not enough to abandon it.

Harry let out an exasperated sigh. “Lean on me, then. I'll help you to the car and--”

“No!” Claire instantly protested. “It really hurts. I think it might be broken. It's got to be badly sprained at the least. I really need to stretch it out and keep it elevated.”

Harry looked thoroughly vexed. “What do you want me to do? Leave your drugged-out brother and Reverend Jenkins out here in the cold while I take you to the emergency room?”

Claire, who had no intention of going to any emergency room, looked over at her brother and felt a small stab of guilt. Robert stood like a statue, not even blinking. Dr. Willis had been reluctant to release him from the hospital, claiming his depression over Marguerite's death was affecting his already frail health. Claire had assured the doctor that her brother would be well looked after and they'd have him for no longer than three hours.

Robert had ridden to the crematorium with the minister and Germaine without any overt sign of distress. He seemed rational but dazed during the brief service, and accepting of the funereal rites until the coffin began its journey toward the crematory furnace. His inhuman cry of rage reverberating through the small chapel, Robert leapt to his feet. Accusing them all of murder, he tried to physically stop the coffin's progress. Germaine managed to subdue him with a few firm words, but the incident was enough to convince Claire and Harry that one of them should stay with him on the return trip. Especially after Germaine announced he would not be returning with them.

The priest stood next to Robert now, offering him gentle words of condolence, only Robert wasn't listening. He needed help and medical science had run out of miracles, but Claire refused to accept defeat. If Germaine was truly one of the dark angels Marguerite had spoken of so often, then he could save Robert. But at what price? Claire bit her lip in hesitation as she regarded the man her mother asked her to trust. From all appearances, he hadn't suffered unduly from his 'condition.' Who was to say Robert would fare any worse? Surely even a life in the shadows was better than no life at all. Wasn't it? Could anyone really believe her brother would be better off dead? Claire didn't think so. And she was convinced her mother hadn't either.

Germaine pushed his glasses back. "I'll see to Robert, Harry. You look after Claire."

"No!" Claire protested again, determined to get alone with Germaine. "Robert doesn't know you, not as well as he does Harry. And from the way he reacted to you at the hospital, I think it would be best if Harry rode back with Robert and Reverend Jenkins."

Although Harry clearly wasn't pleased, he had little choice but to concede with her plan. He'd given his word to Dr. Willis along with Claire. Turning, he faced his adversary. "It's only a five minute ride back to the hospital, St. Justine. Any medical attention Claire may need can wait until we get there. Let the professionals see to the removal of her clothing this time, all right?"

When Germaine merely smiled, Harry gave Claire a quick, possessive kiss. Then tugging up his collar, he trudged over to Robert.

Claire looked uncertainly at Germaine who lifted her into his arms as if she weighed no more than an infant.

"I hadn't pegged you for one who kissed and told, Claire," he murmured intimately.

Claire blushed. "I never said a word to him, about anything."

“Then your obnoxious beau is either a mind reader, or he's keeping extremely close tabs on you.” Carrying her back to the chauffeured car, he gave her a considering look.

“Which ankle hurts?” he asked with a hint of challenge in his tone.

“Neither, right now,” she answered evasively.

Claire felt his gaze pierce through her deception. Though she still couldn't see his eyes, she had the sinking suspicion he didn't believe her.

Germaine waited for the chauffeur to open the door, then he carefully eased her onto the softly padded seat and raised her legs so that they rested along its length. Announcing he'd see to his own door, he let the driver attend to Claire's and stepped to the back of the car. Unable to follow him, Claire sat with crossed fingers for what seemed the longest minute of her life before he finally got in.

“I was beginning to think you'd decided to go off without me,” she teased half-heartedly.

Nodding to the driver, he shut his door. “I almost did.”

She gazed at him, but could discern nothing of his mood through those reflective glasses.

“Are you angry?” she asked finally.

“That depends. Did you really hurt your ankle?”

“No,” she confessed in a whisper.

He sat back against the seat. “Why the pretense, Claire?”

“I needed to talk--you were determined to leave. It was all I could think of on the spur of the moment.” When he said nothing, she asked, “You don't mean to see me again, do you?”

He turned his head toward her. “I'm sure I'll remain involved with the production in one capacity or another, now that we've been assured a decent run.”

The reviews had been glowing, comparing them to Phantom and Les Miz, but that wasn't what Claire meant, and he knew it as well as she did.

“Is it because I finally discovered what you really are?”

“Back to that again, are we?” he asked, one brow rising above the gold rim of his glasses.

“Could you remove those now? The windows are tinted and we can raise the partition if you prefer, but I like to look into a person's eyes when I'm talking.”

He pressed the button that operated the tinted partition separating the passengers from the driver, then removed his glasses. The heavy cloud cover and tinted windows made the day seem nearly night, but it was light enough for Claire to see how much he had changed in the past few hours. He looked nearly as cadaverous as he had in the mirror.

His complexion had color, but she suspected it was artificial. What the makeup couldn't hide was the gaunt look to his eyes and the almost skeletal sharpness of his cheeks.

At her expression, he slipped back on his glasses. "I'm merely tired, Claire. You see before you a man for whom the term 'beauty sleep' has a deeper meaning, but there is nothing supernatural about it. Nothing at all."

"Are you hungry?" she asked softly. When he sharply turned his head toward her, she added, "You had nothing for breakfast. Were you able to at least grab something for lunch?"

His lips curved slightly as if he recalled a private joke. "No, but I'll be sure to grab something for dinner." He laid his head back against the seat.

Tucking her feet beneath her, Claire slid over and lifted his glasses. His eyes were closed.

"I believe there is a homily concerning curiosity," he cautioned in a low voice.

She raised a hand to his cheek, and he gazed at her through glittering gold eyes. His flesh felt cool, but his eyes shimmered with an unnatural heat that radiated hunger and desire. Acting purely out of instinct, Claire straightened and unbuttoned her coat. Germaine merely watched her until she removed her gloves and began unfastening the neck of her dress.

Jerking erect, he grabbed her fingers. "If you think to seduce me into making love with you in this car, I advise you to think again."

"I'm offering myself to you, Germaine. I could ease you and you could help me in return."

"Help you? How?" he asked sharply.

"Help me understand why--" a part of her yearned to ask about his powers and why she felt so drawn to him despite herself, but she murmured instead, "--why you let my mother die."

As if reading her thoughts, he answered, "You presume I possess some unworldly gift that magically alters fate and saves lives."

"I know you do."

"You know nothing, Claire. You are a true innocent, clinging to childish perceptions of life and death, and love triumphing over all. Your mother would have died no matter what anyone did for her. I never had the power to save her. All I could do was make her life a little easier until death claimed her, which is exactly what I tried to do."

Claire turned away from him and blinked back her tears. He had to be lying to her. He was her last hope. If he was telling the truth, Robert didn't have a prayer, and that was something she refused to accept.

Germaine gripped her chin with a gentle but unyielding hold, forcing her to meet his eyes. "No one can escape death, Claire, not even me." She didn't say anything, because she couldn't. She had no evidence to argue. No proof. Nothing. She tried swallowing her despair, but like a bitter pill it remained stuck in her throat, causing unwanted tears to slide down her cheeks. Claire thought she heard Germaine curse under his breath, and she wished she could crawl into a hole and hide. She felt his hands gently frame her cheeks and she tried to pull away, but she had neither the strength nor the will to do so. Then he bent forward and kissed her.

For Claire, the kiss was more than the mere press of his lips against hers, it was a melding of wills. She felt a part of him reach out to her, reassuring and loving. His embrace was without passion, but not without desire. It was as if he were silently urging her to be patient and not lose hope, but for Claire his message meant much more. It meant her suspicions were correct.

When he broke the kiss, she stared at him for a long moment. "When, Germaine?" she asked softly. "When will you be ready to trust me enough to tell me the truth?"

He let out another exasperated sigh and buttoned the neck of her silk dress. "You are more persistent than a little girl who's convinced Santa Claus has hidden a special present under her bed. Trust me, Claire, all you'll find under there is a thick layer of dust."

"When Germaine?"

His eyes met hers and she could see the indecision in them. She held her breath, fearful if she pushed too hard that she'd lose what small advantage she'd gained.

"Give it till the end of the week," he said finally. "If you're still determined to pursue this insanity by Saturday night, I'll see what I can do to oblige you."

Although Saturday was only three days away, Claire was afraid to let it go--certain that once they parted he would continue to avoid her. Only she still didn't know what to do about it when the car pulled to a halt in front of the hospital and Germaine held out a hand for the sunglasses she held.

"Can we continue seeing each other until then?"

His hand remained patiently extended. "Don't press me, Claire. I'm not a man who likes being chased, even when the woman is both talented and beautiful."

Her cheeks stinging from the reproof, Claire tossed him his glasses and turned her back on him. The man was insufferable. If he didn't want to be with her, she wasn't going to grovel and beg for his attention. She had more pride than that. Except pride couldn't save her brother.

Unable to simply walk away, she sat staring at the door handle when she felt his hands curve about her waist. Claire stiffened, but didn't protest when he pulled her onto his lap. Though she wondered if she hadn't been a little too compliant when she felt a strong arm

ease beneath her thighs. "You should never turn your back on a chauvinist," he whispered into her ear. "The implied invitation is often just too tempting for us to ignore."

Humiliation honing an edge to her already sharp temper, Claire turned to put him in his place just as Harry opened the door.

"Thank you, Harry," Germaine murmured as Claire's red-faced suitor sputtered in obvious annoyance at finding his girlfriend seated on another man's lap. Germaine stepped from the car with Claire held firmly against his chest. "Your timing is perfect, for once."

Then dropping Claire into Harry's open arms as if he was relieved to be finally rid of her, Germaine turned on his heel and strode away.

* * *

That evening, Germaine attended the performance, but didn't come backstage to see Claire afterwards. Still fuming over his high-handed treatment of her in the limousine, Claire told herself she was glad he had enough sense to keep his distance. But she knew it was a lie.

Later that night, when she lay in bed with her nightgown buttoned up to her chin and her robe lying neatly at the foot of her bed, she examined her contradictory feelings for Germaine St. Justine. And, despite her every effort to fight it, she feared she was falling in love with the impossible man.

It was a complication she had neither anticipated nor wanted.

He wasn't anyone she would have chosen for herself. He was too arrogant and dictatorial, but he was also gentle and caring, and he certainly knew how to kiss. Even so, a part of her felt as if she were little more than a hapless moth being inexorably drawn toward the fatal flame.

She tended to be logical, goal-oriented and wary. Yet she knew this exasperating, domineering man held a claim on her that no other man ever would. The knowledge was neither logical nor rational, but her proposal in the limousine was proof. She felt herself gravitating toward him like a flower to the sun. And she wasn't the first woman in her family to do so.

She'd seen the way her mother had blossomed beneath his light teasing, her face alight with a vibrant glow whenever he was near. She'd never seen her mother bloom like that before, and beneath Claire's mixed feelings of gratitude and resentment lay a tiny seed of wanting. A seed that had flowered, almost overnight, into an unexplainable desire.

Despite her initial disbelief, Claire was convinced everything her mother had said about Germaine St. Justine was true. The unquestioning love in Marguerite's eyes had been for him, not his father. Just as his affection for Marguerite had been equally obvious. Yet he had let her die. That was the one inconsistency Claire couldn't accept.

He was alive and immortal, so why had he declined to pass on his gift to the woman he loved? He said that he didn't possess the power to save lives, but Claire was certain that the power of eternal life was his to bestow. Only, he'd chosen not to offer it to her mother.

That bothered Claire, a lot. Not that she longed to be immortal. The thought of living forever gave her an uneasy, hollow feeling. Yet, if she were being completely honest, she would have to admit the thought of dying terrified her. She likened it to being trapped in a dark, empty void. No fiery flames, no angels trumpeting--just nothingness. And despite what she'd been told as a child, she'd never felt her father's presence watching over her like a guardian angel. Nor did she believe he was in a better place. He was just gone, and all she'd felt was an aching loss over his absence.

Even so, Claire knew that death was as irrevocable as it was inevitable. But after just losing her mother to a hideous life-robbing disease, she couldn't bear the thought of losing her brother, too. Even if it meant he had to sleep during the day and drink blood at night, at least he'd be there and he'd be healthy again. Offering a silent promise to her mother and father that she would not fail Robert as she had them, Claire vowed she would get Germaine St. Justine to make her brother immortal.

However, unlike any other vow she'd made, this one filled Claire with a deep foreboding.

* * *

The next night, Claire sent Germaine a note requesting he come to her dressing room after the show. He returned the note, declining politely.

The night after that, Saturday night, Claire took no more chances. Germaine was going to honor his promise and admit what he was if she had to force it out of him.

Feeling the fate of her brother's life resting on her shoulders, Claire slipped Lucy's full-length cloak over her nineteenth century costume gown and took the least conspicuous route she knew to the private boxes. Spotting an usherette, she drew the cloak's hood over her wig and motioned her over.

"Ms. Daniels!" the woman cried out in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"Do you know where Mr. St. Justine sits?"

"Yes, but it's an open box. Wouldn't it be better if I gave him your message instead?"

"No!" Claire objected, then added a bit less emphatically, "I need to see him now. Will you show me the way, please?"

The young woman agreed, reluctantly. However, when she attempted to announce Claire first, Claire simply edged her way past only to halt just inside the doorway. Rather than the single gentleman she expected, three men stared at her with faintly surprised expressions.

Ignoring the others, she spoke directly to Germaine. "May we speak, sir, in private?"

Germaine gave the usherette a nod. "It's all right, Polly. Thank you." When Polly left, he regarded Claire with a quizzical gaze. "Isn't it bad luck for members of the audience to view the leading lady in costume before the performance?"

"This isn't a wedding, St. Justine, and I'm hardly superstitious." She glared at the two men who regarded her with looks akin to open gaping. "Would you two gentlemen mind leaving us, please? I'd like to speak with Mr. St. Justine alone."

One promptly rose and made a quick but elegant bow to her. "Yes, yes, of course. Wouldn't dream of interfering. Come along, Marcus," he urged, stepping through the curtain.

"Please, Marcus," Claire implored when the other man seemed reluctant to move.

Marcus stood and inclined his head in her direction, but remained within the alcove.

Frustrated by his friend's implacability and Germaine's apparent disinterest, Claire paced.

"Why are you deliberately avoiding me?" she asked angrily.

"Perhaps, because I believe it to be the best course--for both of us."

She whirled and faced him. "I don't think I'll ever understand you. Two days ago, you take me home, undress me, and put me to bed. When I awakened, you told me you spent the night in my apartment--on the couch."

"Do you doubt me?"

"There is very little about you I don't doubt. You are a man of contradictions."

When he continued to stare at her through narrowed, tawny eyes, Claire threw out her last lure, hoping either Germaine or his friend would snatch at the bait. "I have only your word nothing happened between us. What if I wind up pregnant?"

Marcus snorted. "Of all the things you could wind up being, fair Thespian, a mother-to-be is the least likely of all."

"That's enough, Marcus," Germaine warned in a low voice.

Reeling in her catch with every ounce of skill she possessed, Claire gazed at the huge man who stood with his arms folded as if he were St. Justine's personal bodyguard. "Are you saying it's impossible?"

Marcus started to reply when Germaine answered, "That would depend upon Harry."

Goaded by his infuriating, tight-lipped responses, Claire marched over to Germaine and slapped him. Instantly regretting her impulsiveness, she rubbed her stinging palm and bit her lower lip to keep from crying over her own stupidity. The man had a way of bringing out the worst in her, yet he didn't so much as blink in response. He remained rock still,

neither flinching nor wincing while Claire's hand felt as if she'd hit a wall. A smooth, marble wall to be precise.

Flexing her throbbing fingers, Claire glanced over at the giant sentinel leaning casually against the walled partition. His expression gave no clue to his thoughts, but she got the impression her show of temper had amused him. She turned back to Germaine. "I want to know the truth. If you won't tell me, then maybe your silent sentinel over there will."

"I can't sire children, Claire. If it's offspring you desire, you should save your tempting proposals for Harry."

Claire could feel her eyes burning, but she refused to let him see her cry. "It's not your inability as much as its underlying cause that interests me. You gave me your word, Germaine. It's Saturday night, and I'm here." Seeing him clamp his lips together, she said, "I'm beginning to think your promises are no more real than your sweet but false assurances of affection."

He stiffened slightly at her insinuation. "I've made no attempt to deceive you."

"Maybe not, but you're very clever with words, aren't you? No doubt you've had years of practice, and my feeble attempts at uncovering your secret are no more than a humorous diversion for you. Was my mother merely a temporary amusement as well?" He clenched his fingers into fists, but made no other move. Claire knew she'd angered him, but it wasn't his anger she sought.

Finally accepting that no matter how much she begged, chided or taunted, he'd never agree to help her, Claire turned away. She was forming the words to concede him the victory when, out of the corner of her eye, she caught him gesturing to Marcus. After the larger man had stepped into the hallway, Germaine drew both sets of curtains together so that they were secluded in a bower of velvet drapery. Then stepping toward her, he gripped her waist and gently turned her till she faced him.

His voice a low and seductive murmur, he said, "We are alone, per your request, and you have my full attention. So, tell me, Ms. Daniels, what exactly do you want me to confess to you?"

Certain he could hear the frantic pounding of her heart, Claire swallowed back her fear and asked the question that burned deepest in her mind and heart. "Are you a vampire?"

CHAPTER EIGHT

Rather than answer right away, Germaine gazed at her through shimmering golden eyes. Claire's heart gave a single flutter as if his stare possessed the power to impale it. Now that they were alone and she had his full attention, she realized she was seeking the impossible: irrefutable proof that something that could be so horrible, yet potentially wonderful, actually existed.

Unnerved by his continued silence, Claire started to tremble. Germaine brushed his fingers along the length of her arms from her elbows to her shoulders causing her to shiver lightly. When his thumbs sensuously caressed the sensitive points just below her jaw, she gravitated toward him. A delicious thrumming flowed through her like an electric current that warmed and excited her simultaneously. Caught in a maelstrom of sensation, Claire closed her eyes and held breathlessly still as his touch brushed her very soul.

"Do you really want to hear the truth, Claire?" he asked, his voice a mere whisper. "Though such knowledge is said to set you free, its release may bring to light details best left in darkness."

Like the moth, she sensed the heat but flew on anyway. "I need to know. It's important to me."

"So I gathered. Care to tell me why?"

When she shook her head, he tilted her chin up, forcing her to look at him. "I will honor your privacy, Claire, just as I will expect you to honor mine. Is that clear?"

"Yes," she replied, his implication jolting her slightly. "Are you saying I haven't done that?"

"You have told Harry a bit more than I would've liked." When she started to protest, he added, "What you and I do tonight, within this alcove, must remain between us and no other."

"I never said a word to Harry about you undressing me," she insisted.

"That isn't precisely the divulgence I meant. My life and reputation aren't all that's at stake here, Claire. There are others involved. Many others. At the moment our lives are free from suspicion, but should ugly rumors start surfacing on the oddities of our life style, it could set our efforts back several hundred years. I want to avoid that at all costs."

"I understand," she murmured while her heart fluttered at the significance of his admission.

"Another thing." He ran a single, long finger along the line of her cheek. So simple a touch, yet her breath caught in her throat. She stared at him--a willing captive. "Despite your mother's wishes, I think a relationship between us would be a mistake," he

admitted soberly. "Your life is filled with public adoration and reporters while my life does not lend itself well to publicity. My affairs are kept secret by necessity rather than personal whim, and that's something I cannot change."

"I don't care about publicity," she protested, falling silent when he pressed a finger to her lips.

His golden eyes expressed genuine regret. "I'm telling you this not to open the subject to debate, but to bow out gently. I can't afford all the attention you would bring into my life. Nor am I willing to risk the innuendoes and rumors a relationship between us would surely foster."

Claire's chest tightened with pain and disappointment. He had to continue seeing her. Her plan depended on his full cooperation.

"You have your entire future before you," he added gently. "A future which holds the promise of a husband, children and a successful career both in the theater and film."

"I see," she murmured huskily, although she had absolutely no intention of giving up.

"No, you don't, but you may in time," he replied with a hint of sadness. "Our lives are already entwined in several ways because of your mother. Those connections are unbreakable. It is the areas that we have not yet explored together that I think are best left uncharted."

"But you promised--"

"You already have your answer, Claire, but if you require proof, you need only kiss me."

With a thrill of frightened anticipation flushing her cheeks, Claire closed her eyes and tilted her head back. His firm lips pressed against hers, then covered her mouth with a gentle pressure urging her to open for him. She shivered slightly, but obeyed his silent entreaty. His tongue felt cool and smooth against hers, as if he'd been drinking ice water, yet he tasted warmly sweet, like honeyed nectar. Finding his kiss more potent than champagne, Claire suddenly feared the repercussions of over-imbibing, especially with him, so she endeavored to remain impassive. But his kiss possessed a power all its own. Like a slow, deep seduction, it compelled a response from deep inside her.

Drowning in a vortex of passion despite her resolve, Claire pressed closer only to have him suddenly draw back and regard her through narrowed, darkly burning eyes. She swallowed uneasily, wondering if his cravings could drive him to bite her when he asked, "What are you afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid," she insisted with a faint tremor. When his expression turned skeptical, she asked, "Does it hurt?"

"Kissing?" he questioned a little incredulously.

"No, the other. Does it hurt when you . . . You know?"

His smile grew infinitely tender. "You're asking me whether it hurts to make love when I've barely kissed the back of your hand."

She stiffened. "You weren't kissing my hand, and I wasn't asking about making love."

His smile widened in a way that wasn't entirely natural. This time Claire caught a glimpse of unusually pointed canines.

"It all depends on your perspective, love," he murmured gently.

When she started to draw back, he let her go. A mask of indifference descended back over his features. "It's late," he murmured tightly. "You'd better go backstage now. Percy will give you one of his famous set downs if you're still missing at his five-minute call."

Claire shook her head. Her fear wasn't strong enough to keep her from what she'd come for--irrefutable proof. "John Percy can wait," she informed him. "I want you to fulfill your promise."

His expression was intent, almost grim. "Must I smile ever wider for you?"

"No, I...." She glanced down at the elegant cut of his dark suit.

"All right, Claire, we'll do this your way." He pulled her tightly against him. "This time when you kiss me, try to welcome my advances by extending me an invitation that no man could ignore--mortal or otherwise. In short, my sweet, sweet Claire, try kissing me back."

At her indignant gasp, his lips recaptured hers with tantalizing persuasion. Feeling lightheaded and uncertain, Claire tentatively responded. His tongue met hers in a brief greeting, inviting her pursuit. She had kissed this way before, but it often made men a bit more amorous than she liked. Germaine St. Justine, however, seemed to excel at restraint.

He kissed her in a way that coaxed her into participating--allowing her to take the lead, to withdraw or pursue as she wished, and it was a heady feeling. No longer afraid, she eagerly responded to the gentle press of his lips against hers. He gave her a small hug of encouragement that tightened slightly when her tongue brushed against one of his canines. To her astonishment, he groaned like a fully aroused man when the woman of his desire presses against him.

Her tongue retook the same path and the impossible had occurred. The tooth had grown to three times its former length. Although its point was more defined, she doubted the tip was sharp enough to pierce flesh. But when her tongue instinctively sought the other side to see if it had changed as well, Germaine moaned and gave her a firm yet gentle push away.

"Hasn't your curiosity been appeased, yet?" he asked, his expression pained as if he fought an inner battle. Claire looked into his eyes and saw the same iridescent glow she'd seen reflected in her mirror. With his canines elongated and his eyes alight with an

inner fire, he looked quite terrifying, but Claire no longer felt fear when she looked at him. Whatever he was and whatever he became, she knew he would never hurt her.

She placed her hand along the hard plane of his cheek, then watched in spellbound fascination when he gripped her wrist and drew her fingers toward his mouth. His lips closed gently over her index finger, and he released her hand.

Her own lips slightly parted, she eased the tip of her finger beneath the elongated point of his tooth and gasped at the feel of a needle-sharp tip gently penetrating its cushioned pad. She held her breath, feeling a slight tug as he drank no more than a pinprick's worth of blood from her. The sensation, however, was indescribable. It felt as if he were caressing her into an orgasm. Claire's entire body trembled as a cocoon of hot, silken desire slowly enfolded her until an aching need for fulfillment engulfed her. She wanted him to take her right there. She wanted him to lower her to the floor, tear off all her clothing and . . .

With one arm clasping her close to support her, Germaine pressed his handkerchief to her bleeding finger. Dazed and aching, Claire stared at him in pained disbelief, relieved to find him as shaken by the experience as she was. His expression, however, was set with resolve.

"You don't mean to leave me like this, do you?" she asked, a little terrified by the prospect. "I feel as if my entire body is begging to be stroked by your touch. Even in places where--"

"Hush," he ordered. Claire fell silent, but tears rolled from her eyes. He pressed his handkerchief into her palm and wrapped both arms about her. "I barely tasted you, Claire. Your reaction should not be that strong."

"But it is," she insisted, alarmed by her insatiable need to rub herself against him.

"I know. I felt it too, but it shouldn't be." He tightened his hold. "Relax and breathe."

His softly-spoken command overruling her own instincts, Claire obeyed him. Comforted by the security of his embrace, the torment in her pulsing body eased, but she still trembled from the intensity of her experience. "Is it always like this?" she asked a little shakily.

"It's never like this," he murmured dryly, lifting his handkerchief to dry her eyes. Her trembling subsided, but she grew agitated again when he released her.

"You will see me again?" she asked, uncertain whether a relationship with him might kill her even as she feared a moment's separation from him.

He was about to answer her when Harry shoved open the curtains. Before Claire knew what was happening, Germaine had pushed her behind him and was ordering her to stay put. He took a step forward just as Harry charged into him like a rubber ball slamming into a stone wall. Only Harry didn't bounce once he hit the floor, he grunted, then cursed.

Directing a scowl at Germaine, Harry rose unsteadily to his feet. "If you don't mind...." he muttered tightly, brushing off his jacket sleeves while he waited for Germaine to step aside.

Germaine's brow arched, but he took a single step back. Claire could tell by the way he watched them that Germaine would like nothing better than to toss Harry out of the curtained alcove like a rag doll. And Marcus's sentry-like position at the entryway confirmed her suspicion that Harry was in dire jeopardy of visiting the orchestra seats, the short way, if Germaine so much as blinked.

Oblivious to the danger he was in, Harry broke into a harangue about her unusual pallor. Then turning an accusing glare on Germaine, he said, "What did you do? Drug her again?"

Germaine gripped the back of the velvet-covered seat at his side. "I did not seek the lady's company, Collins, she sought mine. And you are intruding."

When Marcus took a menacing step forward, Claire let out a soft cry and crumpled into the nearest seat.

Harry gave her a disbelieving look. "Surely, you can't have twisted your ankle again?"

"No," she murmured in a weak voice, noting the savage gleam in Germaine's eyes. The unnatural glow had dimmed, but he was a long way from the laconic, urbane gentleman he normally appeared. And Claire knew she was the reason.

Convinced that what had passed between them was too intense for even a man with Germaine's restraint to dismiss, Claire forced herself to think rationally. She could bear a separation, as long as she knew it wouldn't be a long one. Confident Germaine wanted her as much as she needed him, Claire turned her attention to getting Harry safely away.

"My foot's fine," she answered, "but I am a little dizzy. Germaine was going to help me backstage. Now that you're here, Harry, perhaps you could take me instead?" Though she was unable to see Germaine, Claire sensed his withdrawal as he slowly retreated into indifference.

"Are you ill?" Harry asked, bending closer to her in concern.

"No, I'm fine. I've just been having some disturbing dreams about Mother that I needed to discuss with someone. Germaine was helping me to understand them better when you came storming in here like a maddened bull." She twisted her neck to look at Germaine, but his shuttered expression denied her even a glimpse of his thoughts and feelings.

"Thank you, I'm sure I'll rest much easier now," she murmured, hoping for a smile at the very least. When he merely nodded, she added, "May I visit again, should I have another dream?"

His distant demeanor turned frosty. "I suspect another would be better suited than I to help you through such difficulties in the future," he advised her, his tone more chilling

than the bitter cold front sweeping the city streets.

“He's right, Clarissa,” Harry concurred. “If the dreams persist, you should see a doctor.”

Trembling as if she'd just been tossed out into the icy streets without a stitch of clothing on, Claire clenched Germaine's handkerchief in her fist and surged to her feet. “I don't think that will be necessary, Harry. I believe I'm suddenly cured. Gentlemen.” Offering Germaine and his sentinel a tight nod, she gripped Harry's arm. “Come along, Harry. I've a play to perform.”

Without looking back, Claire practically dragged Harry out of the small, enclosed area.

“I apologize,” Marcus murmured, once he was assured they would not be overheard. “I was being enjoyably distracted by our little Thespian usherette when....” He cut off his explanation and gave Germaine a curious look. “I never really liked that seat anyway,” he remarked offhandedly.

Germaine glanced down to discover he had gripped the seat back so hard that his fingers had pierced through the upholstery and dented the metal frame beneath it.

Marcus bent to give the damage a closer inspection. “I'm all for employing mortals to do menial labor, but this might prove a little difficult to explain.” Germaine pulled his fingers from the punched fabric and gave them an experimental flex before his gaze instinctively returned to the curtained door. Marcus's gaze followed his. “To avoid more rumors, it might be best if you appointed one of us to tend to this little problem of yours.”

Realizing they no longer spoke of the ruined seat, Germaine regarded his friend through resolute eyes. “See to the physical damage if you wish, Marcus,” he murmured silkily, his gaze shifting back to the entranceway. “But leave the rumor control to me. This is one little problem I fully intend to take care of myself.”

* * *

When Claire returned to her dressing room, John Percy was waiting for her.

“You are this close to a severe scolding, young lady,” he warned with a two-inch space between his thumb and forefinger.

Claire gave him a grim smile and pressed on his fingers until they were no more than an inch apart. “When I'm this close, you may take me to task, John, but not tonight. Okay?”

His blue eyes narrowed with concern. “Depends. Anything happen I should know about?”

“No,” she assured, giving him a kiss on the cheek. “But thank you for asking.”

He nodded. “Next time you decide to flee the castle, princess, at least let the court jester know where you can be found.” He put his hand to his stomach. “There's only so much Roloids can do for a guy who feels as if his guts are being ripped out.”

Smiling through her anger, Claire thanked him for his understanding, then sat at her table so her dresser and makeup assistant could finish their fussing. But the whole time they worked, she felt like kicking herself.

Instead of stomping off in a huff, she should have given Germaine her most winning smile and let Harry escort her away. She was an actress, but for some reason she kept forgetting that fact whenever she was with the enigmatic Mr. St. Justine. She considered herself a calm and rational-thinking individual, yet a single glance from that man could make her so mad she wished she could spit a thousand tiny spiked toothpicks right into his stony, fossilized heart. Her only consolation was that he had seemed as shaken by their encounter as she--at least he did at first.

Claire was certain once he gave the matter some thought, he'd be back. But when Claire received a call from one of Robert's doctors the next morning, she feared she'd run out of time.

Dr. Wasserman was quick to inform Claire that her brother was fine, but he'd been admitted into the hospital for observation last night, although he fully expected Robert would be ready to leave that afternoon. Claire assumed her brother had suffered an AIDS setback when Dr. Wasserman informed her he was a psychiatrist.

"Your brother tried to kill himself last night, Ms. Danielson, by taking an overdose of sleeping pills. It's my opinion that he fully expected to be found since he timed the overdose with his roommate's projected return home; however, I am concerned about your brother's state of mind and I'd like to set up an appointment with you to discuss my concerns further."

Claire agreed to meet the doctor in an hour. She didn't expect him to tell her anything she hadn't already suspected on her own, but the realization that Robert was desperate enough to take his own life filled her with a sense of deep dismay.

After she met with Dr. Wasserman, Claire headed straight for her brother's hospital room. Her dislike of hospitals temporarily overridden by her concern, she opened the door quietly in case he was sleeping. He wasn't, but the moment he saw her he turned away.

"Go 'way," he murmured, his words slightly slurred from the medication.

Claire forced a smile to her lips as she walked over to him. "Dr. Wasserman says you'll be able to go home this afternoon."

"Why bother? I'll only be back here again in a week."

"Oh, Bobby, don't say that," Claire scolded, reaching out to stroke his hair back from his forehead like she used to do when he was younger. "You'll start feeling better soon, you'll see."

He pushed her hand away. "And I suppose Dr. Wasserman said that too, didn't he? What is he--a miracle worker?"

“No,” she conceded, pouring him a glass of water, “but he has every reason to believe Dr. Sperry's treatments will help you.”

“Great, but he isn't the one who feels as if his bones are breaking with every move he makes. Nor is it his skin that's being eaten away by bacteria, or his mouth that's full of lesions.”

“Your T-cell count is improving,” she pointed out handing him the glass, but he pushed that away, too.

“Hip-hip hooray for my T-cells.”

Claire put down the water and straightened his blankets. “It takes time, that's all--”

Robert grabbed her hands then, and she was surprised by the fierceness of his grip.

“Don't you get it, Claire? I don't want to wait any longer. I'm tired of this. I'm tired of what I've become. I'd rather die sooner than later.”

The mere thought tearing her apart inside, Claire pulled free of his grasp and put a finger to his lips. “Don't say that. Please . . . You're just upset. You don't mean it, not really.”

“Damn it all, Claire, I do mean it! Would you stop treating me like a mindless invalid and just listen for a moment?”

Her cheeks burning as if Robert had just slapped her, Claire sat down on the bed beside him and folded her hands in her lap. “I'm listening,” she answered despite the knot of fear lodged in her throat.

Instant regret lined his forehead and he reached for one of her hands. “I bet I could still beat you at arm wrestling,” he challenged with a teasing grin, entwining his fingers with hers.

Claire smiled, but her heart still ached with a despair she refused to accept. “Maybe, but I bet I could still toss you on your butt two out of three.”

“You probably could,” he admitted. “You always were the stronger one--at least where it counted. I'm sorry, Claire, I wish I had your stamina, but I don't. I don't want to continue to live this way, but I don't want you to think you've failed me, 'cause you haven't. You didn't give me this disease, and you can't take it away. But you need to let me decide if I want to live with it.”

Claire didn't say much else after that, but one thought remained. What if she could take away his disease, didn't she owe him that much at least? All she needed was a little more time.

However, when Germaine didn't even show up at the theater that night or the next, Claire started to grow desperate. Unable to ask about him for fear of creating the rumors and innuendoes he'd warned her against, the following Wednesday morning she took action.

Recalling an old bookstore-combination-curiosity shop that Joan had told her about, Claire slipped into a torn, faded pair of jeans and the ratty-looking sweat top she exercised in and took a cab to one of New York's less affluent districts. Offering to pay the driver an extra twenty if he'd wait, she dashed in and after a ten-minute search, purchased a copy of Hazelcroft's Book of Witchcraft and Demonology--with a guide to summoning spirits. Having found nothing that dealt with vampires in particular, she settled for Hazelcroft's in the hopes that the same techniques that worked for ghosts and other unworldly beings might also work for vampires.

Then returning to her apartment, she settled down to read. Merely browsing through the age-worn pages gave her the willies, but she came across an incantation that promised to deliver the sought spirit, or being, directly to her doorstep in a state of enamored bliss. Amused despite her inner squeamishness, she equated the process to Cupid's Federal Express.

Having listed the items she'd need, Claire spent the next two days rummaging through a variety of shops, which ranged from "country quaint" to "skin-crawling-creepy," purchasing assorted merchandise. Working her way through her list, she started with candles "the color of midnight" and finished with eight pints of human blood.

Then Sunday night, a week after she'd approached Germaine in his private box, Claire set out to summon him to her home.

Using a mortar and pestle carved out of Elysian black marble, she ground together the mix of ingredients given in the spell's recipe. An unusual mix that listed among its contents twenty-four petals of the blue violet dried in the light of a waxing moon, and twelve sprigs of rosemary, which, prior to being crushed, had to be spaced no more than two inches apart, placed between two lengths of bridal-white satin and pressed for two nights beneath her mattress on the side where she usually slept.

Besides pulverizing these and other fragrant herbal blossoms, Claire also had to chop, mash and blend in an unsavory lot of foul-smelling herbs. Next, she was instructed to let the ingredients "co-mingle" for an hour while she prepared the area for the "summoning." Having no spare room to drag her furniture into, she rearranged her sofa, love seat, tables and chairs to the far edges of her plush, white carpet, leaving a twelve-foot circular patch in the center of her living room.

On the inner diameter of the circle, she evenly spaced out the thirty-nine candles: thirteen the color of dusk, thirteen of midnight and thirteen of dawn--each held upright by a small, flat disk of solid silver. Dawn and dusk had been particularly difficult colors to decide upon, but Claire finally selected a lightly graduated candle of mauve to blue for dusk, and red to orange for dawn.

Next, she fetched the mortar. Wrinkling her nose in distaste, she carefully sprinkled the finely ground powder into the shape of a pentagram on her guaranteed "stain-resistant" French Vanilla carpet, taking care that the apex of the five-pointed star pointed east. In

the center of the crudely-made symbol, Claire placed the handkerchief Germaine used to treat her bleeding finger.

Then, after lighting all the candles from east to west, she turned off the lights and went into her bedroom. Putting on the newly-purchased nightgown of “virginal lawn” that the book recommended, she lay down on top of her satin coverlet. Legs extended, but together, and hands crossed, she pressed a note he'd written against her heart and repeated the incantation that was meant to evoke the spirits into fetching her love to her.

It took three attempts at saying the Latin verse before Claire could repeat it without pulling a pillow over her face in embarrassment. Admittedly, she did feel rather silly, but it was her anxiety over the way Germaine was likely to react once he discovered her purpose for summoning him that had Claire seeking cover like an ostrich.

Still, she continued repeating the simple phrase and by her fifth effort, her theatrical training came to the fore. Closing her eyes, Claire imagined Germaine standing before her and called out, *Tempus venire tibi est*. She felt a faint response and was just beginning her seventh recital when a thunderous pounding invaded her apartment. The sound made her flesh crawl, bringing to mind visions of a living corpse beating determinedly on the inner lid of his coffin.

She wondered if it was wise for her to persist in her necromantic dabbling when the pounding sounded again. Feeling more than a bit foolish, Claire rose from the bed, slipped on her robe and headed for her front door.

After making a circuitous route around the shimmering pentagram, she peeked through the peephole. It was Germaine, and he didn't look pleased. His hands thrust deep into the pockets of his woolen slacks, he appeared to be staring at her through the reinforced wood.

“Open the door, Claire,” he ordered quietly.

Claire didn't hesitate to draw back the dead bolt and lift the guard chain. But her earlier uneasiness quickly grew into full-fledged disappointment when the impassioned lover, she imagined sweeping her off her feet, stepped into her hallway and halted in horrified disbelief.

“What the....” His tawny eyes surveyed the circle of thirty-nine flickering candles with a look that progressed from open incredulity to worldly reserve before they lifted to meet hers in bland inquiry. “Have I come at an awkward time? Are you . . . entertaining?”

Pride turning her embarrassment into anger, Claire gave her front door a shove and let it slam shut. “Every third Sunday is the Black Sabbath. Didn't you know?” she retorted, thrusting the dead bolt back into place. Let him interpret that as he pleased. If he didn't already know what she was up to, it wouldn't be long before he'd figured it out for himself.

She turned to face him but his back was to her as he examined her black marble mortar.

Lifting a pinch of the pulverized contents left over from her sprinklings, he crushed them between his fingers and watched them float back into the bowl.

“Eye of newt?” he asked conversationally.

“Among other things,” she quipped back, still not certain whether it was coincidence or magic that had prompted his visit.

He set the bowl down and regarded her through narrowed eyes. “What other things?”

Though he'd posed the question in a tone of idle curiosity, Claire got the distinct impression his feelings were anything but idle. He was growing distinctly more annoyed by the minute.

Torn between her own vexation and chagrin, she pointed to her copy of Hazelcroft's. “It's all in there, if you must know.”

He stepped over the candles into the inner circle and glanced at the open page.

“A charm for summoning spirits,” he read aloud, his disapproval slowly turning to amusement, he flipped through the pages. “Just whom, may I ask, were you summoning?”

Feeling utterly foolish, and thoroughly disappointed, Claire snatched up her candle snuffer and began extinguishing the useless wax tapers. Dusk, midnight, dawn. Dusk, midnight, dawn.

She was reaching for the tenth candle when Germaine grabbed her wrist. Not hard, but firm enough so she couldn't pull free.

“Who, Claire?” he persisted gently.

“You, damn you! I was summoning you!” she confessed, embarrassment stinging her cheeks.

He released her wrist. “Not that I wish to dispute your methods, but wouldn't it have been easier to use the phone?”

With a small cry of fury, Claire grabbed the nearest unbreakable item, a thin volume of love poems. Realizing she was letting her emotion rule her actions, but too angry to care, she drew her arm back and threw it at his head with every ounce of strength she had.

“Your number is unlisted!” she cried. Narrowly escaping recapture, she ran to her set-in bookshelf and picked up a volume of Shakespearean sonnets. Throwing it next, she followed it with her complete collection of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Byron, Keats and Shelly, not noticing he was catching each literary work and setting it down before she fired off the next one.

“You didn't give me your address,” she accused, “and since I didn't wish to begin any 'ugly rumors,' I couldn't ask anyone for it.” Having finished her meager supply of poets, she went on to pommel him next with her collection of playwrights--alphabetically.

Albee, Allen, Ayckburn . . . “You stopped coming to the theater, you refused to visit me backstage, and you probably wouldn't have answered my calls even if I did have your precious, secret, unlisted, phone number!”

She was just reaching for her hard bound copy of Hamilton Deane's version of Dracula, when Germaine plucked it out of her grasp and placed it back on its shelf with care.

Claire wanted to hurt him. To beat her fists against his chest and scream. But when he drew her into his arms, he disarmed her more effectively than if he'd set all her books out of her reach.

“I'm sorry,” he murmured apologetically. “I was wrong.”

“Damned straight you were,” she agreed, her heated cheeks pressing against his light gray turtleneck sweater. Lulled by the feeling of security Claire felt whenever he held her close, she began to doubt if she'd ever know and accept the full extent of his abilities.

Accepting his proffered handkerchief, she sniffled lightly and said, “You may scoff at my methods, but at least they work.” When he didn't answer her, she raised her head and gazed up at him. “They did work, didn't they?”

“Perhaps,” he answered evasively.

Drying her eyes, she asked, “What does 'perhaps' mean?”

His eyes twinkling, he placed an arm firmly about her waist. A precaution, no doubt, meant to keep her from reaching again toward the bookcase. “Actually, I heard rumors you were frequenting some rather unsavory establishments, and I grew concerned.”

“You never heard me call out to you?”

“I didn't say that. If I were being totally honest, I'd have to admit I knew you were looking for me, only....”

“Only, you didn't want to see me.” When he didn't deny it, she pulled free of his embrace. She couldn't force him to want her anymore than she could force him to save her brother. Realizing she'd gain nothing from begging, Claire fought to hold onto her dignity. Tomorrow she could initiate a search for another vampire who was less averse to her charms. Except she didn't want another vampire. She wanted this one, only he didn't seem to want her.

“Well, don't let me keep you,” she whispered finally. “I'm sure you're a very busy man.”

“I said I was wrong, Claire. And it wasn't that I didn't want to see you, I merely thought it best I keep my distance--to protect you.”

“Protect me? From what?”

“From me and the darker desires I have for you.”

That admission caused Claire's heart to flutter uncertainly in her chest. Forcing herself to

appear unaffected, she murmured, "In case it has escaped your attention, sir, I'm no longer a child. I can assure you that I am fully capable of handling any and all desires you may have for me."

"That's good to know, for I fear summoning me here tonight has already sealed your fate."

A little discomfited by the darkness of his prophetic statement despite her skepticism over its sincerity, Claire hastily straightened her disheveled hair and clothing with her fingers. "If that's the case, perhaps we should take a moment for some refreshment?"

He gave her a wry smile. "Thank you, no."

"Don't look so smug, St. Justine," she called back on her way to the kitchen. "I know your limitations, and took them into full consideration when I made my purchases."

When Germaine followed her, Claire opened the refrigerator door and proudly displayed the eight bags of blood she'd procured from the neighborhood blood bank.

"They're clean," she informed him. "I told the attendant that I was conducting a pre-med work study at Columbia on the different clotting aspects of each type. When he started to tell me it was against their policy to give out blood to individuals, I offered him money, but I think I got taken."

"How much did he want?" he asked, picking up one of the burgundy red plastic bags.

"Seventy-five for each, but the ABs. They were a hundred."

"You were taken," he pronounced, carefully replacing the bag back on its shelf.

Claire allowed herself an inward sigh. "Well, I can't take them back, so pick your poison. I've got a positive and negative for each blood group."

When he hesitated, Claire sensed she'd made another mistake--a big one. "What'd I do now?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all," he assured, selecting the O positive bag. "This'll be fine."

She took the bag from his hand and shut the refrigerator door. She'd wanted to appear nonchalant and blasé when she served him, but she felt more like a clumsy ghoul. She didn't even know how to open the damn thing.

Laying the bag on her white kitchen counter, she reached for a pair of scissors. "Is there any special way you do this?"

His lips twitched slightly. "I usually just use my teeth."

Paling, she gave him an agonized look. "This is all very amusing for you, isn't it?"

His expression guileless, he professed innocence with a casual lift of his shoulders.

Ignoring him, Claire held the bag between her thumb and forefinger. She snipped the tubing below the small metal clamp, but had to close it again with her fingers to keep the

blood from spilling out all over her counter top.

“How do you like it served?” she asked between clamped teeth. “In a glass, or...”

He stepped behind her and placed his fingers over hers. “I’ll do this, Claire.”

“No, I’m fine. Shall I get a glass?”

“No need,” he answered smoothly. “The intravenous line makes an excellent straw.” At her soft cry of despair, he drew her against him. “Shh. It’s all right. I’ll get the glass. Just sit down and let me see to it.”

Her knees weak and her stomach queasy, Claire gave in and sat at her kitchen’s small counter. She couldn’t do it. She thought she could, but now she realized just how naive she’d been, and she began to have second thoughts about the course she’d set for herself and Robert.

Claire watched him tip nearly half the contents of the bag into a large wineglass and set it in the microwave. Of course, he’d want it warm--ninety-eight point six no doubt. She could see herself greeting him at the door now. “Hi, Hon. Have a bad night at the graveyard? Here, let me warm up your supper. We’re having AB negative again tonight, your favorite!”

She shuddered and lowered her face to her hands. “I’ve made a real mess of things, haven’t I?” she asked when the microwave dinged.

“Not at all. What you did was incredibly brave and considerate. Thank you,” he murmured, retrieving his glass from the microwave.

“But it wasn’t right, was it?”

He replaced the retied bag in the refrigerator and presented her with a glass of chilled white wine. “You did nothing wrong, Claire,” he assured her, setting the wine near her elbow. He reached out to lightly touch her hair and a tiny shudder coursed through Claire’s body. Germaine, the blood, her plan, everything seemed unnatural to her now. Germaine lowered his hand and sat on the stool next to hers, facing her. “As I said once before, it’s all a matter of perspective. To us, blood isn’t merely a food or a drink, it’s our whole existence--our sole means of survival. Only through the act of sharing our blood can we procreate, and for us the taking of blood is far more intimate and passionate than mortal lovemaking ever could be.

“We drink from bags or glasses, not out of choice, but because our preferences aren’t always available. And we don’t classify our choices by blood type, but by individuals. Living, breathing, mortals, who wish to share their life’s blood with us. It’s an act of sharing, and a gift of love.”

When Claire finally looked at him, he smiled. “I’m sorry if I teased you a little, but choosing from a pile of bags on a refrigerator shelf was a little too cold blooded--even for me.”

“I didn't realize--”

“I know you didn't, which makes your gift all the more special. You wanted me to feel at home and comfortable, although the act of seeing to my needs made you squeamish. I understand completely, and I'm humbled by the lengths you've gone to merely to welcome me in your home.”

When Claire offered him a weak smile, he pressed the glass of wine into her hand and took hold of her elbow. “Come on, let's get out of the kitchen, shall we?”

She let him lead her into the living room, which both of them stared at in dismay.

“That's going to be hell to get out of the carpet,” he remarked with a grimace, giving her a gentle push toward her bedroom. Suddenly filled with misgivings, Claire balked.

“What?” he asked when she stopped mid-stride.

“Perhaps we should stay out here. I could blow out the remaining candles, and it wouldn't take but a few seconds to rearrange the furniture.” At his dubious expression, she frantically looked about her. “What about the dining room? It's clean.”

His lips curved into a decidedly predatory grin “Perhaps the dining room would be more appropriate. I am feeling a bit hungry.” At her stifled cry, he bent toward her. “I am neither a rapist, nor a thief. I would never take anything from you that you did not want me to have--even if I were starving to death.” He held up his glass. “And you've gone to great pains to insure that unhappy event will not occur any time soon. All right?”

At her nod, he guided her into the bedroom but stopped just short of entering. Confident she was too distracted by her own thoughts to notice his momentary absence, he turned back toward the living room and drew upon his preternatural talents. Moving his hand in a single, quick sweep, he created a short-lived burst of air that extinguished all the candles. Then stepping inside Claire's room, he quietly shut the door behind him.

CHAPTER NINE

Claire perched on the edge of her bed and sipped her wine, pretending she found nothing at all unusual in having a gentleman join her in her bedroom to drink blood. Inwardly, however, she shuddered at the knowledge. Telling herself she was being foolish, she tried not to think about what he was drinking, but her brain remained stuck on the image of her sitting propped up in bed with a straw in her neck.

After a moment, Germaine set down his glass and regarded her through eyes that seemed to pierce through to her private thoughts. "Why were you trying to contact me, Claire?"

Claire thought it a reasonable question, but that didn't make it any easier to answer. "Several reasons," she murmured uneasily. "I thought, after what happened at the theater, that we'd...." Her nerve failing her, her voice faltered.

"We'd what? Be lovers?" he offered helpfully. When she shrugged uncertainly, he asked, "What about Harry?"

Claire's stomach twisted guiltily at the reminder, but she feigned an air of nonchalance. "What about him?"

"From the way he's insinuated himself into your life, I would have thought things were rather serious between you."

Harry had made no secret of his intentions, but Claire had always avoided the discussion. First came college, then her career, neither of which Harry had fully approved of, and finally her mother's illness. Despite his personal reservations over her choices, Harry had stayed by her side, confident that she'd eventually settle down and marry him. It didn't ease Claire's mind any to admit if Robert weren't so ill, Harry might have been right. "We've known each other a long time," she admitted. "He's been a good friend, but...."

"But what? He's proved less than satisfactory in bed?"

Claire's cheeks burned. "No. I mean, I don't look at him in that way."

"In other words, you don't love him." When she shook her head, he asked, "Is he aware of your feelings?"

Her blush intensified. "I've tried not to encourage him, only...."

"Only you feel grateful for all the help and support he's offered throughout Marguerite's illness?" At her uncertain nod, Germaine asked, "What about me? Did your sense of indebtedness impel you to seek me out as well?"

"Of course not! My reasons for contacting you tonight had nothing to do with gratitude."

"Just what were your reasons, Claire? You look ready to scream if I make even the smallest move toward you, so it can't be the promise of physical love that you seek."

You've resisted my every suggestion, so it can't be my advice that you're after. You're clearly put off by the notion that I drink human blood to survive, so it can't be morbid curiosity that prompted your mini seance. So why did you try to contact me?" When she didn't answer him, he stood. "Well, whatever your reasons were, it appears they no longer are. Therefore, I think I'd best go before we both make a mistake."

"No!" Claire rose, but she couldn't quite bring herself to touch him. Not as long as her apprehensions overpowered both her desire and her vow. Admittedly, a secret part of her still longed to experience the intense physical passion of his vampiric touch, but a mental image of him sipping from her neck the same way he casually sipped a pint of O positive from a glass made the small hairs on her arms and neck stand on end.

He looked at her as if he knew exactly what she was thinking, then turned and strode into the living room.

Claire followed him. She was still struggling to overcome her squeamishness when he slipped on his jacket. A wave of despair washed over her.

"What if we took things more slowly? We don't need to . . . be intimate . . . on our first night together, do we? Couldn't you simply hold me until I fall asleep?"

His eyes regarded her with a burning intensity that both thrilled and terrified her. "I am a vampire, not a eunuch, Claire. If you want to cuddle something, I suggest you go out and buy a puppy or a stuffed animal."

"I thought--"

"No, you didn't, and that's the problem. I can't ignore what I am, any more than you can. I may not be mortal, but I'm still a man, with a man's hopes, fears and desires. And my desire for you has grown too fierce for me to simply lay beside you like a big brother. Therefore, I wish you a pleasant good night." Opening the door, he walked out.

"Wait!" Claire called after him, but he continued toward the elevator without stopping.

Indecisive, she stood in her open doorway, watching him walk out of her life. In her heart, Claire knew if she let him go that she'd regret it for many years to come. There was nothing evil or ghoulish about Germaine St. Justine. He was kinder, gentler, and more considerate than most mortal men she knew. If only . . .

Her mind made up, Claire clutched her robe about her and ran after him.

The elevator doors opened just as she reached him. He stood looking straight ahead without a flicker of emotion in his expression until she placed her fingers in his hand, then his eyes bore down on her with a look so hot that her breath caught in her throat.

"Please," she softly beseeched him. "Don't humiliate me any more than I've already humiliated myself this night." Gripping his fingers, she gave his hand a gentle tug. His flesh felt cool and firm to her touch, but not unnatural. He let her lead him back to her apartment, but he made no move to unzip his leather jacket.

When she shut the door again, he remained where he was--watching and waiting. Claire knew he suspected she and Harry were lovers. Though it would undoubtedly please him to learn that they weren't, as protective as he was of her she doubted he'd be pleased to hear what she was going to say next. Only something warned her she'd best be as honest as possible with him from the start.

"It isn't what you are that has given me second thoughts, at least not entirely. It's what I am. I was hesitant to tell you, except now...."

He propped one shoulder against the door and slid his hands into his pockets. A picture of deliberate nonchalance in direct contrast to the dark glow in his eyes. Reminding herself that looks and words couldn't kill, Claire softly admitted, "I'm a virgin."

Other than a slight pursing of his lips, Germaine displayed no reaction to her confession. "I see," he answered in a deadly-soft voice. "Give me one good reason why."

"Why what?" she asked hesitantly. "Why us? Why now? Or why you, and why not Harry?"

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't take you into the next room and spend the next ten minutes applying my hand to your backside the way your father should have years ago."

Rather than frighten her, his chauvinistic attitude merely angered her. "I'm not seeking another father, St. Justine, mine did very well--thank you anyway."

"Really? It seems to me that you've wrapped both your father and your boyfriend around your little finger. I suspect neither one of them has ever denied your slightest wish. No doubt, you believe you can bring any man to heel in the same manner."

"That's not true!"

"No, it's not. I am neither George, nor Harry, Claire, and I will not be wound around any part of you. I am domineering, autocratic and extremely possessive. Get involved with me, and I will not permit you to see anyone else--even Harry," he warned in a low, possessive purr that sent a tingle of awareness racing down Claire's spine.

"Are you insisting I give up all my friends?"

"No. You may visit with anyone you wish, as long as you do not take them to bed. And I mean that figuratively as well as literally."

"I've already admitted there's been no one else, so why are you saying this to me?"

"For the very same reason you hesitated to tell me of your innocence. Making love with me will not be the same as making love with a mortal, but it will be making love. Some differences are obvious, some subtle, and some you already know. I can never give you children. Harry could--perhaps. With me, you'd remain a virgin--at least technically. With Harry, you wouldn't--at least technically. Harry would grow old with you--I will not."

For a moment his expression allowed her a glimpse into the darkness enshrouding him, and she discovered his youthful mien was a paltry shield against the sinister slice of Father Time's scythe. Claire feared that darkness more than anything else about him. It beckoned her to join him and ease the ache of his loneliness. Then his eyes locked with hers and she gasped as the yearning within those golden depths reached out to touch her like a caress. "As to the things I can give you that Harry cannot...." he continued in a low, mesmerizing tone. "The bond we share is already strong. If we mated the link between us would be ten times stronger. We'd be able to communicate through the strength of our minds alone, even if we were miles apart."

"You'd be able to read my private thoughts?" she asked, a little unnerved by the pulse of ancient power she felt emanating from him.

"I don't know." His answer was filled with all the uncertainty Claire felt. "Normally I can only receive strong emotions or thoughts sent to me directly, but our bond is already so intense, I'm not sure. It's possible, I suppose, if your thoughts were allied with emotion."

"Will I be able read yours?" she asked, her voice betraying her uneasiness.

"I've had more practice at hiding my thoughts and feelings than you, but that too may be possible. There is a downside, however. Once we mate, you'll be mine, body and soul. That part of the legend is true, I'm afraid. The mortal is at the complete mercy of the vampire's whims."

Claire felt as if a hand had closed around her throat. "Are you saying I'd be your slave?"

"If I wished it, yes."

The steely certainty in his voice chilled her and she turned away, only to realize he was offering her both a reason and the opportunity to politely back out. He had been her mother's lover, but she clearly had never been his slave. It was he who'd scurried to her whenever Marguerite needed him. Understanding what he was trying to do gave Claire the confidence she needed to stand firm.

"I have one last question," she quietly informed him.

"Ask it."

"You tell me I may know no other men while we are together, does the same apply to you, or are you allowed to be with as many women as your appetite demands?"

"As long as you live, I shall take no other mortal in hunger or desire. You alone will sustain all my needs."

Claire wasn't sure whether she felt reassured or intimidated by that prospect. When she slowly turned back to face him, he added, "Although our union may not bear the sanctity of the church, to me it is even more binding. I will love, cherish and protect you until the day you die, but on my terms and by my rules, which I will expect you to obey without

question or argument.”

“Isn't that expecting an awful lot?”

“From you? No doubt. However, since I am responsible for the well being and care of ten others, it is not a subject open to dispute. Furthermore, as I have no wish to endanger my group with an even greater risk of exposure, I must also insist that you be discreet in telling others about us.”

Claire hadn't considered that others might be involved. Then again, consideration of the consequences had played little part in her decision-making of late. “Just what are your terms and rules?” she asked while a part of her still wondered if she'd rather not know.

“One, that you never reveal our true state to anyone on the outside. Two, that you avoid all mention of our relationship to the press. And three, that you obey any direct commands I may give you--even when you are opposed to them.”

“Are you saying I will still possess the ability to defy you if I wish?”

He smiled briefly before his expression sobered to an earnest intensity. “As long as your well-being or other lives are not in jeopardy, I will not subliminate your will to mine.”

Grasping the significance of his promise, Claire regarded him evenly for a moment.

“Like you did the night of the party when you ordered me to the hospital? Or perhaps the night you tricked me into agreeing to Dr. Willis's sedative when you asked if you could kiss me?”

He was human enough to look chagrined at her accusations, but the moment was fleeting at best. “As I said, as long as your well-being is not in jeopardy.”

Realizing this was one argument she couldn't win, Claire accepted his restrictions with a nod. “All right then, I agree. What else?”

“There is nothing else, Claire. It's your choice. You sent out the invitation, and I accepted. Now you have to decide if your invitation was extended in error.”

Despite her misgivings, Claire recognized the real error would be to let him go. She had come too far to turn back now. Raising her chin, she dropped her shoulders and let her robe slide down her back. Although his pose remained guardedly detached, Claire could feel his awareness crackle about her like a summer's night storm. It filled her with the necessary boldness she needed to reach for the small white bows at her shoulders. Swallowing the lump of nervous tension that had formed in her throat, she released the ribbons, but was unable to suppress a tiny shiver as her virginal-white gown slid down her body to the floor in a soft whisper of surrender.

Germaine's eyes flamed to life with desire, but he clamped his lips together.

“Perhaps it is you who has changed his mind,” she whispered, her hands and arms rising to shield her nakedness.

“No,” he murmured hoarsely. Stepping forward, he reached out and swept her into his arms. “Never,” he vowed with dark promise, his lips claiming hers in a kiss that robbed her of all thought as he carried her into her room.

He laid her with gentle care on the satin comforter, then shrugging out of his jacket he stretched out beside her. She felt the cool brush of his fingers on her breasts, making her nipples tingle and swell. His hands grew warm as he continued to touch her, and he touched her everywhere in a way that left her aching for more. His fingers and lips worked magic on her body until her blood was liquid fire and her muscles coiled with urgent eagerness. Her initial nervousness gone, she wanted to feel him against her, all of him, except he still wore his damned sweater and pants.

Freeing her mouth from his, she protested, “I want to touch you. Why aren't you--”

“Hush,” he ordered, kissing her with a silent promise of later. She was surprised, not by his ability to speak directly into her mind, but that the sensation was reassuring. It was as if they shared a link with each other that no one else could. It was private, intimate, and deeply erotic.

Erotic and addictive.

Although a part of Claire realized she was behaving wantonly, she was too consumed with wanting him to care. She thirsted for the taste of him with a longing that would not be denied. She craved to envelop herself in his clean, rainy scent until it became her own. She hungered for his gentle caresses, certain she would die of desire if he denied her.

So, when his fingers finally moved between her legs, Claire opened to him with eager anticipation, then whimpered in painful pleasure as he stroked her desire into a raging need. Her inner muscles taut and trembling from an almost unbearable tension, she arched her hips and neck in a silent plea for him to take her. Except when he moved over her, he merely kissed the vulnerable spot beneath her ear before he started a trail of kisses from the valley between her breasts to her navel.

Consumed by the sweetest torment imaginable, Claire clutched the creamy-soft cashmere encasing Germaine's arms to hold him to her. “I'm ready for you, aren't you going to--”

“You read too many horror stories. Just relax, Claire,” he murmured before lowering his head between her thighs.

“No!” she gasped, grabbing fistfuls of his hair in protest, but the rhythmic stroking of his tongue soon had her gasping for a totally different reason.

Her entire body quivering with involuntary tremors of arousal, she released his head to grab a handful of the bedclothes. Poised on the brink of what promised to be the most glorious climax she'd ever known, Claire felt him gently pierce her flesh.

The ecstasy she'd experienced when he'd pricked her finger was intensified a thousand

times over. It was as if every pleasure center in her body was being stroked. She wanted to writhe and scream with passion, yet she couldn't move. Consumed by conflicting sensations, she feared and craved each one as she soared while she plummeted, became whole and replete as she shattered into a thousand exquisite pieces, burned with an insatiable desire while she shivered uncontrollably with an inconceivable rapture. All at once, separately, and together.

Nothing was right, yet everything was wondrously perfect.

She floated in the thin corridor between life and death in an ecstasy so sweet it neared agony. Then the last vestiges of her control were swept away. Reality became surreal as time stretched immeasurably and her will ceased to be her own.

Her body experienced countless orgasms, each more powerful than the last, yet she was denied even a moment's breath before the next one claimed her. All she could do was ride each wave of the incredible, mind-robbing pleasure until she wondered if she would die of the onslaught of exquisite sensations. At that very moment, Germaine carefully eased himself from her. Even then, she gripped his shoulders, not wanting him to stop, wanting it to go on and on, until . . .

Finding her voice at last, Claire managed to release one, long, keening wail of primitive rapture before a dark mist enshrouded her and she lost consciousness.

She awoke to the erotic sensation of something wet and slightly rough sliding along the length of her arm. Germaine bent over her. His eyes and smile warm, he rubbed the cool, wet terry cloth over her stomach and Claire moaned with pleasure. Her flesh was alive--hot and tingling, and the slightest touch made it quiver with expectation.

"Easy," he murmured, continuing to wash her legs and thighs. "I know your skin is sensitive right now, but a cool sponging helps."

She looked at him then, and noticed he was thoroughly and magnificently nude. Reaching up, she gently touched the light sprinkling of hair on his chest when he ordered her to lift her knees. She obeyed without thought or question only to gasp at the feel of the cloth rubbing her. The sensation was overwhelming. Her fingers clutched his arms and she climaxed again, almost instantly, the intensity of it leaving her awed and frightened.

"What's happening to me?" she asked, her body still trembling from the aftermath.

"Nothing. You're simply recovering from your first loving with a vampire."

"Will it always be like this?"

"Lord, I hope not. I'm not sure even I could take it if it were always this intense."

Seeking reassurance for an experience that was as alien to her as it was wondrous, Claire gazed at him with uncertainty. "Was it as pleasurable for you as it was for me?"

"More so. Linked as we are, my pleasure is doubled through yours. Your feelings are

extended to me directly through your thoughts and body.”

Realizing he felt everything she did brought a blush to Claire's cheeks. “I had no idea....”

He regarded her through eyes that still held traces of a lingering hot brilliance. “Nor did I.”

Emboldened by his admitted satisfaction, she ran her hands over his smooth shoulders. They were warm and pliant beneath her fingers, yet solid beneath. It was as if she stroked finely made porcelain covered with lightly padded silk.

“Can we do it more than once?”

“If I'm careful, we can make love several times a night. The danger isn't in the frequency, but in the amount I take from you.”

“You have a beautiful body,” she confessed in a whisper of awe. “It's shaped like a statue of a Greek god.”

“Thank you. But I'm not the one they've made statues of. Marcus is.”

Claire shuddered lightly at the realization that Marcus's love of the theater wasn't the only similarity he shared with Germaine. For some reason that made the other man seem all that more dangerous, and she shivered. “I don't believe your friend cares for me very much.”

“Don't let Marcus's warrior attitude fool you. He's a great admirer of yours.”

“Yes, I could tell by the way he fawned all over me at our first meeting.”

Germaine laughed. “Marcus doesn't like to be caught off guard, and your impromptu visit nearly did that. Truth is, I think he was privately cheering for you, but since his first duty was to me, he couldn't show it.” With a casual flick of his wrist, he tossed the washcloth into her bathroom sink from across the room, then lay down beside her.

Crediting her lover's uncanny accuracy with a washcloth more to luck than skill, Claire ran her hands along his shoulders and down the length of his arms. “What about you, Germaine St. Justine? What are your private feelings toward me?”

“Like Marcus, I'm a little stunned by your tenacity. With all the men you have to choose from, I'm still not certain why you chose me.”

Claire gazed at him surprise. He was one of the most alluring men she had ever met. She imagined him fighting off women, not wondering why one might be attracted to him. The fact that he seemed unsure about it made him seem all that more exceptional to her. “I haven't dated a lot,” she confessed a little sheepishly, “but I have been propositioned a few times. Most of the men I've known viewed me as some sort of conquest. I was a relative unknown, hungry for work, so they assumed I wouldn't chance risking my career by refusing them.

“I hate to admit it, but I thought you were going to be one of those men, and I was

scared. I didn't want to lose the role of Lucy, but I wasn't about to sleep with you to keep it. Little did I know how wrong I was. You not only didn't use your position to get me into your bed, you did everything you could to keep me out of it.”

“So, you chose me because I'd injured your pride.”

“No,” she assured him with a wry laugh at the notion. “I chose you because you were caring and gentle, yet you made me feel alive and very feminine. To Harry, I'm little more than a precious commodity being held in escrow until I've fully matured. He likes his relationships simple. Everything in black and white where he can track developments on paper and forecast future growth with certainty. You view me first as a woman, secondly as an actress, and thirdly as an actress who happens to be starring in your play. You make your decisions based on instinct rather than logic, and you don't try to make people fit inside tiny round holes like square pegs. I'd say I chose you because you're one of the few people I've met who didn't want to change me into something I'm not.”

He rewarded her with a devastatingly sensual grin. “You've a point there. I don't think I'd ever want to change you.”

Possessed by a nearly irresistible urge to keep touching him, Claire trailed her fingers along the length of his firmly muscled arm to his chest. “May I ask you a question now?”

“You may ask me anything you wish, anytime.”

“Why did you insist upon staying dressed when we made love?”

He laid back against the pillow and placed one hand behind his head. “When a mortal dies and is reborn a vampire, his or her body goes through many changes that are not unlike the infancy period of a mortal child. For instance, the growth of the canine teeth into fangs can be likened to the process of cutting new teeth. It's a painful phase that often makes the new vampire irritable since it hurts to drink, but the only thing that can soothe the discomfort is blood.

“Another change is the rapid loss of body hair which can be a terrifying and unsettling experience. When the shedding cycle is complete, all that remains is the hair the fledgling possessed on his scalp at the time of death, along with his eyebrows and lashes. The rest of the body is smooth and clear--with most scars and blemishes gone as if they never existed. The skin is as pure and soft as a newborn babe's. To some, the clearing up of a bad complexion is almost worth dying for.

“At any rate, a newly made vampire looks very similar to those ancient Greek statues you alluded to earlier. Lovely to look at, but a little unnerving to have crawl in bed beside you.”

“But you have hair now--on your chest, arms and legs,” Claire pointed out as she enmeshed her fingers within the springy curls evident upon his chest.

“Yes, but only because of you. Once the vampire seeks human companionship and

begins to make love again, the hair starts to grow back. For women, the growth is softer, almost downy in texture, but if a man continues to seek mortal companionship, he may even need to shave again. Once the relationship ends, however, the process reverses itself.”

She gaped at him in astonishment. “Are you saying you haven't . . . How long has it been?”

“Your mother was the last woman I loved, Claire, and I haven't been with her since she married your father. It's been twenty-three years.”

As the full significance of his admission sunk in, Claire turned onto her stomach to gauge his expression more closely. “You never intended to get involved again, did you?”

“No. However, you managed to change my mind.”

Resting her head on his chest, Claire promised herself that she would never let him regret his decision. She would give him all he desired and more.

They made love again--twice. Each time was as wondrous as the first, though Claire no longer fainted in reaction--perhaps because Germaine took care to limit the amount he took from her.

Feeling radiantly alive and thoroughly loved, Claire rose up to kiss him again when she felt his manhood stir against her leg. Her blue eyes lifted to meet his gaze in surprise.

“That's another gift from you,” he answered. “It is also a signal that I've taken all that I should for one evening.”

“Why? I mean I feel fine.”

“Good, and now you need to rest, or you'll really feel the effects come tomorrow evening, and I have other plans for you then.”

She smiled, but settled quietly in the curve of his arm. Trailing her fingers lazily across his chest, she asked, “How much more blood would you need to make love to me like a mortal?”

“Too much to even consider it.”

Raising her head, she looked into his eyes and was surprised to find they were now a rich brown instead of gold. “Your eyes have changed color,” she remarked uneasily.

“If you look closely, you'll notice my entire body has gained a more natural coloring.”

“What other changes have taken place?” she asked feeling a little chilled and wondering if she'd left a window open.

Germaine drew her close to his body, which was now warmer than hers, and wrapped her in her comforter. “I am stronger, and far less vulnerable to sunlight than I was before. And the link we share has intensified to a point that distance and time will never weaken it.”

When her teeth began to chatter, he tilted her chin up and examined her more closely. Muttering a curse, he tossed back the covers and got out of bed.

“Don't leave me,” she pleaded, uncertain what was happening to her.

“It's the blood loss, Claire,” he advised turning on her electric blanket and tucking it around her. “I took too much. Now I want you to lie still while I go into the kitchen for a moment.”

The mere thought of him leaving her made Claire tremble so hard the bed shook. “No,” she protested weakly. “I'll be fine, just stay here and--”

Quiet, he commanded mutely. When she fell reluctantly but obediently silent, he said, “I'll only be a moment, and I'll talk to you the entire time we're apart. All right?”

The moment she nodded, he left the room, but continued to send her thought messages. Most were humorous, commenting on the state of her living room and his ineptitude in the “womanly arts” of house cleaning. A few were reassuring, but the ones that warmed her more than any other were the sensual, erotic love poems he sent to her in picture images.

Still, when he returned a few minutes later, it seemed to Claire that he'd been gone forever. He carried a glass of what looked like a strawberry-orange drink.

Helping her sit up, he cautioned, “I made it quite strong, so I want you to take it slowly--one sip at a time.”

She did as he directed and found the concoction, whatever it was, to be deliciously sweet. She tasted the orange, but the other flavoring was illusive--sometimes strawberry, sometimes cherry, sometimes a flavor that she could only compare to Ambrosia--nectar of the Gods.

“What is it?” she asked when he pulled back the glass after she'd only taken a few sips.

“A homemade concoction adapted from an old family recipe,” he answered, watching her so closely that Claire imagined him easing into her, warming her like an invisible blanket.

She closed her eyes and savored the feeling. “I can recognize the orange juice, but I can't quite place the other ingredient. It tastes sweet, but....”

“It's also highly addictive,” he added, putting the glass to her lips again. “Just one more sip, then we'll wait awhile.”

She was obeying his instructions when it occurred to her what it was he was giving her. Wrapping her fingers around his hand, she tried to draw the glass closer, but he pulled it back. “It's your blood, isn't it?” she asked. “If I drink enough, I will become one of you, won't I?”

“Yes.”

“How much does it take?”

“More than is in this glass. Now, lie down and be quiet.”

“If it's not dangerous for me to finish what's in the glass, why don't you let me do it?”

“I didn't say it wasn't dangerous, Claire, merely that it wasn't enough to change you.”

“What's the danger, then?”

“It could make you even more dependent on me. So dependent, your body would require a 'daily fix' so to speak. This isn't Peter Pan's medicine, Claire. Being with me is far more dangerous than flying out of your bedroom window. Each time I come to you, your life is at risk. If I love you too long, or too hard, I could kill you. The problem is that both of us are going to want me to do exactly that.”

She shivered slightly, but his words, not the aftereffects of their lovemaking caused it. Suddenly, she felt unaccountably tired and realized he was sending thoughts to lull her asleep. She wanted to tell him not to do that, to ask him more about his powers, but her eyes closed and her questions vanished as she fell into a dark, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER TEN

Nine a.m. the next morning, Claire was pushing her vacuum cleaner about with grim determination. It didn't improve her mood any to discover Germaine had been right: "eye of newt" was hell on white carpets. Nor was a pentagram on her living room carpet something she could leave for the cleaning woman to handle. Gossip was always a liability in her profession, but the press would jump at something like this quicker than a chorus line gypsy would leap at the chance for a lead role. And Variety's headline of Drac's Doll Digs Devils, made her push the vacuum even harder.

Claire stopped momentarily to wipe her damp forehead with the back of her hand, then continued with her task, confident she would win in the end, just as she always had before.

Nothing had changed, yet everything was different.

Daylight hadn't cleared things up in her mind--it only muddled them. What had seemed right, nearly perfect, beneath the silvery enchantment of the moon seemed almost unnatural when examined under the sobering brightness of the sun.

Chiding herself for whining about the way she'd made her own bed, Claire knelt down to scrub at the nap of the carpet and winced at the sharp pain in her groin. She'd awakened feeling rested, alive, and terribly sore. More sore than the day she fell on her high school balance beam.

Giving her pants a hard yank to ease her discomfort, she continued her vacuuming. He'd left his mark on her. She hadn't expected that, though she doubted she would have objected last night if he'd branded her. This morning, however, she was no longer adrift in a thrall of passion. This morning she'd gazed at herself in the mirror feeling isolated, in pain and terrified that she'd lost more than her innocence last night.

She was afraid she'd lost her identity and free will.

Consumed by an almost overwhelming need to cling and be reassured, Claire had lain in bed for over an hour before she took herself in hand. He looked like any other man she'd seen asleep, except for two things. The first was his position. He slept on his back with his hands folded over his stomach. That alone would not be remarkable, perhaps, if it wasn't for the second thing--his unusual stillness. She never saw him move, not even to breathe, much less snore. The difference was subtle enough that it might have escaped her notice if she hadn't already known the truth about him. Such knowledge only served as an eerie reminder that the same man who'd brought her to those mind-robbing, screaming climaxes throughout the night, and lay in quiet repose beside her in the morning was, in fact, dead. A wave of panic consumed her. Her every instinct demanded she get away as quickly as possible, except whenever she tried to leave him, even just to go to the bathroom, her stomach cramped so hard that she broke out into a cold sweat. Still, she'd done it--for her own sake.

After Claire had showered, dressed and drank her first sip of coffee, her pain and panic had eased enough that she'd felt a little more in control. At least capable, if not eager, of tackling the living room. She'd picked up and thrown away the candles, grateful they had somehow burned themselves out before they'd gutted, removed all the dripped wax and retrieved the handkerchief she'd used to single out Germaine in her incantation. Then she'd attacked the carpet.

The exercise helped, slowly restoring Claire's natural optimism until her earlier insecurities seemed preposterous and silly. Her life needn't change simply because . . .

Claire. Her name echoed in her mind like a ghostly lure. She held her breath. Perhaps he'd go back to sleep. Perhaps . . .

Claire . . . Come back here, please. Now.

She fought against the immediate urge she had to obey him. She needed to be strong. Independent. Free to make her own decisions, her own choices . . .

Claire, I'm really not in the mood to play "catch the maid" right now. Just leave the vacuuming until later and come back to bed. Please.

Fighting the unnatural pull of his mind, Claire closed her eyes while her body trembled from the effort it took to disobey his summons. She never imagined that resisting him would be so difficult, but she was determined to try. Fighting back the only way she knew how, Claire positioned the vacuum over a new section of the pentagram. However, when she pushed the reluctant machine forward, it suddenly died. She flipped the foot pedal on and off and gave it an experimental shake. When that didn't work, she glanced over to see if the cord had become disconnected. It had. And from the irritated expression on the naked man idly waving it back and forth, the hapless cord was in jeopardy of losing its compact, three-pronged head.

"I wanted to finish the carpet," she explained guiltily, even as she mentally berated herself for her cowardice. "You were right. Witch's Brew is hell on plush pile carpeting."

"I can help with that, later. For now, I'd really like you to come back to bed."

She glanced about her. "But there's so much to do, and--"

"I sincerely hope you aren't a 'morning person', because if you are it will never work between us." When she made no reply, he dropped the cord. "I see."

Claire flinched at the finality of those two words, but lacked the courage to meet his gaze.

"Would you like me to leave?" he asked softly.

"No!" She drew a shaky breath, still terrified by the prospect of his leaving her. "I mean, there's no reason. Why don't you go back to bed and sleep while I finish this?"

"Because it doesn't work that way. I can't sleep if you're not slumbering peacefully at my

side. And I definitely can't sleep while you're pushing around that wounded elephant.”

“I'll vacuum later, then,” she promised as a now-familiar sickening feeling of panic began to build inside her. “I just need to finish cleaning the kitchen. There's a small bloodstain on the counter, and I want to bag up all the leftovers from--”

“In short, you will do just about anything to keep from lying next to me again.”

“It's not that, it's just....” She swallowed hard and charged on. “I need to be certain that I can still live my own life--apart from the time I share with you. That I'm still an individual of 'sound mind and free will.”

He nodded perfunctorily. “Very well, I'll get dressed.”

“But I don't want you to leave,” she insisted. His back already turned, he walked into her bedroom and shut the door.

Claire sank onto the sofa and fought her impulse to run after him and beg him to stay. Her stomach growled and she realized she was hungry, yet even the thought of eating made her stomach hurt again.

When he entered the living room dressed in his sweater and slacks, Claire had to bite her tongue to keep from begging him not to leave her. He looked so noble, so handsome, and so incredibly easy to lean on. Nevertheless, she had to prove this to herself. She had to be strong.

He stopped by one of the chairs and watched her for a moment before he crossed over and knelt before her. “Such uncertainties are not uncommon, Claire. You needn't worry. Your will is still very much your own.”

She shook her head in sharp denial. “I'm not nearly as sure about that as you are. I keep feeling as if I'll die if you leave me. And I mean that literally.”

“You won't die, I promise. But your desire to be with me so we can do things together--sleep, laugh, play, whatever--is not all that abnormal in mortal relationships, either. It's called love.” When she lifted her eyes to his, he added, “But even a strong emotional involvement doesn't always offset the awkwardness a couple experiences the morning after a night of intense, physical passion.”

“Is that all it is?” she asked, wanting, needing to believe.

“I'd say so, yes. At least I think that's it. Does the prospect of returning to bed with me fill you with disgust?”

“No,” she protested instantly. “Only....”

“Only that isn't what you want to do right now.”

“I don't know any more. Whenever you're close to me, I can't think very clearly.”

He smiled, then gently cupping her face in his hands, he kissed her. She met his kiss without reservation. When he drew back, he gave her a look that was both amused and

warmly intimate. "Good morning," he murmured.

She blushed at the absurdity. "Good morning."

"I like the way you blush. I like many things about you, Claire Daniels, but I don't like awakening alone. At least allow me the decency to wish you a pleasant day before you go off strangling wounded elks."

She smiled at his gentle teasing. "I thought it was an elephant."

"Whatever it was, it sounded in severe pain." When she stared down at her tightly entwined fingers, he said, "As I see it, we have three choices. We can attack this mess together, after you've had some breakfast, go back to bed and sleep for a few more hours, or I can leave."

Her chin jerked up at his last suggestion. "I really don't want you to leave, only I'm not very hungry, and if we go back to bed together, the last thing we'll do is sleep, and . . . And I can't do anything else with you right now."

"Why not?"

She shrugged, then added in a whisper, "Because it'll no doubt hurt me more than I already hurt now, and I'm sore enough as it is."

He sprang to his feet and grabbed her hand. "I knew I forgot something. Come on."

Claire balked. "Why? What are you going to do?"

"You'll see." He drew her back into the bedroom and shut the door. "Remove your sweats and underpants and get on the bed. Have you a pin?"

"A pin?" she squeaked in alarm.

"For me, not you. Where's your sewing kit?"

She pointed toward her dresser. "This really isn't necessary. I'm sure in time...."

He returned with a two-inch needle and motioned her onto the bed. "Vampire bites aren't something that time alone can heal, sweet Claire. You're going to have to trust me on this," he advised, giving her a lift up when she refused to move.

She tensed in alarm when he reached for the bottoms of her sweats. "No, I...."

"Here, hold this," he directed, handing her the pin, then, before she could even protest he had her panties down about her ankles, her knees raised and her legs parted. Ordering her to hold still, he gently examined her.

Unable to do much else, Claire lay back in embarrassed silence with the needle clutched between her thumb and forefinger. He'd not get that from her at least without a struggle.

"Hold the needle," he ordered, then with a quick jab he pricked his own finger. Even with her head slightly raised, Claire felt rather than saw him place a drop of his blood into each tiny hole.

She gave out a small gasp of surprise as a ripple of gentle warmth spread throughout her lower region. Within seconds the warmth changed to a cool tingle, then dissipated, and with it went all trace of her earlier discomfort.

She regarded Germaine with near amazement as questions ran through her mind. Her thoughts so distracting that she didn't even notice he was removing the rest of her clothing.

"I felt it, I saw you do it, yet I still can't believe it. What else can you do?"

"You mean like rub my stomach and pat my head at the same time?"

"No," she answered, exasperated that he chose that moment to pull her top over her head. "Your ability to heal, how extensive is it?"

"Not as extensive as I might wish at times."

His begrudgingly given admission hit her full force. "Oh-my-God! Ten years ago, Mother was given a highly experimental drug and she went into an immediate remission. Her condition improved so much that even the doctors believed they'd cured her." She stared at him in open amazement. The knowledge that Germaine could cure someone without transforming them was the answer to her prayers. "It was you, wasn't it? You gave her an infusion of your own blood!"

Unfastening her bra, he motioned her under the covers. She obeyed without hesitation and waited for him to get in beside her. When he did, he pulled her into his arms.

"Unfortunately, I did not succeed in curing her."

"You gave her ten more years of life, cancer free. I'd call that a success. But how were you able to do that without turning her, and why didn't you--" She sat up quickly and her head struck his chin. She winced at the pain, but didn't draw back when he reached up to rub the sore spot. "Those latest remissions," she continued, belatedly remembering to drag the sheets up to cover herself. "They were because of you, too? Weren't they?" When he didn't answer her, she knew she was right. "Why did you stop? You could have saved her."

Lowering his hand, he shook his head. "Believe me, Claire, if I could have saved her, I would have. I did all I could."

Claire didn't understand, but she very much wanted to. "It worked the first time," she insisted. "Why are you so sure it wouldn't have worked again?"

He sighed in a way that made her suspect she was taxing his patience again. "You aren't going to allow me any peace until I've explained the entire process, are you?"

Knowing she'd never be able to sleep until he'd answered all her questions, Claire offered him a tiny smile of apology.

He gave her a look, but went on to tell her how vampires not only had the power to take

and give life, they also possessed the ability to cure certain ailments and diseases. At least those carried through or involving the blood system. There were certain dangers in doing this, however, especially if the mortal drank the blood. But when the vampiric blood was applied externally, or given as an injection, the healing effects were still active without jeopardizing the individual's immortal soul. Yet, even that method wasn't infallible, as her mother's case had proved, and it possessed its own share of pitfalls.

In a quiet, somber voice, he related how they were all descendants from the ancients, godlike beings who once roamed the earth--worshipped by mortal men and women. Like most heirs, they inherited certain traits from their ancestors. Physical appearance. A seeming ability to appear and disappear within the blink of an eye. The power to discern what was in the hearts and minds of those who came under their influence, and the more secretive talent of imposing their will upon those less powerful than themselves.

"The older the vampire, the more intense and refined his powers," Germaine explained. "As I am little more than two hundred years old, I am considered young. Little more than a fledgling to someone like Marcus."

"How old is Marcus?"

"Thousands of years older. He lived as a Roman soldier in the time of Nero."

"I see," she lied, more interested in their astounding ability to cure than their birth dates or their pecking order. "I don't mean to sound critical, but why haven't either of you used your ability to aid medical research? Look what you managed to do for my mother. Even if you couldn't cure her cancer, you did so much to ease her pain. Think of what you could be doing to help humanity, instead of merely feeding off people like leeches."

He gave her a narrowed look. "I hadn't realized you thought so highly of us."

"You know what I mean. You could wipe out Leukemia."

"Perhaps."

"Pernicious anemia!"

"Maybe."

"AIDS...."

"Yes, well, such are what dreams are made of, but you seem to forget all the rules and regulations that govern modern medicine. I don't know of any hospital that would endorse a man who simply walked through their doors and announced, 'I am a vampire. I've come to cure your sick.' After they finished laughing, they'd lock the poor soul up."

She was so close, she refused to accept defeat now. "You could back up your claims with a simple demonstration of your powers."

"No reputable institution would even listen to us, much less let us 'demonstrate' on an actual patient. It's not as if we're accredited, Claire. If anyone were to delve into our

backgrounds with any depth, they'd realize we don't even exist. Any identification we carry is either fictional or falsified, and any research we do requires complete secrecy.”

“It worked with Mother,” she persisted. “Surely it'd be worth trying again with others?”

“That is a matter of opinion,” he answered succinctly. “As careful as we are, we don't always succeed, and our failures have had some rather devastating consequences.”

He was trying to dissuade her, but she wouldn't let him. Too much was at stake. “Others might not view those consequences in quite the same light as you. I know my mother would have welcomed the chance for immortality, considering her alternative was death.”

His golden eyes took on an eerie incandescence, their glowing centers seething whirlpools of emotion. “I spoke of deaths, not turnings,” he said softly. “And for a few hapless souls it was an ordeal of agony from which death was a welcomed release.” His jaw tightened briefly as his eyes darkened with remembered pain. “Your mother took that risk once, and I refused to put her through the torment a second time.”

“Don't you think that should have been her choice?” Claire asked, unable to understand how he could withhold his powers from someone and feel perfectly justified about doing it. Seeing his features harden into a dispassionate mask, Claire fought to keep him from retreating into that damnable shell of his, again. Entwining her fingers with his, she gripped his hand.

As if understanding her plea, he drew her trembling hand to his mouth and kissed it.

Somewhat reassured, Claire tried another tack. “I'm sure there are people out there who could help you, if you'd let them. Have you even tried to get a legal endorsement?”

He gently released her hand. “No, Claire, and we won't. Even if we could get a medical facility to regard us seriously, chances are we'd end up staked alive to a dissection table.”

“That's ridiculous. No one would do that. It would be illegal, not to mention inhumane.”

“Only if we were viewed as human. Since we are technically already dead, it could be argued that we have no rights.”

“What about a private clinic with independent funding?”

“If such a thing did exist, it would have to operate under a rigid code of confidentiality. That would preclude us from having patients, since we couldn't tell anyone about it.”

“There must be something you can do,” she insisted, refusing to give up.

“There is and we are, but I'm not permitted to discuss the details with an outsider.”

Claire felt an instant's twinge of hurt. “That's what I am to you--an outsider?”

“Not to me, but to the others in my group you are. Now why all the interest in special clinics? Altruism is a most noble virtue, but I get the feeling your concern is a little more

personal.”

Claire hesitated. She needed Germaine's help, but she was growing more and more doubtful that he would give it. “My brother's not well,” she admitted quietly.

“So I gathered. Is it AIDS?”

Claire jerked her head and stared at him in awe. “How did you know?”

“Vampires have a second sense when it comes to disorders of the blood. That, and the fact it was last on your list had something to do with it. What do the doctors say?”

Experiencing the sinking, uneasy sensation she always felt when she spoke about Robert's illness, Claire plucked at the sheet. “He was coping until Mother died, then he--he took a turn for the worse. He's out of the hospital now, but he's scheduled to go back twice a week on an 'out patient' basis.” When Germaine didn't comment, Claire returned to the topic that offered her more hope than she'd ever believed possible, “How much can you tell about a person by tasting their blood?”

“A great deal. Much more than I'd care to discuss with you right now. I'm sorry about Robert, but I'm sure Dr. Willis is providing the best care possible.”

“Dr. Willis is a fine doctor, but medical science isn't exactly breaking any speed records coming up with a cure. Maybe if they'd caught it earlier, he'd have a better chance--but even that miracle cocktail they're touting isn't keeping him from wasting away before my eyes. Do you have any idea what it's like to watch someone you love being slowly drained of his vitality by a disease that labels him a medical liability and a social pariah? Robert is only twenty-years-old, and I couldn't bear to lose him now. Not so soon after....”

“Believe me, Claire, I do understand. Losing a loved one is never easy, but despite what you think, Robert's chances of survival are increasing every day. The latest vaccine shows every indication of offering a breakthrough for AIDS victims--if not an outright cure.”

Feeling as if her only real hope was being tauntingly held out of her reach, Claire answered softly, “I think a cure already exists, but it's almost impossible for an outsider to obtain it.” When he showed no signs of relenting, she added, “At least tell me how your powers work. What can you tell about a person from their blood?”

“Since you refuse to drop the subject, I'll tell you. Only don't say I didn't warn you.” When she merely waited for him to continue, he said, “That O positive donor you purchased for me was a male, approximately twenty-five, most likely a Caucasian. He was a smoker, in good health, but with a tendency to gain weight, eat spicy foods and drink heavily on occasion. Enough? Or do you want to know what he had for lunch?”

Claire swallowed to settle her stomach, then shook her head. “Could you tell how badly Robert was infected by tasting him?”

“Probably. Is that why you summoned me last night? Did you think to offer yourself as a bribe in the hope that I would agree to transform your brother into a vampire?”

“No!”

“I can't say I'd blame you if you had, but it makes a difference to me. Did we make love last night for Robert, or for us?”

Claire knew her answer was important in the same way she knew that Germaine would sense it if she lied. So, she spoke carefully--with as much conviction as she could summon. “Robert discovered he was HIV positive nearly twelve months ago. Given his lifestyle, we have no idea how long he'd been infected. From his symptoms, Dr. Willis determined Robert had the complex but not the syndrome. Three months later, the same day I was admitted as an outpatient for some routine diagnostic tests, Robert was admitted into the hospital with pneumocystis carinii, and pronounced to have AIDS. I've been involved with Dracula for two months. If my sole purpose for being with you had been to solicit your help for Robert, I wouldn't have waited until last night to approach you.”

“Maybe not, except you didn't believe vampires even existed until a week ago.”

“That's not entirely true. Mother told me stories about the dark angels of night, as she called them, many years ago. Although none were specifically about you, nor were they told in a way that I really took her seriously, I never totally discounted the possibility, either.” Claire met his gaze without flinching. “When I summoned you last night, it was for me alone. And when I took you into my bed, Robert was nowhere near us in body or thought.”

Germaine nodded, but the slow burning fire in his gaze suggested he wasn't completely convinced. He wanted to believe her, he just wasn't sure that he could. Yet he didn't refute her. Instead, he pulled her into his arms and warned her she'd best get some sleep, for she'd be given little chance to make up for it later.

Claire obediently closed her eyes, though her mind was too full of possibilities to sleep. Yet even as she lay quietly at his side, she fervently hoped her intuitive lover couldn't read all her thoughts. Because if he could, he'd realize just how accurate his suspicions really were.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

When Claire and Germaine finally rose later that afternoon, Claire took pains to avoid any mention of AIDS, Robert, or Germaine's powers. Instead, she strove to maintain the illusion that she and Germaine were simply two lovers sharing the afternoon together. An illusion she needed even more than he did.

As promised, he helped her clean the living room and kitchen. Then insisting she eat, he herded her toward the kitchen, except Claire was no longer hungry. She saw nothing unusual in her finicky appetite, but when she told him as much the persistence of his response surprised her.

"It's not a request, Claire. You need to eat, whether you feel like it or not."

"Why? I often skip meals, and it's never bothered me before."

"You weren't missing a pint or more of your blood, then. I warned you things would be different with me." His golden eyes narrowed speculatively. "The thought of eating makes you nauseous, doesn't it?"

"A little," she admitted hesitantly, more than a bit wary of his remedies.

"That's a gift from me, but one I must insist you disregard. If you can't," he added in an ominous undertone, "I'll have to stop seeing you."

"You're joking!" Since he obviously wasn't, she asked, "Are you suggesting our joining has given me some sort of death wish?"

"Not exactly. It's more along the line of shared likes and dislikes. I took more than I should have last night, so it's especially important that you eat tonight."

Realizing he would continue to wear her down until he had his own way, Claire gave in begrudgingly. "Do I get to choose what I eat this time, or do you decide again for me?"

His mouth curved slightly. "You may eat what you wish. I won't interfere."

When she chose a steak and a salad, he approved, but rather than cook he offered to make the salad while she broiled the steak. From the way he avoided even looking at the cut of sirloin, Claire sensed the sight of the meat disturbed him, except she had no idea why. "Cooking my omelet didn't seem to upset you," she thought aloud, "yet I get the feeling merely looking at my steak does. Why?"

He kept his gaze fixed on the cutting board while he sliced a tomato for her. "It comes with the condition. I can handle, prepare and even cook dairy products and vegetables without a qualm. Meat, unfortunately, is a distinctly different matter. I'm in good company, however."

"Just meat?" she asked, wanting to understand despite her own uncertainties.

"Actually, no. Fish, fowl--any formerly living creature being seared creates a rather unpleasant reminder of our own vulnerability." When she gave him a perplexed look, he

added, "Vampires are essentially dead creatures, Claire, and cremation is the only infallible method man has found to destroy us. Although beheadings were considered quite fashionable and effective for a time."

Claire regarded her blood-red steak with a grimace and wondered if she should have a salad and leave it at that.

"Eat your steak, Claire, I'll be fine. One can't be around mortals without some sacrifices."

"Sacrifices? You mean like fixing meals that make you feel like death warmed over?"

A tiny smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "It is a small price to pay," he assured her. "And considering the alternatives, the inconvenience is minor."

"What alternatives?" she asked, her imagination conjuring up meals consisting of blood-soaked puddings and steak tartar.

He smiled fully then, as if her horrified visions amused him. But when she shuddered in squeamish distaste, he explained, "The alternatives I spoke of were for me, not you. I much prefer the intimate setting of your home to a crowded restaurant, and I would never get any satisfaction from watching you eat packaged or frozen dinners. My only other option is to absent myself entirely when it's time for you to dine. However, that solution holds even less appeal than the other two."

Claire rewarded him with a wry smile. "Why don't you finish making the salad," she suggested, "then go sit down while I see to the steak?"

He agreed, and the compromise seemed to work. Claire didn't quail at pouring him a drink and setting it in the microwave to warm. She even managed to tie off the tubing and place the bag back in the refrigerator without any queasiness at all.

As she presented his glass to him, she said, "I thought I'd set the table with the bouquet William Hailey sent, only I..." She hesitated, unsure how to phrase her question now that she'd discovered vampires were sensitive to reminders of their own death. "Does the sight of flowers upset you? They are roses," she added quickly in case that made a difference.

He laid his hand over hers. "As long as they're not lilies, I'll be fine," he assured her.

"What happens if they're lilies?"

He leaned forward and whispered confidentially, "If it's a full moon, I turn into a werewolf, otherwise I assume the form of a bat."

Claire yanked her hand back. "Very funny." She fetched the vase and plunked it down before him.

"They're lovely," he murmured, lightly fingering a delicate petal. "Actually, I happen to enjoy flowers, organ music, and satin sheets, but I do not sleep in a coffin, change into

animals or recoil in terror from holy sacraments. Any other concerns?"

"None that a full moon wouldn't cure," she retorted, sweeping back into the kitchen to check her broiling steak.

At dinner, Germaine seemed reserved but polite. He avoided watching her eat, which gave Claire an excellent opportunity to observe him. Although they'd spent the day in easy companionship, Claire had sensed a steadily growing reserve in her lover. He didn't try to make love to her again, which wasn't surprising, given his concern over her continued well-being, but when she'd playfully teased him by tickling his ribs while he scrubbed at the carpet, he'd grabbed her wrists and pushed her away with a firm shake of his head.

After dinner, he rose and offered to help her clean up. When she declined and jokingly remarked that she would play the scullery maid this night, he said, "Then, if you have no objections, I think it would be best if I took my leave of you now."

"Why?" she asked, feeling almost as nonplused by his old-world formality as she was by his statement.

"You need to return to your normal routine, and I have things to attend to as well."

"I don't have any special plans...." The phone rang, cutting off her arguments. It was Harry. Knowing Germaine would become suspicious if she started whispering into the phone, Claire simply said, "Harry, I have company right now. I'll have to call you back tomorrow." Then before Harry could argue, she hung up.

Germaine's brow quirked slightly and the phone rang again. Claire picked it up. "Not now, Harry," she insisted directly into the mouthpiece, then hanging up, she took the receiver off the hook.

"How can you be certain that last call was from Harry?"

"Because I know Harry. He calls me every Monday night at 6:57 p.m., promptly following the six o'clock news, then again every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday morning from his office at nine a.m.."

"What about Fridays and the weekends?"

Claire shrugged. "We used to meet for breakfast every Friday and have dinner together on Saturdays and Sundays. But since I've been involved with the play, we haven't done that.

"No, he just calls you instead. Another excellent reason why I should leave."

"I'd like you to stay," she insisted, feeling at odds over the newness of their relationship and the unexpected changes it had created within her.

"You'll be fine," he reassured her gently while he reached for his jacket.

"It isn't that. The truth is I find I sleep better when you're near me."

“Really?” His tawny eyes regarded her with blunt skepticism. “Is that why you were up at the crack of dawn--vacuuming?”

Claire silently cursed herself for not being able to arrest the guilty blush that stole across her cheeks. “It wasn't that early. I'm usually up by nine, and I was a little anxious this morning. Everything was moving so quickly between us. I guess I just panicked a little.”

“And now you feel our relationship has expeditiously taken a slower turn?”

“Not exactly. Today was pleasant. I've never had a man help me clean house before.”

“Today was an exception, Claire,” he informed her, zipping up his jacket. “I'm not precisely the domestic type.”

A little of Claire's pride reasserted itself. “I never assumed you were, but I guess it was foolishly naive of me to think you enjoyed yourself a little.”

“I did, in some ways, but only because of you.”

“Then why are you leaving?”

“Because real life will intrude tomorrow, and I have no place in your mortal lifestyle, such as your daily habits and phone calls from Harry.”

That statement did much to salve her injured pride and reassure her. “Are you jealous?” she asked softly.

“A little,” he acknowledged honestly if not happily. “A lot actually, only I'm not sure it's wise for me to admit that to you right now.”

He bent down to kiss her cheek, but she shifted her face so that he met her lips instead. Rather than pull away, he drew her closer and kissed her with a gentle but thorough passion that stoked the smoldering embers of her desire into a blaze that rivaled his glowing eyes. His hands roamed over her back in an enticing dance of seduction before they curved around her bottom and pulled her against him. Claire trembled as an ancient quiver of longing surged through her veins. Exquisitely aware of his strength and power, she could feel the mortal part of him stir to life. Heady with her own sense of power, she kissed him deeply and discovered his teeth were fully elongated.

He still wanted her.

That realization pleased, relieved and terrified Claire--all at once. That she loved Germaine and enjoyed being with him was indisputable. That his powers were part of the reason she had pursued him so avidly was also undeniable. What terrified her was his ability to take over her mind and body until she ceased to exist as a separate identity. She had begun the seduction, yet she ended up the seduced. Her thoughts became his and his needs became hers. Enveloped within the silken cocoon of his trance, she became lost to all but his feelings and desires--until it was his will alone that kept her alive. The knowledge that another person, even one she loved, could have that much mastery over her, gave Claire the chills. Though every part of her body ached for him to

finish what she'd begun, Claire was unable to suppress a tiny inward cringe at the prospect of totally losing herself to him again. When Germaine abruptly pulled back, Claire knew he'd sensed her unease. She only hoped he could not read her mind as well.

"Good night, Claire," he murmured darkly before striding toward the door.

"Wait!" she called, hurrying after him. "Why are you leaving now?"

"I think you already know the answer to that."

She did. He'd sensed her shrinking away from him and he was hurt by it. Not angry, just hurt. "This is all so new to me," she confessed.

"I know. It's not just your aversion, Claire. Believe me, I understand the adjustments you've had to make, and you've done an exceedingly excellent job of it. It's the reason you chose to seek me out in the first place."

Claire's heart sank. Robert was her brother--of course she wanted to save him. Surely that wasn't a crime. She stared down at her un-bandaged hand. It had been almost two weeks since she'd cut it. Although the wound was little more than a red line now, she couldn't help but compare the difference between current medical treatments and the instant healing effects of vampire blood. She closed her fingers over her palm. "You may know a lot about me, Germaine, but you can't know everything that's in my heart."

"Perhaps not," he conceded gently. Then giving her a quick kiss, he said, "But if you knew me better, you'd realize I treat love and deceit very seriously. I've discovered the combination can be quite devastating when applied in tandem by someone you care about." He regarded her through eyes bleak with the harsh realities of an unnaturally long life. "Lies borne out of fear and love will only end up destroying the very thing you sought to protect in the first place. Believe me, it is a lesson one need learn only once." That said, he walked out her door.

Claire hesitated a fraction of a second before she ran after him. "I love you," she called out. He stopped, but didn't turn around. "I love Robert, too, but I don't want him to come between us."

"I can't help him, Claire. At least, not in the way you want me to. I'm sorry."

"I understand," she whispered, her throat aching with disappointment.

"But can you accept it?"

"I'll try," she promised, knowing he wouldn't believe her if she agreed outright.

He turned to face her then, and tenderly cupped her chin in his hand. "What about Harry? He's not going to accept defeat gracefully, you know?"

She nodded. At the moment, Harry Collins was the least of her concerns. "He'll come around."

"I won't tolerate having Harry dogging our tracks like some neurotic bloodhound,

Claire. If it takes an engagement ring to convince him he's de trop, I'll get one--and I'll expect you to wear it. Understood?"

Surprised and a little taken aback, Claire stiffened at his commanding tone, but she agreed. She needed Germaine far more than he needed her, and, oddly enough, the thought of wearing his ring wasn't an altogether unpleasant notion to consider. It was his manner of proposing that could stand improvement.

At her nod, he returned with her to the apartment and immediately took her to bed.

He undressed her slowly, kissing each newly bared patch of skin as it was revealed to him. Then quickly divesting himself of his own clothing, he took her into his arms and made love to her slowly, gently with his hands and mouth. The slower pace allowed Claire the time she needed to adjust and learn. Rather than becoming a pawn to her emotions and physical responses, she participated actively in their lovemaking. And in participating she discovered when he touched certain parts of her body--just below her breasts, the inner curve of her elbows, knees and thighs--she reacted almost as intensely as when he caressed her between her legs.

But the quick, light butterfly motions of his tongue against the most intimate part of her had Claire clutching her headboard and crying out in passion. A passion that was liberating since it didn't attempt to dominate or control her as it had before.

He made love to her until she was little more than a limp doll--exhausted and replete. Only then did he let her sleep. A sleep which she greeted willingly--blissfully unaware that the entire time he spent patiently coaxing her into writhing, breath-robbing climaxes, he never took so much as a drop from her in return.

* * *

The next morning, Claire awakened feeling amazingly well and rested, and very much her own person. Easing carefully out of bed in an effort not to awaken Germaine, she slipped into her sweats and headed toward the kitchen for a cup of coffee when she heard a wavering high-pitched tone, like an electronic civil defense warning.

Concerned, she quickly glanced about for the source and noticed the phone was still off the hook. Recalling how Germaine disliked being disturbed in the morning, she set her answering machine to pick up on the first ring and replaced the receiver. The phone rang immediately. Claire picked it up with the sinking realization that Harry must have stayed up all night trying to reach her. Pushing the stop button on her recorder, she reluctantly drew the receiver to her ear.

She expected a coldly delivered lecture on phone etiquette, but what greeted her was silence. "Hello?" she whispered tentatively.

"I believe you owe me an explanation and an apology, Clarissa, and I'm waiting."

"Harry, what a surprise! I didn't expect you to call for another two hours."

"I'm still waiting, Clarissa," he repeated with emphasis.

"Yes, well, now isn't a good time. Why don't we meet later today--say for lunch?"

"If you don't tell me who is there, and why you kept the phone off the hook for the last twelve hours, I'm going to do exactly what I started to do more than twenty times last night. Come over there and pound on your door until you give me the explanation I deserve."

Claire was stunned. She had difficulty believing Harry would ever be that assertive, but she wasn't about to challenge him. The last thing she needed was a confrontation between Harry and Germaine just now, and she would do whatever was necessary to ensure that didn't happen. "Not over the phone, Harry," she insisted, her tone a bit more firm.

"Then breakfast. Our usual spot in fifteen minutes. If you're not there by then, I'm coming over." His ultimatum made, he hung up.

Claire stood for a moment torn between anger and uncertainty. Harry had never been so dictatorial with her before. He was often insistent to the point of being obnoxious, but she'd always been in control of the relationship--able to coax him into seeing things her way. Only now Claire was no longer confident she could do that. And with Germaine, she hadn't been in control since that first day when she caught him kissing her mother.

Afraid to test her immortal lover's patience or devotion just then, and unwilling to risk the chance Harry might refuse to see reason, Claire gathered up a change of clothing and rushed into her bathroom. Giving herself a quick wash, she got dressed and jotted a brief note to Germaine about needing to run some errands. She'd tell him the truth, later, once she was assured he wouldn't get angry and walk out on her again. She placed the note on her pillow and laid a single rose across it.

Although she didn't particularly like the thought of leaving Germaine, she experienced none of the panic she'd had yesterday. So, it was reluctance, not fear, that made her hesitate a moment before a stark recollection of what she risked spurred her into action. Her thoughts centered on Robert, she gathered up her purse and keys, quietly shut the door and ran to the elevator. The moment she was out of the building, Claire ran toward the small corner coffee shop she and Harry frequented.

He was already at the door, his eyes fixed on his watch. His expression resolved, he shoved his hands into his pockets and started in her direction when Claire rushed up to him, out of breath.

"Sorry I'm late, but fifteen minutes doesn't give a lady much time to dress."

Harry didn't say a word. His fingers gripping her elbow, he escorted her over to their usual booth in stern silence. After they gave their orders without glancing at the laminated menus, he leaned toward her and asked, "Who is he, Clarissa?"

Hoping to divert him, she attempted a lighthearted smile. "You know, Harry, my legal

name now is Claire, not Clarissa. Can't you at least try to call me that?" When he said nothing, she sighed and asked, "What makes you think my guest is a he?"

"Don't play games with me--Claire. Lord, we are practically engaged."

"No, we're not," she protested immediately.

"Maybe not officially, but even your mother expected us to marry--eventually."

"Don't bring my mother into this, Harry. I still haven't forgiven you for the way you purposely dragged your feet the night she died."

"I was exhausted. You know this time of year is always hectic for me. Everyone is seeking last-minute tax shelters. Besides, I already apologized, rather profusely, for that."

"I know, I know," she agreed, dismissing his excuses with a wave of her hand before she noticed the concerned way he was looking at her. He did care about her, more deeply than she'd realized, and though she didn't want to hurt him, she knew it had been a mistake to let him grow so possessive of her. She didn't love him, and she never would.

The waitress returned with their breakfast plates balanced on her arms and her hands sporting a thermal pot of freshly-brewed coffee and the requisite stainless steel creamer filled with low-fat milk. Claire waited until they were served before she reached over and touched Harry's hand. "You're a good person, Harry. I know I came to rely on you quite heavily during Mother's illness, and you took diligent care of all three of us. I can't tell you how much I appreciated everything you did, but--"

"But now you've found someone else, and good 'ole Harry can take a hike, is that it?"

"No! That is, not exactly. You're a financial whiz, Harry, and I hope--"

"Damn it, Clarissa . . . Claire. I was courting you as my future wife, not a client."

"I know that, only--"

He tossed his wadded paper napkin on the table. "Just tell me who he is, and I'll leave."

"Why? I mean why does it matter who? Maybe it's no one. Maybe I simply wanted some time to myself."

"You told me you had company, then you took your phone off the hook for more than twelve hours! What am I supposed to think?" When she didn't answer, he rose. "I assume he's still there. Why don't we go back to your place so I can introduce myself properly?"

"No!" Her lips clamped together, Claire waved him back to his seat. "Just sit down, and I'll tell you." When he did as she asked, she murmured, "It's Germaine St. Justine."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "I suspected as much. Nothing like a little job security, eh, Claire? Keep Broadway's most reclusive angel happy in bed and your star will rise as surely and quickly as he does. Is he good? Is he worth the sacrifice of prostituting

yourself for your career? Does he make you cry out in pleasure, or is this simply another 'business transaction' of yours?"

Anger, humiliation, embarrassment and guilt all fought for supremacy inside Claire, but her sense of justice prevailed. "Harry, don't. Attacking me won't change anything--I love Germaine."

"He's an eccentric millionaire! God, even you accused him of being a blood-sucking, coffin-carrying vampire yourself."

Claire's cheeks were already warm, but that reminder made them start to burn. "I was wrong. I was wrong about many things. He may be a bit of an eccentric, but he has a reasonable explanation for each of his quirks. I'm sorry, Harry, I didn't mean for you to find out this way, but it's happened so quickly."

He sat back then. "A little too quickly, if you ask me. How's Robert?"

Claire stared at him, bewildered and uneasy over his sudden shift in topics. "He's better. Dr. Willis says he's beginning to show some improvement from the new drug combination they've got him on. His appetite has returned, and he's even gained back some of the weight he lost during Mother's illness."

"I'm pleased to hear it. Treatments like that can be expensive. It must be comforting to know St. Justine's money will be available if you need it."

It wasn't Germaine's money she was after, but the accusation was close enough to make Claire mentally cringe. Just then, she felt Germaine initiate a tentative connection with her and had to struggle against the compelling impulse she had to run to him. She sensed he was displeased. He'd probably read her note and objected to her rising without awakening him first to let him know she was leaving. She would have to pick up some groceries to make it look as if she'd just stepped out for a moment. Later, once he'd calmed, she'd tell him the truth, but first she had to make certain Harry wouldn't cause any more trouble.

"Germaine would no more deny me help with Robert than you would, Harry, but the need for financial assistance had nothing to do with why I got involved with either one of you."

Although Harry nodded, Claire got the distinct feeling he didn't believe her. He planted his arms on the table and leaned closer as if he wanted no one else to hear what he was about to tell her. "You've made a mistake, Claire. A serious one. But you're too blinded by your concern for your brother to see that yet. Despite your tendency to get a little overemotional on occasions, I thought we made a superb couple. I still think so. We've known each other a long time, and you're right, our friendship won't end simply because you've decided to have an affair. I'm not pleased about it, but I'm patient enough to wait--at least for a while. Call me when you've changed your mind." Straightening, he flung enough money onto the table to pay their bill and walked out.

Claire left shortly afterwards, her emotions mixed. Harry had conceded with far more grace than she'd expected after his earlier threats. She stepped into Flannigan's corner market and bought milk, orange juice, cheddar cheese and eggs. She was feeling hungrier today, and the thought of sinking a fork into one of Germaine's omelets had her mouth watering.

Perhaps, after a bit of sweet-talking, she could convince him to make one for her. However, the moment she entered her apartment, Claire knew she hadn't made it back in time.

"I'm home," she called out, hoping for, but not really expecting, an answer.

Setting down her groceries, she went directly into the bedroom. In the center of the made bed lay her note torn neatly in half. Laying diagonally across it was the rose she'd left him, not a petal out of place.

The message was subtle, but clear. He hadn't been pleased to awaken with only a piece of paper and a flower lying next to him. He'd told her as much yesterday. Still, Claire was convinced she'd done the right thing. Waking him to announce that she was meeting Harry would have only brought on another argument, and writing it in a note would have been worse.

Claire returned to the kitchen to unpack her groceries. She'd talk to him tonight, when both of them would be in a better mood to discuss the matter.

She stopped when she saw the note taped to her answering machine. Her steps slow, she crossed the room to pick it up.

The next time you make an appointment to 'run errands', you might want to make certain you aren't recording your clandestine arrangements for posterity.

He'd listened to their phone message. She must have hit the wrong button and pressed record instead of stop. Still, that didn't give him the right to eavesdrop on her private conversation. She may have stretched the truth a little by telling him she was only running "errands," but that didn't excuse his own breach of conduct.

Despite her unease over the precariousness of her situation, Claire put away her groceries and didn't try to contact Germaine. Preferring to state her arguments in person, she tried to distract herself by glancing through the stack of manuscripts her agent had sent her. Six o'clock, still feeling at odds, she headed for the theater.

Informing both John Percy and Joe, the stage guard, that she wanted to see St. Justine the moment he showed up, Claire got into costume and makeup. At his five-minute call, John Percy stuck his head in.

"St. Justine did drop by for a minute, but he was in a hurry, so he asked me to tell you he's sorry but something's come up and he needs to cancel his appointment with you tonight. He said he'd most likely be in touch in a day or so. Anything special you want me to tell him if he happens to call later?"

Feeling as if her heart had twisted inside her chest, Claire shook her head. "Thanks anyway, John. I guess it wasn't that important after all."

Claire's performance that night was less than spectacular, but she got through it. At home, she tried to reach Germaine with her mind, but he blocked her out. She fixed herself a small salad, ate, showered, then got into bed. The bed seemed almost huge to her, and much more lonely than it ever had before. She wished it still possessed the heavy silk draperies that would have hung from it centuries ago. She'd like nothing better than to crawl into bed and shut herself off from the world.

Turning her electric blanket on high, she drew the covers over her head and indulged in a good, old-fashioned crying jag. She couldn't say when or how it happened, but within moments, although no one was physically in the room with her, she was no longer alone.

Germaine still wasn't talking to her, so it wasn't a communication of words precisely, but his presence was making a concerted effort to curb her crying despite his own anger and exasperation.

She tried resisting the thoughts to get him to talk to her directly, but she was no match for St. Justine's subtlety. In the end, she let herself be soothed to sleep.

The next morning, however, Claire was determined to end the foolishness. If he cared enough to comfort her when she was upset, then he cared enough to be with her. She considered summoning him again, only this time she knew she would have to be the one to go to him.

His pride was hurt and he was angry, and until they had addressed their concerns face-to-face, Claire feared Germaine would refuse to see her. His brief contact with her last night had been reassuring, but it hadn't changed a thing.

At the theater that night, Claire did what she didn't dare a week ago. Rumors be damned, she sent out inquiries asking if anyone knew where Germaine lived, his phone number, or any other way she could get in touch with him. However, no one seemed to know anything about the man. He really was a reclusive eccentric.

By the time the play was over, Claire was convinced Germaine would never be found unless he wished to be. Then Nigel Watkins approached her just as she was entering her dressing room.

Her hand poised above the door handle, Claire glanced up at the elderly veteran actor who had befriended her at the beginning of their rehearsals. Like a kindly, old, uncle, Nigel had taken her under his wing and coached her privately when she had some difficulties grasping the sensual aspects of Lucy's surrender to Dracula. A few weeks later Nick Ventura joined them, and some of their finest scenes had come about because of Nigel's coaching.

Recalling how he'd gently admonished her for insisting that Dracula's primary goal had been to steal Lucy's soul, Claire gazed at her mentor through newly opened eyes. His

insights into the dreams and desires of vampires did not come from hours of research. It came from personal experience. And she instinctively suspected he also knew how to contact Germaine.

Nigel bowed to her in a way that reminded her of an eighteenth-century gentleman soliciting a lady's hand for the minuet. "I hear you seek, St. Justine," he announced politely. "I might be able to help, if you would permit me one small question."

Feeling as if she'd been transported back two hundred years, Claire responded in kind. "If it is one I am allowed to answer, I will do so gladly."

"My dear, I believe you've already given me your answer by your response, but I must be certain. Therefore, I beg that you forgive an older man one indelicacy when he inquires whether you have been intimate with the man you seek?"

Claire hesitated as she weighed Germaine's reaction against her need for Nigel's help. Her mind made up, she nodded.

"I gather then that he's resisting your efforts to contact him?"

"We had a small misunderstanding, which I'd like to rectify, but he refuses to talk to me."

"I see. He did not specifically forbid you to contact him, did he?"

"No...."

"Good. Then he will most likely be angry by what I'm about to suggest, but he won't be furious enough to cause you any real harm."

"Germaine would never harm me, Nigel," Claire assured him with the certainty of a woman in love.

"Yes, my dear, I'm afraid he would, but only if you forced him to it. The rules he lives by are exacting and strict. They have to be if he wishes to continue intermingling as he does among those so different from himself and those of his kind, but I think you already know that. If not, he'll undoubtedly make his position painfully clear before dawn."

Far from certain she cared for his choice of words, Claire still asked, "Then you'll help me?"

"Yes, if you're certain you're up to the challenge. I doubt he'll be pleased to see you, but he will be even less pleased to see you with me. St. Justine is a very possessive man."

"So I've learned," she replied, confident Germaine would not object to a kindly, elderly man escorting her about. "What do you need me to do?"

"Just get changed and meet me near the stage entrance when you're ready. Germaine owns a private nightclub. It's in one of the better parts of town, but it's still no place for St. Justine's lady to be found walking about unescorted."

Eager to accept any connection, no matter how tenuous, Claire readily agreed. A half

-hour later, she slipped into the waiting taxi cab where her muffler-draped friend waited. The taxi was already moving when Nigel edged the long woolen scarf from his face. As acquainted as she was with makeup techniques, disguises didn't easily fool Claire, but she was sure her face hid none of her surprise at finding that she was sitting next to a thirty-year-old stranger.

Her mouth agape, Claire stared at Nigel Watkins in amazement. "I really thought you were around sixty or seventy years old."

"A touch of special makeup and a little acting go a long way, my dear, but I pray you will keep my small secret while I keep yours."

"Yes, of course. Now I see why you implied Germaine wouldn't be pleased to find me in your company."

"There are other reasons. You shouldn't be so trusting, Claire dear. Germaine St. Justine is a powerful man, and powerful men acquire equally powerful enemies. Your readiness to believe the best of others makes you a prime target for an attack against him."

Claire felt a small tingle of alarm. "Are you a friend of Germaine's, Nigel?"

"We are acquaintances. Friendly rivals, if you will. I admire his goals, but I don't necessarily agree with his methods of securing them. If he is a conservative, then I'm a moderate. It is the fanatic liberals you must be wary of. They comprise a dangerous faction who believes in the right of the strong to prey upon the weak, and they have no compunctions against killing. Indeed, they view it as a God-given right--and in using the title, God, I refer to the ancients, not the monotheistic being that you worship."

Listening to him, Claire got a small glimpse of a world she hadn't even known existed. It was a world of shadows and darkness that sunlight rarely penetrated. And her first step into Illusions made her realize just how naive she really was.

A muscle-bound waiter approached them the moment they entered the crowded room lit solely by candles and a ceiling that blanketed them with the faint glow of starlight. "I'm sorry, Mr. Watkins, but we're filled to capacity tonight," the Herculean gentleman informed them with regret.

Claire didn't need to be told that, she could see the place was packed. Germaine must be doing extremely well if he owned this popular nightspot.

"We aren't here for a seat, Hugo," Nigel responded smoothly. "This young lady is a personal friend of St. Justine's, and she has asked to see him."

Hugo turned politely toward Claire. "Your name, miss?"

"Claire, Claire Daniels," she responded a little unevenly.

When the waiter displayed no reaction to her name, Claire doubted he'd ever heard of her or her supposed relationship with his employer. For a reason she couldn't really define, that bothered her. Keeping her vexation with Germaine to herself, she followed

their escort into the private room he opened up for them.

“Mr. St. Justine is away just now,” he explained deferentially, “but I expect him back at any moment. May I offer either of you some refreshment while you wait?”

Nigel ordered a Virgin Mary, 20-25, straight, and Claire suddenly found it difficult to swallow. The knowledge that her companion was ordering the blood of a woman, between the ages of twenty to twenty-five, free of any known diseases was just a little unsettling. Especially since she fit all of those qualifications quite nicely.

Her complexion a little green, Claire requested a glass of white wine. Hugo's eyes flickered slightly at her request, but he left to see their order filled with prompt efficiency.

Claire turned to Nigel. She was about to suggest she may have made a mistake, when the older, polite gentleman, Claire recognized from Germaine's box, swept into the room with a dramatic flourish.

“It is you, by God. What an unexpected delight!” He rushed forward to clasp her hand, but stopped when she drew back from him. “Pray, forgive me,” he murmured, bowing deeply. “Sir Frederick Compton at your service, ma'am. Join us in the back room, won't you? Be delighted to have you, truly. Everyone there's dyin' to meet you, if you'll forgive the expression. You too, Watkins, always happy to see a former friend. Though why you chose the Black Cross, over the Silver Chalice, is beyond me.”

Nigel smiled warmly at the other gentleman. “Victor is a bit more permissive in his regard to transformations and fidelity, Freddie. I admire your fearless leader's standards, but I cannot live with them.”

“S'not so difficult. 'Taint as if we're asked to be celibate, only careful.”

Leaning closer to Nigel, Claire whispered, “Is this another of those reasons you suggested Germaine wouldn't be pleased to find me with you?”

Nigel took her hand in his and kissed it. “You are a lovely lady, Claire, and Germaine is aware that once your identity becomes known within our small underground community, many will be seeking to persuade you over to their side. To say I am tempted to offer for you myself is an understatement, but I doubt Germaine would greet my suit with affinity.”

“No, he wouldn't,” Marcus agreed, stepping into the small room. He took up Claire's other hand. “A pleasure to meet you again, Ms. Daniels, although I doubt our prince will view it as such.”

“Germaine is a prince?” she squeaked, her throat tight with growing dismay.

“Not by birth,” Marcus reassured her. “He is of noble blood, and perhaps a prince or two is hanging about in his family tree, but for me the title is one of honor and respect for the man chosen to stand guard for our safety and welfare.”

“Invited her to meet the others,” Freddie chimed in. “Along with Watkins, of course.”

Marcus nodded to Nigel. “You are welcome here, sir, as long as you do not attempt to trespass against those who offer you succor.”

“I come solely as a friend, Marcus. Any claim here is clearly St. Justine's.”

“Your assurance is of great comfort to me, sir. I should hate challenging you, Watkins. The boards of Broadway would miss a man of your diverse talents.”

Claire gazed at each man in open astonishment as she realized they spoke of killing one another simply because she wished to speak with Germaine. She was about to tell them both off when Marcus took up her arm.

“Do not look so murderous, Ms. Daniels, we mean no harm to you or each other. However, as I'm sure you've been told, our society is governed by rules. Rules that must be followed if we are to remain at peace with one another.” He placed her hand near his elbow. “We can be quite civilized, but it might behoove you to keep in mind that there is safety in numbers. If cornered, I suggest you head for the nearest crowd of friendly faces.”

Claire accepted both his advice and his escort with a few misgivings while Marcus led her and Nigel to a room that was directly opposite the nightclub. Its decor was a soft, sky blue with navy, white and maroon accents. It was clean to the point of being almost antiseptic, yet surprisingly comfortable. And it was in direct contrast to the nightclub itself.

“We call this the day room,” Marcus explained as a golden-haired Adonis approached them. He, too, kissed Claire's hand.

“Ah, Ms. Daniels, what a pleasure it is to have you here, so we can finally meet the fair lady who's stolen our stalwart leader's heart.” Easing her out of Marcus's protective custody, he placed a familiar hand about Claire's waist. She stiffened, but the gentleman either didn't notice her reaction, or wasn't the least put off by it. “I'm Auguste Sinclair,” he claimed, drawing her hand to his heart. “Don't worry. You're perfectly safe with me, fair lady. I am a trusted childhood friend of Germaine's, who--”

“Who is in grave danger of losing his head if he doesn't unhand the lady at once,” the gentleman under discussion warned in a silky purr from his casual stance near the doorway.

Auguste couldn't have released Claire more quickly if she'd sprouted thorns. Claire sent an anxious look at Germaine only to realize that both Marcus and Nigel had been right. He wasn't pleased. And from the cold glance she received in return, Claire discovered Nigel had been right about something else. If Germaine deemed it necessary, he wouldn't hesitate to make their dispute public--even to the point of causing Claire acute embarrassment.

Anger replacing fear and uncertainty, Claire stiffened her spine and silently challenged

him to do his worst when Marcus gripped her arm in silent admonition.

“Don't be a fool,” he whispered. “Only an idiot or a matador waves a red flag before an angry bull. So, unless you carry a matador's estoque beneath that charming cashmere coat of yours, you'd best lower your lovely blue eyes and let me do the talking.” Claire watched with an expression close to wonder while the former Roman gladiator bearded the lion with nothing more than a warm smile of diplomacy for his shield.

“Germaine, you should have told us you were expecting guests, we would have ordered the best silver polished.”

Though his lips curved slightly in response, Germaine's face lacked any sign of humor. “We needn't stand on ceremony with Nigel, Marcus. Have the silver brought out as it is.” Claire shivered at the cool civility that hung like a fragile thread from the sharp edge of Germaine's words. And seeing the way those glacial eyes slid toward Nigel next, she suspected the silver he spoke of was both pointed and deadly.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Nigel didn't move a muscle, not even to blink. "You once told me I'd be welcome at Illusions, anytime. Have you changed your mind?"

"Not yet. However, you'd find me much more 'welcoming' if you came alone."

"Maybe. Then again, maybe not. Your lady was being a bit indiscriminate in her quest. Had I not volunteered, she might have happened upon an escort a little less chivalrous, or someone who might have chosen to take her someplace else entirely."

This time Claire took Marcus's advice and avoided Germaine's gaze. "Thanks a lot, Nigel," she murmured sweetly. "You're a big help."

"It's for your own good, Claire," he advised her before turning back to Germaine. "She needs to know of the dangers, St. Justine, and it's your duty to tell her. You can't blame Claire when it's your fault she doesn't understand."

"Do you believe me incapable of looking after my own?" Germaine asked silkily.

"Not at all. It's just that I happen to have first hand knowledge of what you're up against. And unless I've misread the matter, I'd say your situation has recently become vulnerable. A vulnerability that could turn deadly if you're not careful."

"Your warning is noted, Nigel, only please bear in mind that the final judgment on that is mine to make, not yours." When Nigel agreed with a nod, Germaine added, "I don't mean to sound ungrateful, for I do appreciate your gentlemanly intervention. You're welcome to stay if you like."

"Thanks anyway, but I'd best go. Victor doesn't like us fraternizing with other groups. Business dealings with outsiders are fine, and we are welcome to bring in as many newcomers as we please, but consorting with rival orders is taboo. Yours especially."

"I may not hold with Victor's philosophies, but I bear no grudge against him for our differences. Why can't he do the same?"

"He's a proud man, Germaine, who believes you betrayed him." With a quick glance at Marcus, he added, "And Victor is not a man who takes betrayals lightly."

Declining to comment, Germaine escorted Nigel out. Although she was curious, Claire was given no time to ponder that small interaction, since Marcus assumed the duty of host in Germaine's absence and introduced her to the others. Sam Wilson, their bartender, who, with his balding head and reading glasses, made Claire suspect he was the only other mortal in the room beside herself. Auguste, she'd already met, and Arthur reminded her a little of Harry. The rest, Simon, Gregory, Maurice and Francis, were very different from her preconceived notion of the urbane, sophisticated vampire, yet she had no doubt they were immortal. And the fact that she represented little more than an evening snack to any of them made her just the tiniest bit uneasy.

"Ms. Daniels has the lead in Germaine's new musical," Marcus announced.

Claire received faint nods of approval and recognition from all but two, who, in their open admiration of Claire's celebrity status, rushed over to her.

"We've seen every performance, Ms. Daniels," Francis and Maurice gushed in unison, giving Claire the distinct impression that the two were inseparable--even in sleep.

"Gregory is quite adept at the piano," Francis informed her.

"He really is," Maurice concurred. "Please, won't you sing a number for us?"

Germaine walked back into the room the moment the request was made, and from his expression Claire got the uneasy feeling that she wouldn't feel much like singing once they'd spoken privately. "Thank you," she murmured appreciatively, "but this isn't a very good time." Knowing she should walk over and confront Germaine directly, Claire discovered she was oddly reluctant to begin their discussion.

As if sensing her ambiguity, which he probably did, Germaine cast her a wry look.

"Anything we have to say to each other can wait the length of one song," he proposed.

"You wouldn't mind?" she asked, adopting the deferential tone Marcus had suggested.

With a casual lift of his shoulders, Germaine walked over to the bar. He ordered a drink, then turned to face her. "You needn't ever fear my minding the sound of your voice raised in song, sweet Claire. Something that has pleased so many could never displease me."

Though his words were double-edged, the slight gentling of his expression was all the encouragement Claire needed. Choosing her favorite number from the show with the confidence that Germaine would discern the meaning behind her selection, she stepped over to the piano and sang.

A Whisper in the Night was the plaintive lament Lucy made when she finally conceded her love for a man whose desire for her defied her own ability to deny him any longer. It ended with Lucy unclasping the crucifix her father had placed around her neck and letting it fall to the floor as she slipped back into bed and awaited the silent, rippling fog that signaled her lover's approach.

When the last, lingering note faded, everyone but Germaine stood up and applauded. Still uneasy, Claire glanced over at him. His returning smile was both warm and intimate. He had understood. Their differences were far from resolved, but he was no longer angry.

Marcus must have seen the look also, for he strolled over to clap Germaine on the shoulder. "So it is true. Music really can soothe the savage beast."

Germaine gazed at his friend through hooded eyes. "Though William Congreve is undoubtedly turning in his grave at your slaughtered rendition of his sentiment, I have to agree. When sung by an angel, music soothes most sweetly indeed."

Her courage stuck to the only sticking place she had--her heart--Claire crossed the room

to stand before her lover.

"I'm sorry about our misunderstanding, but listening to my private messages on the recorder was terribly wrong of you."

Germaine placed his hands on her waist and bent slightly toward her. "I suggest you spend the next hour singing, my angel, else--"

His warning was cut off when an angry woman was forcibly dragged into the room by an equally angry man.

"I wasn't flirting, Phillip," the young woman protested, trying to pull free of her captor's grasp. "I barely even looked at the young man."

"You looked long enough to notice he was young, my lovely, flirtatious wife, and looking wasn't all you were doing." The man glanced over at Germaine, who had protectively drawn Claire close to his side. "I refuse to play the cuckold any longer," he announced broadly. "I would like to formally accuse my wife of infidelity and submit a petition to have her publicly punished."

Claire gasped in outrage, but Germaine ignored her. "How do you answer these charges, madam?"

The young woman shrugged. "You know me, Germaine. Fidelity is foreign to my vocabulary." She turned to her companion. "Forgive me, my love, but I grow weary of your rather ineffectual efforts to please me."

The gentleman's anger instantly dissolved as an expression of hurt surprise swept across his features. Rolling her eyes, the woman jabbed him in the ribs to break his hold.

He jerked in reaction, then glared at her. "You are my wife, Phillipa. You vowed to cleave to me alone as long as you lived, and you've broken that vow more times than I can count. I love you, but I will no longer accept your immoral behavior. As your husband, I have certain rights, and I mean to exercise those rights tonight." He faced Germaine. "I seek the council's permission to publicly chastise my wife."

Germaine's countenance turned ominously severe. Releasing Claire, he stood and faced the woman. "These are serious charges, madam. You had best say something in your defense, otherwise I will have no choice but to submit your husband's petition to a vote."

Three astonished voices echoed, "What?"

Claire gazed at her lover with a mixture of fury and disbelief. The gentleman called Phillip looked a little ill, and his wife, who apparently shared his first name as well as his last, turned alarmingly pale.

"You'd actually agree to this?" Phillip asked Germaine, his disbelief evident. "You wouldn't challenge me first?"

"She's your wife, Phillip. It would be churlish of me to interfere after all she's put you

through.” He faced the woman. “Since you offer no defense, I can only assume his plea for punishment is warranted.” Raising his hand, Germaine called for a vote. “How many here support Phillip's request?” When every man present raised his hand, Germaine gestured toward Marcus. “Bring Phillip one of our whips. The feather one should do nicely. And order the platform lowered.” He turned back to the woman, but her eyes were narrowed on Claire with a look of speculation.

“As it is too early to close the club, shall I order a gag and restraints brought out as well, madam?” Germaine inquired with formal politeness.

“That won't be necessary,” the woman answered before facing her husband. Her expressive eyes begging forgiveness, she bent on one knee before him. “I have erred most grievously against you, my husband, and can but plead for your leniency and mercy.”

“But . . . But, I don't understand,” Phillip stammered, his widely horrified eyes shifting from Germaine to the short handled whip Marcus pressed into his hand. It looked like a mutated feather duster with its long leather thongs embedded with hundreds of soft curling ostrich plumes.

Claire didn't think the instrument would really hurt, but from the woman's uneasy expression, she wasn't certain. Her uncertainty didn't lessen any when Hugo and a muscle-bound gentleman Claire didn't recognize escorted the woman over to a large platform lowered from the ceiling. Nor did it diminish when, the two men positioned their prisoner stomach down on the soft black velvet. But by that point, all Claire knew was that she couldn't let this travesty continue.

She marched over to Germaine. “You can't be serious about this,” she protested, grabbing his arm. “This is barbaric.”

“Perhaps,” he concurred absently, “but it's been a long time coming.” The woman managed to glower at him before her head was pressed back down on the padded platform. Germaine gave his full attention to Claire. “I warned you we had rules and restrictions you wouldn't necessarily agree with,” he reminded her. “Apparently this is one of them. Now do as I say and stand over by Sam while Phillip sees to the unhappy, but necessary, chastisement of his wife. We are waiting, Phillip,” he advised, pointing to the whip Phillip held with open distaste.

When Phillip reluctantly raised his arm, Claire didn't think, she reacted. Desperate to put a stop to the injustice, she grabbed the nearest thing to her--a barstool. As Phillip lowered his arm, Claire lifted the stool. Rushing forward with it raised above her head, she hurled it at the vampire with all her might. The stool struck Phillip's shoulders and bounced off, as if he were made of concrete, then crashed to the floor. Phillip, who barely flinched, merely spun on his heel and caught Claire by the arms. Claire cried out in surprise rather than pain, since for all his speed and strength, Phillip's grip was amazingly gentle.

“What the . . . Who the devil are you?” he asked, clearly stunned by Claire's unorthodox protest to the official proceeding.

“The lady you're touching is Claire Daniels, and she's mine, so I suggest you let her go-- now,” Germaine advised, his tone hinting at dire consequences should his warning go unheeded. “If you wanted to pick a woman to fight over, Phillip, you chose the wrong one.”

“I see,” Phillip murmured softly as his hold tightened. Claire gazed at him in confusion. She'd expected him to release her as quickly as Auguste had, not hold her hostage.

“This woman deliberately sabotaged my council sanctioned method of dispensing justice,” he announced in a voice that carried across the room. “I demand the right to see her punished.”

“What?” Claire gasped, trying to wriggle free but finding it impossible to break her captor's painless yet unyielding grasp.

Germaine's brow wrinkled slightly as he considered Phillip's request. “Your charge is not without warrant. Her attack was in open defiance to my directive, perhaps....”

“Germaine!” Claire squeaked in outrage. “You can't seriously suggest you'd let this man whip me?”

Germaine seemed to consider the notion for a moment before he resolutely stepped forward. “Of course not,” he reassured, reclaiming her from Phillip's hold. “I would never let another man lay a hurting hand upon you.”

Relieved, Claire let out a tiny sigh and unthinkingly relaxed against him.

His hand tightened slightly on her waist. “I'll simply have to administer this punishment myself.”

“Germaine!” Claire protested, falling silent when every man present, except Phillip, rose in her defense.

“It seems none of us could allow you to do that, my prince,” Marcus declared with regret.

“So, I see. Must I fight you all, then?”

“I made the initial challenge,” Phillip announced. “So, I'll represent the dissenting consortium.”

“So be it,” Germaine conceded. “The winner decides the outcome. If Phillip prevails, I will defer to the council's judgment. If I prevail, the judgment is mine for a term no less than twenty years. Are we agreed, gentlemen?”

At the murmur of consent, Germaine removed his jacket. “Till first blood, or cry surrender, Phillip?”

“Surrender,” Phillip declared, discarding his own jacket.

Marcus stepped forward to escort a stunned Claire and a curiously complacent Phillipa back to the bar where he insisted they take a seat. When they were both safely out of the way, he moved to stand guard beside them.

Claire's astonished gaze switched from the man she thought she knew to a woman she had never met. A woman who sat beside her stretching unconcernedly as if being ordered to lie upon a whipping platform was an ordinary, everyday occurrence.

"Are you all right?" Claire asked, noticing a bleeding gash on Phillipa's neck.

"I'm fine. Why? Oh, that," she murmured when Claire indicated her neck. "It's nothing." She dabbed at the small cut with a cocktail napkin that had various forms of Cheers printed on it in ten different languages. Each salutation was embossed in blood-red ink, and centered around a single, red drop. "Sometimes Phillip gets a little carried away," she explained offhandedly.

"Oh." Claire grimaced inwardly. It didn't ease her mind any to know that a member of Germaine's group could be so unfeeling toward his mortal mistress. "Doesn't it hurt?"

Phillipa's answer was delayed when Auguste, assuming the role of officiator, began stating the rules. Phillip and Germaine paid him little heed, concentrating instead on testing their foils until he asked if either of them would require a second, at that point Germaine flipped his jacket at him. "Seconds are hardly necessary, Auguste, when the duelists are immortal."

An amused grin curving her lips, Phillipa returned her attention to Claire. "No, it doesn't hurt," she assured her lightly, "unless I happen to look in a mirror." Chuckling at her own humor, she signaled the bartender with her hand. "Speaking of mirrors--Sam!" When Sam ambled over to her, Phillipa cast him an engaging smile, then leaned over the bar until she practically fell into the bartender's arms. He looked neither surprised nor pleased by her display, but Phillipa didn't seem to care. "Have a look at my neck, will you? Claire seems to think it needs attention, and I require a professional opinion."

While the duelists took their positions, Sam glanced at Phillipa's neck. Holding her chin, he placed his fingers near the tiny puncture mark and pressed. Phillipa winced, but didn't pull away. Apparently satisfied with what he saw, Sam lowered his hands and went back to work.

"Well?" Phillipa demanded with a hint of impatience.

Sam flicked a glance in her direction. "As to the bite mark, I've seen worse. As to your neck, I think your husband should have wrung it long ago."

"So much for professionalism," Phillipa muttered, sinking back into her seat.

Shrugging unsympathetically, Sam reached under the bar and drew out a small vial of red fluid which he plunked before her. "That's Marcus's, so use it sparingly."

Phillipa smiled her thanks at him. Putting a dab of the sparkling red fluid on her finger,

she patted it against her neck. Within seconds the angry, red mark disappeared. Then, with only a quick whistle of warning, she tossed the vial back to Sam, who caught it single-handed while he prepared a round of drinks for the spectators. Winking her thanks, Phillipa extended a finely manicured hand to Claire. "I'm Phillipa Michaels, and the gentleman is my husband."

"So I gathered," Claire answered, accepting Phillipa's hand before her gaze involuntarily shifted back to Germaine who was thrusting and parrying his way along the path the others had thoughtfully cleared of all tables and chairs.

"I probably shouldn't admit this," Phillipa muttered beneath her breath, "But I really hope Germaine loses this one. He deserves to be taken down a peg or two after what he just did. For a vampire, he can be a real pain in the butt sometimes."

Claire felt a sudden sinking feeling in her stomach. "This has happened before?"

Phillipa shrugged offhandedly. "More times than I'd care to remember." She counted on her fingers, then grimaced. "Shit, the number's probably in the forties by now. I'm surprised no one's suggested they rename that mangy whip after me." She took another sip of her drink.

Horried, Claire didn't know what to think. "Your husband has ordered you whipped more than forty times, and Germaine permitted it?"

Phillipa's deep violet eyes widened with surprise. "Phillip would never order me whipped. He's much too softhearted to ever do that. Oh, he's applied that feather cat o'nine tails to my backside whenever the council demanded it, but never very hard--and never as hard as the others."

"The others?" Claire asked, suddenly finding it difficult to swallow. "Are you saying Germaine has whipped you?"

Phillipa made a rueful face. "Germaine St. Justine can hold a grudge through eternity. Though he's never done it, himself, I think he would've enjoyed taking a whip to me tonight. He's partial to lessons, as you've probably gathered, but he has an unusual code of honor. He'll never lay a hand on a woman without gaining her permission first, but once he's got it, all bets are off."

Her mouth too dry to swallow, much less talk, Claire took a large gulp of her wine, then commented dryly, "He didn't seem too concerned about gaining your permission tonight."

"No, he didn't, which is what made me think he was on to us. It also made me think he knew Phillip wasn't going to hurt me. Still, none of that excuses his conduct."

"What do you mean 'on to you'?"

Phillipa's eyes narrowed as she gazed at Claire. "I'm going to ask a personal question. You can tell me to go to hell, if you like, but I need to ask. Did Germaine initiate you

this weekend?"

Claire hesitated briefly before she decided she owed no loyalty to a man who would permit such barbarity, even if he didn't apply the whip himself. Anger heating her cheeks, she gazed at her new friend. "Although I hate to admit it right now, yes he did, why?"

Phillipa looked confused by Claire's statement, but said, "Because he was acting like a teething fledgling all last week. Irritable, cranky, out-of-sorts, and totally unreasonable. He left here Sunday night muttering about witches' spells and Latin incantations, and returned early yesterday afternoon grumbling about answering machines and errands. May I ask what happened?"

Even anger couldn't loosen Claire's tongue that much. "It's a long story, and if I ever decide to speak to the man again, I think I should straighten things out with him first before I discuss it with anyone else."

Phillipa's brows rose with sudden understanding. "I see. If that's the case, then I think I'd better keep my mouth shut until Germaine has a chance to talk with you."

Claire gave the other woman a wry smile. "I'm not sure either of us will live that long. Please, don't stop on my account. Believe me, there's nothing you can say that will make matters worse, and you could improve them."

Phillipa still looked uncertain, but she nodded. "As I said, with Germaine growling and tossing out insults like he was itching for a fight, Phillip and I thought we'd offer to scratch by staging a little show. Only it seems he saw through our playacting and called our bluff."

Claire couldn't believe her ears. "You're saying that was all a show? Phillip's accusation--your plea--Germaine's call to the council? Even the vote to have you whipped?"

"Purely acting. That is, all except Germaine and the council's part, which neither of us expected. You may have noticed, though, that Phillip makes a lousy actor. He forgets the insults aren't real and gets hurt. Germaine, however, is a master at the game of pretense."

"So I'm beginning to realize," Claire muttered. "And this--duel? Is this a show, too?"

"In a manner of speaking, although Germaine is fighting for supremacy in a way. His right to govern you without council approval has been challenged. That's quite an honor, Claire. Even I don't have the council's open support yet, which they made all-too-apparent tonight," she grumbled.

"Forgive me for seeming dense, but what makes any of this an honor?"

Phillipa looked momentarily uneasy. "My situation is a little different, but normally when a vampire takes a mate, their disputes remain private unless the mortal breaks one of our laws. Then he or she is brought before the council for punishment. In your case,

the council so admired your courage in confronting the growling lion in his den that they're challenging Germaine's right to discipline you privately. Germaine has accepted the challenge--on the stipulation that if he wins, he will have sole authority over you--even if you break one of our laws."

Claire was beginning to think she'd be old and gray before she ever spoke to the tawny-eyed vampire again. "Are you saying that St. Justine is fighting for the right to beat me if he wishes?"

"I hadn't thought of it quite that way, but yes, I guess he is."

"Any chance he can be seriously injured tonight?"

"Not Germaine. He's an expert swordsman. Much better than Phillip."

Claire rose. "Too bad. I'd like to see him bleeding from a major artery right now." She took a step away from her seat when Marcus grabbed her arm to stop her.

"I cannot let you leave, Ms. Daniels. Please sit down."

"Just how will you stop me, Gladiator? Tie me down with the chains you keep stored next to that whip?"

A faint smile crossed his lips. "I could, but I won't."

"I wish to leave, now. So unless you mean to physically restrain me, I suggest you get out of my way."

He lowered his arm and stepped to one side. "Far be it from me to hinder you, Ms. Daniels. But then, I'm not the one who wishes you kept here."

"Let him do his worst," Claire remarked tightly, but when she started across the room, Marcus let out a shrill whistle of warning. Germaine turned, and Phillip, unable to check his thrust in time, struck him.

Germaine reacted instantly and instinctively, lifting the tip of his blade to Phillip's throat. Phillip raised his hands and dropped his sword, his surrender pronouncing Germaine the winner.

"Sorry, old friend," Germaine murmured in a near whisper. "But this was one battle I couldn't afford to lose."

Then moving with preternatural speed, Germaine stood before Claire, blocking her exit. "Just where do you think you're going?" he challenged with a slight rise to one brow.

Although his ability to seemingly vanish and re-materialize across a large-sized room in the space of a second still caused Claire to jump, her anger held fast. "Home. Away. To any place that doesn't cater to men who cross swords over the privilege of beating women."

"Would you prefer I concede that privilege to someone else?"

Furious, she tried to push past him, but found herself trapped in his arms. Knowing that fighting was useless, she accepted his restraint with ill-disguised rancor. "In case it has escaped your notice, St. Justine, this is the twentieth century. In it men and women are equal, and they don't go about striking one another with indemnity from assault charges."

"I see. Then, I suppose I could bring such a charge against you for throwing your entire library at me, book by book."

Claire closed her eyes, feeling herself weaken despite her ire. "It wasn't my entire library, and there is such a thing as justifiable homicide, which I am confident any sane jury would allow in my case, even though I didn't succeed. But yes, you could bring charges against me--although you'd most likely be laughed out of court."

"My point exactly. Courts tend to disregard things that fall outside their judicial realm, which is precisely why we don't have courts in our society, Claire. Our society is unlike yours in that each order is its own principality with its own set of rules despite the fact we all face the same challenge--how to survive without being exposed for what we really are. Because of the diversity in our backgrounds and culture, we meet those challenges with differing philosophies. Some rule their groups like dictatorships, others offer no real leadership at all. I rule by council vote.

"My challenge was not only over the right to govern our relationship as I see fit, but the right to decide your fate should such a decision prove necessary. In other words, I do not require council approval over anything that concerns you, not even your life."

"It wasn't my life that was in jeopardy a few minutes ago, it was my pride," she reminded him bitterly

"And that wasn't in real jeopardy, either. You should know me well-enough by now to realize I would never pursue any action with or against you without your prior approval."

"So I've discovered," she muttered, her resentment deepening.

"Speaking of discovering things," he segued neatly, leading her back to the bar, "how was your breakfast with Harry?"

She whirled and glared at him. "Then you admit that you played back my personal phone messages without my consent?"

"I admit to nothing of the kind," he insisted, handing her another glass of white wine before taking a sip from his own drink. "That machine of yours is in dire need of a major overhaul. When I awoke to find your note instead of you, I wasn't pleased. Actually, I was a little perturbed, but I was also hungry. While trudging into your kitchen I heard your machine making the most horrendous whining sound. It had reached the end of its tape and wouldn't turn off. I pressed the stop button and it immediately rewound and started to play on its own. I am not the sort to read people's mail or eavesdrop on

conversations, but I'm not a saint either.

“When I heard Harry demand to know who your lover was, I have to admit my curiosity was piqued as to your response. I wouldn't have been nearly as upset had you awakened me to tell me what had happened, but you even lied in your note.”

“Would you have let me go by myself to meet Harry if I'd told you the truth?”

“Probably not,” he admitted unabashedly.

“Then the only thing the truth would have gained me was a quarrel. I had to meet Harry alone, Germaine. I owed him that much, if nothing else.”

He bent his head forward slightly. “Will you at least tell me what he said?” he inquired, flexing his injured arm.

The movement drew Claire's attention to the gaping slash edged with crimson, like a large wine-smeared kiss, staining his upper shirtsleeve. “You've lost blood. Isn't that dangerous?”

“It could be, but my present distress isn't physical in nature. What did Harry say, Claire?”

She turned away as worry, frustration and anger battled inside her. He'd endangered himself, and for what? The privilege to punish her privately? “You're right. I don't agree with your rules and restrictions, Germaine. And I don't like them. They are pointless, cruel and demeaning games.”

“They aren't games, Claire,” he insisted with growing impatience. “They're law enforcement. How do you think your world would be without laws and people to enforce them?”

“That's different!”

“Is it? When you deal with immortality, the stakes may be different, but individual needs remain essentially the same. Food, shelter, clothing--even love. The issues that separated us when we were mortal do not magically disappear during transformation, and no society can prosper without enforceable guidelines. At last count, I believe there are over two hundred and fifty brotherhoods across the globe and seventy-five sisterhoods. Each with their own form of leadership and rules. Compared to some orders, our code is considered quite lenient. I do not endorse capital punishment, dismemberment, or premature burial, for infractions--yet others do.”

“No, instead you endorse flogging those who disobey your laws.”

His eyes narrowed slightly as if her accusation had chafed his pride. “I don't, actually. But I do believe in upholding order.”

“Even for yourself?”

“I'm no exception. The rules apply to me as well.”

“Have you ever sentenced yourself bound to that platform while others whipped you?”

“No, nor have I ever ordered anyone else placed there, either. It wasn't I who requested Phillipa be punished. I merely honored the request.”

“I don't care whose idea it was, I would never forgive you if you placed me in that position.”

“By fighting for you, I have assured that will never happen. Our private disputes will remain private even if they turn public. No one will ever interfere in what you and I choose to do with, for, or to each other. You are mine alone, Claire, and I am yours.”

“But neither of us is excluded from your laws?”

“No more than we are from yours,” he reminded her quietly. “I never suggested our joining would be free of conflict, did I?”

Although Claire had to admit he'd warned her, she wasn't sure she could abide by his rules. However, until she knew more about the specific laws that governed his group, she had to accept the fact she simply wasn't going to win this argument.

“I'm sorry I lied about Harry,” she admitted after awhile.

“And I'm sorry you felt that you had to,” he acknowledged with equal regret. “Did you tell Harry about us?” At her grudging nod, he asked, “How did he take the news?”

“Better than I thought. Although I suspect he still considers you as little more than a passing fancy for me.”

“Perhaps he's right,” he ventured soberly before sipping his drink.

“No, he's wrong. Only at times like this, I don't know how two people, so different from each other, can ever reconcile their differences.”

“They make compromises, such as you promise to tell me the truth, and I promise to hear you out before I start challenging people to duels. All right?”

At her hesitant agreement, he bent toward her. “I love you, Claire, and right now I want you more than anything. Not just because I'm hurt, although that has admittedly put an edge on my desire, but because I admire your spirit and your ideals. I never, ever, want to hurt you. And as long as it is my decision alone to make--I never will.”

Claire swallowed and placed her hand in his.

“However,” he added with a meaningful look, “your friend Watkins made a valid point, earlier. Now that you've made it common knowledge that we're together, your life could be in danger. Therefore, I'm going to have to insist you take some special precautions.”

“What kind of precautions?”

“Common sense ones, really. Don't go anywhere at night without a proper escort--”

“Germaine, I work at night. I can't be expected to wait for people to take me places

whenever you're not around. I'll be fine. I've managed so far without your protection, and I'll continue to function quite well without it in the future.”

“No, Claire, you won't. And that's final,” he insisted, his tone brooking no argument.

Claire drew her hand from his. “Is this how it's going to be? I disagree, and you turn autocratic.”

“Undoubtedly, yes. I am not a man of great patience.”

“It isn't patience that's at issue here, Germaine, it's respect. I'm an adult. I can make my own decisions, and I'm not about to follow your dictates simply because you command it.”

“I do not command out of arrogance, Claire, but out of expediency, since urgency rarely lends itself to in-depth explanations. At such moments you are simply going to have to trust me.”

Despite her frustration, Claire knew she would have to be the one to compromise on this, or he would only refuse to see her again. “I can't promise I'll always do as you say, but if you ask me to trust you, I'll do my best. We aren't facing any dire emergency right now, however, so tell me why you think my life is in danger.”

He sat back on his stool. The others had stepped away awhile ago to give them privacy, so in the vast room they were essentially alone.

“I warned you there were dangers in loving someone like me. Our instinct for survival is strong. Sometimes too strong. The powers we possess must be carefully governed if we are to continue living peaceably among mortals.

“I am adamant, almost to the point of obsession, that everyone allied with me must obey my rule governing transformations--or suffer the penalty. It is not an easy tenet to live by, and many think I am interfering with the natural right of immortals to insist upon it. There are several groups who would like nothing better than to bring me down because of my beliefs, and others who would not scruple against taking innocent lives to see their wishes fulfilled.”

He took her hand in his and squeezed her fingers. “I vowed to protect you, Claire. It would destroy me if you were captured and made an example of to get back at me.”

“By making an example of me, you don't really think they would kill me, do you?”

“Oh, they would kill you, all right. Make no mistake about it. However, it isn't your death as much as the manner in which it would be executed that terrifies me. Being transformed against your will is not a pleasant experience. You may take my word on that.”

Sensing the deeper meaning that lay behind his words, Claire placed her fingers over his.

“Is that what happened to you?”

He didn't answer her, but the haunted look in his eyes before he turned away filled Claire with an aching need to ease his pain. "Can you tell me about it?" she asked softly, knowing he would most probably refuse.

This time when his eyes met hers the ghost-like emptiness in his gaze had been replaced by soft regret. "Someday, perhaps, but not tonight."

Claire knew from her intimacy with Germaine just how intense the vampire mating ritual could be. To have someone take her that way, against her will, would be equivalent to rape. An image of being forcibly stripped and held down while a stranger sank his teeth into her most sensitive and vulnerable spot, made Claire cringe. Perhaps it wouldn't be just one. What if a group of them chose to feed from her at once as if she were nothing more than a living banquet? Such a death would be a terrifying, violent experience of pain and degradation, and even the thought of it had her clutching Germaine's fingers.

I'll protect you, Claire, if you will let me, he assured her silently.

Her uncertainty dissipating beneath the intensity of his promise, Claire nodded.

That night Germaine made love to her with a passion that left Claire breathless and astounded. He kissed her all over--carefully, reverently, yet differently. Where before he had only placed his lips to her flesh, this time she felt him gently pierce her and sip--taking just enough from her to make her skin and muscles pulse with an unfulfilled desire.

By the time he'd removed her underclothing, Claire was begging him to take her, to make her his totally and completely. Her entire body was engulfed with a raging heat that he alone possessed the power to cool. There was no embarrassment, no second thoughts, just a heartfelt yielding from one individual to another.

Germaine did not deny her a second longer, and Claire's climb to ecstasy accelerated as her heated blood flowed from her into him in an outpouring of love and desire intermingled. Claire felt as if her heart might burst from the pleasure, yet there was no pain--just a serene tranquillity that she embraced without fear or reservation. When she finally awakened from her trance-like state, Germaine was beside her, embracing her as if she were the most precious thing he'd ever held in his arms.

She could tell he had bathed her and healed the tiny wounds he'd created, and she felt at peace with him in a way that she never felt when they were apart. Wrapped within the warm protection of his arms, Claire acknowledged that the link they shared was more than a means of communication, it was a conduit for sensitivity and shared feelings. It connected her and Germaine with a slender thread of thought and emotion that was unlike anything she'd ever experienced before. Claire clung to the security of this intimate joining of minds with all the tenacity of a drowning person. Though she wasn't the one drowning, this fragile extension between them was quickly becoming Claire's lifeline to survival.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Less than twenty-four hours later, Claire's lifeline grew unexpectedly taut.

The day began innocently enough with Germaine getting out of bed when she did saying that he'd like to watch her exercise. Having no good reason to object, Claire shrugged and slipped into her exercise clothes while Germaine remained unabashedly and gloriously nude--watching her. She assumed her usual position on the floor, legs spread out in a "V," her arms stretched out toward her toes when he said, "Why don't you take off your sweat suit? It's much easier to gauge a workout's efficacy, if your movements are unhindered by cotton flannel."

"But I don't have any tights," she blurted as her body tensed in instinctive alarm.

"You don't need any. In fact, it's best if you wear nothing at all. The Greeks exercised that way, and they were once considered the greatest athletes in the world."

She stretched toward her other foot. "I doubt their clothing, or the lack of it, was directly related with their ability to throw pointed, wooden sticks and flat metal disks," she mumbled, while pushing herself even harder in the hope that he would mistakenly attach her heightened coloring to exercise rather than embarrassment.

"Maybe not. Although I suspect a spell of cold weather did much to improve their speed." At her own increased pace, he asked, "Do you still feel uneasy with me, Claire?"

Her head bent, Claire slowly drew her legs together. "Not uneasy, exactly...."

"Then what? It isn't as if your body is in need of toning. You're in great shape. I merely want to watch your muscles functioning in their natural state."

It took a bit more convincing, but once Claire managed to get over her personal inhibitions concerning nudity, she discovered she rather enjoyed Germaine's instruction. He knew a lot about the human body, and with the aid of his firm touch and gentle guidance, this exercise session was far more profitable and pleasurable than any Claire had previously grunted and ground her way through.

By the time they stopped for breakfast, Claire was famished. Yet, it wasn't hunger that prompted her to sit unfettered and naked at the kitchen counter while she consumed a bowl of cereal, half a grapefruit and cup of coffee. Being unclothed with Germaine seemed a natural extension of their morning play. It felt right and incredibly intimate.

Germaine watched her eat with an indulgent smile. For the moment his hunger was appeased and he was content to simply look at her. However, it wasn't long before his strong, tapered fingers moved upwards to trail along her thigh.

Claire stopped eating and closed her eyes. The mere touch of his hand started a warm flow of desire through her as her body prepared to welcome him in the age-old way of women and men. She instinctively parted her legs in a silent invitation that his fingers did not hesitate to accept.

Knowing that he was watching her take pleasure from his touch made Claire's response all that more intense. Her breakfast momentarily forgotten, she gripped the counter, pressed back in her chair and responded to the man who had taught her just how rapturous physical love could be. She arched her back with a cry of un-suppressed delight, while her inner muscles contracted in ecstatic release. Her skin aglow in the aftermath of her orgasm, Claire felt as if every muscle in her body had turned more limp and useless than her milk-soaked bran flakes. She let out a soft sigh of contentment.

"And they call Wheaties the breakfast of champions," she murmured huskily.

Germaine chuckled. "I love watching you reach your climax, which is something I cannot do when I take my own pleasure of you. But even more than watching you, I enjoy touching you. Your thighs are so fine and smooth that my fingers gain a pleasure all their own when they caress you. So much so, I'd like to request a favor from you."

Claire was feeling particularly obliging. "What is it?"

"I'd like you to wear stockings instead of panty hose. I'd prefer you wore nothing at all, but the less the better. I like the feel of your satiny skin on my fingers, Claire, not linen, cotton, nylon or whatever other materials you like to place upon your lower half."

Despite the intimacy they'd just shared, Claire still blushed. Somehow the thought of going about without any underwear on made her feel wickedly indecent. She glanced at him beneath lowered lashes. He was asking, not demanding. In actuality, he was telling her something of his own intimate preferences. He preferred his women unencumbered by undergarments that were difficult to remove.

She was framing her response when a fist-like pounding at the front door distracted her.

"Just a minute," she called out unthinkingly, then gazed at Germaine with amused consternation before the two of them rushed into the bedroom to make themselves presentable.

Claire slipped into her robe. "Stay here," she ordered, closing the door on his immediate protest. But when she peeked through the peephole, Claire's stomach knotted with dread.

Unable to delay the inevitable any longer, she rolled back the dead bolt and opened the door. "Harry, you really should call first," she murmured with a tinge of exasperation.

"Is he here?" Harry demanded, brushing past her to step into the small entranceway.

"Please do come in," she muttered, locking the door.

Oblivious to her sarcasm, Harry faced her. "I asked you if he was still here, Claire."

"Hello, Harry," Germaine announced from the bedroom door, and Claire didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed when she saw he was fully dressed. The man clearly had a knack for getting people in and out of their clothes in record time--including himself.

“St. Justine,” Harry greeted with a slight sneer. “I thought I would tell you face-to-face what I told Claire yesterday. You may have money and a tremendous amount of influence over her career, but I've known her since grade school. I've loved her for more than ten years, and I intend to make her my wife despite any brief, meaningless, indiscretion she may have with you.”

“A noble sentiment, Collins. However, noble sentiments are useless when they are unwelcome, unneeded, and undesired.”

“What would you know of Claire's needs and desires? You two barely knew each other a month ago, yet you were both involved in the same theatrical production. I was the one who stood by her throughout her mother's illness. You showed up only a few days before the end. Now her brother's ill and Claire knows she can count on me again to help her. She can't possibly have that same certainty with you.”

Germaine gave Claire a sharp look that brought an immediate guilty flush to her cheeks. “Oh? Why can't she?” he inquired evenly.

“Because you're short term. Once she realizes that, you'll be history.”

Germaine smiled, but Claire had seen friendlier expressions on a snake. “I think you'd be surprised to discover just how long term I can be, Harry, but I admire your persistence.” He turned to collect his coat and Claire felt him mentally summon her.

Hoping he didn't mean to carve Harry into tiny pieces, she crossed the room to Germaine. His gold eyes penetrated hers, asking her to make a choice. Her decision made nearly two weeks ago, Claire took a step closer, and Germaine promptly put his arm around her, drawing her into his embrace.

Casting a fleeting glance in Harry's direction, he murmured confidentially to her, “I have to go now, but I want you to think over all I've said.” When she nodded, he tilted up her chin and kissed her in a way that was both possessive and incredibly intimate for all its public display. He not only wanted to reassure Claire that he had no intention of abandoning her, but to show Harry just who it was she belonged to.

Lifting his mouth from hers, Germaine gave her a quick hug. “Dinner tonight at Sorentos?”

She nodded in stunned, but pleased, surprise.

“This time, I will call on you,” he added with a meaningful look. Then releasing her, he wished Harry a pleasant day, put on his sunglasses, and left.

Harry started to explain, but before he could utter a word in his own defense, Claire told him exactly what she thought of his high-handed tactics and pushed him out of her apartment. Then shutting the door in his face, she dead-bolted it.

* * *

Harry stared at the locked portal and frowned. Claire was letting her emotions rule her again, but he would deal with that later.

St. Justine was an entirely different matter. The hold he had over Claire wasn't natural, and Harry was beginning to suspect the man himself was a little unnatural. Too much secrecy shrouded the man's private life for him not to be up to something. Although Harry had no idea what it was St. Justine sought to conceal, he meant to find out--and quickly.

For Claire's sake, Harry intended to prove just how easily she could be deceived without his levelheaded counsel to guide her.

* * *

When Claire arrived at the theater that night, a dozen blood-red roses awaited her. The attached card, which said simply Until tonight, was signed in a bold, masculine scrawl - Germaine.

Claire considered her performance that night to be one of her best. Guided by her own experiences, she played Lucy Seward with an enlightened insight few others could claim. Only shy, innocent Lucy was wrong. Dracula did not desire her blood. He wanted her for his bride.

When Claire entered her dressing room, Germaine was already waiting for her. He rose, and with a quick sideways glance at her dresser and makeup assistant said, "I explained I was here to discuss a project with you, in case there was any misunderstanding over the flowers I sent."

His efforts to appear businesslike and formal brought a smile to Claire's lips. Like him, she didn't want it printed in Variety that they were lovers, but she had no objection to people knowing they were seeing each other. Since he sent her the flowers to begin with, she assumed he felt the same way but had more difficulty acknowledging it. Leaning forward to appreciate the roses' delicate fragrance, she murmured. "You may send me flowers anytime you wish, St. Justine." Then with a playful laugh, she ruined his grand gesture by kissing him directly on the mouth.

Though he seemed inwardly pleased by her impulsive gesture, Claire thought his kiss was remarkably restrained compared to their morning activities. The two young women watching them gave a few muffled giggles of delighted surprise, but did not offer to leave.

When Claire drew back, Germaine was smiling. His eyes, however, promised retribution. He placed his hands on her hips. "A gentleman always follows a lady's lead. When these two are finished with you, I pray you will keep my preferences in mind while you dress for dinner." Smiling at the way Claire's cheeks bloomed bright pink at his intimate suggestion, he bowed and took his leave, announcing he would wait for her in the hall.

Although the two women didn't stop talking for a second, Claire didn't hear a single word they said. Her thoughts remained on the tall, handsome man standing sentinel just outside her door, except the man she pictured in her mind had far less clothes on.

When Claire was finally freed to join him in that narrow corridor, he regarded her with one eyebrow arched inquiringly. The cad wanted to know if she'd catered to his wishes. Linking her arm with his, she offered him a dimpled smile.

"Though a true gentleman would never be so improper as to require something so intimate from his ladylove, a true lady would never think of denying her lover's most heartfelt request."

His eyes grew warm with an inner fire as his mouth curved with an appreciative smile. "Such devotion deserves a reward, don't you think?"

Claire's hand tightened on his arm. "Not here," she protested.

"Why not? The area appears deserted, and if anyone should come along--you've more than suggested our meeting is for intimate purposes. This will merely remove any misconceptions that a few isolated individuals might still harbor about our relationship."

Her playful mood shattered, Claire refused to move. "I hardly think a dinner date implies an assignation, but what you suggest . . . Are you so angry with me for kissing you in front of those women that you'd purposely humiliate me in public?"

"I'm not angry at all, Claire, and I have no wish to humiliate you in public or private. I am, however, not above teasing you any more than you are above teasing me." He drew back to look at her with a disturbed expression. "I thought you knew me well enough by now to realize I'd never do anything you didn't want me to?" When she looked away, he added, "Never think that I am reluctant or ashamed to admit my desire for you openly."

"You wouldn't mind if others saw us?"

"I am an extremely possessive and protective man, Claire, who has gone to great lengths to keep his vampirism a secret. Do you seriously think I would chance either of us being exposed in so obvious a manner if I believed there was a real risk of discovery?"

Put that way, Claire had to shake her head. Suddenly the notion of him taking her in the theater held an undeniably erotic appeal. "Do you think anyone would come backstage? I know where they store Lucy's bed."

His eyebrows drew together in an exaggerated frown. "I'm not certain I want to make love to you on the same bed where Dracula seeks you every night."

Drawing his arms around her, Claire pressed against him. "I assure you, good sir, that he hasn't the slightest idea what it's all about. He still bites ladies on the neck."

The smile in his eyes changing to a heated glow, Germaine willingly followed Claire's lead to Lucy Seward's lacy four poster bed. The platform mattress was exceptionally hard for stage use, but all he did was perch her on the edge of it. Then raising her calf-

length suede skirt and silk under-slip to her waist, he gazed long and lovingly upon the view she offered him.

The notion that he gained pleasure from simply looking at her made Claire desire him even more. She drew her skirt even higher and opened her legs to him. "May I watch you as well?" she asked a little tremulously.

His golden eyes seemed to pierce her where she sat, but the infernal flames that lit them no longer frightened her. In truth, she found herself responding to the very differences that had once made her recoil with fear. He smiled knowingly at her. "If you wish to watch, I would be most happy to accommodate you. However, it may take some acrobatics to achieve it."

Claire was more than willing to be flexible. With her weight braced on her hands and her thighs resting on his shoulders, she watched him gently part her before he pressed his mouth and tongue to that tiny part of her that already pulsed with need. That was the last coherent thought Claire had. Within moments she was caught up in the rapture of Germaine's special loving. Her body possessed, she writhed in near torment as he drew her closer and closer toward euphoria. However, the moment she reached that illusory pinnacle of pure bliss, Claire was physically paralyzed while mentally she remained in the throes of an exquisite ecstasy she never wanted to end.

As always, she screamed out her pleasure the moment he released her from her sensual enthrallment. This time, however, she remained conscious.

Her breath still coming in gasps she regarded him with an even look. "I'm surprised you managed to keep a straight face when I suggested trying to watch you."

"There is always a first time," he answered dryly while he carefully healed the small puncture marks he'd made in her flesh. Even that simple touch caused Claire to gasp with delight as her lower region felt bathed in the warmth of sunlight.

Although the rest of the evening was spent in more conventional pursuits, it was still a feast for the senses. The texture of finely spun silk caressing her bare skin, the taste of imported wine and savory Italian cuisine, and the sight of the man she loved seated across from her with a warm smile of appreciation softening his face, made Claire feel lovely, sensuous and desirable. Although Robert was never far from her thoughts, even her worries about him seem far removed from this night when Germaine's demeanor suddenly turned serious, and he reached across the table to clasp her hand in his.

"I've given much thought to what Harry said this morning," he began gently, "and in some ways I think he may be right." Claire tried to pull away, but he refused to release her. "Hear me out first, we can always argue later if you insist." Although Claire's heart twisted with the fear that he meant this evening as a farewell gesture, she allowed him his say.

"Harry's accusation that ours has all the earmarks of a passionate, but temporary,

Broadway romance carries more validity than I'd like. I have taken much from you, and offered little in return.”

“That's not true!” she protested, unable to keep silent any longer. “You've given me a great deal, and I don't give a damn about what Harry thinks!”

“I doubt Harry is the only one who feels that way. I'm not right for you, Claire,” he admitted, drawing a small black jeweler's box from his jacket. “You'd be far better off without me.”

She glared at the tiny box. “If you think you can buy me off with a piece of expensive jewelry, St. Justine, you'd better put that back before I get angry enough to ram it down your throat. If you want to stop seeing me, just say so.”

“I want to stop seeing you,” he echoed tonelessly, looking as if the admission physically pained him. At Claire's in-drawn gasp, he added, “Only I find it impossible to give you up. Possibly because you won't let me.”

Feeling battered and uncertain, Claire pulled her hand free from his and dabbed at her burning eyes with her napkin. “What are you saying?”

“I'm saying something I never thought I'd say to another woman, Claire, but you are unlike any other woman I've known. You're fiercely independent, yet tenderly vulnerable. You're quick-witted, smart, an excellent conversationalist and incredibly sexy. You're also the first person who's conducted a seance to summon me and the only woman who has ever had enough temerity to pursue me into my private domain, let alone challenge our official proceedings.” He pushed the box toward her. “You've made it quite clear you don't want this, but I'd like you to at least look at it before you refuse it. Please.”

Claire opened the small box with grave reluctance. Inside was a sparkling diamond ring--an engagement ring. She gazed at Germaine in confusion.

“I warned you that I am an extremely possessive man, Claire,” he reminded quietly. “I don't like other men assuming my lady feels little more than a passing fancy for me. As long as we are together, I want everyone to know that you are mine, and you will remain mine.”

A lump gathered in Claire's throat. “Are you asking me to marry you?”

“Yes, if that's what you want. We can recite vows before a minister or priest, if you wish, I am more than willing. If you need more time to think things over, I will wait until your heart and mind are in accord. All I ask is that you accept and wear my ring in the meantime.”

With a shaky nod, Claire handed the box back to him and extended her left hand.

“Would you put it on for me?”

He agreed and was just slipping the ring onto her finger when Harry unexpectedly

charged over to their table and shoved himself between them.

Germaine's face was a mask of barely controlled fury as he gripped his chair to keep from lashing out at their intruder. "If you value your life at all, Collins, I suggest you never try that again," he growled from deep in his throat.

Ignoring him, Harry grabbed Claire's wrist to yank the ring off her finger, but she jerked her hand back before he succeeded. "You don't know what you're doing, Claire," he protested, his voice and face pained with an unprecedented dismay. "He has you so beguiled that you actually believe he loves you, but he is incapable of loving anyone or anything. Believe me, Claire. I've spent the entire morning and afternoon asking about him. He's an evil man, and he'll destroy you if you stay with him."

"Harry, please," Claire cautioned as other dinners turned to stare at them.

Harry leaned closer until his nose nearly touched hers. "I'm trying to save your life, Claire. He tortures any woman who dares oppose him. I know. I've met one. She's in love with a member of St. Justine's select club and wants to marry him, but St. Justine refuses to allow it. She says she can't be one of the inner circle without becoming a member, and she can't become a member unless she can get someone to initiate her into the club. An impossibility without Germaine's permission.

"Because of Germaine's prejudice against her, she's tried to go elsewhere. But when he learned of her plan, he ordered her tortured. I offered to go to the authorities for her, but she begged me not to say anything. She said St. Justine would kill her if he found out she'd even spoken to me. Please, Claire, leave him and come with me now--I beg you. He's dangerous."

Claire glanced briefly at Germaine. His expression was hard and unforgiving, but his gaze wasn't directed at her. She didn't think he even blamed Harry. Someone else had earned his displeasure, and whoever this person was, she had gotten herself into some serious trouble.

Although Claire didn't doubt Germaine could be remorseless if a situation required it, she also knew he would never hurt a woman by choice. Only something had happened--something terrible. She wanted to hear Germaine's side, but not while Harry was there. This was between herself and the man whose ring she now wore.

Seeing the maitre d' approach them, Claire laid a calming hand on Harry's sleeve.

"Whoever told you this is exaggerating, Harry. Germaine loves me. He'd never hurt me, or any other woman."

"You're wrong, Claire," Harry insisted, ignoring the headwaiter's polite cough. "The woman was not exaggerating, and she's terrified of this man. So terrified, that she refused to tell me what he did to her. But whatever it was, it caused her extreme anguish, both mental and physical."

"I'm sorry, Harry. I know you only want to protect me, but I'm with Germaine now." She

held up her hand. "I've accepted his ring because I love him, not because he's threatened me."

"Have you ever tried to oppose him?"

"Sir..." the maitre d' interjected.

"We're lovers, Harry, and lovers sometimes quarrel. We make up eventually."

Harry glanced over at Germaine, who watched him the way a hungry but savvy fox sizes up a potential meal. When he looked away, Harry's expression reflected his defeat. Germaine would never permit him to take Claire away, even by force.

"You're making a terrible mistake, Claire. You've engaged yourself to an inhuman monster who lives off others' terror. You think he's suave, mannered and sophisticated, but he's heartless, cruel and sadistic. He'll destroy you, if you stay with him, and I don't intend to let that happen. We've known each other too long for me to stand by and watch you end up like sweet, young Sybill."

Germaine jerked to attention, but said nothing. The maitre d' politely cleared his throat.

"See, even your demonic lover acknowledges the truth of what I say." Reaching out, Harry grabbed Claire's arm. His attention focused solely on Claire, he didn't see Germaine's fingers clench into steely-white fists. "Please, Claire, come with me now, before it's too late."

"Sir," the maitre d' warned, his English lightly accented and highly affected. "You are disturbing the other diners. I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to leave."

"No, Harry," Claire answered firmly, her eyes still on Germaine who looked ready to commit murder. "I'm staying."

Harry's gaze followed hers. "You hurt her in any way, St. Justine, and I'll see you pay for it--dearly." Then he bent forward to kiss Claire goodbye. His lips had barely brushed hers, when Germaine came surging to his feet. A lurking press photographer happened to choose that unlucky moment to snap a picture. For Germaine, it was the proverbial straw, only it wasn't a camel's back that was in jeopardy, it was the hapless photographer's wrist.

"Germaine!" Claire cried out as she watched the man she loved bring another man groaning to his knees with a simple twist of his hand.

The maitre d' sputtered with dismay as Germaine released his captive long enough to retrieve his camera and expose all the film inside it. His movements so quick and smooth, the incident appeared more a case of mechanical defect than inhuman design. Then, with a murmur of apology, Germaine gripped the fallen man's chin and gazed into his terrified eyes. "It is most unfortunate your camera was not better made. If I were you, I'd write a letter of complaint to the manufacturer."

The photographer's eyes seemed to glaze over as he nodded in docile accord.

Lowering his hand, Germaine helped the stunned man to his feet. "It seems I do not always recognize my own strength. How is your hand?"

The man gazed down at his fingers, as if he just realized he possessed any, and tentatively flexed them. Shrugging, he next made a fist without any sign of discomfort.

"It works," he answered, then ran his other hand over his eyes as if he were plagued by a sudden and unexpected headache.

"You look a bit peaked," Germaine suggested sympathetically. "It would probably be best if you went home and slept. Once you've had a good night's rest, I'm sure you'll be fine."

The confused photographer nodded in grateful agreement. Then with fumbling hands, he gathered up his broken equipment, wished everyone a pleasant evening and walked steadily, out of the restaurant.

Claire was still reeling from the shock of that encounter when Harry grabbed her protectively about the waist.

Germaine turned with a fluid grace that was not entirely natural, and the smile he bestowed on Harry brought to mind ancient, unspeakable evils. Claire gasped as the small hairs at the nape of her neck rose in alarm.

"Release her, Collins, before I really forget myself and break every bone in your body."

"Gentlemen, please," the maitre d' beseeched, finally regaining his voice.

Harry let go of Claire and backed up a step. "I'll save you, Claire. I'm not sure how, yet, but I'll save you." At that, he edged the maitre d' aside and marched out of the restaurant.

Germaine drew his wallet from his pocket. "Collect your things, Claire," he ordered. "We're leaving."

"Why?" she asked with a small shiver of panic. "Is what Harry said true?"

"We'll talk, later. Right now, I want you to pick up your purse and walk to the door." He threw two one-hundred dollar bills on the table, clearly not wanting to wait for their check to be tallied, and confident the surplus would keep the establishment from asking too many questions.

The maitre d's eyes widened, but he merely inquired, "Shall I have the waiter get your coats for you, sir?"

"Please," Germaine replied tersely.

Claire reached out and gingerly touched Germaine's sleeve. "I promised I would do as you asked, without question, if you told me to trust you. Is this one of those times, Germaine?"

"Not exactly. I just don't want to explain in a public restaurant, all right?"

Claire didn't argue. She simply walked beside him to the restaurant entrance.

When the waiter rushed over to help them into their coats, Germaine paid him another twenty for his prompt service.

The young man bobbed his head in gratitude. "I hope when you come again, Mr. St. Justine, that you will remember to ask for Michael."

"I'll remember, Michael. Thank you." When they stepped out of the restaurant, Germaine proffered his elbow to Claire and asked, "Do you mind if we walk?"

Swallowing back her uneasiness, Claire linked her arm loosely through his and shook her head. The night air was brisk, but not bitter, and she liked to walk. But more than that, she needed reassurance that Harry was wrong, except she feared Germaine would not offer it willingly.

Uncertain where to begin, she considered all she'd seen and heard that night and chose to start with the revelation that bothered her most. "Who's Sybill?"

Germaine slanted her a wary glance, but answered, "She is a mortal in service to Arthur."

"In service?" Claire repeated, more than a little alarmed by her lover's choice of words.

"Theirs is more of a business arrangement, Claire. Arthur secured Sybill's services about six months ago when he picked her up in a bar."

"Oh. Then they aren't really in love with each other?"

Germaine shrugged, but Claire felt a wave of raw strength flow over her fingers and knew his attempt at nonchalance was merely a facade for a much stronger emotion.

"Some measure of affection exists between them, I suppose," Germaine allowed. "Sybill has professed a certain fondness for Arthur, but no, they are not lovers in the true sense of the word. Arthur hired Sybill to serve his needs both in and out of bed. In return, he has promised to see her mortal needs met as well."

"Then why did she tell Harry she'd been tortured?"

"The question is why was she speaking to Harry at all?"

"Surely, she's allowed to talk to people?"

"Not about any business that transpires between her and Arthur, or the council."

"Then you did torture her!"

He looked at her then, and his golden eyes pulsed with an icy fire. "She broke one of our laws and we punished her for it," he corrected, securing his grip on her hand as they crossed Fifth Avenue.

Once across, Claire pulled away from him. He let her go, but Claire sensed it was only because he feared hurting her. His expression revealed his displeasure over the attention

they were receiving, but right then Claire didn't care if they drew a crowd. "What did you do, whip her with that feather duster you keep around for recalcitrant women?"

"Lower your voice," he warned quietly. When she merely glared at him, he admitted, "The council did sentence Sybill to ten lashes of the feather whip, but I neither judged her nor carried out the sentence."

Although Claire lowered her voice, she did not attempt to disguise her revulsion. "Is that whip so painful she would consider it torture?"

"No. It smarts, but it leaves no welts, nor does it break the skin. It is meant to humiliate more than hurt. The punishment was supposed to be public, but even that was waived when she pleaded for a closed session. I am confident she was given every consideration due her."

"How kind of you. What did you do, offer her a blindfold, a pillow and a Kleenex?"

"Perhaps. But more likely Arthur would have seen to it that she did not suffer overlong. He is a bit more businesslike about his relationships than I, but he is not unkind. I wouldn't let him remain with us if he was."

"I can't tell you just how much that reassures me. You strip women and beat them, but you're benignly generous to them afterwards."

Germaine gave her a look that suggested he didn't appreciate her sarcasm, but when he gestured for them to continue their walk, Claire didn't argue. She did, however, refuse the offer of his arm. They walked side-by-side, their differences pulling them apart, while their love and desire to understand and be understood vied to keep them from separating altogether.

His eyes straight ahead, Germaine said, "As I've said before, our order is relatively lenient in regards to punishing mortals. Some groups would have sentenced Sybill to death for what she did. In others, she could have found herself feeding ten or more at once, or one right after another until she had no more to give."

That was too close to Claire's own horror-filled visions not to make her shudder. "What about Victor's order? What would they have done to her?"

Germaine stiffened slightly at that question. "He would have allowed her to do as she wished, I suppose. Chances are if she'd joined Victor's order, he would have made her a slave. That would have cured her desires quickly enough."

"Which desires?"

"All of them. Especially her pronounced inclination for seeking out men to pleasure her. Promiscuity is frowned upon, but tolerated, when the participants are vampires. For mortals, however, consorting with more than one vampire is forbidden--unless the individual was hired especially for serving the group as Hugo and James have been."

"Hugo and James are slaves?" Claire asked, her voice rising slightly.

Germaine rewarded her with another one of his warning looks, but said, "We don't keep slaves, Claire. Hugo and James are servants hired under contract to Illusions. They receive their lodging, food and clothing free. In addition, we give them a salary for which they give their blood to whomever they choose, no more than three or four times a week. We give them free medical care and their hemoglobin is checked nightly.

"However, they are the only ones free to choose their partners. We cannot vouch for our mortals' safety otherwise. Should a mortal companion wish to change partners, he or she presents a petition to the council with the reasons for requesting reassignment. Any attempt a mortal may make to seek outside pleasures without council sanction is punishable by the whip or the dais."

Claire felt suddenly ill. All these rules and regulations made her relationship with Germaine seem cold and artificial. "What is the dais?" she asked in a near whisper.

Germaine's eyes assessed her with silent swiftness. "Mind if I answer that another time?"

Claire shook her head, but only because she was no longer sure she wanted to hear the answer. What if Harry was right? What if she had engaged herself to a monster?

They reached the entranceway to her apartment and Germaine stopped her.

"None of this concerns you, Claire, which is precisely why I fought for you."

Claire wanted to believe him, but no matter how he put it, she knew she'd never come around to his way of thinking. "And Phillipa said council protection was an honor," she muttered wryly.

"It is," he insisted. "The council's challenge to protect you the other night was a great compliment and a very rare honor. You should be proud of your accomplishment."

"Really? What pride is there in being honored by a group of men who are so barbaric that they don't think twice about ordering an unhappy woman whipped simply to keep her in line?"

Germaine shook his head. His expression held no anger--merely resignation. "It's not that simple, Claire. Had Sybill approached any of the men privately to request his intervention, I am certain he would have stood up as a champion for her."

"What about you? Would you have stood up for her?"

He hesitated, then slowly shook his head. "I didn't want Sybill admitted to begin with. When she began causing trouble, I petitioned to have her barred from the group. However, I am just one voice among many. Arthur wanted her and chose to keep her despite their initial difficulties. The council decided in his favor."

Claire stared out at the traffic-lined avenue. "I still think whipping a person is wrong, no matter what the crime is."

“That's your right, Claire,” he replied, reaching for her arm. “And should you ever be placed on the council, we would put your concerns to a vote.”

Beginning to doubt that he would ever take her protest seriously, Claire pulled away from him. “Tell me, Germaine, when has a woman, let alone a mortal woman, ever served on your precious council?”

“One hasn't, yet. But then our council has never stood up for a mortal before, either.”

“So Sybill had no say in her own punishment?”

His jaw tightened, but the look he bestowed on her was one of eternal patience--ever tried. “We allow for appeals, just as your legal system does, but they are not encouraged.”

“What about her rights, Germaine?”

He thrust his hands into his pockets. “Sybill was no more unaware of the consequences if she got caught than you are, Claire, and she chose to take that risk. We may not have cases or lawyers, but we allow our accused a plea in their own defense. If they request time to present their arguments, the council grants an extension more often than not. Sybill wasn't overly pleased by her sentence, but she offered no actual objection to it until the first stroke.”

“Was Arthur the one who whipped her?”

“No,” he admitted quietly, though his shoulders dropped and his expression grew shuttered. “Arthur asked to be exempted from the duty, so Sybill selected Gregory in his place. From all I heard Gregory was firm but fair in the administration of the sentence. Sybill was undoubtedly sore afterwards, but not incapacitated.” He glanced at his watch. “I'd best see you upstairs. If word gets out that Sybill has approached another group to initiate her, there'll be trouble, and I want to be there to defuse some of it before things get out of hand.”

“Wait.” Her need to know momentarily overcoming her resentment, Claire placed a staying hand on his sleeve. “You're not telling me something. What is it?” When he didn't answer her, she started putting the pieces together herself. “You just said Sybill was both aware of her punishment and relatively accepting of it. So why would she accuse you of torturing her, especially since you had nothing really to do with it?”

“I'll tell you in the elevator,” he promised, giving her a gentle push forward.

Claire complied. A part of her was desperate to know the truth while another part feared the answer might cast an ugly tarnish over the love and trust she still had for the man beside her.

Once they were in the elevator, she turned to him. “What went wrong, Germaine? Why is Sybill so bitter toward you?”

“Again, it was not my recommendation, but I concurred with the sentence. Supposedly,

Sybill writhed and screamed at Gregory's every stroke, as if he'd flayed her raw. Though her flesh was barely pink when Gregory reached over to untie her, she complained that the pain was terrible, worse than any she'd ever experienced before, and she begged him to offer her release.

"Gregory has a special fondness for mortal women, and he finds it difficult to refuse their pleas, even when it's obvious they are lying. He is also a bit more inventive in his loving than Arthur, and Sybill can be quite vocally responsive when she is stimulated in a certain way."

"I gather they were caught?"

"With her knees draped over his ears," he admitted dryly.

"What happened to them?"

"Since Gregory was single, he was forbidden to mate with a mortal for a month. And as this was Sybill's second offense, which occurred while she was being punished for her first, the council sentenced her to the dais for ten minutes. It was my participation in that ordeal that has undoubtedly labeled me a torturer."

"Did you hurt her?"

"No, but what I did caused her exquisite agony all the same. This is your floor, ma'am. I'll see you to your door, then I have to go."

Claire nodded. She had thought she would try and convince him to stay, but now she wasn't sure she ever wanted to see him again. Even worse than that was her nagging suspicion that Harry might have been right after all.

"You aren't going to tell me what you did to her, are you?"

"Not tonight. I sense I've already created enough doubts about me and the ways of our order. Although I can appreciate your ambivalence, Claire, you need to also understand that it's going to take a little time before you fully comprehend all the reasons for our rules and the necessity of enforcing them. I'm also not sure I should be the one telling you this, since your opinion means a great deal to me and you'll no doubt perceive me as a major offender." When she made no response, he added, "If I get the chance, I'll call you later and we can talk about this some more."

Claire nodded, but she doubted she'd want to talk to him about anything later. Not until she had time to sort things out in her mind. She let him kiss her on the cheek, then she stepped into her apartment. Locking the door, she glanced down at her left hand. The sparkling diamond and gold band on her finger suddenly felt cold and heavy--like the shackles of a condemned prisoner. Tears streaming down her cheeks, Claire closed her fingers into a fist. With a sharp twist and a tug, she could release herself from the symbolic coupling. Yet her hand remained tightly closed. No matter how much she detested Germaine's laws and punishments, nothing short of murder could make her stop loving him. And that murder would most likely have to be her own.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Nigel watched their newest supplicant kneel before them with dispassionate interest. Physically, she was quite a beauty, he conceded. The firelight cast a softness to her features, giving her an otherworldly, almost ethereal glow, while it enhanced her mortal beauty--the way the fiery blaze of a raided ship imbues its pirated treasure with a golden aura.

Still, it wasn't just the firelight that brought pirated treasures to mind. The woman's looks alone could inspire thievery. With long, blond hair crowning her delicate features like twisted strands of gold, eyes that sparkled like bright, priceless emeralds, and a figure that rivaled Venus herself, she undoubtedly had every man present yearning to possess her. Yet something unidentifiable about the iconic maiden gave Nigel the impression that she was as cold and hard as the precious objects her classical beauty brought to mind.

It wasn't her manner. Her appeal to Victor was both humble and heartfelt. It wasn't the nature of her request, petition for immortality had been made by many before her, and granted without reservation. It wasn't even her timing, although admittedly the current hostility fermenting over the issue of transformations made her approach less than desirable. It was none of these things that made Nigel uneasy about accepting one such as her into their fold. It was the fact she was from Germaine's group--a fact that Nigel knew all too well, and so did Victor.

Yet, Victor seemed curiously uninterested in the woman herself. All he wanted to discuss was Germaine and the young actress he'd reportedly initiated. While Nigel could understand Victor's preoccupation with Germaine's love life, their young applicant's animosity toward her former leader took him aback.

With a hatred that was almost palpable, she was willing to do anything that might bring Germaine St. Justine to his knees, and Victor couldn't have been more delighted. He'd made no secret of his quest for revenge against his former ally, and wasn't above using less than honorable means to snare Claire Daniels into his trap.

Nigel may have sworn his allegiance to Victor, but he had no intention of letting Claire fall victim to this long standing disagreement--not when he still wanted her for himself.

And he did want her, but not if she was unwilling to be taken. That was the difference between him and his leader. Nigel, like Victor, believed it was the vampire's birthright to grant the gift of immortality. What Nigel didn't believe in was seducing women against their will.

Victor, however, maintained he had a right to convert whom he pleased without justifying his actions to anyone or anything--especially Germaine. The fact that St. Justine had convinced other factions to curtail their transformations was cause enough

for Victor to launch his own campaign against his one-time drinking companion. And it was more than enough for him to try to take from Germaine the very thing Germaine had once taken from him. The woman he loved.

Nigel stood in a small semicircle with his blood brothers and watched Victor place a patronly hand upon the mortal woman's slender shoulder.

“If you do as charged,” he intoned with echoing authority, “and track the Daniels woman for a week, reporting her activities and whereabouts back to me daily, I will personally ensure that you are granted all you ask. Your youth and beauty shall be eternal, and you shall be taught how to use your powers in a way that will make vampires and mortals alike eager to carry out your slightest whim.”

The female fervently promised not to fail him. Kissing the ring on the hand Victor extended to her, she proudly rose to her feet. Without even a blush to cover her nakedness, she smiled and strolled slowly out of the audience chamber. Nigel observed the pronounced sway of her departing posterior with the certainty that no good could ever come from one like her.

* * *

The next morning Claire received a call that made her quarrel with Germaine over Sybill, Harry and Arthur seem petty. Still, she did not try to contact Germaine. Not yet. Instead, she called John Percy and informed him that she would be missing both their matinee and evening performances that day. Her brother was gravely ill, and she needed to be with him.

Claire felt Germaine calling out to her, but she was afraid he would only try to stop her, and this time she was determined to outwit death. Last night, she hadn't wanted to discuss her feelings until she'd had a chance to think. By morning, thinking seemed irrelevant. When Robert was strong enough, Claire intended to seek out Victor Cummings herself.

At the hospital, Dr. Willis informed her that Robert was resting comfortably, but suggested she go home and wait until they called her. When Claire realized he was gently trying to dissuade her from seeing Robert, she insisted upon knowing why. She never expected to hear the doctor admit that her brother didn't want to see her.

Feeling her knees give way, Claire sat down. She knew Robert had been upset with her the last time they were together, but she didn't think he'd refuse to see or talk to her again. She was the only family he had left. He was her baby brother.

“It's my fault,” she murmured disconsolately, but Tom Willis refused to hear it. Sitting next to Claire, he patiently assured her that she was in no way responsible for Robert's antisocial behavior. He explained the syndrome and why they'd listed Robert's condition as stable-but-critical, adding that the fluid in his lungs required constant monitoring to combat pneumonia. Telling her they should have a better picture by the end of the week,

he urged her to go home and come back Friday.

Claire thanked him, but chose to wait at the hospital in case Robert changed his mind. She wanted to be there if he needed her. Though her decision did not please Dr. Willis, he accepted it, and left her to thumb through the hospital's meager assortment of magazines.

Nine hours later, while skimming an article on the latest escapades of the British royals, Claire could no longer ignore the now shouting voice in her head. I've had it! If you don't tell me exactly where the hell you are in five seconds, I'll . . .

I'm at St. George's Hospital, Germaine, she answered, not caring to say any more than that, and figuring that would appease him.

I'll be there in five minutes, he advised, and was there in three.

Claire saw him step out of the elevator and question the floor nurse. She supposed he was asking about Robert's condition, but he looked confused. When the nurse pointed in her direction, he immediately rushed over to her. Gently grabbing her by the arms, he examined her with his incisive, gold eyes, swiftly but thoroughly. "Why are you here? What happened?"

"Robert tried to commit suicide by drowning himself in the bathtub," she answered, afraid to meet his gaze. She had to be strong. "His roommate found him and called the hospital. He's still in intensive care."

Germaine straightened and ran a shaking hand through his hair. "Claire, love, the next time you say you're in the hospital, and you're not there for yourself, mention it, all right?"

She risked a brief glance at his tensely set features, then quickly looked away. She was so close to breaking down that she could taste her tears.

He stared at her a long moment before he said, "Even in my society we allow a man to speak in his defense before we condemn him."

"I no longer care about that," she answered, her eyes beginning to well over. "My brother tried to kill himself, again, and right now he's all I can think about."

"You said--again? Has Robert tried this before?"

"Just last week, only they didn't think he was serious. It appears they were wrong. This time he nearly succeeded."

"I see. Is Dr. Willis attending him?"

She swiped at her eyes with a trembling hand. "They have a whole team of doctors overseeing his case. Dr. Willis, Dr. Sperry, who's supposedly an expert on AIDS, and Dr. Wasserman, a psychiatrist. But he's still dying, Germaine, and I'm responsible. I warned you something like this would happen, but you refused to believe me."

“You didn't give your brother AIDS, Claire, or a death wish,” Germaine reminded her testily.

“Nor did I give my mother cancer, but that really doesn't matter, does it?” Desperation strengthening her resolve, Claire stared at him, daring him to contradict her. “Robert's going to die, just like she did, unless I can find a way to save him.”

Germaine met her gaze, then closed his eyes for a moment. “What have they told you about his condition?” he asked tiredly.

Putting aside her bitterness, Claire answered his question. “That he'll need a lot of care and bed rest for a few weeks. He's terribly weak, but they expect he can leave the hospital--”

“St. Justine,” Tom Willis called out, his hand outstretched in greeting.

Recalling what had happened to her the last time these two gentlemen got together brought a heated glow to Claire's cheeks while she watched her lover shake hands with her family doctor, who regarded them both with a knowing look.

Ignoring Claire's blush, Germaine said, “Ms. Daniels just told me what's happened. Any chance I might be allowed a glance at Robert's charts?”

“Yes, that is, I suppose so. You do realize it is his primary illness that is still our main concern, and that Dr. Sperry is the one in charge, not me?”

“Think you could put in a good word for me?”

Tom Willis looked clearly surprised. “You want to see him? But I thought--” Stopping mid-sentence at the slight shake of Germaine's head, he cleared his throat. “I think that can be arranged.”

“I simply want the opportunity to discuss Robert's condition with him. That's all.”

“Done.” He shook Germaine's hand again. “After all you did for Marguerite, I'm certain Sperry will be very interested in speaking with you. I'll arrange it and give you a call. Are you still at the same number?”

“Either there, or you can try reaching me at Claire's.”

Her embarrassment over Germaine's suggestion superseded only by her surprise over his request, Claire stared at her immortal lover with her mouth hanging open. Tom Willis gave an indeterminate snort that sounded suspiciously like a muffled laugh, and said, “Well, perhaps you can succeed in getting her to go home, she refuses to listen to me.”

“I'll do my best,” Germaine promised, returning Claire's surprised look with an arched brow.

Wishing them a good night, Willis continued down the hall.

“You're going to help Robert, after all?” Claire asked, wanting to hope, yet afraid to.

“That depends.”

Claire's fingers clenched the magazine she still held. “On what?”

“Dr. Sperry, Robert and you. Such an undertaking puts many people at risk of exposure, Claire, and I won't do it without a few assurances.”

Her fingers beginning to ache, Claire glanced down at her hands and noticed the ring he'd placed on her finger nearly twenty-four hours ago. The only thing that mattered now was Robert. “If you agree to cure my brother, I'll do anything you ask.”

“You can relax, Claire. I hold no great affinity for bedding martyrs. Besides, that isn't what I seek from you just now.”

Relief mingled with hurt as Claire laid down the gossip magazine and folded her hands in her lap. “What do you want?”

“If we go through with this, Robert will need your understanding and support. You cannot give either if you're ill and exhausted yourself. So, first, I want you to go home and get some sleep.”

“Will this . . . I mean, will Robert become like you when this is over?”

“No, he won't. But if it's not done carefully, he could die.” When she stiffened, he said, “I'm offering Robert the chance for a normal life, Claire, but there are no guarantees. Both of you will need to understand and accept that before we go any further with this.”

“What about immortality?” she asked softly, needing to know. “He would be alive forever then, wouldn't he?”

“No, Claire. Such an existence isn't life. It's a mockery of life. You spend eternity feeding off the blood of others, absorbing their lives simply to exist. All the pain, joy, fear and love you feel is theirs, not yours. Without them, you are little more than a dry, empty sack--forever thirsty, forever in need. I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy, let alone the brother of the woman I adore. What I offer is the chance for a cure, but once you understand what Robert will endure for it, you may change your mind.”

Although his words did little to ease Claire's misgivings, she kept her doubts to herself. “It's ultimately Robert's choice, but no matter what he decides, I'm grateful for your offer.”

“Save your thanks. Many people will need to agree to this before I can offer anything.” Germaine glanced at his watch. “It's nearly ten, have you eaten?”

“I had something in the hospital coffee shop earlier.”

Germaine thrust his hands in his pockets. “I'd hardly count a stale donut and coffee that stands on its own as a meal, Claire.”

Claire smiled then. “It was a stale bagel, not a donut.”

“I stand corrected,” he replied with a formal bow. Their eyes locked for a moment and

Claire felt an overwhelming urge to rush into his arms, but uncertainty kept her frozen in place.

Germaine straightened and drew back his shoulders. "I'll call you after I've spoken with Dr. Sperry to let you know what I've decided." When she nodded, he inclined his head in a curt farewell and turned toward the elevators.

Seeing him walk away, Claire realized how badly she didn't want to be alone just then. Rising a little unsteadily to her feet, she called out to him. He turned, but remained by the elevators.

Claire gripped her chair. "I bought some eggs, milk and cheese the other day," she confessed, risking one step closer to him. "Rumor has it you whip together a rather tasty omelet."

"Is that an invitation, Claire?"

"Actually, it's more of a plea. These hospital chairs aren't too comfortable, but I'll most likely spend the night in one of them if you leave here without me. And I really don't want to spend another night in a hospital if I can avoid it."

He walked back toward her and extended his arms in welcome. She stepped into them, grateful for the security they offered. His lips pressed warmly against her hair, he murmured, "Never let it be said that a St. Justine ever turned his back on a lady in distress."

* * *

Once Claire was through eating, and feeling relaxed, Germaine rose to escort her into the bedroom. She could tell by the way he touched her that he had no intention of staying. Gazing into his golden eyes, all Claire wanted was a chance to forget herself in his arms. She needed his special gentleness, his understanding, but most of all she needed him.

Wordlessly, she reached for the buttons on his shirt. He gripped her fingers to still their movement, but she persisted, confident he would not deny her once he realized she truly desired him.

He didn't, and afterwards Claire wondered, just briefly, if she would ever grow accustomed to the intensity of emotions and feelings he consistently aroused within her.

The next morning, she awakened to the shrill cry of the phone. Still asleep, she groggily fumbled for the receiver and rasped out a sleep-laden, "Hello?"

"Claire, it's Dr. Willis. Hope I didn't awaken you?"

Claire was instantly awake. "No, no, I'm fine. Is everything all right with Robert?"

"Robert's fine," he assured her in his practitioner's voice. "Actually," he added a bit more hesitantly, "I wished to speak with Germaine, and wondered if he might be with

you.”

Claire's gaze slid guiltily to Germaine who watched her with an understanding smile.

Considering Germaine had been the one who originally disdained any possible rumors about their relationship, Claire managed to swallow back her embarrassment. After all, she was a grown woman. “He's here,” she answered. “Just a moment.” She handed the phone to Germaine. He leaned over to place a kiss on her heated cheek, then put the receiver to his ear.

“Tom,” he said, and the rest of his conversation was little more than murmurs of agreement or concern until he ended the one-sided talk by saying, “Today at four? That sounds fine, and thank you, Tom.” At that he handed the phone back to Claire and rose from the bed to retrieve his clothes.

“He has arranged for me to meet with Dr. Sperry and Dr. Wasserman this afternoon. He said Sperry sounded open to a discussion, but wanted to speak to our physician directly.”

“You have a physician?” she asked, finding the notion a little incongruous.

“We do, but I need to discuss the case with him beforehand.” In the time it took Claire to blink, he was dressed. “I'm not certain Holzburg will approve,” he admitted, leaning forward to give her a quick kiss, “but I think I can convince him. I'll call you as soon as I know something.”

* * *

True to his promise, Germaine called around six o'clock that evening. “Dr. Sperry has agreed to allow Dr. Holzburg to treat Robert for a month, as long as Holzburg keeps him up-to-date on Robert's progress, and, of course, that Robert agrees.”

“A month. Will the treatment take that long?”

“No. The treatment itself should take only a few hours, but Robert's immediate recovery might look a tad suspicious. That month will be extended over six months of reported therapy in which Robert will gradually improve. Dr. Holzburg has done this sort of thing before for other 'incurable' illnesses, but this is the first time he's ever knowingly treated an AIDS patient.”

“Is Dr. Holzburg?....”

The hesitation and uneasiness in her voice must have suggested what it was she wanted to know, for Germaine answered, “Yes, Claire, he's one of us. He's been the driving force behind much of our research. He's thorough, competent, and I trust him completely to decide what's best for the group and Robert, which is why I'll need to talk to Robert as soon as possible. Dr. Willis says he'll be out of the hospital tomorrow. Perhaps the three of us could meet privately to discuss the matter?”

“We could meet here,” she offered, preferring the setting be familiar as well as private.

“That would do, as long as you understand that I'll need about a half-hour alone with Robert before I can give Holzburg my assurance that his patient is fully aware of the risks and has agreed to all our stipulations.”

Claire assured Germaine she understood, and they agreed to meet around four o'clock at her place. She briefly considered calling Robert and discussing the idea over with him, then decided against it. This was not a topic of conversation to have over the phone. But before she discussed Robert's options with him, she needed to confirm one of them beforehand.

During that evening's performance, between acts, Claire went directly to Nigel's dressing room. Although it was common knowledge that Nigel required a special makeup technician to assist him with his light-sensitive eyes and skin, Claire didn't know if the person was also in Nigel's confidence. So the moment she entered the room, she asked Nigel if they could speak alone.

Keeping in character, Nigel turned to his assistant. “Would you mind terribly, Louis? I should hate to have to deny such a heartfelt request from our lovely Ms. Daniels.”

Louis sniffed in disdain, as if he resented being excluded from a potentially juicy piece of gossip, but left as requested. The moment he was gone, Nigel dropped his elderly facade.

“What's wrong?” he asked a little leerily, yet with obvious concern.

Claire hesitated. She knew Germaine would be furious if he ever found out that she'd approached Nigel, but Robert's life was at stake, and Germaine didn't seem too confident regarding the success of his procedure. As Claire saw it, she really didn't have much of a choice, and she owed it to Robert to examine all the possibilities. Unfortunately, that didn't make her task any easier.

“You once told me that the main difference between Victor and Germaine was that Victor permitted transformations. Correct?”

Nigel's frown deepened. “That's not the only difference, but it is a primary one. Why?”

“I need a favor. I'd like you to ask Victor if he'd be willing to transform my brother.”

A look of relief passed over Nigel's features, and Claire realized that he feared she'd come to ask him to perform the deed personally. Assaulted by a twinge of regret, Claire knew she was being unfair to Nigel, but she would never ask him to betray his friendship with Germaine in that way. Not if she had a choice.

The look of concern settled back over Nigel's features. “Again, I must ask why?”

“Robert has AIDS, Nigel. He's not even twenty-one yet. He doesn't deserve to wither away like an old man while his body turns against him,” she insisted, her throat tightening around the knot of anguish lodged inside it.

“I trust Robert remains blissfully unaware of your plans for him?” Nigel asked, his

features carefully schooled. Claire knew if a flaw existed in her plan, that was it, but she was afraid to admit it aloud. When she didn't answer, Nigel asked more gently, "Is Germaine aware of your wishes?"

Swallowing hard, Claire nodded. "He still refuses to transform Robert. He wants to try some procedure instead, only the process could kill Robert rather than cure him. Please, Nigel, just talk to Victor and ask him if he would be willing to discuss the matter with Robert and me?"

"Before I approach Victor with your proposal, Claire, I think you'd better talk to your brother. There's very little point in my obtaining Victor's agreement if Robert is against the idea."

"Robert doesn't want to die, Nigel. I'm sure of it," she insisted with more confidence than she felt. "Victor could be his only chance of survival."

Nigel glanced down at his aged hands, and Claire could see he was reluctant to agree. She could understand his ambivalence, but he had an eternity in which to make things right with Germaine. Without his help, Robert might only have a few days remaining him.

Claire didn't know what else she could say to convince him. Robert was all that remained of her family, and without him . . .

"There is another difference between Victor and Germaine that I think you should know about," Nigel said softly. "Germaine will do things because he cares about a person, Victor's motives are usually selfish. If a petition doesn't appeal to him on a personal level, he refuses it."

"What would he want?" Claire asked, wondering how she could ever entice a man like Victor.

"You," Nigel answered bluntly. "He'd only do this if he could use you to hurt Germaine. Personally, I think that price is a little too steep, and I'd like to think you feel the same way."

"So would I," she whispered. "Maybe if I talked to Victor myself, I could convince him to help me, somehow."

"That would be a mistake," Nigel warned her.

Claire gazed at him, trying to get him to understand. "The only mistake would be for me not to try at all, Nigel. If Victor refuses to see reason, I can always walk away."

"You think so?" Nigel met her gaze, and Claire could see the infernal fire burning in his eyes despite the protective contacts he wore. She instinctively tried to step back only to find she couldn't move. Panicking, her heart raced frantically with the suspicion that she had misjudged her fellow co-star.

"Five minutes," John Percy called out, with a knock at Nigel's door.

Nigel transferred his gaze from Claire to his dressing table, effectively freeing her from his preternatural arrest. Claire's first instinct was to run from the room as fast as she could, but her concern for Robert kept her rooted where she stood.

Once her pulse had calmed enough for her to speak, she asked, "Will you help me?"

"You don't know what you're asking, Claire," he whispered, his voice hoarse and strained.

Gathering her courage, Claire walked over and laid her hand on Nigel's. "I know you hesitate because of Germaine. Believe me, Nigel, I don't want to hurt him, either. I still love him very much, but I can't agree with him on this any more than you can, not if it means my brother's death."

"Give me a day to think about it, Claire, and talk to Robert. If he agrees, and you still feel the same way tomorrow, ask me then, and I'll give you my answer."

Forced to content herself with that, Claire opened the door and faced Louis.

"It's about effing time," he muttered, shoving her aside and slamming the door in her face.

* * *

One o'clock, the next afternoon, Claire was about to head for the hospital when she heard a muted rapping at her door.

Surprised, she peeked through the security hole. Flinging the door open for her brother, she rushed forward to keep him from toppling over. "What are you doing here?" she asked, slipping her shoulder under his arm to help him inside. She remembered how muscled he'd been when he'd played high school football, and now he weighed less than she did. "Why didn't you wait for me? Dr. Willis told you I was coming to get you today, didn't he? So why--"

"Stop it, Claire!" he demanded before he collapsed into a paroxysm of coughing. Catching his breath, he said, "You're my sister, not my mother, and I'm no longer ten-years-old."

"I know that," Claire protested, leading him over to the couch. She helped him sit, then hurried to get him a glass of water even as she realized he was right. She had always felt protective toward Robert, and those feelings intensified when Marguerite first fell ill. Claire was only thirteen then, Robert--a spoiled and pampered ten. Being little more than a child herself, Claire occasionally lost patience with her pesky younger brother, until the night their father pulled her aside and said, "I'm depending on you to be the older and wiser one, Claire. You'll need to be the woman of the family for a bit while Mom concentrates on getting better."

Claire met her new obligation with serious determination, and when Marguerite's cancer practically disappeared over night, she saw it as a heavenly sign of approval for her

diligence and hard work. Only Claire's diligence didn't save her father. And the fact that she'd been in the hospital at the time of his heart attack only increased her feelings of guilt.

Recalling what her father had asked of her, Claire did her best to help take care of Robert. She was the one who made sure he had enough money for lunch, that his shoes matched, and that he wore his clothes label-side in. She'd learned years later that Marguerite hadn't interfered in her motherly behavior because she'd assumed it was Claire's way of working through her grief. Perhaps it was, Claire couldn't say herself.

Eventually Claire left for college, and she and Robert went their separate ways. Except she never quite lost the feeling of responsibility she had toward her younger brother.

Robert accepted the water she handed him, but didn't drink it. When his cough subsided a little, he gazed at her through tired but resolved eyes. "I love you, too, Claire. But it really pisses me off when you go behind my back like you did today."

"Nothing has been decided, yet," she protested, watching him with concern. He'd just gotten out of the hospital, surely he should be lying down. Maybe she could . . .

"Nothing has been decided?" he challenged, forcing himself to sit erect as he struggled to talk without gasping. "Dr. Sperry seemed to think otherwise when he signed my release." Robert took a deep, slow breath, and continued. "All grins and smiles he told me that I would be under a Dr. Holzburg's care for the next month, at your request."

"With your consent," she corrected, fluffing the pillow behind him. "I wasn't trying to go behind your back, Bobby, honest. I intended to discuss everything with you today. Now why don't you go lie down while I fix one of those high energy protein drinks Dr. Sperry prescribed?"

"I don't want to lie down," he insisted, slowly rising to his feet. "And please, if you're going to insist upon fixing me something, at least make it a Coke. They gave me enough of those Cal/Pro drinks in the hospital to last me for eternity." Claire flashed him an uneasy look, but did as he asked--then stood beside him in the kitchen, watching indulgently while he chomped on an ice cube. When she refused to sit unless he did, he finally agreed to sit at the counter with her.

As they conversed in her small kitchen alcove, sipping cola and sparkling mineral water, Robert said, "Sperry told me this Dr. Holzburg is a pal of St. Justine's. What's going on, Claire?"

"Germaine thinks Dr. Holzburg can help you, only...."

"Only what?" he asked impatiently. "You're looking at me as if you're afraid I might suddenly rip off my shirt and start howling at the moon."

"No, you won't do that. At least I don't think you will." She gazed at him then, realizing what she'd come to accept as a normal, everyday part of her life might sound just the tiniest bit farfetched. "The truth is, I'm not entirely sure how it works. From what

Germaine told me, this treatment will either cure you or....” Unable to say the words, she let her sentence trail off.

“A cure?” he questioned, his voice laden with disbelief. “Germaine St. Justine knows of a cure for AIDS?”

“A possible cure,” she corrected, adding more hesitantly, “There's also a third alternative. It's a process which Germaine could perform, but he is adamantly opposed to it.”

“Why? Is it considered too radical?”

“You could say that, but considering his procedure could kill you. I think--”

“I'm not afraid of death, Claire,” Robert interrupted her quietly. “In fact I welcome it over countless months of wasting away until I'm little more than a rickety sack of tissue and bones. That scares me more than anything. It's the dying process, not death, that gives me nightmares.”

For Claire, it was the finality of death that terrified her most. Leaning closer, she spoke very softly. “This third alternative would change you so that you would never be ill again. And you would never die.”

Robert merely stared at her in dumbfounded silence for a moment, then he laughed. A cynical laugh--devoid of hope. “That's good, Claire, Really good. You almost had me there for a moment. Never die. Nice twist.”

Claire shook her head in frustration. “I'm not saying this right. You would die, but your death would be little more than an unpleasant night's sleep.” When his expression grew even more skeptical, she quickly added, “I know you think I'm just making this up, but try for a moment to imagine what I'm suggesting is possible. Just think how your life would change, Bobby. When you awoke, you would be invincible. You would be free of illness, injury and infections for eternity, but you'd be giving up a lot, too. Like eating, basking in the sun, and--sex.” She said this last very softly. Claire suffered no illusions about how her brother had contacted his present illness. But even after years in the theater, where such relationships were celebrated rather than condemned, she was still uncomfortable talking about it.

Robert wriggled his fingers before Claire's face as if he believed she was seeing ghosts and goblins. “You've been reading too many horror stories, Sis, or else acting in that vampire play you're in every night has finally--”

“This isn't a joke, Robert,” Claire insisted, slapping his wiggling fingers, “and I'm not playing at anything. This is real. As fantastic as it may sound, vampires exist, and one is about to make you an offer that will either cure you or kill you.”

His eyebrows raised in blatant disbelief, Robert sat back in his chair. “St. Justine, a vampire? I can't believe I'm hearing you say this, Claire. You, who probably never believed in Santa Claus, telling me your boss is a vampire? You're pulling my leg,

right?"

"I've never been more serious in my life."

Robert looked at her as if she'd spoken in tongues. "I'm beginning to think you might benefit from a visit with Dr. Wasserman yourself. I know you want to believe in miracles, but nothing alive can convince me there are men and women out there who have lived for centuries drinking blood and sleeping in coffins."

"Perhaps not--alive . . . You heard what Mother said about André. Did you think she was crazy?"

"No," he agreed slowly. "But she wasn't making much sense at the end, either." A shadow of pain crossed his pale features. "Then again, neither was I for a few months there. Dr. Wasserman helped me put my life into perspective. I was so focused on staying alive that when I finally realized I couldn't succeed, I only wanted to kill myself. Later, as I lay in the hospital feeling sorry for myself, I discovered my obsession with finding a cure was only wasting my life, not extending it.

"Unfortunately, while I was absorbed with myself, you were left to deal with the financial and emotional reality of Mom's and my illness alone. No, don't dismiss it, Claire. It shouldn't have happened. But it did. So, I can't fault you for seeking miracles. Lord knows I searched for one myself long enough, but they don't exist. Not for Mom, not for me. No matter how desperately we wished they did." Reaching for her hand, he clasped it in his own. He felt warm to Claire, but she didn't have a chance to comment on it before he said, "When a person is dying, the defining line between fact and fiction often becomes blurred. Near the end, I think Mom glorified her memories of André until he became almost superhuman in her eyes. That was Mom's wished-for miracle, Claire, not reality. He was a man, and her lover, not a grantor of eternal life."

Fighting to keep from losing him to resignation and apathy, Claire instinctively tightened her grip on his hand. "What if I told you Germaine and André St. Justine are the same man?"

"I'm afraid I'd probably laugh in your face."

"What if I could prove it to you? I have a picture with the letters André wrote to Mother and a note Germaine sent to me. The two men could be twins and their writing is identical. Do you want me to show them to you?"

He withdrew his hand from hers. "What good would that do? I'm no handwriting expert, and it's not uncommon for a son to look like his father. Neither one can prove what you're suggesting."

"I told you that Germaine and I had grown closer over the past few weeks. What if I were to say that we are lovers, now?"

"I guess I'd have to congratulate you. It certainly took you long enough. I was beginning to think you were going for the Guinness World Record as the oldest living virgin."

Claire ignored him, since technically that record was still in her grasp. “He doesn't make love like a mortal, Robert, he--” Hearing another knock at her door, she stopped and took a deep breath. “That's Germaine,” she murmured, feeling her stomach give a nervous flip as she rose to her feet. “Whether you believe me or not, I hope you'll at least listen to what he has to say. He can explain all that I can't,” she promised. “But keep in mind what I told you about the other alternative. After you hear Germaine out, we'll talk further, then you can decide what you want to do.”

At Robert's weary but consenting sigh, Claire strode over to the door. Despite her conviction she'd been right to do so, she was still a little uneasy about violating another of Germaine's cardinal rules, but she'd really had no other choice. Germaine threatened to hold the one thing away from her brother that could save him. He admitted himself that Dr. Holzburg's treatment held no guarantees, and Claire refused to risk her brother's life for anyone. If it came down to it, she would insist Nigel take her to Victor where, if she had to, she would offer herself in exchange for Robert's life.

She shuddered to think of Germaine's reaction when she told him of her intentions, but such a threat might spur him to reconsider his policy on transformations. At least for Robert if no one else.

When Claire opened the door, Germaine stood with his hands in his pockets, waiting. From his expression Claire suspected the words were probably unnecessary, but she said them anyway. “I told him.”

“I see,” he answered coolly. “And did he believe you?”

“I don't know. He's in the kitchen.”

Germaine merely nodded, then handing her his coat he preceded her into the kitchen. Claire swallowed the lump in her throat and stepped into the room directly behind him.

“Well, St. Justine. I hear you're a bona fide, blood-drinking, coffin-sleeping vampire,” Robert announced with a trace of bravado that did not succeed in masking his unease.

Germaine straddled a white, vinyl-padded chair and folded his arms across its back.

“Actually, I sleep pretty much where I choose, so you're only two-thirds right.”

Robert looked a little nonplused. “So what's your grand plan? Do you drink my blood until you've made me immortal?”

“Not exactly. Medically speaking, the process is more like a blood transfusion.”

“Whose blood?” Robert asked, inching back in his seat a little.

“Mine. There are some risks, however. You could die.”

“Not if you transformed him,” Claire added insistently. “He could live forever then.”

Germaine didn't move for a moment, but when he did finally look up, Claire knew he would never change his mind. He'd let Robert die before he'd transform him. “I believe

you already know my answer to that. So, there's little need for me to reply--is there?"

"Maybe not, but your answer isn't the only one available to us, is it? I suspect Victor Cummings wouldn't refuse immortality to someone as sick as Robert. Maybe we should speak to him first?"

Germaine started to rise, but Robert stopped him. "Wait! Claire cannot decide this for me. It's my decision to make, but I'm still not convinced they shouldn't lock both of you up with the crazies. If I'm to believe you, I'm going to need some proof. Assuming you can do that, I want to hear all about this procedure of yours, so I can be sure I'm making the right choice."

"I couldn't agree more," Germaine concurred quietly, "which is why I must speak to you alone." His tawny gaze, colder than ice-encrusted gold, sliced into Claire like a sliver of frozen sunlight, searing her with its iciness. "Go into the living room and stay there until we come out."

Claire hesitated. Germaine might be furious with her, but he was also prejudiced and she wanted what was best for her brother.

"If you do not do as I ask," he added in a frigid undertone, "you will find Robert's choices drastically reduced."

"Go on, Claire," Robert urged. "Be happy with the knowledge that Germaine and I are willing to discuss the matter. Keep pushing, and we both may walk out on you."

Germaine turned sharply to gaze at Robert, and for the first time since he'd walked through her door that evening, he smiled.

Unable to argue against both of them, Claire did as they wished. The waiting was torture. They remained closeted in her small kitchen for nearly an hour, and when they emerged, Robert looked scared and pale, but convinced. Like her, he finally accepted the truth of what Germaine St. Justine really was.

Stepping forward, he gave Claire a warm hug. "I know you want to 'save' me, but I've decided to accept Germaine's offer. From all he's told me, I think I would only resent the life your transformation would sentence me to endure. And it seems time is not exactly on my side. My best chance for a normal life is now. You were right. This isn't a kid's game of make believe, and as an adult I have to decide the course of my own life." Bending slightly, he kissed her cheek. "I'll call you in a few days," he promised in a subdued voice. "Maybe we'll have dinner together to celebrate." Then with an uneasy smile of thanks to Germaine, he left.

Germaine drew on his coat. "He says he doesn't want to wait and agonize over this, but wants it over with as quickly as possible. I'm going to see if I can arrange things for tomorrow, and I told him I'd call once I got things arranged."

"I'll want to be there as well, so call me, too, all right?"

He looked at her through eyes that were colder than death. “You threaten to go to my worst enemy, then expect me to call? Excuse my candor, darling, but you can go to hell first.”

“I know you're angry, Germaine, and I won't argue that you even have a right to be, but don't exclude me from this to punish me. He's my brother, and I....”

“I am well aware of your familial relationship, Claire. And your priorities.”

Claire paled. “But what if he dies?”

“Your presence will not save him, and if you show up at the clinic, you take a serious chance I will cancel the procedure altogether.” When Claire merely glared at him in impotent fury, he gave her a polite nod. “I'll see myself out.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Confident Germaine wouldn't spite Robert simply to get back at her, Claire wheedled the time and location out of Robert and showed up at the clinic with him at six o'clock the next evening.

Though the address was different, since the entrance was on the other side of the building, Claire discovered the clinic was a compact complex that took up the entire lower level of Illusions. She walked in with a feeling of dread, expecting sterile walls and a tiled floor. What she didn't expect was a waiting room that looked like an amateur set designer's vision of genteel opulence.

With a pale blue, eighteenth-century Aubusson carpet, a nineteenth century receiving desk, twentieth-century unmatched chairs, green shaded student lamps and mixed antique furnishings, the room looked more like Sherlock Holmes's drawing room in a grade B movie than a clinic. Even the walls were lined with century-old glass cabinets that housed yellowed medical texts along with a few diagnostic tools that looked very intricate, sophisticated and archaic. Claire gazed about in open-mouthed surprise, while Robert's attention remained fixed on the elderly gentleman who had come forth almost immediately to greet them--Dr. Holzburg.

Claire noted his handshake was cool, yet firm, while his greeting was both warm and friendly as he announced how pleased he was that both of them could make it.

He must have noticed Claire's uneasy expression, for he gently clasped her arm to reassure her and said, "I couldn't help but notice you looking at the unusual decor of our waiting room. Most of the furniture here is a private donation from Germaine's and the others' personal collections. I can assure you that our treatment room is far more technically advanced. Would it ease your mind any if I took you in to see it?"

Warmed by his generosity, Claire nodded eagerly, but doubted the wisdom of her decision when Dr. Holzburg escorted her and Robert through the ornately paneled doors of the waiting area into the white-tiled torture chamber she'd originally envisioned. In the center of the antiseptic-smelling room were two full-length metal examining chairs that had reinforced vinyl straps draped across the middle and foot of the chair tables. Between the straps, on one chair only, lay a white sheet neatly folded into a square.

Behind the chairs were two huge machines, with digital readouts, pumping equipment and miles of tubing that looked so new Claire wondered if they had ever been used before.

"That's our blood transfer machine," Dr. Holzburg explained, drawing Claire closer as a fond parent might drag a reluctant child over to meet an eccentric aunt.

"It's part blood-washer, too, as it helps remove some larger impurities in the blood. By itself, it's shown an astounding success with certain bacterial infections that circulate through the blood, such as streptococcus and cholera. Viral infections have proven a

great deal more difficult to screen, however, and still require a host to filter them.”

“Then Germaine will not actually drink Robert's blood?” she asked, gazing at all the buttons and readouts on the transfer machine.

“Oh no, my dear. No. The average person has ten to twelve pints of blood, which need to be filtered at least twice. For a vampire to drink that much at once--just isn't possible for even the most bloodthirsty among us. No, we definitely need the transfuser to treat a case like your brother's,” he added with a nod to Robert who stood a few feet away staring uneasily at the examining chairs.

Her voice low, Claire asked, “Have you ever transfused an HIV positive patient before?”

“We have, in fact. With a great measure of success, I might add.”

“Then the patient lived?”

“Oh my yes, but he was lucky. We thought he merely had the flu, and it wasn't until we began the procedure that we realized his condition was much more serious. That did add a few complications, but I would still call the treatment a resounding success despite them.”

“What sort of complications?” Claire asked, wondering what Germaine didn't tell her.

“I don't think we need to bother Ms. Daniels or her brother with a lot of tiresome details, Ben,” Germaine announced from a doorway that seemed to magically appear within the far left wall of the treatment room. He wore a one-piece suit of white spandex that fit him like a second skin, and Claire couldn't take her eyes off him.

Stepping forward, Germaine extended his hand to Robert in greeting, but other than a brief glance in her direction, he ignored Claire entirely. That reaction was more telling than if he'd shouted at her. To him she was persona non grata. In defense, Claire's eyes flicked briefly over at Marcus, who stood like a block of carved granite behind his leader.

“If you have any second thoughts or reservations, Robert, now is the time to voice them,” Germaine suggested solemnly.

Robert shook his head. “You offer me the hope of a normal life. I can't get that anyplace else, and I'm willing to accept the risks.”

Germaine nodded. “If you're sure?....”

“I'm sure.”

Without further words, Germaine gripped Robert's chin. Turning his head slightly, he bent forward and bit him on the neck. Robert tensed and let out a startled cry of protest, then gripping Germaine's shoulders he shut his eyes and fell silent.

The entire time, Germaine kept his eyes open and fixed upon Claire.

Unable to move, Claire stood and watched the man she loved feed upon her brother. A

few seconds later, Germaine withdrew and handed Robert a square of white linen.

“Press this against the wound. I apologize for the technique, but I needed to ingest a sample of your blood and I've found there's no easy way to prepare someone to be bitten. A quick puncture usually works best, though it's often more painful.”

“Only at first,” Robert admitted thoughtfully. “Once the initial discomfort passed, I found it--very pleasant. So much so, I'm almost tempted to reconsider vampirism.”

At that Claire turned away. She didn't know what she'd expected, but this horror show matinee wasn't it.

“Dr. Holzburg will want to examine you before we begin, Robert.” Germaine announced, his tone returning the conversation to a professional level. “There's a changing room over there. Why don't you go ahead and get undressed.”

When Robert left them to get changed, Germaine turned to the elderly doctor. “He is presently free of any opportunistic infection, but his T-cells are greatly reduced. It is only a matter of time and exposure before he falls prey to an infection.”

“Then he no longer carries the pneumocystis organism?”

“Not that I can tell. I would say both his heart and lungs were healthy, though I suspect his lungs may have suffered some residual scarring from his suicide attempt.”

“I need you to be sure about this, Germaine. I don't want to take the risk if he has an infection. Any infection. You, above all, should realize the dangers we face if he harbors a secondary virus or bacillus.”

“I do, and I take full responsibility for all risks. As his host, I am confident I can cure him.”

“Then what are the risks?” Claire asked, unable to keep silent any longer.

“None that should concern you,” Germaine assured her, his tone formal and aloof.

“Robert will emerge a healthy man, free of infection. I once promised you that no harm would come to your brother, Claire. I am now honoring that promise. If you insist upon staying, I will permit you to wait in the other room until it's over. However, the moment Robert is fit to leave, I want you both out of here--for good.” When Claire started to protest, Germaine turned toward Marcus who'd remained like a silent, towering statue throughout their conversation. “Escort Ms. Daniels into the waiting room, Marcus, and see that she follows my instructions.”

“No,” Claire protested, stepping back before Marcus could restrain her. “I want to stay.”

Germaine took one step forward, putting them nearly nose-to-nose. “You will do as I say in this, Claire, if Marcus has to ensure your obedience with physical force.” When she still didn't move, he added more softly, “For once, try to consider your brother's feelings in this. The procedure will cause Robert no little amount of pain and put his body under severe stress. He will be allowed no covering other than that sheet you see folded over

there. If things grow more difficult than expected, we may have to remove that as well. I think he would like to be spared the indignity of having his sister watch him lose control over his bodily functions. Now go with Marcus.”

Pale and feeling more than a little ill, Claire made no protest when the Roman gladiator guided her with firm gentleness from the room.

Led to an antique chair, Claire obeyed Marcus's silent command by perching herself on the edge of its seat. Her nervousness evident in the way she folded her hands tightly in her lap. “I had no idea the process would be so painful,” she admitted in a hoarse whisper.

“I'm sure you didn't,” Marcus concurred quietly.

The sounds coming from the treatment room were muffled, but audible. “How long will it take?” she asked, unaware of the taut huskiness of her voice.

“An hour or so. However long it takes to filter your brother's blood through Germaine.”

An hour seemed like a lifetime to her. “Can I see him then?”

“Once he's been made presentable, you should be allowed to see him.”

Claire nodded, but her head jerked up when she heard her brother give out a sudden yelp of protest. She could only catch a few words, as most were merely murmured reassurances, but she gathered that Robert found the metal examining chair a bit cold to his bare skin.

“They always complain of the cold at first, yet afterwards all they recall is the fire that burned in their blood.”

Claire gazed at Marcus with uncertainty. “You know what's going on in there, don't you?”

“Like the bats we are often associated with, vampires are noted for their acute hearing,” he answered matter-of-factly.

“Will you tell me what they're saying?” she asked, refusing to let a little sarcasm put her off.

“Most of it you'll be able to interpret for yourself, but I am not prohibited from answering any questions you may have.”

“I suppose you're also not prohibited from restraining me if I try to leave this chair?”

“I've been instructed to do whatever is necessary to keep you from entering that room before it is appropriate for you to do so.”

“Why doesn't that surprise me? What's happening now?”

“They are securing your brother to the table and he is expressing some concern over the necessity of having his arms and legs restrained.”

After what Germaine said, Claire suspected vinyl straps alone would hardly be sufficient.

“Germaine is assuring Robert that everything is being done to guarantee his safety and well being. Now Germaine is going over to his own chair.”

“Is Germaine also restrained?”

“As a precautionary measure only. Vampires have a high tolerance for discomfort. His left arm and leg will be secured to prevent him from accidentally jerking either of the needles free.”

“I saw only one sheet. Why isn't Germaine covered as well?”

“He requires no covering as he continues to wear the same outfit you saw him in, with two small holes made at the needle sites. The needles are now in place and they are beginning.”

At first Claire only heard a low vibrating hum, then under the steady droning of the machinery she thought she detected a low moan of pain.

“Is that my brother?” she asked, her fingers gripping the delicately padded arms of her chair.

“He is doing quite well,” Marcus praised as he knelt before her and gathered her hands in his. “You may squeeze my fingers if you like. You cannot hurt me, but I fear that antique chair does not share my invulnerability.”

Claire accepted his offer with a strained smile. “Germaine was right. You must work very hard to disguise your inner gentleness behind that mask of stoic indifference.”

“It is a constant struggle for me,” he admitted without changing his expression. Just then, Robert cried out. “Oh God, it hurts. It's burning me alive inside! Stop it now, please! I can't take anymore. Oh God, I'm on fire. Take the needles out, now!”

Then, after a long string of equally emphatic curses, he screamed. Claire jumped to her feet, but her brother didn't stop screaming. He sounded as if they were torturing him. Reacting instinctively, she started toward the doors, but was drawn into Marcus's hold.

He wrapped his arms about her and pressed her tightly to his chest. Held immobile despite her instinctive struggles, Claire cried out her own protest while her brother continued to scream out in unbelievable agony.

Then the sound altered and all she could hear were horrible-sounding garbled cries of torment.

“What's happened? What are they doing to him?” she asked, still terrified, but no longer fighting what was clearly a losing battle.

“They have gagged him. The screaming does not help, it merely leaves the patient with a hoarse voice and sore throat.”

To Claire, it seemed as if the process was unrelenting and her brother was being kept in excruciating torment for hours, then the sound changed again, this time to relieved, unobstructed sobs.

“It’s almost over,” Marcus told her. “He will feel fatigued and exhilarated at the same time. He should take it easy over the next few days, though I doubt he will see the need. Is there someone who can stay with him?”

Her throat constricted, Claire found it difficult to breathe much less talk, so she nodded. “I tried--to get him--to stay with me--but....” Claire took a deep breath. “He has a friend....” she explained, her voice trailing off uneasily. She didn't condemn Robert for his lifestyle, but she didn't approve of it either. They had come to an understanding of sorts that allowed them to care deeply for each other without anger or prejudice over things they couldn't change.

“A friend,” Marcus repeated, his expression impassive. “You should know, Claire, that although Robert is cured, he is not immune to re-infection. He will need to be very careful if he wishes to continue in his present lifestyle.”

“I understand that, but does he?”

“I suspect Germaine made everything quite clear to him when they first talked.”

“Most probably. It's quiet in there now, may I go see him?”

“We wait until Dr. Holzburg comes to us.”

When a half-hour later Robert emerged through the doors instead of Dr. Holzburg, Marcus quietly excused himself and strode into the treatment room.

Claire gave Robert a grateful hug, yet the entire time she kept her eyes on the door for some sign of Germaine. Despite his pique, he had to know she would be worried. Surely he wouldn't avoid her out of spite.

Releasing her brother, Claire asked, “How do you feel? Did they say you're cured?”

He raised his eyebrows and shrugged. “Great and yes. According to them, the procedure worked. It wasn't anything I'd care to go through again, but Dr. Holzburg assures me I'm cured. He suggested I take a long vacation in Europe--visit a few spas, the shrine at Lourdes, or perhaps make a pilgrimage through Jerusalem before I see Dr. Sperry again.”

“What are you going to do?” Claire asked, wondering why Marcus didn't at least come back to reassure her if Germaine refused to.

“Celebrate!” he answered with a soft laugh. “At least that's what I want to do. I must admit I had my doubts, but St. Justine came through for me. I only hope he's all right.”

“What do you mean? He's immortal, why wouldn't he be all right?”

“That's what I thought, only the fellow who helped me dress said that occasionally the

treatment could be dangerous for the vampire as well, but only when the blood is transfused rather than ingested.”

“Did he say why?” Claire asked.

“Sort of.” Robert hesitated, then gave a small shudder as if even discussing vampires made him uneasy. “I still have difficulty accepting all this is real, but it seems that when a vampire feeds normally, his system sorts out any harmful organisms while it draws whatever nourishment it can from the rest. However, if the blood is transfused, the vampire's system still filters out the harmful components, but is unable to draw any sustenance before it is transfused out again.” While Claire thought over what Robert was saying, he added, “I learned something else today, that vampires are quite old, ancient really, and for them, the advances of medical technology actually work against their natural ways. To complicate things further, I think Germaine lied to Dr. Holzburg.”

“What do you mean?” she asked softly.

“I'm almost certain I still had pneumonia, yet from what this Francis fellow told me, Dr. Holzburg would not have permitted the procedure if I had a secondary infection. He said to transfuse me could put Germaine's body into a state of shock, a condition which would force him to go into hibernation for several decades until his body had healed itself of the infection.”

“But Germaine never said anything about the possibility of danger to himself. He only spoke of you,” Claire protested.

“I know. He never mentioned it to me, either. He saved my life, Claire, knowing it could cost him a century or more of his own. I wanted to thank him, but they said it would be better if I simply got you and we left. As they escorted me out, I managed to catch a glimpse of him. He looked as if he'd lost a hundred pounds and aged as many years in under two hours.”

Claire gave her brother a reassuring hug. “He's very strong, Robert, I'm sure he'll be fine, but I can't go with you. My place is with him right now, and I mean to be there despite what anyone says. I'm sorry.” Pulling away from Robert, Claire drew a deep breath for courage, then walked past him into the treatment room.

Her view of Germaine was nearly blocked by the six men bending over him, but she recognized the white stretch suit he wore. As she stepped closer, her mind began registering other things. The worried expressions on the men in white gathered around their patient. The bottle of whole blood being fed intravenously. The quiet whir of the life-supporting machinery in the background. It was how she'd pictured her mother's death in her dreams. Then an even stranger reality replaced the unreal quality of the dream.

“This isn't working,” Holzburg announced dejectedly. “He needs fresh blood from a living mortal, and he needs to drink it, not have it dripped into his veins. I'd suggest we

comb the back alleys for a sacrifice, except I doubt his body could stave off any strange or unfamiliar bacteria an unknown mortal might harbor--especially one found lurking in the streets of this city.”

Claire reached the foot of Germaine's chair and gasped, then mentally recoiled in horror. The corpse that lay there looked nothing like the man she knew and loved. His skin held a deathly pallor, his cheeks were sunken, and his arms and legs looked as if they were little more than flesh-covered bones. There was nothing left to him. Her throat tight with emotion, she ventured a step closer.

“You shouldn't be here, Claire,” Marcus admonished, gently gripping her elbow.

“There's nothing you can do for him now, anyway. Time alone can heal the damage he has suffered.”

Claire started to cry, but her tears merely expressed her inner torment, and she was barely aware of them. “He never told me, Marcus,” she whispered hoarsely. “I wouldn't have let him do it if I had known, you must believe me.”

“I know, and I'm certain he knows as well. Now, let me take you home.”

“No!” Claire stood firm. Though she could see little of the man she loved in the corpse lying before her, she instinctively knew whatever he'd become, he still needed her.

“What about my blood? He's used to it, so his body shouldn't have any difficulty accepting it.”

“That's very kind of you, Claire,” Holzburg answered, “but you don't have nearly enough blood to give him. He'd drain you dry, and still need more.”

“Couldn't my blood give him the strength he needs to take the rest from another?”

“No, Claire,” Marcus interceded. “You speak of sacrificing your life, which is something I cannot allow. Germaine would kill us all if we permitted that.”

“It's my life, Marcus! Not yours, or Germaine's, and I can do....”

“Wait! Claire has something there,” Holzburg interrupted. “Maybe after she's given Germaine a pint or two of her own blood, we could transfuse her while he takes the rest.” The others looked hopeful until Holzburg shook his head. “No, that won't work. He's still too weak to even drink for himself.”

“We could transfuse the blood directly into his fangs until he's strong enough to drink on his own,” Phillip offered.

The others merely stared at him. “You want to be the one to insert metal needles into Germaine's canines?” Auguste challenged him.

“I'll see to that part of it,” Marcus answered, “if the rest of you make sure he's firmly strapped down.”

Dr. Holzburg raised his eyebrows. “You're a better man than I, Marcus Aularius.”

“No, merely a stronger man, and perhaps a trifle more desperate one.”

Phillip and Auguste saw to Germaine's restraints while Holzburg prepared Claire. To avoid watching the doctor, Claire closed her eyes and forced herself to breathe normally so she wouldn't hyperventilate. Courage, she recalled from her school days, was the mastery of fear, not the absence of it. If that were so, she deserved a medal. She couldn't recall ever being so scared. To take her mind off her own problems, she forced herself to look at Germaine. What they were doing to him, however, did little to ease her own uncertainties. Using ten straps to secure Germaine's ankles, knees, waist, wrists, elbows and chest seemed a bit excessive. Germaine was barely breathing. Surely a thin needle couldn't cause that much fight from a man who looked like a living skeleton.

“Marcus,” Holzburg called out when the former gladiator had finished assuring himself they'd securely restrained his friend. “I'll need your help here for a moment. I want to insert a needle catheter into Claire's arm to avoid sticking her more than once, but I don't want to risk giving her an anesthetic because of Germaine.”

Claire didn't have to be told what that meant. If Dr. Holzburg thought he needed Marcus to hold her, this catheter thing was going to hurt. Her muscles tensing in dread, Claire turned her face into Marcus's shoulder when he knelt behind her to hold her arm. “Did Germaine ever tell you I'm a coward when it comes to needles?” she whimpered against his starched cotton jacket.

“No, I can't say that he did,” he replied in a low murmur of reassurance.

“Well, I--” She let out a sharp hiss of pain at the pinch of the large bore needle pricking her left arm, then counted to ten under her breath while Dr. Holzburg eased the plastic sheath into place just below the bend of her left elbow.

“That's it for that one. Now all we need to do is place a similar contraption on her wrist for Germaine.” At Claire's soft groan of dismay, Holzburg apologized but claimed the safeguard was necessary. “The shield serves as a guide to aid fledgling vampires in piercing the skin. And in Germaine's present state, he's weaker than a fledgling.”

Dr. Holzburg held up the plastic piece to show it to Claire. It looked like a two-inch flexible strip of plastic with two half-inch prongs sticking down. Sharply pointed prongs that would be inserted directly into the veins in her wrist. If the needle shunt had been painful, this would be ten times worse.

Leaning back in her chair, Claire swallowed several times to keep from passing out, or worse, throwing up.

Marcus rose smoothly to his feet and stood before her. Lifting her hands, he turned them over to examine her wrists. “This one looks best,” he pronounced, selecting her right wrist. Then before she had time to protest, he bent forward and sank his fangs into her.

Claire gave out a small cry that was more surprise than pain, then fell silent as a familiar, yet different, languor took over her body.

Withdrawing from her, Marcus gazed softly into her eyes. "It's not quite the same, is it?" When Claire shook her head in numbed confusion, he firmed his grip and ordered, "Say ouch."

"Ouch," she echoed cooperatively, then repeated the interjection through clenched teeth when he pressed the plastic shield into the puncture site he'd created.

"I apologize," he murmured, handing her wrist back to Dr. Holzburg. "But I thought you might find the personal touch a little less traumatic."

"Much less," she agreed with a relieved inner sigh. "Thank you, Marcus." He responded with a dismissive wave, then moved back to Germaine's side.

While Dr. Holzburg taped the plastic mouthpiece to Claire's throbbing wrist, she watched Marcus guide a thin metal catheter into one of Germaine's fangs, and what she would have sworn was impossible occurred right before her eyes. Germaine, who moments before had been too weak to raise his head, became a snarling, writhing creature that would kill to protect itself from this assault. When thrashing and bucking did not gain its release, the being howled like a trapped animal in agony.

Once the catheter was in place, Marcus and the others who'd helped to hold Germaine steady, took a step back. Germaine fell silent, but remained agitated until he spotted Claire. His gaze riveted on her face, he held himself perfectly still while she rose to her feet and approached him. The metal brace holding his jaws open kept him from talking, but Claire was positive he recognized her. Wanting to offer him some reassurance, she tentatively reached out to stroke his cheek. At the first brush of her fingers, he closed his eyes and relaxed.

"Can he hear me?" she asked, a little unnerved by the transformation she'd just witnessed.

"He's pretty far gone, Claire dear," Holzburg admitted, "but it's possible."

"Stand back, Claire," Marcus ordered. "I need to catheterize his other fang now."

"I'd like to stay, Marcus. If he grows too agitated, I'll move away, but I'd like to be with him as long as he'll let me."

Her request clearly didn't please Marcus, but he didn't argue. Claire accepted the responsibility of keeping Germaine's head steady, with Auguste as her back up while the others took their positions. The moment the thin metal tubing touched him, Germaine's eyes flashed open, but this time they remained locked on Claire. Other than that small reaction, he did not move.

"Tilt his head back a little more, Claire," Marcus instructed. "We've almost got it."

Germaine was obedient to the slightest pressure of her hand, then the muscles in his neck tightened and he let out a low moan of pain.

"There!" Marcus pronounced, stepping back. "It's done." Holzburg swiftly attached the

Y tubing first to Germaine, and then to Claire. Holding her arm directly above Germaine's head as Holzburg instructed, Claire watched her blood flow directly into Germaine's fangs.

He closed his eyes and accepted the crimson fluid like a baby bird accepts food from its parent. Unable to even close his mouth, he was literally being force fed directly into whatever organ served as his internal filtering device.

"Let me know when you feel a slight tug, Claire. That will signal he's drinking on his own and we can switch him to your wrist."

Germaine's eyes opened again at that remark and he gazed inquiringly at Claire. Surmising what it was he wanted to know, she held up her wrist to show him the shield.

"I know it's not your preferred site," she teased gently, "but I've a suspicion that Dr. Holzburg would--" She let out a soft gasp. "I felt a tug."

"Good," the doctor praised, pulling the needle out of Claire first so that Germaine could drain the tube. "Okay, St. Justine, we're going to remove the catheters and let you drink from Claire directly. We'll be giving her transfusions, so take what you need, you won't hurt her."

When they eased out the thin metal tubes, Germaine stiffened, but didn't make a sound. They removed the metal clamp next. He opened and shut his jaw experimentally to test it, but made no further movements even when they loosened his restraints.

"Go ahead, Claire," Dr. Holzburg urged. "Put your wrist to his mouth and let him drink."

Though Germaine had not tried to communicate with her, even silently, Claire instinctively knew he would refuse to drink from her through a plastic shield. He accepted the indignity of being force fed, since he was given no other choice, but he would not tolerate the notion of feeding out of a fledgling's mouthpiece.

When Germaine turned his head away, Dr. Holzburg stepped forward to intervene, but Claire merely lifted her wrist to Marcus.

"Take it off," she commanded.

Germaine instantly twisted his head back to gaze at Claire, and Marcus's eyes widened with understanding. "No doubt I'd feel the same, were I he. This will hurt, Claire," he warned.

"Just do it." Claire gritted her teeth against the pain, but when she gave a soft cry, Germaine sat straight up. Stretching the loosened restraint to its limit, he gripped Marcus's throat with one hand. Marcus closed his eyes and didn't move, but Claire did.

Pulling free of Marcus's loosened grasp, she placed her bleeding wrist to Germaine's lips. "It hurts, Germaine. Take the pain away now, please."

Germaine released Marcus's throat to gently hold Claire's wrist. She winced at the

soreness of his teeth entering her, then sighed as she succumbed to the spell he alone could weave about her. Lost in the warm and gentle sensation, Claire barely felt the doctor insert the needle into her other arm, which signaled the first of many transfusions.

She lost track of the time, and knew little of her surroundings until Germaine carefully withdrew from her. So she was surprised to find herself stretched out beside him, her head cradled within the protective curve of his arm.

“You're right,” he murmured softly, his eyes closed. “It is a poor substitution.”

“He's taken twelve pints. That's an encouraging sign. Hopefully, after a few weeks of rest and a constant supply of fresh blood, his body and powers should be fully restored.”

Claire raised her head only slightly, and noticed that not only was his color back, but in the past few hours he had regained the solid-looking figure he'd had before he'd transfused Robert. It was nearly two o'clock in the morning, and Claire was exhausted. Still, she didn't want to leave.

“May I stay?” she asked, moving to sit on the edge of the metal chair while Holzburg taped her wrist and bandaged her arm.

“No,” Germaine answered, his eyes still closed. “I'll rest better if I'm alone.” Then more softly, he added, “You've paid your debt, Claire. Now it's time to say goodbye.”

“Debt?” she sputtered, caught between anger and disbelief that he was still annoyed with her after all they'd been through together.

He turned and searched her face, reaching into her thoughts. “Robert was the real reason your mother wanted you and me to get involved, wasn't he? And you promised her before she died that you would do whatever was necessary to save him, didn't you?”

Claire didn't understand what he was talking about, but she could sense his strong feeling of betrayal. She didn't know how to convince him that her fight for Robert's life in no way diminished her love for him. “Robert's my brother,” she protested. “It's natural for me to want to save him, but that doesn't mean--”

“And I was merely the man you chose to serve that purpose, wasn't I?” he demanded, cutting her off.

Dismay filled Claire's eyes as she grasped his thinking. “No, you've got it all wrong.”

“Have I?” Though his eyes were a deep golden brown, they held little warmth right then. “Then why did you threaten to go to Victor Cummings if I refused to guarantee Robert's life? You knew how I felt about transformations, let alone Cummings, so you couldn't possibly love me and still threaten me with the one thing you knew would tear me apart. So, why did you do it?”

Realizing she had no excuse, Claire shook her head. “I never meant to hurt you, I only wanted....” He raised his hand to cut her off, then turned his back on her.

“Perhaps it would be best if you left him alone now,” Marcus suggested. “His body's been through a great strain and he's not thinking too clearly.”

“You're wrong, Marcus. He's thinking very clearly,” she disputed before bending over Germaine. “Just tell me one thing. Do you think I would have asked you to do this if I knew it would endanger your life?”

His shoulders lifted slightly, but he still didn't face her. “Maybe not, but I'll never really know the answer to that, will I? And to be truthful, I wasn't willing to take the chance that my worst suspicions weren't correct. Now be a good girl and go away. I'm tired.”

Overwhelmed by a crushing sadness that stole her breath, Claire left then, but his words continued to haunt her for days afterwards. He was wrong. So very wrong. She never wanted to endanger his life, she merely wanted to save Robert's. Yet, every time she tried contacting him mentally, he barely acknowledged her. His answers were clipped and brusque, either ordering her to go to sleep, or informing her he was too busy, tired, or simply not in the mood to talk with her just then. No matter what, he would not discuss the issue of her threat to seek out Victor, and if she attempted to bring it up, he would immediately close his mind to her.

Only once did he ever initiate any contact with her, and that was three days after she'd left him at the clinic. She was fixing herself a cup of tea when she accidentally scalded her hand with the boiling water. He was in her mind immediately, doing what he could to ease her while he determined the extent of her injury. He didn't come to her, but he stayed with her mentally until she fell asleep that night. His gentle concern and his insistence upon remaining with her until he was confident she no longer suffered any discomfort, prompted Claire to finally seek him out herself.

From his earlier cautions, she knew Germaine would be even angrier with her if she showed up alone, so the next day she asked Nigel if he would be willing to escort her. To her surprise, he refused.

“It isn't you, Claire,” he assured her. “If you sought anyone other than St. Justine, I would be delighted to oblige you, but trust me when I say it's dangerous for you to go to him at this time. Take my advice, and don't ask anyone else to escort you there either. These are precarious times, Claire. More precarious than even I realized, and our mutual friend stands at the center of it all. You'd be better off keeping as far away from him as you can until things settle down again.”

Claire thanked him, but she'd already made up her mind. Nigel merely put his hand on her arm to detain her. “Look, if you mean to ignore my well-meant advice, at least let St. Justine know. You'll be putting yourself in great danger if you don't let him organize your protection.”

“I'll talk to him,” she promised, choosing not to confide to her one-time mentor that Germaine wasn't exactly speaking to her just then. She did keep her promise, however, and tried again that night to contact Germaine, but he refused to even acknowledge her.

Angry and frustrated, she expressed her intentions to him--in detail.

Seconds later she got her response. I'm warning you, you'd best stay away from me, Claire. Defy me in this, and I won't be responsible for my actions.

I'm not afraid of you, she retorted. And I think we need to talk.

You should be afraid, he warned, terrified, in fact. And we have nothing to say to each other. Then wishing her a pleasant evening, he terminated any further discussion by closing his mind to her.

The next night Claire did precisely what she threatened, but the moment she stepped into the day room at Illusions, she knew she'd made a mistake. They did not bar her from entering, but her presence was far from welcome. Both Phillipa and Phillip told her outright that she shouldn't have come, while the rest of the group barely spared her a polite nod of greeting.

Hugo stepped forward to inform her that St. Justine was out at the present, but was expected back shortly. It was then that Claire noticed the shield secured to his wrist. She shuddered. He and James were little more than walking meals to this group--fresh meat, or male prostitutes depending on how one looked at them. Claire was about to ask Hugo why a man would seek such a position when Phillipa gripped her arm.

"I'm serious, Claire. You should get out of here, now. Germaine will be furious when he sees you, and I think you've caused enough trouble already."

Claire turned to the woman she'd come to view as a fellow conspirator, if not a friend. "You too, Phillipa? For some reason, I believed you'd be more sympathetic."

"No one blames you for trying to save your brother, but...." She hesitated as if she wanted to tell Claire something, but had been warned against it. "Trouble has arisen among the groups, and though you're not directly responsible, Germaine is being called to account for your actions."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you'd better go if you don't want to cause even more trouble."

"Nigel warned me against coming here tonight, but he wouldn't tell me why so I came--"

"Marcus can see you home," Phillipa interrupted. "Can't you, Marcus?"

Marcus shrugged. "If that is her wish."

Claire felt something shrivel inside her at the coolness of his response. He had been the one who'd helped her through that terrible ordeal with Germaine. He knew how worried she'd been and how deeply Germaine's rejection had wounded her. The realization that he blamed her as well hurt Claire more than a physical slap to the face ever could. "I thought you'd understand, at least. Can you honestly believe I would purposefully jeopardize Germaine's life?"

“Not physically, perhaps. However, your threat to seek out Victor was by far the greatest injury you could have dealt him.”

“Robert was dying and I was desperate. Do you think I wanted to go to Victor Cummings?”

“I have no idea. All I know is that you would have carried out your threat had Germaine not acceded to your demands. And Germaine knew it as well. What he didn't know was whether your love for him could withstand a test against your passionate devotion to your brother.”

“Did he say that?”

“No, but then words aren't always necessary between friends, are they?”

Claire sank down on a barstool. “I guess not. Victor Cummings was never more than a desperate, final resort for me. I thought if I told Germaine that I intended to go to Victor that it might get him to change his mind about transforming Robert. I had little to lose since he was already furious with me for telling Robert the truth about him.”

Phillipa clapped a hand over Claire's mouth. “Never admit such a thing again,” she warned, grabbing Claire's shoulders and giving her a small shake. “Especially in public. Didn't Germaine tell you that divulging the true state of a vampire to the uninitiated is viewed as a crime against the entire brotherhood?” she whispered, glancing furtively about her, but no one was paying them any attention.

“He warned me it was one of those laws I wasn't supposed to break, which is how I knew he was going to be angry.”

“Angry! Claire, breaking that law is punishable by death, if the council so chooses.”

“I don't think killing me is exactly what Germaine has in mind,” she argued when a pair of warm hands rested lightly on her shoulders.

“I wouldn't be so sure about that, my sweet,” Germaine answered, his fingers sliding around her throat. When Claire merely arched her neck and pressed against him, he asked, “What are you doing here, Ms. Daniels?”

She tried to face him, but his knee kept her stool from turning more than a quarter turn. “I came to see you,” she admitted truthfully.

He gave her a slight nod. “As you can see, I am fully recovered, thanks to your generosity, now you can go.”

She took a moment, visually devouring him with her eyes before she raised a hand to his cheek. He stiffened, but didn't pull away. “You've lost weight,” she murmured softly.

He briefly closed his eyes, then took a step back to distance himself from her. “I'm fine, Claire. Much better than anyone could expect, so you may put your motherly concern to rest and go home.” He glanced about the room. “I assume Nigel came with you, where is

he?"

Claire sighed, but lowered her hand to her lap. "Nigel didn't come with me, Germaine. He refused to."

His back and shoulders stiff, Germaine slipped his hands inside his pockets. "Did he happen to say why?"

"No, but he seemed to think I could be in some danger if I insisted upon seeing you."

Ignoring that, he asked, "So who came with you this time?"

"No one."

"No one!" he shouted, then recalling himself he backed up another step. "That's at least four times in the space of one week that you've blatantly disregarded my wishes, Claire." When she merely shrugged, he asked, "Are you trying to see just how far you can push me?"

"No, at least not on purpose. Besides, you're the one who's being difficult."

Phillipa coughed and Marcus found an excuse to go across the room while Germaine bent menacingly over Claire.

"You accuse me of being difficult?" Claire winced at his low roar. He wasn't yelling exactly, but it was damned close. "You defy me at every possible turn, and do everything you can to make my life a living hell. Short of staking me into a coffin while I sleep, I can't imagine what sort of torture you intend to inflict on me next."

"I never meant to hurt you, Germaine, I only wanted to save my brother's life."

"Yes, and at any cost."

"No! Not at the cost of injury to you. You're immortal, I never thought you'd be hurt."

"No? And did your thinking lead you to believe that I lacked feelings as well?"

"Of course not. I know you have feelings, very generous ones at that, but you're also inclined to be stubborn, pigheaded, obtuse...." He grabbed her wrist and Claire let out a sharp cry of pain. Immediately releasing her, he reached out and gently examined the bandaged area.

"This isn't the hand you burned," he observed quietly, "you're right-handed." He captured her other hand and when he noticed both were bandaged, Claire could see the anger grow in his eyes like a hungry flame greedily devouring dry timber. "Why wasn't this taken care of?" he demanded in a voice that carried throughout the room. The question was not rhetorical, nor was it directed toward her, yet Claire knew his fury was fueled entirely by his concern for her. He cradled her hand on his thigh and began to unwrap it. "Marcus," he called out, "explain how you could assure me Claire was well when she still carries the marks from my teeth?"

Claire bent forward and kissed her angry, autocratic lover on the ear. He jerked his head

back and glared at her. "Don't toy with fire, Claire," he warned beneath his breath.

"It wasn't Marcus's fault. You ordered me to leave, remember? Besides, it no longer hurts, and it's healing quite nicely."

He'd nearly finished unwrapping her wrist when he gave her one of his looks. "Vampire bites don't heal, unless--one, the recipient is also a vampire. Two, the bite is treated with the blood of a vampire, or three, the inflicting vampire dies."

"Well how was I to know that? You never..." Her voice trailed off when she noticed Germaine staring at the two puncture sites on the inside of her wrist. They were still extremely sore to the touch, but he seemed content merely to look. Wondering if it was hunger that held him so enthralled, she was about to offer herself to him when he said, "I recognize your work, Marcus. I had no idea..." The rest of his sentence remained unsaid as he skimmed his finger over the wounds.

Claire glanced over at Marcus. He knew all along that Germaine would discover what he did for her, and had risked a century's old friendship simply to spare her a little pain. She placed her fingers over Germaine's. "Dr. Holzburg wanted to insert a shield into my wrist to help you, but was reluctant to use anesthesia because of your condition, so Marcus made it easier for him and me."

His eyes filled with unspeakable pain, Germaine gazed at Marcus. "Was I that far gone?"

"You were a bit unpredictable, and we wanted to protect Claire."

"I see."

This time Claire looked confused. "Well, I don't. I thought the device was intended to help Germaine--because he was so weak?"

"In part," Marcus explained. "A mature vampire is rarely that weak, however, and the shield is as much a protection against a fledgling's over-enthusiasm as it is a guide."

"You thought Germaine might hurt me?"

"The point was we couldn't be certain either way. Germaine's system rejected most of Robert's blood since it was so badly infected. Normally that would merely leave him still hungry, but since we were removing Germaine's blood at the same time, he was slowly starving himself. The longer he remained hooked up to Robert, the more desperate his body grew for sustenance. The sight and smell of fresh blood could have sent him into a feeding frenzy, and we needed to devise a way to protect you should he turn ravenous. We knew if we told you this, however, that you'd insist upon taking the risk, so we said the device was needed for Germaine. When he refused it, he was telling us that no matter how starved he was, he wouldn't hurt you. He may not have accepted blood from you at all, however, if you hadn't pleaded for his help. Given the circumstances, I'd say it worked out quite nicely."

“That depends on your point of view,” Germaine contradicted before he requested a lancet from Sam.

Claire wasn't pleased by their ruse, but she understood it. What concerned her more was whether or not Germaine could accept what Marcus had done without feeling betrayed. She watched him tend to her hands, and offered no argument when he rolled up her sleeve to treat the incision in her arm. She knew he was hurting, but she didn't know how to ease him.

When he had finished ministering to her, Claire reached for his hand. “I love you,” she said softly.

He shrugged. “Perhaps you do, in your own way.”

“Her devotion was never in question, Germaine,” Marcus contradicted. “She offered her life for you when she believed it to be the only solution.”

Germaine gave Claire's fingers a light squeeze, then released her. “I need more time.”

Claire clasped his hand in both of hers. “Time may mean nothing to a man whose life spans centuries, but we mortals tend to be on a rather tight schedule in that regard. And staying apart from each other hasn't solved a thing,”

“I'm not sure what you expect of me.”

“Perhaps I merely want you to realize how miserable we would both be if we stopped seeing each other. Then again, perhaps I want you to forgive me for doubting you, and apologize for the way you doubted my love for you.”

“It's not quite that easy,” he answered with a hint of regret.

“Why not?”

“Do you remember the rules I spoke about when we first got involved? The ones I warned you that you would be expected to follow?”

“Yes,” she whispered, knowing that in his eyes she'd been guilty of breaking two of them.

“That first rule, the one about telling others about us, is inviolate.”

“Phillipa told me it is punishable by death.”

Before she could even react, his hand flashed out and gripped her chin. “I won't even ask how you came to discuss the matter with Phillipa, since if you told her you broke the law it could then become an issue for the council to vote on, and no longer just between us.”

When Claire started to protest, Germaine gave her a warning squeeze. “I could still demand certain rights regarding you, but I cannot control which items are brought before the council for a vote--and the council can't turn a blind eye to your activities forever. As to the death penalty, though it remains on our books, we have not enforced it for centuries. Banishment is much more likely, that or a public whipping.” When Claire

drew back from him, he added, "It may be barbaric, but it is also effective--especially when the entire council administers it."

"I'd rather you killed me first," Claire insisted, rubbing her chin.

"I won't say what I'd rather, since we'd only argue, which brings me to the final rule--the one about obeying my direct commands."

"Obedience is what you require from children and animals, not mature, full-grown adults."

"After you've lived for more than two hundred years, we can talk about maturity and growth, until then, you are, in many ways, a child. And before you start proving me right by allowing your tongue to be guided by temper rather than wisdom, I want to add that as long as our disputes remain private, there is no real problem. However, if the council doubts my ability to govern you, I will have to confront the matter openly--either by battle, resignation, or proof that you will obey me even when it is in your best interests not to."

"What are you saying?"

"That what Phillipa told you was the truth. One of our members has issued a protest against the transfusion on Robert. He's claiming the procedure not only endangered me, but the entire order. He has requested a convening of the council at two a.m., tonight."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that my ability to govern the order will be brought into question. A motion will undoubtedly be submitted that I've allowed you to cloud my judgment, and that I no longer possess control over what you say or do, which in turn would present you as a very real and serious threat to the group. Refuting that statement would have been easier if you'd listened to me for once--and stayed away," he added, giving her a significant look.

Claire felt as if she'd swallowed a rock. "Is that why you warned me to stay away?"

"Mostly, although I was more than a little irritated with you then, too."

She took his use of the past tense as reassurance that he'd forgiven her, but it did little to ease her mind. "Who is bringing these charges against you?"

"Arthur," he answered with a grim smile. "He insists I have a personal grudge against Sybill, and he's convinced it's my opinion alone that prevents him from taking her as his lifelong mate. In some respects, he's right, and this is his way of getting back at me--through you."

"He wants to separate us?"

"Not exactly. What he wants is for me to give my consent for Sybill's transformation, which in turn will open the way for others to do the same. Of course, that is something I

will not do. Other issues are involved, but Arthur's pride is at the center of them all, so they are unimportant--for now.”

“Will you lose your position?”

“I doubt it. Too many on the council support me. Either way, I greatly fear....”

He stopped at the sound of arguing coming from the back entrance. Before Claire could even see what was happening, she heard Germaine mutter a colorful oath. Just then a sweetly-voiced woman cried out, “Let go of me, you giant oaf, you're hurting me!”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“What is it? What's going on?” Claire demanded, unable to escape the horrible feeling of déjà vu that came over her when Gregory marched into the room, dragging a struggling young woman, no older than twenty, directly behind him. Though the woman's pathetic efforts to escape bordered on the absurd, Gregory showed no signs of amusement. In fact, he looked ready to knock his captive senseless, if not kill her outright.

Germaine gripped Claire's arm. “Stay here and be quiet,” he ordered tensely beneath his breath. Then releasing her, he spoke quietly to Phillip and Auguste before he strode over to Gregory. As Phillip and Auguste left the day room for the nightclub, the young woman, who'd seemed more angry than frightened a moment before, screamed in absolute terror at the sight of Germaine. Scrabbling like a trapped animal, she added biting and scratching to her frantic writhing, trying everything she could to break Gregory's hold while tiny, panicked screeches streamed from her throat.

“Silence,” Marcus commanded in a thundering voice. “Else we shall give you something really painful to scream about, woman.”

Claire gaped at Marcus. The change in him couldn't have surprised her more if he'd transformed into a bat right before her eyes. His threat made an impression, however, for after a few token whimpers the woman quieted. Discounting her reddened cheeks and puffy eyes, Gregory's reluctant prisoner was an exceptionally attractive woman. She had softly curled, long, blond hair, sparkling green eyes, and a sweetly delicate face.

Arthur stepped forward into the gathered circle. “May I have her now, Gregory?”

Claire held her breath as Gregory shook his head. “Not until I say my piece. I wish to formally accuse this creature of treason, and request the council impose the death sentence.”

“Those are serious allegations, Gregory,” Germaine responded with firm authority. “Perhaps you'd best tell us exactly what instigated them.”

“Gladly. Not only has this Jezebel sought out another group when we denied her transformation, but she has been relating our secret activities to an outsider. Today, she even went so far as to suggest he report us to the local constabulary.”

Claire knew then, without a doubt, that Gregory's female prisoner was the infamous Sybill and the outsider he spoke of had to be Harry. Realizing Gregory could just as easily be making those accusations about her and Robert made Claire's throat tighten with dread.

A loud murmur of discontent broke out among the men, but Arthur shouted above it. “She's not the only one guilty of treason! St. Justine's woman's crimes are equal in nature and intent.”

At Arthur's denouncement, the blood drained from Claire's face down to her knees, which wobbled uncertainly. She clutched a nearby chair to steady herself.

"I heard her confess her transgressions openly," Arthur continued, indicating Claire with an incriminating finger, "and admit she committed them in full awareness of her wrong doing. I was not alone in hearing this either. Others will back me if called to testify under oath. So, whatever punishment you decree for Sybill, I shall demand in turn for Claire Daniels."

"Ms. Daniels' guilt has yet to be decided, Arthur," Germaine pointed out in a silky voice. "Even if she is found guilty, this would be her first offense, not her fifth, so her crimes would not exact the same severity. Furthermore, the issue is moot, since Claire Daniels answers only to me."

"Perhaps the council should vote on that as well," Arthur challenged with a sneer in his voice. "Apparently I'm not the only one having difficulty controlling his woman."

Germaine ignored him and turned back to Gregory. "Have you any proof that Sybill openly sought transformation outside our group?" The tenor of his question made the small hairs at the back of Claire's neck stand up. This was not the gentle lover she knew. This was a man who would perform his duty no matter how repugnant it might prove to him personally.

"Auguste, Phillip and I overheard her speaking with one of Victor's men. She is scheduled to meet with Victor's council tomorrow night to hear whether they will grant her admission."

"Were you aware of these activities, Arthur?" Germaine asked lightly.

"Of course not. I'd never let her seek out another group. You know that, St. Justine."

"Disregarding the charge of treason, this is the fifth time she's been brought before the council for flagrant disobedience to you, not to mention infidelity. Do you wish the council to excuse this charge and remand her into your custody for private disciplining?"

Arthur glanced at Sybill who held out her arms in supplication. "Please, Arthur, don't let them hurt me again, I beg you. I'll do anything you say, I promise, only take me with you now."

Arthur looked like a man torn apart by indecision. "Why did you do it, Sybill?" he asked plaintively. "You didn't have to sell your body to Victor. I told you I would petition the council for you. Why couldn't you wait just a little longer?"

A wash of angry pride fanned across Sybill's cheeks as she lowered her arms and drew herself erect. "How long is 'just a little longer,' Arthur? All I've done is wait, and all you've done is give me empty promises. I only want what you have the power to give, but I don't have centuries like you to dawdle in." When he turned from her, Sybill curled her lip in a sneer of disgust. "You'd never get St. Justine or his precious council to agree to my transformation, Arthur, and you were a fool to think you could. I only regret I didn't have the courage to seek out Victor Cummings months ago." She turned slightly, letting her hate-filled gaze touch upon each man standing around her. "Go ahead."

Convene your petty little court and sentence me to your punishments. But I warn you now that I will make each of you pay for the pain and torment you have caused me. Especially you, St. Justine.”

“Well, Arthur?” Germaine asked, ignoring her.

“Do with her as you will,” Arthur replied quietly. “We are through.”

In a unanimous vote, the council sentenced Sybill to the dais for thirty minutes--with banishment effective upon her release. Her face grimacing with unspeakable horror, Sybill screamed and fought against the three men who calmly attended to the removal of her clothing.

The delicate, childlike face, with its small nose, gently rounded chin and soft, full lips, was instantly transformed into a hideous mask of pure hatred and terror while the foulest language Claire had ever heard gushed forth unchecked. Sybill's executioners paid her no heed, but continued to methodically strip her of the possessions they had provided for her.

Though Claire felt no personal affinity toward the woman, she wasn't about to stand by and watch a fellow mortal being publicly tortured. Especially not for something she had almost done herself. Claire was debating how she could most effectively put a stop to the proceeding when she felt a gentle hand clasp her elbow.

“Don't waste any pity on that one,” Phillipa cautioned. “She's a prime example of poison wrapped in a pretty package.”

“You condone this? After everything they've done to you?” Unable to look away despite herself, Claire watched the woman being dragged naked and swearing over to the lowered velvet platform. “What are they doing now?” she asked nervously. “Why are they tying her down?”

“To protect her from hurting herself.”

“Hurting herself? Why would she want to hurt herself?” When Phillipa didn't answer, Claire started toward Sybill, but Phillipa stopped her by grabbing her arm. Yanking free, Claire turned to glare at her friend. “How can you just stand by and watch them torture her?”

“I didn't say I watched--I just don't interfere. Look, Claire, if it were you up there, I'd fight like a tigress to save you. But for that she-devil, I wouldn't raise my little finger. She's more likely to stab you in the back than thank you for your efforts. And if you were to help her, you'd most likely end up taking her place.”

“If Arthur has his way about things, that's exactly where I will end up. I'm sorry, but I can't let them do this. Not without a protest at least.”

“Don't do it, Claire. I beg you. Germaine has enough battles without fighting for you, too.”

Claire knew Phillipa spoke the truth, but that didn't make her dilemma any easier. She didn't enjoy open defiance, but her conscience wouldn't permit her to ignore a fellow human's suffering.

"You'd be making the worst mistake of your life, Claire," Phillipa added in a near whisper. "Germaine would fight to the death rather than let you--"

"What's in that bag?" Claire interrupted as she watched Auguste, who was stationed at Sybill's head, place a plastic fluid-filled bag on a long pole that rose directly from the platform. Uncoiling the clear, flexible line, he leaned forward and said something to Sybill, who lay exhausted and resigned on the dais--the deep rise and fall of her chest her only movement. Shuddering lightly, she shook her head. His actions unhurried and exceptionally gentle, Auguste held Sybill's chin steady and slowly eased a two-inch needle into her neck. Sybill gave out a small sound of pain, but she held absolutely still until Auguste released her. Standing again, he tapped the line with his forefinger and watched the crystal blue fluid track its way to the tiny valve half way down the long, plastic tube.

"They're going to drug her with what's in that bag, aren't they?" Claire asked, not certain she believed her own eyes. "What's it going to do to her?"

Germaine turned at Claire's question and strode over to her. Fear kept her rooted where she stood, but it took all of her will power not to recoil from him in horror. He either didn't notice her terror or didn't care. His hands hard on her arms, he gave her a small push toward the door. "I want both of you out of here, now," he ordered. "And if you argue with me, Claire, so help me, I'll...."

Torn between her conscience and her revulsion, Claire turned and gripped his hands. It was more a plea for reassurance than affection, but he seemed to understand as he gently squeezed her fingers in response. His expression, however, revealed no gentleness. Backing up a step, Claire stared at the man she loved, assaulted by conflicting emotions. "I thought I knew you, but I guess I was mistaken. How can you do this?" she asked, her voice a mere whisper.

"This doesn't concern you, Claire."

"Doesn't it? I believe one of your own men wants to do the same thing to me."

"Which is exactly why I want you out of here. Now!"

"Why? So I won't discover what you have in store for me, later?" When he stiffened at the accusation, but didn't refute her, Claire felt a cold knot of fear form in her stomach. Shivering, she wrapped her arms about herself. "Even a condemned prisoner has a right to know what she faces."

"Not here and not now," he insisted, his face a mask of implacability.

"Then when and where?"

“What about Carpathias?” Phillipa recommended. “I’m certain Claire must be hungry, and I’m beginning to feel a bit peaked myself. Maybe we could find a quiet table there to talk?”

Seeing his look of indecision, Claire argued, “Surely it’s not forbidden for Phillipa and me to eat something before I’m taken home? Or are you sending me to bed without supper tonight?”

Germaine cast a cautionary glare at Phillipa before he turned back to Claire. “One hour, Claire. That’s it. Both of you are to be out of there by one-thirty, no later.”

His gaze returning to Phillipa, he added, “I trust I don’t need to remind you of the seriousness of this situation. I leave it to you to see that she gets home safely, then you’re to stay out of sight. The last thing I need is more trouble. And since the two of you are attracting more than your share lately, I want you both far away by the time we’ve concluded this session.”

When Phillipa nodded, Germaine gripped Claire by the chin. “Do me a favor, and for once, please, please, please do as I ask in this.” Then before she could agree or disagree, he captured her lips in a hard, demanding kiss. It wasn’t a gentle wooing by any means, but Claire found herself responding despite the fear twisting inside her stomach.

When he released her, Germaine pushed her toward the door. “One-thirty, Claire,” he cautioned her. His face deadly serious, he turned back to the council’s official proceeding.

While Claire moved toward the exit with Phillipa, she could see they’d covered Sybill with a black gossamer cloth. She was stretched out like an X on the velvet-draped dais, with her wrists, elbows, knees and ankles secured by gold satin cords. The cords had enough slack so that she could move, if she wished, but not much. Rocking her head from side to side, Sybill quietly pleaded for them not to do this to her. Her pleas were futile, since no one but Claire seemed to even hear them.

As each man, gowned in a long, black-hooded robe, slowly approached the dais, Claire noticed they carried something that looked like a peacock tail feather. The nine men assumed their stations around their prisoner, with four on each side of her and Auguste at her head.

Once they were in place, Germaine, wearing the only white robe, took the vacant position remaining at Sybill’s feet.

“What are they going to do to her?” Claire whispered, unable to turn away from the ritualistic torture despite her horror.

Before Phillipa could answer, Germaine gave a sharp nod and four triangular sections of the draped dais folded down and inward, leaving Sybill strapped to an X-shaped platform. The men stepped in accordingly as Auguste turned the small valve in the IV. Claire felt her own body tighten in dread as the clear blue fluid slid slowly but smoothly

toward Sybill's neck.

Sybill gave a brief shudder, then letting out a tiny whimper she closed her eyes and held herself tense. Phillipa gave Claire's arm a sharp tug.

"Come on. Let's get out of here before the screaming really starts."

After Phillipa had literally pulled her out into the street, Claire asked, "Are you going to tell me what it was they were doing to her in there?"

Phillipa gave Claire a brief glance before she hustled her across the two-way street onto the adjacent sidewalk. "What do you think they were doing?"

Claire wasn't sure, but she fervently hoped what she suspected was wrong. "Giving her a drug of some sort." When Phillipa neither denied nor confirmed her supposition, Claire asked, "But why? And why the robes and the feathers? What purpose do they serve?"

"The robes signify it as a council ceremony, and the feathers are part of the punishment."

"What do they do? Tickle her until she screams for mercy?"

"In a way. At least the second part is right." They stopped before the restaurant. "Look, Claire, I'd like to tell you, but I can't. What you witnessed was a council-sanctioned punishment. Only a member of the council is permitted to reveal its form and purpose--and even they are bound to a vow of secrecy which permits few exceptions." She gestured at the ornate wood and brass trimmed doors. "Now, do you want to eat, or go home?"

"Eat," Claire conceded reluctantly, although the thought of food made her stomach hurt. She wanted to know the truth, but she didn't want Phillipa to get in trouble for telling her. One thing she was learning from her experience with immortals was patience. Eventually, she'd find out from Germaine everything that she wanted to know, along with a few other things that she'd probably be much more blissful never knowing.

* * *

Claire had never been inside Carpathias before, but in the short time she'd been in Germaine's musical, she'd heard many speak very highly of it. So, she was a little surprised when Phillipa, who'd suggested the restaurant, seemed hard-pressed to recommend any of the entrees. Her expression sheepish, Phillipa admitted in a low voice that she was on a strict liquid diet and Carpathias was one of the few restaurants in town that catered to it.

Claire ordered a steak salad while Phillipa, with a queasy-looking grimace, ordered a glass of their special Sangria. She requested the wine be robust, well-aged, and without any fruit.

"But the fruit's the best part of Sangria," Claire protested with a surprised laugh.

Phillipa shrugged. "I prefer it with a bit more bite." Thanking the waiter, she sent him off.

"What about your diet? Aren't you going to order your drink now?"

"I just did, Claire. The Sangria here is loaded with special nutrients."

"Surely a glass of wine can't...." Claire's throat suddenly constricted. "I studied French rather than Spanish in school," she admitted uneasily, "but I just recalled what the literal translation of Sangria is. It seems I've made some faulty assumptions about you."

"I wasn't insulted, Claire. In fact I was flattered you saw me as a sister in blood--a fellow mortal. We aren't very much alike, but we do share a similar taste in men."

Claire felt as if someone had just pulled her chair out from under her. "Your perfume. How stupid of me. I should have recognized your unique scent long before tonight. I certainly was quick enough to detect it on Germaine that night at the theater."

"It was an extremely emotional night for him, Claire," Phillipa explained gently. "He had watched a close and dear friend die that day. Someone he had loved, yet was denied from openly mourning. He was torn up inside with a grief he wouldn't allow himself to express and I only wanted to help him. I had no idea he was seeing you, and I never meant to cause trouble between you."

"You didn't. At least not for long," Claire reassured her softly. It had been an emotional night for her, too. "I guess Phillip's accusations weren't all playacting, were they?"

"Before I even attempt to answer that, I'd like to tell you a little about myself. I figure afterwards you'll either hate me, or understand me just a little bit better."

The waiter rejoined them, so Claire waited until they were alone again before she assured Phillipa a confession wasn't necessary. "I tend to think everyone's life is an open book," she explained, "but I'm beginning to realize that some people have secrets they don't want to share."

"Too many already know my life story for me to consider it a secret, and my first meeting with Germaine wasn't all that auspicious."

Leaning forward, in the way women usually shared confidences, Phillipa went on to tell Claire that she'd been a sixteen-year-old runaway, who was destitute, starving, and at her wit's end when she met Germaine St. Justine. After a month of sleeping in the streets and eating garbage, she was so desperate for a decent meal, that she was determined to have one even if she had to sell herself for it.

Too hawk-faced and skinny to attract clients on her looks alone, and too intimidated to openly sell herself to the kind that trafficked in the area where she'd finally ended, Phillipa went in search of something "better." But women who had "gentlemen friends" looking after them already occupied all the prime spots.

Loners like Phillipa had to take what they could get, and pray it would be enough.

When evening darkened into night, and Phillipa still had no takers, she grew a little bolder. Spotting a gentleman leaving a nearby lounge, she approached and asked if he wouldn't like to take her somewhere a little more private. Assuring him, with a few movements she'd seen the other women make, that she'd make any time he spent with her well worth his while.

His eyes alight with a soft inner glow, he gave her a look that seemed to penetrate directly through to her soul. In a soft, yet faintly mocking voice, he asked her just how she intended to ensure his time would be well spent.

Her mouth dry with uncertainty, Phillipa answered that she would do whatever he asked of her, no questions, for the price of a meal. Not a cheap, cafeteria-type dinner, but an expensive one with cloth napkins and a waiter. A dinner that she would remember for a long time to come.

The gentleman scrutinized Phillipa a little more closely, and asked how old she was. Guessing he might object to her age, she lied and told him twenty. His eyebrow arched in a skeptical slant, but he grabbed her arm and took her in a cab to Carpathias where he fed her the most glorious meal she'd ever eaten.

Phillipa pointed out the table to Claire. "I think I fell a little bit in love with him during that meal. He was handsome, kind, and he fed me first, not afterwards. Yet the entire time he neither spoke to me nor asked anything from me. He merely watched me eat. When he was assured I'd finally had my fill, he took me up to the most sumptuous hotel room I'd ever seen. There, he prepared a bath for me in a sunken white marble tub."

Though Phillipa assured him she was clean, he insisted upon bathing her, saying that he enjoyed performing such services and she'd promised to do whatever he asked without question.

Bound by her own words, Phillipa gave herself over to his care. She'd never had a more thorough or pleasurable bath in her life, and by the time he was through, he knew her body almost as intimately as she did.

Germaine had told her later that he'd bathed her to check her over for any signs of abuse, drugs or disease. Once he was satisfied she was well enough to serve him, he made glorious, passionate love to her.

It wasn't until it was over that Phillipa noticed two things. One, he hadn't removed a single stitch of his clothing, and two, he hadn't obliged her to reciprocate his attentions in any way other than to express her enjoyment, which was no great hardship for her.

What she didn't notice was the speculative gleam in his eye. He lay beside her, his hand idly stroking her bare hip. "How old did you say you were?" he asked with quiet purpose.

"Twenty," she repeated, more concerned over the fact her new lover had yet to discover she was a virgin. Recognizing her good fortune in finding this gentleman, and hoping

he'd consider keeping her for a while, Phillipa placed her hand on his chest and confessed he was the first man ever to make love to her.

His brow lifted again, but she thought nothing of it even when he smiled and pulled her up to stand beside him then promptly sat down again. He held her between his knees, his hands firm upon her waist.

His thumbs gently caressing the indented plane of her stomach, he continued to ask her a few innocent-sounding questions--such as: her name, where she lived, whether she had any brothers or sisters, what year she graduated from high school . . . Lulled by his easy manner, Phillipa was caught in her lie without even realizing it.

It wasn't until he quietly repeated her answers and concluded aloud that she must be about sixteen-years-old that Phillipa grew uneasy.

When she protested that he would only have declined her offer if she'd told him the truth, he grudgingly conceded she was right, adding that he certainly would have been more circumspect with her if he'd known she was so young. Then in the softest voice she'd ever heard a man use, he asked whether her coming to his room meant she gave him permission to handle her as he saw fit.

When she readily agreed that it had, he asked, "Then you give me full leave to do whatever I want with you, even if my actions bring you discomfort?"

Believing he spoke of the sexual act, Phillipa answered, "I am not that innocent! I'm fully aware what you will do may cause me a little pain, and I'm not afraid. You have my permission to do whatever you please with me."

He smiled then. And before Phillipa even knew what he was about, she was laying across his knees and experiencing the extent of his displeasure in a way she'd remember for a long time to come. Confident he had made his point, Germaine placed her back on the bed with the warning that she'd best never lie to him again. Then tossing her a handkerchief, he left her alone to cry.

But Phillipa was too scared to cry. She'd gotten a chance for a better life, and she'd botched it. Moving gingerly, she rose from the bed and got dressed. He'd hurt her. Not badly, but enough that she was acutely aware of certain movements, like sitting. She was slipping her arms into her skimpy wind-breaker when he came back into the room and demanded to know what she was doing.

Unable to hold back her tears any longer, she haltingly explained that she was leaving since it was clear he had no further use for her. He looked a little nonplused by her reasoning, but pulled her onto his lap. Quietly, he explained that he most certainly did have a use for her, but not until she was at least twenty-years-old. Then tenderly drying her eyes, he laid out his plan for her.

Germaine put Phillipa through high school, then technical school. The whole time he acted like a concerned older brother toward her. Encouraging her to date if she wished,

which she did, but because she was certain he meant to marry her when she was finally of age, she continued to save herself for him. Something which would never have been possible had he insisted she return home.

On Phillipa's twenty-first birthday, Germaine took her officially as his mistress. And when she lay in soft, sweet repletion in his arms, he told her the truth about himself. Looking back on it now, Phillipa was surprised she'd accepted it as well as she had. The knowledge that the man who'd just sent her into a screaming climax was in truth a vampire, could not have been easy to believe, but Phillipa knew this man would never lie to her--about anything. Then holding her close to him, he informed her of the rules he would expect her to follow and obey if she wished to remain with him.

"You already know what they are," Phillipa assured Claire as she rattled them off by rote. "Don't reveal to any outsiders what I've told you. Remain true and faithful to me, taking no one else as your lover as long as we're together. And do as I ask without question." Still, it was his last rule that gave me the most difficulty. "Know that despite the tender feelings I hold for you, our relationship cannot continue past ten years."

A lump gathered in Claire's throat as she stared down at the ring he'd placed on her finger. "He never mentioned that part of it to me," she whispered, her eyes beginning to sting at the realization he would eventually insist they part.

"He never gave you his ten-year speech?" Phillipa questioned in surprise before she too noticed the ring on Claire's finger. "May I see that?" she asked, her hand extended. When Claire placed her hand in Phillipa's, Phillipa examined the ring more closely. "Talk about engagement rings!" She glanced over at Claire as if she suddenly realized something. "Germaine gave you this ring, didn't he? As far as I know, he hasn't given a ring to a woman for over two hundred years, and even then he was practically forced into it."

"Germaine was engaged before?" Claire asked, so stunned by the revelation that she didn't know whether to be jealous or angry. "When?"

Phillipa immediately let go of Claire's hand. "I shouldn't have said anything. Forgive me, Germaine should be telling you this, not me." Claire didn't argue, but when she dabbed at her eyes with her napkin, Phillipa reached for her hand again. "Do you mind if I ask how you met Germaine?"

Claire shook her head. "It was the first night he visited my mother in the hospital."

"Germaine visited your mother in the hospital?...." Phillipa looked suddenly pale. "Oh, Claire. I'm so sorry. Here I was jabbering on and on about Germaine's loss and I was speaking of your own mother."

"It's all right, Phillipa. I understand."

"Believe me, I had no idea. None of us knew. We thought your only connection to Germaine was the play. I wondered why he got involved so quickly. Normally, he waits

two years or more before he seeks another companion, but after the pain he went through losing Marguerite . . . To be honest, I really didn't think he'd get involved again--ever. Which was why we were all so surprised to learn about you. No wonder....”

“I didn't know Germaine usually waited two years,” Claire admitted. “I was aware he didn't want to get involved again, but I think Mother and I pushed him into it. After all that's happened, I begin to wonder if Mother's main concern wasn't Robert all along.”

“That's ridiculous. It's natural for a mother to be concerned about her ailing child, but from what I know about Marguerite, she never would have sacrificed the life of one child to save another. She wanted what was best for both of you, and Germaine. Besides, Germaine is not a man who's easily pushed into anything.”

“Perhaps,” Claire conceded, but she still had her doubts. “I know that neither Robert nor myself ever suspected Germaine might be in any danger from the procedure. All along Germaine knew he risked a century or more of his life to save my brother, and I repaid him by threatening to offer myself to another man. In a way, I'm surprised he forgave me as quickly as he did.”

“I think Germaine will always forgive you, but if you had gone to Victor, he would have been devastated. He would have forgiven you, but I doubt he would ever take you back.”

“And what happened this evening was supposed to be Germaine's way of taking me back? I've seen more welcoming expressions on a boa constrictor.”

“His pride was hurt. That's all. I should think that ring and the kiss he gave you tonight would relieve some of your concerns.”

“Some,” she agreed, though Claire was far from convinced her problems had been solved. “What about you? You were with Germaine first, yet you married Phillip. How did that happen?”

“I'm not sure I should answer that, either. How much has Germaine told you about vampire/mortal relationships?”

“He mentioned a few things, like: the mortal is subject to the immortal's will, if the vampire so chooses, the mind link, and the feeling of dependency that seems almost mind-crippling at first will gradually grow less daunting as the relationship matures. That's about it.”

“Did he also happen to mention that the act of joining was addictive? That a mortal could become so dependent on the vampire's feeding that she would do just about anything to have him carry it through to its ultimate conclusion--death and transformation?”

“He mentioned something about that, but not nearly as strongly.”

“Well, for me, it was that strong. I wanted Germaine in a way that left me aching and trembling inside whenever he was apart from me--even if he was only a foot away. And

it didn't lessen, no matter how much time passed. I managed to keep my desperate longings to myself for three years before I began asking him about transformation.

“He's undoubtedly already told you how adamant he is against making any more like himself, although he rarely says why. He once told me it was because a fledgling usually ends up hating its creator, but I suspect his reasons go much deeper than that. They may even be inter-linked with his own transformation, but he'll turn grimmer than a three-day corpse if you even ask him about it.”

Claire looked surprised. “I thought he did it to protect other mortals from becoming like himself, because he fears what the world would become if vampires overran it.”

“That's as good a theory as any. Still, as noble as Germaine is, I don't believe he's refused to make another vampire, for more than two hundred years, solely out of fear of depleting the human population. I was the perfect example. I was essentially alone with no one but a group of male vampires to care whether I lived or died. Who would have objected? I certainly didn't. In fact, once I started asking him to transform me, I couldn't seem to stop. Every time he came to me I pleaded with him to make me immortal, but he refused. And it began to tear us apart.

“I loved him, and I wanted to be with him for eternity, but I wasn't about to wait until I was a haggard old lady for him to change his mind. I wanted to be transformed while I was still young and fairly attractive. For three years I begged him, almost nightly. By then I was twenty-seven years old and I was afraid to wait much longer. Eventually, he grew tired of arguing with me, and quietly, but firmly, told me he thought it was time I began searching for a mortal husband. I knew it was the end, and that he would force me to marry if I tried to resist. It was the way he ended all his relationships.

“I reminded him that I was still a virgin, that it would mean giving myself to another man. I asked him if that wouldn't bother him, even a little. He could tell I was upset, and he held me while he assured me that it would bother him a great deal, but his main concern now was me. He couldn't give me what I wanted, but perhaps with a mortal husband I would no longer desire to live for centuries feeding off the blood of others. But I knew better. I knew I wanted to be with him forever, so I approached a member of his group to help me.”

“Phillip,” Claire supplied with an understanding nod, but Phillipa only smiled.

“Immortals are forced to live a comparatively transitory life. Every ten or fifteen years, they must move far away from all who know them to a place where they can begin again. To further the deception, all the individuals change their names.”

“That's why Germaine changed his from André?”

“Exactly. When I was mortal, I went by my given name of Louise. Phillip was Henri, and Germaine went by his third name--Phillip.”

Claire blushed. “Again, I leapt to a conclusion.”

Phillipa reached over and clasped Claire's hand. "It was a long time ago. Germaine hadn't even met your mother, yet. I didn't tell you before, because I was afraid you'd be hurt."

"I'm not, not really," Claire assured her, though in fact she wasn't sure how she felt--except foolish. "It seems I've made many assumptions without ever questioning if they were true."

"You had no reason to question yourself. Phillip and I were married. It's natural to assume I would take the name of the man who transformed me."

"That's what I meant. I thought it was merely a coincidence you shared the same name. I didn't even know you were a vampire until today."

"Trust me, Claire, that's a compliment. Anyway, it took me almost a year to convince Henri, or Phillip, if you prefer, to transform me. We both knew Germaine would be furious, but Phillip's desire to make me his in all ways, and mine to become immortal, eventually won out. Germaine was wrong then, too. I never hated Phillip for what he did. I was and still am grateful to him. He risked his life for me, and paid a severe price for his betrayal, but, unfortunately, I'm still not in love with him. Through it all, I can say I have only one real regret."

"What's that?" Claire asked, thinking Phillipa regretted not being more patient with Germaine. That she didn't try wooing him instead of making demands.

"I regret I didn't have the presence of mind to have Phillip rid me of that blasted hymen before I died. You see before you a perpetual virgin, which is irrelevant when I mate with a vampire, but an absolute torture of frustration whenever I take a mortal lover. You keep whatever you die with. Long hair will grow back if you cut it, long nails if you file them, and your maidenly badge of honor will redevelop even if you have it surgically removed, which is a treat I can attest to personally. What's worse is that I have not found a mortal who can pierce through the damned thing, and vampires have no interest in it." When Claire groaned and slid down in her seat, Phillipa looked chagrined.

"Sorry, I didn't realize," she finished lamely.

Claire waved her hand to show she harbored her friend no ill feelings, but it was awhile before she could ask, "What other choice did you have? From what Germaine told me, a vampire requires too much blood to make love like a mortal. To do so would only kill his partner before he was even ready to . . . Well, you know."

"The next time Germaine tells you that, you might want to remind him that all the blood does not have to be yours. Three or four pints of bottled or bagged blood would do nicely. Unfortunately, the amount required does make a vampire a bit over-sexed in that regard, which for a mortal can be a highly pleasurable but physically taxing and exhausting experience.

"Still, if I were you, Claire, I'd grab at the chance. One day, when Germaine owes you a

favor, ask him to make love to you like a mortal man. He'll be careful with you, and it could save you a lifetime of eternal regret--especially if you end up as one of us.”

When Claire dismissed the notion with a shrug, Phillipa added, “I know you don't think that's very likely, but it's not impossible either. And if you can get him to make love to you as a man, your chances are even better. Assuming, of course, that the notion of immortality appeals to you.”

“I don't know. Death terrifies me even more than the process of dying, but the notion of living forever is a little daunting. I guess I imagined things would always be the same between us, but that was pretty naive of me, too. I gather Germaine was angry when he discovered what you and Phillip had done?”

“Yes, he was,” a deep, masculine voice answered behind her. Claire felt a tiny fraction of fear laced with desire at the sound of his voice. His lips practically touched her ear and she could feel a whisper of his cool breath brush her cheek. “Furious, in fact,” he added in a smooth undertone. “Almost more furious than he is with you at this very moment, Ms. Daniels.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Her emotions in turmoil, Claire vacillated between her desire to lean back in trust and her instinct to shrink away in self-protection. The notion that Germaine could torture another woman twisted Claire's heart with dull pincers of dread while a tiny, inner voice insisted that the man she knew and loved couldn't possibly be that cruel. In the short time they'd been together she'd seen him angry, furious even, but never brutal. Detached and aloof, yes, but not unfeeling or cold. If anything, he'd been unbelievably polite and gentle with her--even when she'd threatened to betray him.

She had to make up her mind.

Fear and love couldn't coexist in the same heart. For one to live the other had to die. Instinctively Claire knew which path she was destined to take. She already loved him. Now, she needed to trust him.

Closing her eyes, she turned slightly and pressed her lips to her lover's unsmiling mouth. "Why don't you join us?" she invited, pretending not to notice he declined to kiss her back.

Germaine let his breath out slowly and sat down. "What must I do to get through to you two? I asked, no, I pleaded with you to be home at least two hours ago."

Both Claire and Phillipa glanced at their watches in surprise. They'd spent more than three hours talking and sharing their feelings.

"It's not as if we did it on purpose," Claire insisted, a swift pang of guilt compelling her to justify the oversight. "Phillipa and I simply lost track of time when we discovered how much we have in common, yet for some peculiar reason neither of us was aware of it."

Germaine's eyes narrowed slightly. "If you think to divert the issue by blaming this on me, think again, my sweet. I'm not buying it." He glanced over at Phillipa. "Anyone see you here?"

"I'm not sure," she responded uneasily.

Germaine's gaze swept the room with practiced nonchalance. "Arthur is seated just three tables away. At least tell me you were discreet in your discussions." When Phillipa gave a guilty shrug, Germaine groaned between tight lips. "Wonderful! You've just made my day complete."

"What difference would it make if Arthur saw or heard us?" Claire asked as casually as she could manage while she glanced uneasily over her shoulder at the man who'd incriminated her before Germaine's entire council.

"I think, Claire," Phillipa explained softly, "that the problem lies in the council vote. Did they side with Arthur, Germaine?"

"Not exactly, although their decision wasn't entirely favorable either. I've been ordered

to take action to ensure against similar incidents occurring in the future.”

Phillipa nodded. “Are you under any time constraints?”

“I must see the matter accomplished within a reasonable period, not to exceed one month.”

From Germaine and Phillipa's solemn expressions, Claire knew the verdict was serious, and that it concerned her. “What exactly does that mean?”

Phillipa reached over to pat Claire's hand. “The council has ordered you punished, Claire.”

Claire drew back as terrifying images caused icy tendrils to crawl up her spine. “No. I don't believe it,” she insisted, watching Germaine's expression turn grimmer than purgatory's gatekeeper.

He gave Phillipa a level look. “I think you'd best tell her exactly what happened when you and Phillip faced the council.”

Phillipa grimaced as if the suggestion made her uncomfortable, but when Claire bit her lip and choked back a groan of mounting dread, she gave a reluctant sigh and said, “The council isn't without feelings, Claire. Nor are they revengeful in their judgments, but they do not falter in their duty to uphold the order's laws. Even so, I pleaded with them for Phillip. I told them I was responsible, not Phillip. That I had tricked him into taking me by telling him I was dying.”

Claire fought to still her growing panic and focus on what her friend was saying. Maybe Phillipa could provide a way out of this predicament. “Was it true? Did they believe you?”

Phillipa gazed at Germaine with regret. “No, it wasn't true,” she admitted softly. “But I'd heard the council occasionally made allowances for crimes committed under special circumstances, and I'd hoped to gain their sympathy for Phillip's sake. I was very convincing.”

“Then they believed you?”

“Yes, until Phillip testified the truth--that he'd taken me because he loved me and wanted me at his side forever.”

Claire felt her brief hope shrinking. “I gather the council doesn't view love as just cause.”

“Love? No. Death? Possibly. Had I been dying, they might have forgiven Phillip his lapse in judgment and welcomed me into the fold, just as they would be obliged to forgive you your transgressions if anything ever happened to Germaine. But because I had clearly been the instigator, they offered Phillip a choice. Banishment, or the loss of one blood tooth. Since banishment would brand him as an outcast, depriving both of us of all friends and support, he elected to undergo the extraction. He could feed with one,

and continue a fairly normal life for the fifty-years it would take for a new fang to develop, but it was still a horrible ordeal.” Phillipa closed her eyes and swallowed.

“As mortals, many of us disliked dentists, but to a vampire the removal of a feeder is akin to having all your fingernails pulled from one hand--only ten times worse. Even with anesthesia he screamed horribly, and for weeks afterwards he had a gaping wound in his mouth that required constant care. As you probably already guessed from your experience with Germaine, a vampire's canines are extremely sensitive to both pleasure and pain. More than teeth, they are what make a vampire unique from all other creatures, and they are the only physical characteristics formed after mortal death. They are necessary, not only for survival, but for the vampire's self-identity. Nothing in your world compares--not even castration. Phillip's loss gave him nightmares for weeks. I stayed with him, knowing I was responsible for every moment of his suffering.”

Sensing Phillipa's inner anguish, Claire instinctively reached for her hand in a gesture of comfort. “Even to an outsider, it's obvious that Phillip loves you very much. I'm certain he doesn't blame you.”

“No, he doesn't, which does little to ease my conscience. I care for him like a brother, but I can't seem to summon the same intensity of feeling he holds for me.” Her eyes lifted to Germaine in apology, but he avoided her gaze by staring at his folded hands.

“Tell her the rest, Phillipa. Tell her what the council elected to do with you.”

Phillipa stiffened at the command, then relented with a philosophical shrug. “My sentence was light in comparison. Every year, for fifty years, on the anniversary of my rebirth, I am required to submit myself to the council for punishment. While I stand before them, ten of them vote on the form it is to take with the eleventh serving as an arbiter in case of a stalemate.”

“The eleventh, is that Phillip?” Claire asked, but she guessed what Phillipa's response would be before she gave it.

“No, it's Germaine. He felt he was too close to the situation to take part in the deciding process and opted to abstain unless the council needed a tie-breaking vote, which also exempted him from participating in my punishment.”

Her heart pounding, Claire turned to Germaine. “If you voted, you could have helped her, perhaps even spared her. Why did you abstain?”

“Because,” Phillipa answered for him, “if he attempted to pardon or spare me, it would mean he condoned what I did. Taking such a stand would be tantamount to a formal denouncement of his position on transformations. He didn't want to see me hurt, but he couldn't spare me either. I put him in a position that left him damned either way--just as you have, Claire.”

Claire shook her head in immediate denial. “No. I only....” she stopped when Phillipa gripped her fingers.

“You told an outsider about us, and you threatened to seek out another order for the sole purpose of offering yourself in exchange for their powers. As much as Germaine loves you, and the council admires you, none of them can simply ignore what you did when faced with a formal petition demanding your punishment. Those are the rules, and as long as he lives, Germaine has no choice but to follow them, Claire.”

Claire tried to swallow the painful lump that had formed in her throat. Didn't her wishes count at all? Would he follow his council's directive even against her will? That thought tore at her insides as she gazed at Germaine. “Have I any say in the matter, or will you drag me screaming and struggling to that platform and order me tied down like you did Sybill?”

“No one will drag you anywhere,” he promised solemnly.

“Will you at least tell me what you and the others did to her?”

Germaine glanced over at Phillipa. “How much did she see?”

“Enough,” Phillipa answered. “I thought you might want to explain the process to her yourself, privately.”

Germaine considered that for a moment, then rose. “Perhaps you're right. Some things need to be experienced to be understood.”

Claire remained seated even when he extended his hand to her. “I won't do it,” she informed him softly. “I refuse to let you humiliate me in that way.”

“I merely mean to take you home, Claire. No more than that.”

She summoned enough courage to look at him then. “I'm doing everything I can to trust you, Germaine. If you damage the confidence I'm placing in you, I don't think I could ever forgive you.”

“Your trust is precious to me, Claire. I'd never jeopardize it.”

With that reassurance, Claire gathered up her courage along with her purse and coat and left with the man who held her heart in his keeping. He continued to touch her, keeping a hand at either her elbow or resting near her waist until they arrived at her apartment.

When they reached the door, she turned and faced him with her arms crossed before her. She couldn't hide the heightened flush fear brought to her face, but she refused to cower. “Are you going to tell me, or not?”

“Inside,” he ordered, his voice little more than a soft purr.

Realizing the man had more powers than she could imagine, much less pit herself against, Claire suddenly felt vulnerable and very much alone.

Germaine cupped her face in his palms. “I told you once that I would never do anything you didn't want me to, Claire. That promise is irrevocable, so you have no reason to fear me.”

She didn't pull away, but she didn't look at him either. "You could simply will me into doing something I'd never agree to on my own. I know you're capable of that."

"I'm capable of many things, but I've never used my abilities against you, have I?"

"No, but--"

"And I won't. You have my word. I'd like to make love to you tonight. Will you let me?"

"I thought we were going to talk first."

"You said first, that gives me hope, but I think it's best if we talk later. Your question is best answered through demonstration, but I promise to stop when and if you ask me to, all right?"

Claire nodded and allowed him to lead her into the bedroom. He drew her over to the bed and ordered her to remain put while he walked back into the living room and collected all the candles she'd used to summon him. Placing them around the bedroom, he proceeded to light them until the room was cast in a warm, golden glow, then he came to her.

His hands exquisitely gentle, he removed her clothing one piece at a time, brushing the sensitive flesh of her stomach, inner thighs and breasts with the soft fuzziness of her cashmere sweater, the silky softness of her blouse and the plush, velvety smoothness of her skirt. Many breathless minutes later, she stood in nothing but her garters and stockings--her skin alive with sensation.

Gently, he laid her on her satin coverlet. It was cold and she tried to sit up, but he held her down, urging her to relax, assuring her she would be warm in a matter of minutes. Then using just the tips of his fingers, he began a feather-like massage that both chilled and heated her. She instinctively parted her legs for him, but he delicately avoided touching her at the heart of her desire, the place where she ached most for his caress.

Her need growing uncomfortable, Claire tried grabbing his hands, but he deftly eluded her grasp. "No, just lie there and experience the pleasure I bring you now. There'll be more, later, but for now I only want you to feel and imagine."

When she started to squirm beneath his erotic ministrations, he suggested she turn over. But the things he did to her there only made her want him even more. He touched her everywhere but at that very center of her that throbbed with unfulfilled desire.

She turned over and reached for him. "I need you," she murmured in a deep whisper. "Now, Germaine, please!"

"In a moment," he promised, guiding her hands to the intricately carved wooden headboard. "Grip here," he ordered huskily, "and don't let go, no matter what."

Unsure, but willing, she obeyed him.

"Now open your legs for me, Claire. Perfect," he murmured approvingly while his

fingers lightly traced her inner thighs. "Easy . . . Don't raise your knees. Keep them flat on the mattress and give yourself over to the sensation. Relax and let yourself feel."

He issued his instructions in such a tenderly erotic way that Claire grew moist at the mere sound of his voice. Though she did not try to resist him, to her it was as if she had a terrible itch, which he promised to scratch, but she had to wait just a little longer before . . .

He continued to touch her ever so lightly, with each caress bringing her closer and closer to ecstasy's precipice. Then his fingers moved lower. With his palm resting on her pelvis, his thumb carefully flicked back the hairs that protected the essence of her femininity. Claire tried to arch her back, but his hand kept her pressed to the mattress. Then lowering his head, he blew soft, cool puffs of air against the part of her that was now throbbing in torment.

Crying out in pure frustration, she drew her knees up and dug her fingers into his hair, yet he still resisted her. With a sob, she said, "Please, Germaine, I can't stand any more of this. I need your touch. I need to feel your mouth and hands on me now. Please, I beg you, no more."

He gripped her waist to steady her. "You wanted to know what I did to Sybill. We gave her a drug that heightens physical awareness until every nerve in her body becomes a potential pleasure point. Then, for the time she is sentenced to the dais, ten men stand around her for the sole purpose of bringing her repeatedly to the very brink of a mind shattering orgasm, only to deny her that ultimate release. Most of the penitents cry before it's over, others even scream, but all of them beg. Promises after promises are given by the woman writhing in an agony of pleasure, pleading for that which she cannot have, while the ten of us continue to torment her as if we were deaf.

"Teasing, taunting, tormenting, but never fulfilling. By the time the penitent is permitted to rise, she is often too weak to stand. Her body is on fire in a thousand places she is powerless to cool. Desperate for release, the woman becomes her vampire's ardent slave, as he is the only one permitted to bring her the pleasure her body now craves, yet he is not always allowed to go to her at once. For me, those times are the worst. The woman is left tied to the dais, alone and in exquisite agony with no one permitted to give her even verbal comfort. When the couple is finally reunited, the woman is usually desperate to do whatever her lover asks of her if he agrees to relieve her torment."

Claire could only stare at him. Her mind instantly rejected what he was telling her, but her body forced her to accept the truth. Like those other women, her present need exceeded her scruples. She ached terribly, and at the moment it didn't matter what he'd done if he would only finish what he'd begun. Her fingers, still lodged in his hair, tightened their grip as she fought to deny her need, but she knew it was a battle she had already lost.

Tears of defeat spilled from her eyes. "I didn't believe you could be so cruel."

His hands slid from her waist to her thighs. "That's the point, Claire. I never could be with you." Then lowering his mouth, he coaxed her into climax after climax until she was weak, sated and replete. However, it wasn't until he raised his head that Claire realized he hadn't taken his own pleasure from her.

Oblivious to the fact that her body gleamed with a fine sheen of perspiration, she shivered and promptly drew her comforter about her. Germaine helped her get settled, then sat beside her. When he did that, Claire noticed something else--he was still fully dressed. He had no intention of spending the night with her. Claire wasn't sure if she felt angry or hurt. The set of his mouth and the glow in his eyes reflected his hunger and desire, yet, for some reason, he'd refrained from taking her.

She shivered again.

"Do you want to get under your electric blanket?" he inquired solicitously.

She shook her head. It wasn't cold as much as humiliation that had her wrapped up like a mummy. She'd pleaded, moaned and begged for release, which he did finally give her six times over, yet he'd remained so detached that he'd disdained sharing her incredibly explosive passion.

"So that's what it's like to be on the dais?" she murmured, resentment sharpening her tone.

"The drug intensifies the discomfort, but yes, that's the general idea."

"Keep your women begging, and they won't wander far from home, is that it?"

"Not exactly. It's more a case of wish fulfillment with a twist--the homily being that a person needs to be certain what it is he really wants before he asks for it."

"The 'he' being a 'she', of course. Does it work?"

"For most, yes. For Sybill, apparently not. Then again, despite her screams of protest it could be that she enjoyed physical humiliation."

Claire shuddered inwardly at the possibility. "I think not. No sane woman could enjoy being tormented in that fashion."

His eyes were dark pools that seemed to absorb rather than reflect light. "Are you saying the ultimate reward isn't worth the small delay?"

Her cheeks burned with humiliation, but she pretended indifference. "Not in my opinion."

"Ah, then I must have misread your cries of delight. I mistakenly thought you were enjoying yourself." When she merely stared at him, he added softly, "You wanted to know, Claire, and words alone would not have sufficed."

"It's not that."

"What then?"

“Nothing,” she snapped, unwilling to admit aloud how his lack of involvement made her feel less of a woman. “I just didn't enjoy it, and I'm certain Sybill didn't either. There's a point when the anticipation dulls and the need becomes physically painful. No sexually active woman could feel pleasure at that juncture, and if she does, she'd better seek help because she's a very sick lady.”

“Undoubtedly. It therefore follows that the men responsible for inflicting such torment have to be sadistic monsters. Don't they?”

Claire shrugged, but drew her comforter even closer. “You said it, not me.”

“No, you merely thought it.”

Dragging her knees up to her chest, Claire folded her arms about them. “So tell me, what kind of chastisement does your upstanding group of superhuman paragons have in store for me?”

“The usual punishment for transgressions of your degree is a whipping.”

“Now why doesn't that surprise me?” She glanced down at her whitened knuckles and loosened her hold on the comforter. “I assume that to ensure the penitent comes to truly repent her wicked ways, the punishment is made public to all who care to watch. Tell me, will my hands be tied to a post, my shirt ripped off, and my back flayed raw for my misdemeanors with no thought given to my original intent? Is this precious council of yours so heartless they fail to recognize a desperate act done solely to save another human being?”

“You personally know every man on that council, what do you think, Claire?”

“I think you're a bunch of sanctimonious lechers who get their jollies by making women beg.”

“Now that you've said it, can you honestly say you believe it?”

She felt cold and empty inside. “I don't know any more.”

“Claire, we can't let mortals go around telling others about us, can't you see that? Consider the chaos it would create if we permitted free sexual license to those entrusted to our care? Wars would break out over individuals as if they were mere possessions.”

“We are mere possessions. We're allowed no rights, no legal counsel--nothing. We are totally subject to your ever-so-righteous council's rules and whims. Besides,” she added in a low murmur, “you were the only one who was supposed to know what I did.”

“Then you shouldn't have been discussing it with Phillipa in a place where everyone could overhear you!” he snapped back in frustration.

A spark of angry resentment ignited her desire to watch him squirm for a change. “What about you, Germaine? Will it give you as much pleasure to hurt me as it did to bring me to an intense physical arousal?”

He drew back from her and rose. "This was a mistake. I shouldn't have come here tonight."

"No, you shouldn't have. Tell me, did you really expect me to accept this mockery as just?"

His back and shoulders held in stiff restraint, he gave a slight shrug. "I don't know. I guess I thought we could reach an understanding of sorts, but I was clearly wrong about that, too."

"Yes, you were. But in case you're in any doubt over my answer, I'll tell you now that I will never willingly submit to this kangaroo court of yours. If you want to punish me for what I did, you will have to drag me in there kicking and screaming. And I intend to scream so loud that someone will eventually call the police--then your little secret society will be finished for good."

"You made your point, Claire," he replied with detached finality. "Don't bother seeing me out. I already know the way." Offering her a brisk nod, he strode out of her room, and her life. Claire stared at her bedroom door. She was free, with her self-will intact. She'd wielded her pointed stake of moral justice, and smote the evil dracul with a single, well-aimed thrust. So, why was her heart feeling like it had just been dealt a mortal blow? Why was she the one in pain?

* * *

By three a.m., the selection in Robert's favorite bar had dwindled down to a collection of middle-aged, bleach-blond queens and punk-haired jail bait. Robert was still had no partner for the evening. It had not been a good night. His former lover and supposed life-mate had deserted him after an ugly quarrel filled with jealous accusations and angry recriminations in which he accused Robert of having an affair. It wasn't true, although Robert had been approached a few times in the past week by individuals who'd assumed they shared a common bond. Another misconception.

Rather than argue with David, Robert let him go. He'd had enough difficulties covering up his miraculous recovery and had been forced to fake a cough to keep from arousing David's suspicions. Apparently his ruse hadn't been all that successful, although he suspected it was David who had found another to capture his interest. In truth, Robert had begun to view his former bed mate as a bit of an opportunist. Now that Robert's death was no longer imminent, David had gone searching for greener pastures and a will with a timelier payoff.

Consoling himself with a bottle of Chivas Regal, Robert considered the motley collection of individuals who, for reasons of their own, remained like him, unattached and available, and decided he would be better off going home--alone. His yet-unfinished article on the fantasies male cover models inspired in female romance readers was due to Romance Weekly on Monday, so he chalked up the evening to a loss and pulled out his wallet.

He was counting out the bills to cover his bar tab when a young woman stepped through the mahogany and etched-glass paneled doors. She scanned the bar until she spotted him. Her lips curving seductively, she headed straight toward him. He'd never seen her before, yet the look she gave him had him recalling a Daliesque painting he once saw of a naked Eve holding out a shiny red invitation to an equally naked Adam. This woman's smile was more strained than Eve's had been, but the invitation in it was no less naked.

Sidling up to him, she laid her fingers over his hand--the hand that held his accounting for one wasted night.

"I hope this doesn't mean you're calling the evening quits?" she protested with a small pout.

"I'm afraid it does," he replied, pulling his hand free and offering the money to the bartender who scowled at the buxom young female like a society matron glowering at an uninvited socialite crashing her exclusive dinner party.

"Ah, but the night's still young," she insisted, pressing herself against him with a suggestive intimacy that was universal.

Robert looked down at her and smiled. He didn't dislike women, some of his closest friends were females, he merely preferred not to bed them. And this one was out to get bedded. Her husky voice and passionately intense expression made her look almost desperate, as if her life depended on her successfully seducing him. If the desire for sex was an itch, this woman needed scratching badly.

She was pretty enough to attract any heterosexual male with active hormones, so he couldn't see why she was so set on him. His instincts cautioned him to avoid her, but she piqued his curiosity.

"Perhaps we could have a drink together," he conceded.

"Not here," the bartender countered. "We're closing."

"Your place," she suggested, her expression too anxious to be wholly innocent.

"Very well. But it's late, so only one drink, then I'll take you home."

She laughed and he found he liked the sound. Her lashes lowered, she gazed up at him and grinned. "You're very gallant, but don't trouble yourself on my account. I'm willing to stay."

When they stepped out into the cool night air, he tilted up her chin. "Have you any idea what sort of bar you walked into tonight?"

She glanced back at the glittering sign advertising The Peacock's Tail. "I don't know what you mean. It's just a bar, isn't it?" she asked, her smooth forehead marred by a tiny frown.

"No. That is, not just any bar, nor is it one in which women are especially welcome."

When her frown deepened, he added, "It's a gay bar. One of the better ones in New York, I might add." When she gazed at him with an incredulous expression, he added, "I'm afraid you mistook me for someone, or something, I'm not."

"You're Robert Danielson, aren't you?" she asked, looking a little disconcerted.

"Now I'm really intrigued. Have we met before?"

She swallowed, then gazed at him beneath long, black lashes. "What difference would that make?" she muttered in an intimate whisper as she raised a hand to his cheek. "All that matters is you, me, and the pleasure we can bring each other." She pouted her lips in a silent offering, but drew back when he stiffened in response. "Maybe if you tried sleeping with a woman adept at lovemaking, you'd discover you liked it," she suggested.

"Maybe," he allowed, but it wasn't the image of them joined in ecstasy that kept him beside her. "You weren't looking for just any man tonight. You came looking for me. Why?"

She shrugged, but kept her hand on his cheek. "I happen to be a fan of your sister's, and I thought you might introduce me to her. Besides, I think you're cute."

"Thanks," he answered absently. He didn't believe her, though he couldn't say why, exactly. "So you're willing to accompany a strange man, who's admittedly gay, to his apartment and offer to seduce him--all for the opportunity of meeting Claire Daniels?"

"But you can't be sure you're still gay," she protested. "Not with St. Justine's blood flowing through your veins."

Feeling every cell in his body suddenly go on red alert, Robert reached out and gripped her arms. "Who told you that?"

"No one told me," she insisted, trying to break free of his grasp. "It's common knowledge in the community."

He looked about to see if she might have some friends standing by to intercede for her. All he saw was an old woman protectively huddled over her cart of scavenged treasures, a drunk seeking shelter in a recessed doorway, and a few other late night pedestrians, too wrapped up in their own thoughts and concerns to pay heed to anyone else's.

"Which community?" he demanded, giving her a small shake.

"You're hurting me!" she sniffed, blinking rapidly to force out a few large tears, but Robert wasn't fooled. The young woman definitely had an agenda, and he wanted to know why he was on it.

"You can turn off the faucet, angel. Such feminine wiles are totally wasted on me."

She blinked, then gazed up at him with a hurt expression. "Don't you find me even the teeniest bit attractive?" she asked plaintively, her chest rubbing against his.

"Not in the least," he answered bluntly, too angry to be chivalrous. "Now, who put you

up to following me?”

Her liquid green eyes turning hostile, she spat in his face. “Queer!” she pronounced, slamming her knee directly into his crotch.

Robert grunted out a fitting epithet as he doubled over in agony. But his colorful invectives were cast out in vain since his assailant had already escaped down into the nearest subway entrance.

* * *

Her entire body aflame with an exquisite agony that made even the delicate caress of her silk dress unbearable, Sybill slipped into the back room of Victor's headquarters and confronted her immortal lover with a defiance born out of desperation.

“I did everything you asked of me for over a week. Now I want you to keep your promise. Transform me--tonight!”

“Did you succeed in your mission?” Victor asked without glancing up from the legal-looking document he was reviewing.

“No, but perhaps you could succeed where I failed. Robert Danielson is gay.”

Victor looked at her then, but his expression revealed nothing of what he was thinking.

“Interesting. Did you at least find out where he lived?”

“No,” she answered more quietly, “but he shouldn't be difficult to track. Please, Victor,” she murmured, seductively running her hands along the length of his muscled arms.

“Take me now. Make me yours as you promised. St. Justine's drug is still inside me and I hurt.”

Victor merely stared at her, his pale blue eyes colder than the Arctic ocean. “That's too bad, but I don't see how I can reward you when you fail me.”

“I did what you asked. I can't be held accountable for a man's sexual preferences.”

“Perhaps you didn't try hard enough.”

“That's not true!” she protested, the admission cutting deeply into her pride, which was superseded only by her need.

“Then perhaps, like me, he discovered your sweetness carries the bitter aftertaste of corruption. It's a taste female mortals often acquire once greed taints their innocence.”

Sybill stared at him in uncomprehending disbelief. He had promised her--

“Promised?” he challenged aloud. “What are promises to a scheming conniver like yourself who would sell her soul for vanity? Did you think me so blinded by your beauty that I could not see you for what you really are?”

She blinked, then having no other resource to fall back on, she tried again to seduce him with her body. Wrapping her arms about his knees, she slid suggestively against his legs.

“You are all I want, Victor. Just you. To be at your side for eternity is more than any woman could ask.”

Victor's crystal blue eyes glowed, but his gaze held no warmth. Just need. For Sybill that was enough. “Take me. Drink from me. Make me your own, and I'll be your slave for eternity.”

He toyed with a strand of her golden hair. “Yes, I think you'd make a very charming slave.”

“Only for you,” she vowed, running her nails along his inner thighs.

He captured her wrists and smiled at her. The sight of his fangs fully extended made Sybill confident of her success. “You will serve me in whatever manner I require,” he corrected gently.

“Yes, yes. Whatever you say. I burn for you, Victor. Please, I beg you, release me from this mortal torment. The pain is unbearable.”

“Is it true torture, my precious?”

“Yes,” she sobbed, willing to do anything he asked for the promise of blessed release.

“Unfortunately, I'm still not convinced you have suffered enough for your failure. Perhaps a week of serving Max and Heinrich will suffice to humble you properly.”

Her eyes widening in horror, Sybill instinctively drew back to gaze at her master and lover in disbelief. Max and Heinrich were ghouls in the true sense of the word. She could barely stand to look at them much less consider having one of them touch her. To be offered as a slave to them would be a punishment beyond cruel--it would be monstrous. She shook her head in quick denial.

“If I demand it, you will give yourself to them and be grateful that I do not banish you entirely,” he informed her flatly.

Sybill's tears were real this time. “Please, Victor. I beg you. Don't do this to me. I have been faithful to your every command. I did try to seduce Danielson, truly. I did everything I could think of, but he refused me. All I ask now is that you ease my pain. My body is on fire, and I need you to bring me the release that no one else can.”

“No one else?” he queried, looking about him. “Nigel, we have a lady here who claims she's in desperate need of relief. Would you be willing to offer her the ease she seeks?”

“Are you mad?” Sybill whispered, glancing in terror at the actor Victor beckoned with a gesture. “I was the one who told you he's one of Germaine's closest allies. He'd kill me for that.”

“You think so, my dear? I'm not so sure. Well, which is it, Nigel? Loyalty to your long term ally and friend, or loyalty to your leader? The lady wishes to become immortal. Will you take her, or shall I throw her out for the ghouls to feed upon?”

Sybill wanted to scream, but she was in too much pain to permit the luxury of pride. She would take what they gave her, and deal with the consequences later.

Nigel Watkins approached slowly until Sybill had to crane her neck to meet his gaze. His eyes were coldly assessing, and his grip on her chin made her wince. "She is not ugly. I do not think it would be a great hardship to drink from her, as long as she understands it is I who will be her master until her fledgling year is up."

"I'm sure she'll be your devoted slave. Won't you Sybill?"

Sybill met Nigel's steely gaze and shuddered. There was no mercy in the man. Not for her. Not after what she had done to him. She clutched Victor's hand. "You promised me you would be the one to transform me--that you would teach me how to use the powers."

"Odd, but I don't recall ever making such a promise. I said you would be taught, and you will, by Nigel." Victor's smile widened. "I have every confidence this union will prove most advantageous despite the poor start you two had. Now you'll be joined for life. Nigel will be your tutor, lover, husband and father. And you, my precious, will gain eternal life through him. What more could any girl want?"

When Nigel extended his hand, Sybill reluctantly laid her fingers over his. Every nerve in her body was screaming for release, and Nigel was her sole means of ending the torment. If he would stop the pain and grant her immortality, she would accept whatever indignation he forced upon her for the night. Once she was transformed, however, she would decide her own fate.

"Oh, one last thing, Nigel," Victor purred softly. "In return for this lovely gift, I will expect you to stay out of my business tomorrow. Furthermore, I think you should know that I would view any interference from you as an act of treason against me."

Nigel merely nodded his understanding and escorted Sybill to his quarters. It wasn't in his nature to hurt women, but he made this one suffer dearly before he let her die. The transformation complete, she lay naked and trembling beneath him with her fingers still clutching his shoulders as she sobbed with relief. Her ordeal was finally over and his had just begun.

They were joined now. For better or worse, she was his now--blood of his blood. The anger he'd felt toward her for the position she'd placed him in was no longer relevant.

Gathering her gently into his arms, he took her into the wash room and bathed away the remnants of her mortal death. Then carefully laying her on a bed of silk draped cushions, he made love to her until the horizon was streaked with a blood-red light. Exhausted, they fell into a dreamless sleep, joined for eternity in a union forged by deceit, pain and blood.

* * *

Later, long after the sun had set again, Claire was sitting in her dressing room removing

her makeup when Harry burst in on her with Robert trailing only slightly behind him.

In an uncharacteristic show of emotion, Harry swept Claire into his arms. "Thank God, you're all right," he gasped in relief. "I was sure he had taken you."

"Who had taken me?" she asked, her eyes instinctively seeking out her brother. He mouthed "Germaine," then shrugged as if to say he didn't know much more than that.

"I'm fine, Harry," Claire reassured, patting him on the back as she tried to slip free of his hold. "No one took me anyplace. I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be at this hour."

Harry gripped her arms while his eyes frantically searched her for any signs of injury. "I heard that they'd gotten hold of you--that St. Justine had ordered you stripped and bound before he initiated you into his secret society through some horrid blood ceremony."

Alarmed more by the intensity of Harry's emotions than his words, Claire clasped his upper arms. "Whoever told you that has a sick imagination, Harry. I'm fine."

"No one told me anything," he confessed, his expression even more tortured. "I saw it all with my own eyes."

Pulling away from her, he covered his face for a moment. Startled by the display, Claire suddenly noticed several other odd changes in her former boyfriend. Normally an impeccable dresser, Harry's wrinkled clothes looked as if he'd showered and slept in them. When he slowly raised his head, she saw how drawn and pale his face looked, and his windblown hair gave the impression it hadn't had a brush or a comb run through it for a week. This wasn't the Harry Collins Claire knew, and she was wondering what other changes may have occurred when he caught her concerned look and returned it with a grim smile.

"No, Claire, I'm not crazy. Not yet. But these dreams are more horrible than any Wes Craven horror film. In them, you are naked, terrified, and bound to a cold, rock wall with chains. St. Justine is robed, but I recognize him from the unnatural glow in his gold eyes. He stretches out his arms so that his cloak hides you from all but his own stare, then he bends over you. You scream a horrible, agonizing scream, and the next thing I see is rivulets of blood pouring down your legs onto the floor. The others approach on their hands and knees to lick the blood off your legs and thighs, then each one rises, and, in turn, sinks their teeth into you."

"Harry, I--"

"You continue to scream as if they are torturing you, but I can't get to you. There are too many, and they are too strong. I watch you die, a terrible, excruciating death right before my eyes, and I can do nothing to save you." Closing his eyes, he ran trembling fingers through his hair.

On a rational level, Claire dismissed the dream as nonsense, but she still shuddered inwardly. "It's just a bad dream, Harry," she insisted quietly. "That's all."

"No, Claire," he countered in a whisper. "It's a prophecy. Germaine St. Justine will kill you before the month is out, and I mean to save you from him, despite yourself. If you won't come willingly, I will take you by force."

"Now wait a minute, Harry!" Robert protested.

"No. I need to be sure she's safe, and the only way I can be certain of that is if she's with me. No one will harm her as long as I have her. I have their word."

"Whose word?" Claire asked, her suspicions instantly aroused, but her question was left unanswered when John Percy knocked then entered.

"Any problems, Ms. Daniels?"

"No, but I'm glad you're here. Robert, I'd like you to see Harry home. I don't believe he should be left alone just now. John, do you think you could escort Mr. Collins to the green room and fix him a cup of coffee? I'd like a private word with my brother before he leaves."

John Percy held the door open for Harry, but Harry refused to budge. "I have to stay with you, Claire. Didn't you hear anything I said?"

"I heard you, Harry, but I still think you're wrong," Claire replied with renewed conviction. "I'm in no danger, nor have I ever been. Someone is out to poison your mind, and she's lying."

"I saw this myself. Sybill had absolutely nothing to do with it."

"I disagree. I think she had everything to do with it. I'm sorry, but if you don't go with John, I'm going to call the guard and have you escorted out."

"But if I leave without you, I can't protect you."

"No one can be protected from phantoms of the mind, Harry. Now go with John."

Harry drew back his shoulders and gave his jacket a sharp tug to straighten it, then leaned forward to kiss Claire on the lips. "You're making a mistake in sending me away, but I'll find a way to protect you despite your obstinacy. No matter what, I will be there for you, Claire."

The moment the door shut behind them, Claire relaxed and let out a small sigh of relief. She had no doubt if John hadn't intervened, that Harry would have been sorely tempted to kidnap her despite Robert's protest. But even Harry must have realized he couldn't overcome both Robert and John Percy. Drawing herself together, Claire looked more closely at her brother. He appeared fit and healthy, though a trifle put out by Harry's antics. "Have you had any ill effects from the treatment? Are you still well?"

"I'm fine. How's Germaine?"

"He appears fully recovered--at least as far as I can tell."

"Claire, I know you think Harry's merely spouting nonsense, but I'm not so sure."

“You? The original skeptic, unsure?”

“The truth is this transfusion seems to have changed me in some way. Physically, I'm the same, but . . . I guess the best way to describe it is to say I've become more sensitive to the immortal world. Things I never would have noticed before--a slight glow in the eyes, a pale complexion, an aversion to bright lights and loud noises--seem much more prevalent. I tell you, Claire, there's a lot more of these individuals out there than you realize, and not all of them are as benevolent as Germaine, nor do they think very highly of your immortal friend's stance on transformations.”

“What makes you say that? Has one of them approached you?”

“Several have approached me, thinking I was one of them. Though they realize very quickly that I am not, they remain intrigued. The fact that I'm gay doesn't seem to matter, and a few have hinted that the pleasures they could offer me would exceed anything I might experience on a mortal level. They speak of a plateau where pleasure and pain are equal until they become inseparable.”

“I hope you aren't considering--”

“I'm not, but the point is, once they discovered it was Germaine's blood that attracted them, their attitudes changed. Some to uncertainty, but most to an almost angry resentment. Then, last night, a young woman approached me. She wasn't one of them, but she said she knew what had transpired between Germaine and me, and she also knew about you. So it logically follows she would know about you and Germaine as well. She claimed she wanted to meet you, but she was after more than that. She wanted me.” When Claire didn't respond, he asked, “Who's Sybill?”

Claire stiffened, then shook her head. “It couldn't be her.”

“Maybe it is, maybe it isn't. Who is she?”

“Someone who has a personal vendetta against Germaine.”

“A curvaceous blond, about five foot six with green eyes?”

“What did she want with you?”

“I don't know, but I'd really like to find out. Meanwhile, I suggest we take Harry's visions a bit more seriously.”

“It was just a dream, Robert, and Sybill's no threat. She's nothing more than an angry, embittered woman with a grudge, and Harry's been taken in by her tale of woe.”

“I'm not so sure, Claire. The woman who approached me last night had the look of someone on the edge. I know, I was there once myself--remember? She may be mortal, but I'll bet she knows a few who aren't, and, unfortunately, to some of the long-toothed bunch we mortals are little more than moveable feasts.”

When Claire grimaced at his phrasing, he chuckled her under the chin. “For once, older

sister, I want you to take my advice and let Germaine know what's been happening. I don't have a good feeling about this, and I want to be sure you're not in any danger."

Promising Robert she'd take care, Claire tried to tell herself it was all foolish. She had nothing against Sybill, so she couldn't believe the woman would really hurt her. And she had absolutely no intention of running to Germaine for help. Help like his she was better off without. Determined to live her life as she always had, Claire finished dressing then stepped out of the theater to greet the fans that lingered for her at the stage door. Signing the last autograph, she tactfully refused the politely couched offers to buy her a drink and turned away from the swarm of theater-goers, who converged on the city streets like a plague of taxi-preying locusts closing in on their next meal. Far from the beckoning crowd, she hailed her own nightly cab.

She'd just gotten out the syllable, "Tax...." when someone, a man, placed a gloved hand over her mouth and a knife to her throat. The knife was warmer than the hand.

"You won't need a hired chaise tonight, Ms. Daniels. You're coming with us."

When Claire started to protest, she felt the knife dig more deeply into her neck.

"Now, Ms. Daniels, I suggest you don't cause us any trouble if you wish to live to see the dawn. One nick and I may not be able to keep my partner off you."

A hideous face appeared in the line of Claire's vision. Although blood already colored the lipless mouth and fully extended fangs like ineptly applied lipstick, from the glow in the creature's eyes, Claire knew this deviant being would think nothing of draining her, then seeking out another. She briefly closed her eyes and shuddered.

"Easy, Ms. Daniels. Max often affects the ladies that way, don't you, Max?"

Max nodded slowly, his feral smile widening.

"Now, will you be reasonable, Ms. Daniels, or will you force me to order Max to take some fight out of you? I assure you it would be a most exceptional treat for him indeed, since those he usually feasts upon are, most unfortunately, already dead."

"What do you want?" Claire asked weakly, her stomach churning and her knees unsteady.

"Your freely given cooperation. No more, no less. Now, close your eyes." When Claire obeyed the pressure of the knife lessened and she felt a soft cloth pressing against her eyes. "Just a temporary precaution, no more," her assailant assured. "We intend to take you someplace for questioning. If you continue to cooperate and answer truthfully, we will let you go." He secured the cloth with a knot. "There. Now do you think you can do this without causing any undo attention to yourself and us?"

When Claire nodded, he praised her with a light squeeze to her arm. Then, under the pretext of guiding her along a darkened alleyway, his arm encircled her waist, and his hand, which started at her hip, slowly rose in search of a more secure hold. He found it

exactly where Claire thought he would, but when she tried to push him off, his grip tightened painfully.

“Now, now, Ms. Daniels. You gave us your word you'd be cooperative. I don't wish to be harsh with you, but if you continue to resist me, I will have to find other less pleasant ways to ensure your cooperation.”

Swallowing back her response, Claire bit her lower lip and forced herself to relax despite the fact he was hurting her. He immediately eased his grip.

“Better,” he acknowledged. “You learn quickly. I'll bet St. Justine admires you as much for your intelligence as he does your beauty.” Claire was thinking St. Justine would be less than admiring of her intelligence right now when they turned the corner.

“Ah, your chariot awaits, my lady.” A door was opened and the guiding hand moved to her head where it pressed lightly. “Careful, I wouldn't want you to hurt yourself.”

Realizing resistance would be futile, Claire was bending down to get into the car when she heard a sibilant voice whisper, “Heinrich, hold it. Someone followed us. We're being watched.”

Claire was immediately drawn back against Heinrich's chest and the knife was again at her throat. “Stay back, or she dies,” Heinrich called out.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen,” a familiar voice demurred. “It is only I, Nigel.”

“Nigel, what are you doing here? I thought Victor ordered you to stay away?”

“Yes, yes, he did. Unfortunately, my hunger got the best of me. I've worked next to that tasty little morsel for nearly three months now. I coached her, tutored her, and molded her. It doesn't seem fair, after all I've done to restrain myself, that Victor should be the one to reap the final reward, does it? Am I not entitled to be the first to sample her loveliness?”

The pressure of the knife at Claire's throat lessened, but Heinrich's hold didn't. “Victor's to be the only one to have her. He said he'd kill us if we even attempted to taste her.”

“Yes, but how will he ever know? I possess a trick that makes the bite marks disappear. I learned it from Germaine. I'll share it with you, if you let me have her first.”

“I don't know,” Heinrich answered, but he sounded nearly convinced.

“I want her,” Max chimed in. “If Nigel can fix it so Victor can't tell, what's the harm?”

“Exactly. What's the harm, Heinrich?” Nigel echoed. “One thing though, I insist upon a moment's privacy for my pleasures. I prefer a lady relaxed and aroused when I take her, and considering the state you two have put this one in, that will take some wooing. Won't it, Claire?”

Claire didn't know what to think. She was no longer certain she could trust Nigel. She wanted to, but he was too good an actor for her not to believe him now. She swallowed

down her fear. "I will never respond to you, Nigel."

"Yes, you will, my sweet. You will cry out for me the same way you cry out for Germaine when your passionate body releases its hot, pulsing blood to me."

Claire shuddered and was about to deny it when she was suddenly thrust forward into a new pair of arms. "Take her," Heinrich ordered. "But be quick about it. We're as eager as you are."

Claire started to struggle, but she couldn't break Nigel's hold. The ease with which he could subdue her became obvious when he effortlessly lifted her into his arms. Claire opened her mouth to scream, which he effectively silenced with a kiss. Yet for all its strength and purpose, the kiss remained curiously chaste.

Quiet, he urged her gently, speaking directly into her mind. When she reacted to the intimacy of his thoughts entering hers, he pressed his lips down more firmly. Stop fighting me, he warned her mentally. If this is to work at all, you're going to have to play along, or these goons will never let me out of their sight.

Claire wasn't one of Broadway's shining new talents for nothing. Giving out a soft moan of pleasure, she lifted her hands to Nigel's neck and met his kiss as if she were so overcome by passion she was responding to him.

Nigel's hold tightened briefly, then he lifted his lips from hers. "Patience, my fair one, patience--we will join shortly. Gentlemen, if you'll but give me a few moments to conclude my business, we'll return anon."

Turning with her in his arms, Nigel walked slowly, but deliberately away. Heinrich called after him with an order to "hurry" but didn't follow. The moment Nigel turned the corner, he started to run, only to Claire the sensation was more like flying. She felt weightless. His movements were smoother and faster than any mortal could ever hope to achieve. Convinced they were safe, Claire started to remove her blindfold, but Nigel stopped her.

"Wait until I put you down. Then while I remove your restraint, you can do some fast explaining why I shouldn't turn you over my knee next."

"What is it about immortals that make you all so paternalistic?" Claire snapped back.

His hold tightened. "Right now, my feelings for you are anything but paternalistic, my dear."

That admission, coupled with the attack she'd just narrowly escaped, caused the last of Claire's bravado to crumble. Clinging to Nigel's coat like a frightened child, she started to cry. He murmured something, which Claire took to be a form of reassurance though she couldn't understand it. When they stopped, he held her close for a moment, then eased her to her feet. Removing her blindfold, he drew her into his arms. Then slowly lowering his mouth to hers, he kissed her. This time, however, the kiss was full of the passion he refrained from expressing before Heinrich and Max. It was a kiss that Claire

could easily lose herself in, but the instant his tongue touched hers, she broke away from him. Despite their quarrels and differences, she was still Germaine's.

Nigel's smile was gentle and thoroughly masculine as he gently removed the traces of tears from her cheeks. "I've wanted to do that for a long, long time, only I feared once I began, I'd never stop. At least I stopped your tears." When Claire didn't respond, he raised his arm and hailed a cab.

Nigel helped Claire into the taxi, then got in himself. Keeping a respectable distance between them, he closed his door and gave the driver the address to Illusions. He remained silently rigid beside her with his eyes fixed upon his black leather gloves. "Germaine would most likely kill me for admitting this to you," he said, speaking soft and low, "but I have wanted you from the first time I set eyes on you. Unfortunately, all you saw was an elderly gentleman who was being kind. And by the time you discovered the truth about me, I had already lost you to another.

"If I felt I had any chance at all to win you, I'd be tempted to fight Germaine myself, but I am man enough to concede defeat when I recognize it. However, that does leave me in a bit of a quandary, as I have clearly burned my bridges behind me." He looked at her then, and beneath the graying hair and lightly wrinkled face, Claire caught a glimpse of the young man he really was. A young man, several centuries old, forced by mortal prejudice to assume the persona of an elderly gentleman. A friend who risked total alienation from his fellows to save her.

"I'm certain Germaine will welcome you with open arms, Nigel."

He raised his eyebrows in blatant disagreement. "Germaine is no fool, Claire. He may accept me into his order, but he will hardly be welcoming."

"You saved my neck, Nigel. If Germaine gets angry, it will be at me, not you."

"If Germaine gets angry," he corrected, "it will be over the possibility of nearly losing you, just as I did."

Claire smiled slightly. "As to that, I'm afraid you'll have to stand in line. I have the entire council vying for a chance to put me over their collective knee."

"Why?" Nigel asked, clearly surprised. However, when Claire admitted she had threatened to seek out Victor by herself, his amazement turned deadly serious.

"I thought you and I had an agreement about that?"

"As I said, you'll have to stand in line." When he turned away from her, Claire braved the question she'd pondered since this whole business began. "Can you tell me why Victor hates Germaine so much?"

Nigel turned to her just as the taxi pulled up before Illusions. "Let's just say that their dislike for each other is the result of a longstanding dispute that ended in the unfortunate demise of a young woman caught between them. A death that was both needless and

tragic since the woman's only mistake was to fall in love with a vampire.”

“What happened? Who was she?” Claire demanded as Nigel helped her from the cab.

“No one you know. She lived nearly two hundred years ago.”

“There's one last question I need to ask before we go in there, Nigel. Since we were never intimate, how could you read my mind?”

“I couldn't. I sensed your fear and merely projected my thoughts to you. Projecting is something all vampires can do, but a true joining of the minds can only be made once a vampire has initiated the mortal. Only death or transformation can end it.”

Claire wanted to know more, but Germaine's men had surrounded the door. They stood as silent sentries with their arms crossed before them, barring not only Nigel, but also Claire from entering. With Marcus taking his station front and center of them all.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Her smile triumphant, Sybill sauntered into Victor's chamber unchallenged, the sight of Max and Heinrich knelt in terror before their displeased master not fazing her in the least. She'd been right about Nigel, and now she'd get the chance to exact her own revenge.

Ignoring her, Victor continued to glower at his cringing underlings with contempt. "You failed me," he informed them quietly. "Failure and treason are two things I cannot abide, and you are guilty of both."

"But--"

"Silence!" Victor bellowed, cutting off Heinrich's protest. "You had your orders. There were two of you against Nigel Watkins, and if you think to convince me that he managed to outwit you both without your cooperation, your thinking is fatally flawed." When neither man offered a defense, Victor turned away from them with an expression of disgust.

"The sight of you sickens me," he growled, crossing the room to a door, which he opened with a gesture for four men to enter. "Take them. Rip their fangs out and bury them. Maybe in a hundred years or so, we'll recall where they are and dig them back up. Then again, maybe not."

"Wait!" Sybill commanded, confident they would obey her. "I may have use for them, and you did promise me my turn, Victor."

Victor cast a glance at her through slitted eyes. "And I grow weary of you reminding me of my promises."

Undeterred by his surliness, Sybill continued. "I want Germaine St. Justine brought to his knees, and you want the Daniels woman he has taken to his bed. I know of a way that will bring us both what we want. These two are expendable to you, but I need them. Give them to me, and I will give you Claire Daniels--willing and eager."

"How?" he challenged, his blue eyes reflecting a deepening interest.

"I know her type. It shouldn't be too difficult. Grant my request and within a week I'll have Claire Daniels begging for you to take her."

Sybill fully expected praise along with Victor's blessing, so she was annoyed and a little offended by his thunderous scowl. "I don't want her injured in any way," he warned. "She is to come to me physically unharmed, with no mark on her but Germaine's."

Sybill shrugged. Victor's mandate didn't hinder her plans since what she ultimately had in mind for Claire Daniels wouldn't mark her, nor was she out for Ms. Daniels' blood. It was the blood of another she sought. "I wouldn't have it any other way," she assured smoothly, confident her first coup was but hours away. She savored the anticipatory rush of pleasure, knowing she would make those who scorned her suffer in ways they had

never dreamed possible. Victory was so close she could taste it, and the flavor of revenge was very sweet indeed.

* * *

Blinking away the tiny balls of ice pelting her face, Claire climbed the steps leading to Illusion's entrance. Standing before Marcus, she challenged, "Were you ordered to deny me entry?"

"Not at all," he replied amenably.

"Then let me pass."

"I fear that's out of the question, unless you surrender yourself to me first. Given the charges brought against you, Claire Daniels, you may enter here only as a prisoner of the council."

"A prisoner? What do you intend to do, chain me up?"

"We only employ restraints when a penitent proves unruly," he advised, his expression a humorless mask of living stone.

Undaunted and uncowed by his threats, Claire poked a finger at the Roman's chest.

"Marcus, Nigel and I are in serious trouble. We don't have time to play games of dominance and submission."

"They aren't games, Claire," Phillip interceded with an equally grim expression. "They are rules we must live by if we are to remain at peace with each other."

"They are barbaric rituals that foster pain, not peace, since two of Victor's men just tried to abduct me."

Marcus's scowl turned deadly as he started toward Nigel when Arthur spoke up. "How do we know you didn't send for them? You threatened to go to Victor yourself less than a week ago."

"Because," Nigel interceded, moving to stand beside Claire, "if she had, then the two of us would be relaxing in a cozy room with Victor instead of standing here in the freezing rain trying to get you brain-dead morons to see sense."

"Nigel's life is in danger," Claire appealed to Marcus. "He needs your help. Surely the safety of a fellow immortal takes precedence over my few misdemeanors?"

Marcus's eyes narrowed sharply. "You have no notion just how much damage your 'misdemeanors', as you call them, have done, do you?"

"I wasn't out to destroy the council, Marcus," Claire protested. "I only made the threat because I feared for my brother's life. Can't you understand that?"

"Unfortunately, what I, or even Germaine, may personally understand no longer matters." When she gazed at him with uncertainty, he added, "By your own words, you have been charged with revealing the true state of an immortal to one who was

uninitiated, and approaching a member of an opposing order for the sole purpose of offering your mortality in exchange for a transformation. As an addendum to your actions, Germaine has been charged with recklessly endangering himself and the group by willfully falsifying his report when he authorized the procedure on your brother. That makes the issue of your punishment now a council matter.” He glanced briefly at Nigel. “If the two of you wish our protection, I’m afraid you’ll have to surrender yourselves into my custody. I’m sorry, but those are our conditions.”

“Come on, Claire,” Nigel urged, pulling on her arm, but Claire refused to move. Nigel had saved her life and she refused to let him suffer for her mistakes. She had considered Marcus a friend once, perhaps he would be again. “Let me see Germaine, alone, for just five minutes, and I’ll agree to become your prisoner,” she promised quietly.

Marcus evaluated her silently for a moment before he nodded and stepped back. However, when Claire started to step past him, he gripped her arm. “Auguste, Phillip, would you please escort Ms. Daniels to Germaine’s office.”

“An escort?” Claire asked with disbelief.

“It is required until the council has granted you an official pardon.” When Claire made no protest, he asked more gently, “Did Victor’s men hurt you?”

The evident concern in his voice eased the sting of his pronouncement. “Not badly,” she answered truthfully. “A few bruises at most. I think they were out to scare me more than hurt me, and they succeeded.”

He acknowledged her admission with a gentle squeeze, then added, “If Germaine does not already know of your injuries, I ask that you refrain from mentioning them. You’ll understand why when you see him.”

Claire agreed, although Marcus’s cryptic caution did little to settle her already jumpy stomach. When Phillip reached for her other arm, she stiffened, but didn’t protest. Having agreed to abide by their rules, she allowed Phillip and Auguste to lead her a fair distance from the others before she said, “If I give my word that I will not try to flee, do you two gentlemen think I could see Germaine without an armed escort?”

Auguste and Phillip exchanged a glance, then released her.

“He’s in there,” Phillip told her, pointing to a doorway to the right of the bar. “Just make sure he knows it’s you and you should be fine.”

Claire found the admonition a bit strange, since she had no intention of pretending to be anyone else, but she murmured her agreement.

Standing before the door, she knocked softly. Receiving no response, she let herself in. The small room was darkly lit, but she could make out Germaine’s silhouette hunched over his desk. The soft scratching of his pen the only sound in the tiny chamber.

Intent upon his writing, Germaine appeared unaware of her presence. Considering she

stood less than eight feet away, Claire was surprised but not concerned. She often got so absorbed in studying for a role that she ignored her surroundings, and Germaine's office seemed suited to intense concentration. With only a hanging tapestry for decoration, two chairs, a sofa, an armoire and his desk to serve as furniture, it was a remarkably sparse, almost Spartan room. Even the furniture was stark. The wood of the desk and chairs was dark, smooth and highly polished, but lacked decoration. The slate-gray cushions on the chairs and sofa matched the stone-block look of the walls and ceiling and the carpet's geometric pattern of varying blues and grays. Bereft of windows, the chamber's only light came from the lamp on Germaine's desk.

The longer Claire looked around, the more she felt like she'd just stepped inside a crypt. Closing the door softly so as not to disturb him, Claire stepped over to see what he was chronicling so diligently. His pen scratches were fast and deliberate as if he needed to put all his thoughts down before he forgot them. As Claire moved closer, several more anomalies caught her attention. The first was her overall impression of Germaine. He was thin, almost as thin as the day he had transfused Robert. With a plaid blanket draped over his shoulders like a shawl, he looked terribly frail and cold. Not from the temperature, but from a cold that came from deep within his own bones. His overall appearance was that of an aging, frail man. Even what little she could see of his arms looked more like brittle sticks loosely covered with grayish flesh than the statuesque physique she remembered. But what struck her the hardest were his fingers. Gripping the pen with whitened knuckles, they curved inward like talons, with nails hard and yellowed like claws.

An involuntary gasp escaped Claire's throat. Startled, Germaine let out an inhuman hiss and sprang at her. Held in an unbreakable clasp, Claire stared into eyes that glowed with lethal intent. She didn't move. She couldn't. Trapped by those eyes, she could only stare in horror.

Then just as quickly as she was caught, she was released.

"Get out!" he rasped in a voice so ancient and gravelly that Claire barely recognized it. And before she had even caught her breath, Germaine thrust her right into Marcus's arms.

"Keep her away from me," he growled, slamming the door in their faces.

Claire shuddered. "What happened to him?" she asked weakly. "He's little more than a skeleton with skin."

"So he is," Marcus replied, releasing her. "Whenever a vampire goes without feeding for an extended period, he begins to--revert."

Claire shook her head, unable to accept what she'd just seen as--natural. "I saw him yesterday, Marcus, and he was fine. A little thinner perhaps, but not a breathing cadaver."

“His system has been through a lot in the past week, so the aging has been more rapid than usual, which means he would recover just as quickly if he fed.”

“Then why doesn't he? Why has he stopped--drinking?”

“I was hoping you might have the answer to that. He won't say.”

Claire stared in disbelief at the shut door. They had quarreled and separated in anger, but she hardly thought he would starve himself simply because she disapproved of his methods of punishment. Something else had happened, something, which was destroying him inside.

She tried reaching out to him with her mind, but all that greeted her was a tomblike darkness. He had closed himself off to her. Then she felt a slight stirring--a sensation more than a thought. Hunger and pain. Not the rumblings of an empty stomach, but a killing hunger. A hunger so powerful it would destroy if it could. Then as quickly as the impression came, it was gone--leaving a black, cavernous void in its wake.

Claire closed her eyes against the guilt squirming inside her stomach. “You think it has something to do with me?”

The look Marcus gave her was answer enough. He reached for her arm. “Come, I'll take you before the council now. We'll hear what you and Nigel have to say, then pronounce judgment.”

Claire shook her head. “None of that matters now. I have to help Germaine.”

“You cannot help an individual who doesn't wish to be helped, Claire.”

“I have to at least try.”

“I can't risk it. I'm sorry.” But when he started to pull her away from the door, Claire let out a scream. It was a scream of terror and pain that was meant to chill the blood of any who heard it. A scream perfected after many nights of rehearsal. A scream that for all its theatricality was an extremely effective and hair-raising cry--and it worked.

Germaine charged out of his office with a roar of rage, but stopped short of launching himself at Marcus. “Let her go, Aularius,” he warned, his body tensed to spring, “else I shall separate your head from your shoulders with my bare hands.”

When Marcus released her, Claire ran to Germaine and wrapped her arms about his waist. All she could feel were bones, but she tried not to think about that. Whatever he was, he was still the man she loved, and she was confident he wouldn't hurt her. So confident, she staked her life on it.

His arms surrounded her briefly before he pushed her away. “Do you value your life so cheaply?” he asked in a gravelly purr that set a series of tiny shivers coursing through Claire.

“No more or less than you,” she assured him, gazing directly into the burning hell of his

eyes. The killing hunger and desire were still there, but an even stronger emotion held them in check. Recognizing it as the same emotion that kept her at his side despite her own fear and revulsion, Claire pleaded, "Don't send me away again, please. I insisted upon seeing you tonight because I was taken hostage, and Marcus insisted on holding me--"

When Germaine's eyes flashed in hot fury at Marcus, Claire quickly interjected, "No. I didn't scream because he hurt me. He just wasn't going to let me see you."

"Tell me," he ordered brusquely.

Claire moved closer, lifting her chin until it rested on his chest. "Not unless you drink first," she whispered.

His eyebrow winged upwards and his hand rose to cup her chin. Not hard, but firm enough to make Claire aware that his strength had not diminished as much as she'd originally thought.

"Who did hurt you, and where?" he demanded quietly, his fingers tightening slightly.

"Nigel saved me," she answered, avoiding his question.

Releasing her, Germaine gazed at Marcus. "Fetch him," he ordered, waiting until they were alone before he asked, "Must I strip you myself to get to the truth?"

Claire shook her head, but kept her eyes lowered. "It's not all that serious. I think they were merely trying to frighten me into submission."

"Look at me." When she obeyed the quietly-spoken command, Claire felt him pull the answer he sought from her mind.

"I can't believe I was so far gone that I didn't sense your pain when it happened," he murmured apologetically as his hand rose to touch her sore breast. Its journey was postponed, however, when Marcus returned with Nigel.

Turning, Claire caught the fleeting look of surprise on Nigel's face when he first glimpsed Germaine. His expression confirmed her own suspicion that Germaine's choice to starve himself was not a common course of action.

"What did Heinrich and Max want with Claire?" Germaine inquired with curt civility.

"They were under orders to deliver her to Victor, unharmed," Nigel answered with equal reserve. "He claimed he merely sought an opportunity to speak with her alone, although I think he fully meant to seduce her into accepting him as a final repayment for Giselle."

"Damn the man for his blindness!" Germaine cursed in a near shout. "I am not to blame for Giselle's death." Despite the vehemence with which he said it, his denial sounded strangely hollow as if he wasn't thoroughly convinced of his own innocence. Releasing Claire, Germaine drew the blanket about his shoulders with a shudder. "She would have been miserable had she lived," he added, his voice little more than a rasping whisper.

“Victor feels differently,” Nigel countered. “Most come to accept the changes in time. Some even welcome them.”

“And those who don't--go mad,” Germaine answered. “Giselle was terrified of what she might become. She begged me for the truth, and I gave it to her. That's all. I didn't harm her, Victor did with his deception. He wooed her with his powers and lured her into accepting him. She loved him, yes, but even she sensed he was hiding something dark and terrible from her. I merely forewarned her of his intent while she still possessed enough of her own mind to understand what was happening. I never expected her to take her own life.”

Claire swallowed uneasily. She could see how Victor might have felt cheated by Germaine's actions, but she didn't understand what Nigel's former leader hoped to gain in abducting her.

“He wants your life, Claire,” Germaine supplied bitterly. “Like many others, Victor knows you have come to mean a great deal to me. Perhaps too much for your own good.” He looked again at Nigel. “Surely he didn't think I would permit such an action to go unavenged?”

“I think he counted on that,” Nigel replied calmly.

Claire gaped at her one-time mentor in disbelief. “How long have you known about this? Why didn't you try to warn me?”

“I tried to do exactly that,” Nigel reminded her with a look of silent reproof. “Victor's been planning to abduct, seduce and transform you from the night Germaine took you as his own.”

“It's not Victor's plans I have a quarrel with,” Marcus interrupted, “it is his deeds.” Marcus exchanged a look with Germaine, and for a moment Claire almost pitied Victor Cummings. Yet the quiet fury Marcus displayed when speaking of Victor turned darkly purposeful the instant he caught her gaze. Chilled by a deep foreboding, Claire ceased worrying about Germaine's rival the moment the gladiator's smoky gray eyes canted down to hers. “We seem to have several unsettled issues here,” he stated with quiet resolve, “and curiously enough our lovely Ms. Daniels is at the crux of them all.”

Germaine shook his head. “I want her kept out of this at all costs.”

“I fear that is no longer possible,” Nigel intervened. “If it were just Victor, I'd say you have a chance. However, another is involved, and her grudge against you is even worse than Victor's.”

“Sybill,” Claire supplied in a whisper, but Nigel continued as if she hadn't spoken.

“Victor used her to spy for him, though I suspect the dear woman had already done quite a bit of that on her own. Her animosity toward you is so great that she tried to get me denounced for my friendship with you. However, her scheming took an ironic twist when Victor gave her to me.

“He outlined his plan with lordly arrogance. For a year, Sybill was to be mine to govern and control as I saw fit, while he pursued Claire. No effort would be made to curtail my freedom, but if I ever tried to interfere with his plans, I would be summarily dispensed with and Sybill would be allowed whatever her little black heart desired. Cross and double cross.”

“But Sybill is only mortal,” Claire protested. “Surely she can't pose that much of a threat.”

“I think,” Germaine interceded, “that Nigel is trying to tell us that is no longer the case.”

Claire felt her throat tighten as she met Nigel's gaze. “You transformed her?” she asked hoarsely. “Why?”

“I had no choice, Claire. Victor was challenging me with a test of loyalty. My refusal would have only resulted in my being sealed into a coffin for a hundred years or so. A condition, which despite its unpleasantness, would have left me sadly ill-prepared to come to your aid tonight.” Offering her a wry smile, he gave his shoulders a philosophical shrug. “My current predicament may not grant me as much control over Sybill as I would have liked, but she is still a part of me. And as long as I live, she will not be entirely free of my influence.”

“Nor you of hers, Nigel,” Germaine warned softly.

“Don't worry, I'll be careful,” Nigel vowed with determination.

“Except Sybill is not our main concern right now” Marcus reminded. “Claire is. So it's most fortunate she's placed herself under council jurisdiction, subject to our sanction and protection.”

Germaine glanced down at Claire and she sensed more than saw the astonishment reflected in his spectral expression.

“I had to see you,” she explained, “and it was the only way Marcus would allow it.”

“Then nothing has changed,” Germaine determined in a flat voice, but Claire felt his hunger flare inside him. He was weakening rapidly.

“I disagree.” Marcus extended his hand toward Claire. “By her own admission, she is our responsibility now. Let her go, Germaine. It is better this way.”

Claire's gaze instinctively returned to Germaine who stood like a man torn between duty and love. He couldn't dismiss her actions and the charges his council had brought against her and himself without violating the laws of the society he had founded. But to turn her over to others for punishment went against his every instinct as a man, and her angry words of last night prevented him from seeing the matter attended to himself. In short, Claire realized, she had left him only one choice.

She had learned from Phillipa that the council not only made allowances under special circumstances, it also honored the obligations of its members. A circumstance such as

Germaine's death or physical incapacitation would oblige the council to care for Claire in Germaine's stead, and absolve her of any previous wrongs she may have committed against them. Determined to protect her the only way he knew how, Claire deduced Germaine was starving himself into an early grave.

And it was Germaine's vow to protect her that had him standing tense and ready to fight his lifelong friend if it came down to a challenge of wills between them. Claire knew without a doubt that as long as Germaine was physically able to defend her, he would. But this would not be the mock swordplay she'd witnessed between him and Phillip. This would be a long and bloody assault with no victors. And with that realization came the cold knowledge that she would have to be the one to ensure such a battle never took place.

Gathering her courage about her like an invisible shield, Claire placed her hand on Germaine's arm. "Why did you stop drinking?" she asked, fairly certain she had already figured out the reason, but wanting to hear him confirm it.

"My reasons do not concern you," he answered tersely, his gaze still fixed on Marcus.

"I think they do." She glanced back at Marcus. "You said earlier that a friend cannot help another who doesn't wish to be helped. That may be true, but I also think that a friend cannot help another by attempting to usurp those obligations he is reluctant to meet on his own. At least not without risking a friendship that is centuries old."

"That may be, but to paraphrase Nigel, 'fate does not always allow us options.' We each have obligations, Claire," Marcus reminded, "and not all of them are pleasant."

Claire acknowledged his admission with a slight dip of her head. "I appreciate your dilemma, but until Germaine releases me, I remain his obligation." Placing her fingers in Germaine's cold, thin hand, Claire faced him. "In disregarding your instructions, I have jeopardized not only myself, but the welfare of your group. I am here now, of my own free will, to answer for my actions in whatever manner you prescribe."

Germaine's fingers tightened over hers. "No, Claire," he whispered as if in terrible pain.

"I'm not exactly ecstatic over the notion, either. Still, if given the choice, I would rather it be you than Marcus. I ask for only three concessions. One: that Nigel be granted whatever protection the council can provide him. Two: that you and I be permitted to do this thing alone--without witnesses. And three: that you love me immediately afterwards in a way that will make my discomfort seem insignificant in comparison, which is not something I can readily ask of Marcus."

Marcus cleared his throat. "Privacy is not an issue, however...."

"I know," Germaine interrupted, reciting by rote the directive that Marcus was loath to finish. "As a representative of the council, protocol demands you remain guard outside the door until you are assured I have carried out the punishment. What is the current consensus on Nigel?"

“Even when they learn about Sybill, I don't think anyone other than Arthur will object to his admission. If it is your wish, we'll put it to a vote.”

“It is my wish.” Germaine turned back to Claire. “Nigel's future is no longer a concern, and you and I have been guaranteed our privacy. As to your third condition . . . I'm not sure it would be wise for me to--”

“I trust you, Germaine. You will not harm me.”

“Disregarding that, which is disregarding a lot, it may be too soon. I'm not convinced you're fully recovered from our sojourn at the Clinic. You could even be anemic.”

“Then test me,” she offered, lifting up her hand. “One taste should tell you.”

Germaine groaned and closed his eyes as if her request caused him physical pain. “You can't ask a thirst-craved man to serve as your wine steward, Claire.” When Claire lowered her hand, Germaine regarded Marcus with a weary, but resigned look. “Take one of Sam's kits and test her. If she passes, bring her to me. If she fails, you know what to do. I'll wait in my office.”

Turning from them, he went back inside and shut the door. Claire followed Marcus without protest. Five minutes later, she entered Germaine's office with her hands full. “Marcus declared me to be within an acceptable limit,” she proclaimed, carrying the box that held the syringe with the tips of her fingers and setting it down as if it contained something alive and deadly inside. “But he thought it prudent to send these along--just in case.”

“How thoughtful,” he murmured dryly. Glancing at him, Claire noticed a little of the gauntness had left his cheeks. It seemed Marcus's precautions had proved unnecessary after all. The knowledge did little to ease Claire's uncertainty, however. For although Germaine's expression appeared more human, it was etched by grim resolve. “Take off your clothes,” he ordered quietly.

“All of them?” she asked, her voice little more than an uncertain squeak.

“At least your blouse and bra. I want to check your injury.”

“Oh,” she murmured, feeling absurdly relieved as she unbuttoned her blouse. He stepped forward when she eased the straps of her slip down and removed her bra himself. The lividness of the bruise surprised even Claire. She knew Heinrich had hurt her, but she hadn't imagined . . .

Her lips opened in a silent “Oh” when in one smooth gesture Germaine gripped her waist, sat her on top of his desk and bent forward to press his lips to the purple colored flesh. “I'll see to it that Heinrich pays dearly for this,” he murmured before his teeth gently pierced her.

Claire stiffened at the slight pain, then gave herself over to Germaine's tender care. A few seconds later, he was healing the two puncture sites and helping her back into her

slip.

Then Germaine lifted her off his desk the same way he had placed her there and helped her stand before him. His fingers tightened slightly. "I had hoped to spare you this," he murmured regretfully.

Sensing his inner torment, Claire did her best to make light of the situation. "It was my choice. I had you so spellbound by my enchantment that you couldn't refuse me."

"You may have held me spellbound, sweet Claire, but it wasn't any archaic incantation in Hazelcroft's that did it."

She gazed into the warm glow of his eyes. "I don't regret summoning you, nor loving you, but I do regret the events that have brought me here today."

"As do I. I don't relish the prospect of hurting you, and I'm still not certain I can finish this. Not now."

"You have to. I know you only wanted to protect me. When Phillipa said the council would be obliged to make allowances for me if you were incapacitated or..." She stopped, unable to finish voicing her thought for the lump in her throat. Had he succeeded in starving himself . . .

"It might have been better that way," he murmured ruefully against her hair. "I'm no longer sure my way is best."

Claire drew back in immediate denial. "It wouldn't have been better for me, and it isn't your way of doing things that I resent. I do think, however, that your rules are a trifle outdated. You haven't given much thought to adapting over the centuries, have you?"

"We have 'adapted' a great deal more than you realize." He lowered his hands and shook his head. "There was a time when I would have cheerfully turned you over my knee. But not anymore." He rose as if to leave, but Claire clutched his arm to stop him.

"If you don't, Marcus will, and both of us would hate him for it despite the fact he would only be doing his duty according to your laws. I don't want to be placed on public display, Germaine, but I won't be the cause of a war between two best friends. So if you refuse to uphold your part in this bargain, you'll be forcing me to surrender to Marcus." When he turned away from her, Claire knew she would have to goad him into losing his temper. She had to make him angry enough so that he would at least feel justified, if not right, about punishing her.

Swallowing back her apprehension, she shrugged her shoulders in a display of unconcerned resignation. "Marcus it is then," she announced, putting on her bra and pulling her slip back up. "Perhaps it won't be that bad. Phillipa assured me that despite Marcus's brusque tone and rough manner that he was an excellent lover. Maybe if I cry a little, he'll take pity on me and..."

Claire let out a small yelp when Germaine gripped her arms. "Why?" he demanded

harshly.

“Because there's no other way. It's either you or him. And if you won't, I know he will.”

Germaine muttered a string of epithets that were older than Methuselah, but he gripped Claire's wrist and pulled her over to his chair where he promptly sat down.

“As I'm the one you've chosen to perform this task, I also choose its form. Ten strokes, flesh against flesh, no more, no less. At which point you will rise and beg my forgiveness. Is that clear?”

“Yes,” she answered in the barest whisper, wondering if she'd done her job too well.

“You agree such punishment is just and fair given the severity of your offenses?”

That admission was almost too much for Claire to make, but she agreed to it and everything else he asked of her, even giving him full permission to see the act completed if she begged him to stop. But she practically shouted that promise as her own nerves had reached their breaking point.

His fingers tightened on her wrist. “Good. Now position yourself properly across my knees and beg me to begin.”

Claire gazed at him with an incredulous expression. “You can go to hell, first!” she snapped, but before she could turn away, her stomach was crashing into his knees and her breath deserted her in a whoosh while steely fingers gripped her waist.

“You should have known my anger wouldn't be enough, Claire,” he warned as his hand came down for the first stroke. Claire sucked air through her gritted teeth, but she didn't cry out.

“Despite your profound acting abilities, I can still recognize a lie when I hear one,” he pronounced before administering the second stroke. To Claire, the second seemed worse than the first, but pride kept her silent.

By the time the tenth stroke descended, Claire was confident the council was well appeased. Despite his initial reluctance, Germaine hadn't spared her, but then she hadn't asked him to either.

And disregarding the tears that stung her eyes, Claire was absurdly proud over that fact. Released, she gingerly rose from his lap. She had met her punishment bravely, without complaint, recrimination or weeping. Raising her chin, she met his gaze squarely and gasped.

The tears she had fought so hard to suppress were streaming down his cheeks. Linked as they were, he had felt her pain twice: once in the giving of it and the other in her receiving of it. Remorse and regret lined his expression despite the fact he refused to meet her eyes. And the proof of his torment continued to pour from him in a stream of pinkish red droplets.

He was losing blood.

“No, don't cry,” she begged, kissing him. “I forgive you and I still love you.” His arms drew her close, and he returned her kisses with fervor, taking care not to hurt her with the pointed tips of his teeth. Despite his solicitude, Claire sensed his hunger for her had become a deep, hurting pain.

Realizing time could be crucial, she squirmed off his lap and sat on his desk. Unable to suppress a slight grimace at the feel of the solid mahogany beneath her smarting hindquarters, she raised her skirt. “Now, Germaine,” she commanded a little unevenly. “I'd like you to see to the other part of your bargain, please.”

He gazed at her with flame-bright eyes. “I dare not,” he murmured tightly.

“What do you mean, you dare not? You promised!”

He laid his hands gently upon her thighs. “Believe me, I would like nothing better than to sink myself deep into your sweet and tender flesh right now, but my desire for you far exceeds my restraint right now. Were I to give into my hunger and sample your deliciousness, my ardor could cause you considerable agony.”

“Oh.” Understanding, Claire quickly snapped her legs together and extended her wrist to him. “This is a little less tender. Start here.”

He drew her wrist to his lips and drank deeply, but not long. When he withdrew from her, he was shaking from the effort it took for him to pull away. “It's worse than I thought,” he admitted unnecessarily since Claire could feel his inner battle. She offered him her other wrist.

“You can't hurt me, Germaine,” she assured when he resisted, “and you need the blood, now drink.” He did as she asked, but refused to drink long.

“No more,” he said, pushing away from her. “I'll kill you if I continue.”

“No, you won't. I'll tell you if I feel the least bit dizzy, and until then, I'll be fine.”

“I won't be able to stop, Claire, I can tell. I won't risk your life.”

Claire thought the man had more willpower than she could ever hope to possess, but she was about to see him lose it. She didn't fear for her own life, though she couldn't honestly say why. Somehow she knew Germaine wouldn't let her die.

Leaning forward, Claire kissed him. Using what she'd learned over the past few weeks, she slid the tip of her tongue over the length of his canines in a series of long, seductive caresses.

He moaned. Seemingly possessed with a will of their own, his hands raised her skirt and parted her thighs while his fingers sought the center of her and mimicked the caresses of her tongue with a light, but steady stroking which left her entire body trembling for more. Then in a single motion, he had her flat on her back and his tongue replaced his

finger.

As her inner muscles clenched with pleasure, Claire felt him press into her with sharp, piercing accuracy. She gasped, then arched her back. Her discomfort quickly forgotten in the haze of ecstasy that followed it. But before Claire was inexorably drawn inside the vortex of mindless passion that Germaine always sent her spiraling into, she gripped his head and held him to her until her body no longer possessed the strength needed to clench her fingers.

The moment he was freed, Germaine immediately withdrew from her causing Claire to let out a keening wail of pure rapture. At least in her mind she did, but what actually emerged from her throat was a rasping gasp for air. She closed her eyes.

“You little fool,” he cursed. Yanking down her skirt, he wrapped her in the thick woolen blanket he'd laid on the back of his chair. The warmth was delicious, and Claire let out a soft murmur of contentment. If she had to die, she decided this was the way to go. She felt immeasurably lighter, almost weightless, so she couldn't understand why Germaine continued to frown at her.

“Marcus,” he called out frantically. “Get a pint of negative blood in here fast. Any type, she's AB.”

Claire reached up to stroke the crease between Germaine's knitted eyebrows. His eyes were an angry but gorgeous shade of brown and his cheeks had a rugged flush to them. They were such strong, chiseled cheeks, she thought absurdly, that she'd be tempted to kiss one if he would only stop scowling for a moment.

Germaine lifted her easily into his arms and held her close to his chest. “If you die on me,” he murmured hoarsely, “I'll see that you regret it for a long time to come.”

Claire merely smiled at him, thinking he looked quite handsome, even when he was furious.

Marcus rushed into the room with the demanded pint and two more. “What happened?” he asked promptly, gripping Claire's arm and positioning it for Germaine.

But Claire wasn't making the slightest protest. She wriggled her fingers at Marcus and vaguely wondered why they tingled so.

“Say ouch,” Marcus ordered sternly.

“Ouch,” Claire responded obligingly before she let out a hiss of discomfort and scowled back at Germaine. “That hurt,” she accused.

“Too bad, because it's only the first of many, and you'll lie there and wince in silence until I give you permission to do otherwise,” he ordered, carefully placing her on his couch.

He was being unreasonable again, she decided, but she would not cry. Crying was stupid. It hadn't hurt all that much, and crying never helped. All it did was make her eyes

red and her nose run. A cool cloth brushed her cheeks.

“Don't cry,” he pleaded apologetically. “I'm sorry I snapped, but I want you to lie still for a few minutes, all right?”

She nodded, but still didn't open her eyes. Her arm was beginning to ache, only she didn't dare complain.

“Loosen your grip,” Germaine commanded. “You're hurting her.”

The pain lessened and Claire smiled her thanks.

“Would someone care to tell me what happened?” Marcus asked. “One moment you are disciplining her, and the next I hear her gasping for air as if you were choking the life out of her, and you're screaming for blood. I am all for making a point, but there is a limit.”

Claire giggled. “He was making love to me, Roman, not choking me,” she answered, attempting to poke Marcus in the ribs but finding her arm securely held. She started to complain, but fell silent at Germaine's fierce glare.

“She had her fingers in my hair and refused to release me,” he explained with a thoroughly annoyed look.

“I understand completely,” Marcus assured. “She overpowered you with her superior strength and refused to let go until she'd had her way with you.”

His lips clamped in a tight line, Germaine set up the second pint of blood. “Considering where it was exactly that I had my teeth sunk into her, I considered it the better part of valor to stay put until she released me.”

Marcus did not attempt to hide his thoroughly amused grin. “I must say you look greatly improved.”

Claire's teeth began to chatter and she started to shiver.

“But at what cost?” Germaine asked as he pressed a glass to Claire lips. She drank the contents greedily, and felt a great deal better just moments later, except Germaine still wouldn't let her sit up. Which was probably just as well, since she couldn't seem to stop shaking, and she was having difficulty feeling her legs and feet.

Over the next hour, the entire council treated Claire with extreme care and gentleness. Their manner sometimes stern when she became restive, they spared no effort to ensure her comfort.

Germaine cradled her on his lap while Marcus gently chafed her hands. Francis and Maurice kept her supplied with hot water bottles while Gregory massaged her feet and Phillip rubbed her temples. Auguste sang her ballads while Nigel and Simon kept her supplied with blood. Freddie, who grew a bit peckish over such proceedings, ran whatever errands were needed.

When Claire finally stopped shivering and could speak without slurring her words, Germaine thanked everyone and dismissed them. The group seemed reluctant to leave, as if they still weren't convinced Claire was out of danger, but a single look from Germaine had them backing out the door.

When they were finally alone, Germaine placed an insistent finger beneath Claire's chin and gazed into her eyes. "Why?" he asked simply.

Claire knew he'd be angry, so she didn't even pretend not to understand. "You were hungry, and I knew you'd never take all you needed unless I held you to me, so I did. There's one other reason why I wanted you to make love to me today," she added softly, "but I doubt you'll like it."

"Probably not, since I'm not too fond of your first reason. I could have killed you, Claire, literally. If you hadn't released me when you did, I could have taken enough to end your life. Do you have any idea what your death would do to me?"

"Probably the same thing seeing you destroy yourself did to me," she answered back. His expression suggested he didn't appreciate her reply, but it effectively cut off his lecture. Willing to take whatever reprieve she was offered, Claire sat up. The pain that movement caused made her draw air through her teeth. "Well I am certain the council is finally satisfied."

"No doubt they will be," he answered ominously.

Not liking his tone or his words, Claire gazed warily at her lover. "Meaning what?"

"Meaning that there's still the formality of your official pardon to be observed." Her uneasiness increasing, Claire opened her mouth to ask what that formality entailed when he begrudgingly added, "You simply stand before Marcus in a brief ceremony where he absolves you."

The tartness of his reply and the tight set of his mouth let Claire know that he still wasn't pleased with her for causing him worry. Claire felt he wasn't the only one to suffer in that regard. He'd caused her a fair amount of worry himself.

"Well the sooner it's over, the happier I'll be," she announced rising to her feet and fetching her blouse.

"Undoubtedly, they feel the same way, but you and I have some unfinished business to attend to, first. You mentioned another reason why you held me to you. I'd like to know what that was."

Claire struggled with the small satin-covered buttons. "You're not going to like it," she predicted.

"Tell me, anyway."

Avoiding his gaze, she tucked her blouse into her skirt. "Since I'll soon be off limits to you, I thought I'd take advantage of the opportunity while I could."

He stiffened, then relaxed, but Claire sensed he'd erected a mental wall between them. "What do you mean 'off limits' to me? Are you going back to Harry?"

"No!" she answered, surprised he'd even think such a thing.

"Is there someone else?"

Her eyes alight with surprised laughter, she gazed at him, then quickly sobered her expression when she saw he was deadly earnest. "Why would you think there was someone else?"

"You said it," he accused. "Why else would you tell me you were leaving me?"

"I'm not leaving you. It's just that we won't be able to . . . you know?"

"Why not?" he asked, still not understanding what to her was perfectly clear.

"Because mortal women, like tides, are subject to the moon's influence. I am due for my period," she announced bluntly.

Germaine blinked for a moment, then his lips curved in a purely masculine grin. Hugging her close, he kissed her. "I can assure you, my love, that such minor inconveniences are no hindrance to a vampire."

At Claire's dismayed groan, Germaine kissed her again, then led her out the door only to reach for Claire's arm in an attempt to pull her back. But as quick as he was, Gregory and Simon were quicker.

"No!" Germaine cried out in rage, except before the single word was out of his mouth, his arms were jerked up behind him. With rage pressing his fangs into full extension, he hissed in fury as he struggled to escape his captors, but it was two against one. The remaining council members stood in a precise semicircle before them, cloaked in ceremonial robes like a group of grim-faced executioners. And Claire suspected she was the one who'd been sentenced and tried.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"If one of you so much as lays a finger on her," Germaine threatened in a low growl, "I'll destroy you all."

Claire's gaze slid from her furious lover to the grave collection of expressions surrounding her, and a cold trickle of fear trailed down her spine. Fearing her actions had somehow changed the rules again, she instinctively turned to Marcus who stood slightly apart from the others. "What's happening?" she asked. His eyes fixed on Germaine, Marcus gave no indication he'd heard her.

"Forgive us, my prince, but the council voted, and this time you were out numbered."

Germaine ceased struggling against Gregory and Simon's joint hold and glowered at his onetime friend. "For God's sake, why, Marcus?" he demanded, the burning fury in his eyes banked to glowing embers.

"I stand here not by choice, but by your appointment as your designated representative--an assignment I would gladly relinquish. Do you wish me replaced?"

"I wish a damn sight more than that. Now, tell me why, damn it!"

"She will not be harmed," Marcus assured softly. "I give you my word."

Reassured, the tension and anger dispersed from Germaine like exorcised spirits, and he slowly relaxed. Claire, however, was not nearly as calm. Harm and hurt were entirely different concepts for these gentlemen, and she already hurt. And though a part of her was relieved Germaine no longer looked as if he wanted to kill Marcus, she suspected the issue of her pardon had suddenly taken on a new slant. "Would someone mind telling me what's going on?" she demanded, drawing Marcus's piercing gray eyes to her.

"As you may have gathered, we've elected to veer a bit from our usual practice. Normally at this juncture, I would ask you a few questions, and if your answers were deemed acceptable, we would lay the issue of your transgressions to rest forever."

"So, what changed your mind?"

"I fear your obvious disregard for your own health and safety did that quite neatly."

Exasperation and discomfort honing her temper, she challenged, "How? Did my concern for Germaine break another one of your many unwritten and unreasonable laws?"

Sir Frederick muttered a sound of utter disbelief. "Nearly scared us all back into our coffins. Not very decent of you to say the least."

Claire considered the hooded figures glaring down at her and realized she was being formally reprimanded by ten men who viewed her much the same way a group of indulgent uncles might look upon a recalcitrant niece. None of them really wanted to hurt her, but their concern for her safety had deemed some form of reprisal necessary.

Softening her tone, she murmured, "I suppose the fact that I never meant to upset or

frighten any of you doesn't count?"

"It matters, of course," Marcus answered. "But it doesn't alter your total disregard for the consequences. You could have died."

"And if I had?" she asked quietly.

"There are those among us who would never have permitted that, and those whose principles would permit no other alternative. Either way, considering the manner of your death, we would have been split. Tempers would have flared and no doubt a few other lives would have met a tragic end before total chaos reigned."

Although Marcus clearly believed his dire prediction, Claire doubted her death would create total chaos anywhere. "I think you exaggerate," she retorted softly.

"Perhaps. Although I am more often given to understatement than I am to hyperbole."

Finding herself caught in the same old trap, Claire's frustration got the better of her. "So, despite my good intentions, the group of you convened in secret where you proceeded to both try and sentence me without a hearing. And since you've found it necessary to restrain your leader, I gather you ruled against me." She glared defiantly at the group of them. "What is it this time? Am I to be drawn and quartered?"

A murmur of dissatisfaction rumbled through the robed assemblage, and Nigel stepped forward. "If you have any qualms at all about doing this, Marcus, I'll gladly take your place."

"That's not my choice to make," Marcus replied, his gaze entrapping Claire more effectively than a steel cage. "It is Claire's."

Suddenly uncertain, Claire closed her eyes and strove to calm her racing heart. Marcus might not like executing the duties of his position, but he wouldn't shirk his obligations. Uncles or no, these immortals meant to ensure she learned her lesson. "What's the punishment?" she asked finally, her stomach churning in time with the pounding beats of her heart.

"One stroke to be received before all attending. You may select the individual you wish to deliver it from any of us, excluding Germaine."

"The council has no right to order this, Marcus!" Germaine protested. "Such a ruling violates all our laws and agreements."

"As I said, we voted this case an exception," Marcus replied evenly. "We were all involved in her care, so we shall all be involved in her punishment. Claire chooses to whom she will yield."

"That's not the point," Germaine argued, but fell silent when Claire touched his arm.

"What if I refuse to yield?" she asked.

"The choice will be taken out of your hands--by me," Marcus answered bluntly, his eyes

resolute.

"I see. Your concern over my welfare is heartwarming, Marcus, but I can't see how disciplining me like a child will resolve anything." When his expression showed no sign of relenting, Claire turned to the group. "Can't any of you see how wrong this is? Corporal Punishment is a humiliating, demeaning and belittling form of chastisement. Can't we resolve this in any other way?"

The men seemed to shuffle uncertainly for a moment before Auguste mumbled, "You speak as our representative, Marcus. Follow your conscience."

Marcus's demeanor remained forbidding, but his tone gentled despite the solemnity of his stance. "Often, but not always, the council will grant leniency if a penitent is truly remorseful. I am empowered to grant you a full pardon if you can look into your heart and tell me you deeply regret what you have done this day."

"I certainly regret having caused you all worry, but I cannot--"

"Consider your response carefully, Claire," Auguste cautioned. "It could make a great difference."

Claire smiled at the group of men surrounding her. They might be paternalistic, autocratic and domineering chauvinists, but she knew they truly cared about her. They wouldn't have risked Germaine's rancor otherwise.

"My actions were not for me alone," she answered honestly. "I did what I thought was needed. Surely, that's not a crime?"

"You should have consulted us first," Marcus pointed out with a logic Claire found totally irrational.

"What good would that have done? You were letting Germaine starve himself."

"It's not that simple--"

"It was to me. I refused to let him waste away into a living skeleton that needed to be buried. So, I did the only thing I could think of to save him."

"You don't really believe we'd let him sacrifice himself? If that were true, then why did we insist upon taking you prisoner?"

"To spare him, but you were too late, Marcus...."

"No, Claire," Germaine interceded reluctantly, but firmly. "They weren't. Had I truly been that far gone, you would be dead."

Claire refused to believe that. She was convinced Germaine would never take her life, but she also knew that persuading anyone to accept her certainty as fact was impossible. Not when Germaine himself rejected the possibility.

"I don't deny your concern was valid, Claire," Marcus assured her. "I merely question your methods. If you'd confided in us, we could have transfused you while Germaine

fed.”

Although her mental image of a group of robed men standing around with bags of blood while Germaine coaxed her into countless orgasms was enough to bring a heated flush to Claire's cheeks, she met Marcus's gaze evenly. “That would have been a trifle embarrassing, don't you think?”

The other men hemmed and hawed while Marcus's ears flushed a dull red. “We would have survived it. The point is, without us--you might not have.”

Claire glanced over at Germaine who looked resentful, but momentarily resigned. All she had to do was tell these men what they wanted to hear, and she and Germaine would be free to go. Except Claire honestly believed she'd been right to act as she had, but she also knew the council would never agree--at least Marcus wouldn't.

In his own way, Marcus was more protective of her than Germaine. And in his eyes, she'd needlessly risked her life. Given the way he'd repeatedly risked Germaine's ire by serving as her champion, Claire suspected he viewed the risk she'd taken a bit more personally than the others. He'd never say so, not with words, but his tone and attitude expressed his feelings in ways he would never openly admit. What nagged at Claire's conscience even more were the consequences if Marcus was forced into discharging his duty against her wishes. Her options, it seemed, were limited and disagreeable. She could either lie, continue to fight, or submit to their punishment.

“That's it, then,” she murmured more to herself than to the men standing before her. “You'll never convince me, and it seems I can't convince you how unjust you're being. Physically hurting someone you care about doesn't solve a thing, and my lying to you would solve even less. I resent everything about this, but I won't fight it since my resistance would only promote more bitterness between you.” She met each man's eyes, and all but Marcus and Nigel looked away. Luckily, Arthur wasn't there.

“As you were Germaine's choice, Marcus Aularius, you will remain mine as well.”

Marcus didn't look particularly pleased, but he held out his hand.

Claire closed her eyes and placed her fingers in his. He drew her toward him until her arms were firmly clasped in his hold. His grip was firm, strong, yet tempered. He was a large man, but he didn't misuse his strength. A master of discipline and restraint, he held her carefully. Though the notion gave Claire little comfort, she was confident Marcus would not hurt her any more than was absolutely necessary to see his obligation carried out.

“Touch her, Marcus, and you will answer to me,” Germaine warned in a soft voice.

“No,” Claire contradicted, her resolve equal to his. “This is my decision, and I have given Marcus my permission. May I remain clothed?”

Marcus promptly bent toward her. “You could be set free, woman,” he whispered harshly, “if you'd only say the words these men require to have their pride assuaged.”

“What of your pride, Aularius?” she asked softly.

“I do not require an audience to settle things between us, if you take my meaning.”

His fingers tightened imperceptibly to all but her, and Claire nodded. “Forgive me, Marcus. I was wrong,” she murmured in a clear but contrite voice. “Next time I will strive to keep in mind that there are others who are more than willing to help, if I but ask.”

Marcus raised his head. “I am satisfied, so say we all?”

“Agreed,” the others murmured in concurrence, and Germaine was let go. He extended his hand toward Claire, but Marcus didn't release her and Claire didn't try to pull away.

When the three of them were alone, Marcus bent his head toward her and said, “I have lived a great many years, and witnessed atrocities you couldn't begin to imagine. I have seen men slowly robbed of their dignity until they begged for death to claim them, and I have brought many to such desperation myself, because it was expected of me. Time has done much to alter the yardstick men use to measure just and fitting punishments, and our laws have changed to reflect the current mores, just as yours have.

“In truth, we pride ourselves on being just and fair to those who are weaker. And despite your many eloquent arguments to the contrary, you are weaker, Claire. To us you are little more than a child--in need of guidance, care and occasional discipline. However, the methods that were once considered appropriate to punish a misbehaving child are being contested today as well. Perhaps the hour has come for us to alter our ways again. We will no doubt discuss it, and it is possible we will even devise an alternative that will be acceptable to everyone, but until that time comes, our original laws stand. Is that clear?”

“Yes,” she answered, her voice a mere whisper.

“Keeping in mind all I've said, do you still yield to me, Claire Daniels?”

Claire closed her eyes and swallowed. “Yes, I yield to you.”

His hands tightened only briefly, but in that instant Claire experienced a tiny measure of Marcus's power. Though he didn't so much as move a finger, Claire felt a sharp pain, like an openhanded slap against her already tender backside. But before she could even jerk in reaction--all trace of her initial soreness was gone. It was as if Marcus had wiped away her discomfort with less effort than it took a wizard to wave his wand--using nothing but his mind.

Claire gaped at her captor in surprise, but he merely smiled. “The heart and the mind are the most powerful tools we possess. Within them lay the secrets of our existence, so we guard their powers as much to protect ourselves as to protect others from us. Despite our supernatural talents, we are essentially human with very human needs, wants and appetites. And since the ability to hurt is as closely bonded to the ability to heal, as the desire to kill is but one turn away from the desire to save, I hope you will remember this

warning the next time you are tempted to flirt with death. Or it could be the last thing you'll ever do."

"I'll try," Claire promised.

With a nod, Marcus released her and gazed at Germaine. "You are dearer to me than my own life, St. Justine. Nevertheless, if you ever place me in a position like this again, I'll put you in a coffin and bury you myself."

Then slapping his forearm against his chest in a soldier's salute, Marcus strode away.

* * *

Claire had no idea if Germaine knew what Marcus did, but he had to have sensed the change in her after the healing. Still a little nonplused about the experience, she was grateful he didn't question her about it even while she wondered why he didn't. As Germaine walked her home in silence, Claire considered everything she had seen and done in the last twelve hours, including her near abduction, which she had almost forgotten in all the tumult. Almost, but not quite. Nor had she forgotten the basic disagreements that brought her and Germaine to this point.

Claire was still uncertain what she should do next when she found herself standing at her door. Still feeling at odds, she glanced tentatively at Germaine. His expression was remote, almost brooding. Claire sensed he wanted to say goodnight and leave it at that, but she felt it was past time Germaine St. Justine finally told her what was going on. Unlocking her door, she invited him in.

"It's after two," he replied wearily.

Thrusting her keys back into her coat pocket, she met his gaze. "Two men nearly abducted me tonight. Don't you think I should at least be told why?"

"Nigel told you why--Victor is trying to get back at me. But you needn't worry it will happen again. I'll make certain you are protected. Now that Nigel is with us, he can escort you most any place you wish to go."

"That's not what I meant," Claire protested, fighting the urge to gnash her teeth. "Do you love me?"

"I should think the answer to that would be obvious."

"Humor me, and answer the question, please."

"Yes. And before you ask, I will tell you that I trust you also."

"But not enough to confide in me," she retorted.

"That's not true."

"Isn't it?" she asked, her eyebrows raised in a bold challenge. "Then why was it Nigel who told me that it's your policy against transformations which has caused this rift between you and the other orders? Why didn't you tell me?"

“I have,” he countered, standing tense and wary before her like a condemned man determined to appear invulnerable. “At least twice since we've been together. It's no secret. Other orders feel it is their privilege and right to convert new blood into our deadly lifestyle. I do not. Thus, they challenge me from time-to-time. It is nothing new, nor is it anything to be overly concerned about.”

“Perhaps not, but that doesn't really answer my question. Why are you so opposed to converting others when the individuals themselves are willing?”

He thrust his hands into his pockets and closed his eyes. It clearly wasn't a subject he wished to get into, but Claire needed to understand why he refused to preserve the lives of even those he loved. Germaine must have sensed her adamancy for he grudgingly stepped into her apartment and shrugged out of his coat while Claire fought the unsettling notion that, like in the “Monkey's Paw,” she was about to get something she'd wished for but hadn't fully understood.

Excusing herself for a moment, she fixed them both drinks. After handing Germaine his, she sat cross-legged on the sofa facing him. When he said nothing after a few moments, she reached over to lightly touch his arm. “Phillipa told me she believed your aversion had something to do with your own transformation. And from what little you've said, I gathered you were taken unwillingly.”

Germaine closed his eyes. “If by unwillingly you meant you envisioned me making a valiant effort to resist the vampire who transformed me, I fear your perceptions of my heroism are sadly overrated. However, few heroes survived to tell their tale in France at the end of the eighteenth century. Material wealth and noble titles did nothing to dissuade and everything to incite the mob's insatiable craving for revenge.

“How well we treated servants was of no consequence. Our birth had made us the enemy, and our folly in believing ourselves infallible was our undoing. In addition, my family had both the privilege and the subsequent misfortune of being confidantes to the King and Queen.

“My father was a courtier and my mother a lady in waiting to Marie Antoinette. She and the Princess de Lamballe were the Queen's closest friends. Such closeness often breeds powerful enemies, but I suspect it was my own foolish pride that brought us so low, so quickly.”

“In what way?” Claire asked softly when he fell silent.

“In a very elemental way,” he answered somberly. “History records the court of Louis XVI as staid compared to the licentiousness of the court of Louis's great-great-great-grandfather, 'the Sun King.' Even so, enough vices proliferated to appease the most jaded palate. It was the third estate's prurient interest in those vices that prompted the press to label Marie Thérèse de Lamballe the Queen's lesbian lover. A scurrilous and unfounded attack, but not an unprecedented one.

“Even I was approached more than once by 'gentlemen' who preferred the company of their own. I was young, arrogant, vitally healthy and informally engaged to Eugenia Gavelle, daughter of the Baron de Ceci. But as the details of Eugenia's dowry were still being formalized, I was officially unattached and available, though I suspect even marriage would not have prevented most of those young men from pursuing me.

“One young Romeo was not even a member of my social circle, but a mere palace guardsman. His effrontery so incensed me, I ordered him thrown out into the streets.

“I can recall him screaming back at me that I would rue the day I had crossed Jacques Guvasier. Unfortunately, he was right. Tossed out without references, he found a warm welcome in the rebellion. Ambitious, he made quite a name for himself, and less than a year later he had me and my family arrested as traitors to the new Republic of France.

“Swords at our throats, we were ripped from the warm security of our beds at three in the morning, and informed that we were being arrested in the name of France. Shivering from the cold, disoriented from the rude awakening, and barefoot, everyone was still in their nightclothes, except me. I was permitted to don a shirt and breeches since I preferred to sleep--unencumbered. In a latent show of gallantry, my mother and sister were allowed to ride in a tumbrel, while my father, younger brother and I were forced to march behind, our wrists tied to the roughly hewn wood of the cart. Michel was only nine years old. He was very brave, but scared and terribly young. Too young to be subjected to such barbarity. I ended up carrying him on my back most of the way.

“When we arrived at the prison, he was taken from me and I was separated from the rest of my family. Brusquely ushered into a small room, I was shoved to the floor. Permitted to rise no higher than my knees, I found myself unwillingly genuflected before Jacques Guvasier.”

* * *

Purposely standing apart from the others, Robert was wryly observing the way other men chose their partners for the night when he spotted the she-cat who'd kneed him enter the bar and look furtively about. Putting down his drink, he stepped behind her and gave her shoulder a light tap.

“Looking for me?” he asked conversationally.

She whirled around, but her look of panic quickly dissolved into one of chagrin. “I suppose you're angry at me for--”

“Angry doesn't begin to cover it, Delilah,” he advised, latching onto her arm. “Still, if you come quietly and answer a few questions, I may just let you go without returning the favor.”

Her green eyes seemed to shimmer as she gazed up at him. “Surely you're not the sort who'd hurt someone weaker and smaller than himself?”

“Not usually,” he admitted, firmly guiding her toward the door. “Not unless I'm severely

provoked.”

Robert couldn't be sure, but before she gave in and meekly followed his lead, he thought he caught a glimpse of a smile curve her lips.

* * *

Germaine's lips tightened into a grimace of remembered pain, and Claire hesitated. She wanted to know what it was that had driven him all these years, but not if it caused him pain. He took a deep breath and looked at her.

“You're sure you want me to continue this? Things got rather ugly at this point.”

“I'd like to know, but not if...”

“It happened more than two hundred years ago, Claire. Even if the revolution had spared my family, everyone I knew and loved would be dead and buried by now anyway.”

“Then tell me,” she responded simply, hoping the love they shared now could heal the injuries he'd suffered long ago.

He regarded her for a moment, as if he was silently gauging her stamina, then he continued. “Jacques made it immediately clear what he wanted, going so far as to even promise me my freedom if I gave myself to him willingly. When I spat in his face, he calmly wiped away the spittle with his handkerchief and ordered me chained to the wall and flogged until he said otherwise.

“He waited until I was too weak to stand, then he came over and released me himself. I can still recall the feel of his fingers stroking my cheek and neck as he knelt at my side and told me my continued stubbornness would only hurt me and those I loved. Then, pressing his lips to my ear, he licked it with his tongue and asked again if I would yield to him.

“My back was on fire, yet the pain felt better to me than his unnatural caresses. Assuring him that I would rather see him in hell, I jerked away from his touch.

“He drew back from me slowly, then rose to his feet. Casually brushing the dirt of the prison floor from his jacket and breeches, he ordered me chained up again. I told him he could flog me until I was dead, but I would never give in to him. He said nothing until he was confident I was well secured, then in a voice laden with good fellowship and companionship, he commanded, 'Bring his sweet young sister in here.'”

* * *

A fleeting image of sweet poison came to mind when Robert gazed at his walking companion, but he didn't question her actual motives until she said, “I'm pleased to see you have changed your mind about me. I assure you, I will make it well worth your while.”

His eyes narrowing, he gave her a long look. “Don't mistake me, Delilah, your winsome

body holds no attraction for me, at all.”

“Something about me has attracted you,” she insisted, her head bowed. “Otherwise you wouldn't be with me now.”

“It is your deviousness, lady, pure and simple. Why were you looking for me that night?” he asked, pulling her aside.

She shook her head. “Not here. Take me to your place. I will answer all your questions there. Afterwards, perhaps, I will even get you to change your mind about me.”

“You were looking for me again tonight, weren't you?” he asked suspiciously.

“Of course. Do you think I would've gone back to that place seeking anyone other than you?”

“I have no idea what it is you're seeking, but believe me I will get to the bottom of it, and more, before this night has ended.”

She kept her face averted, but murmured in a whisper-soft voice, “I believe you will at that.”

* * *

Germaine's fingers gripped his glass. “When Genvieve was escorted into the room, she had no idea what they intended to do to her, but I did. Her eyes wide, she gazed at me while I raged against my chains like a demented animal, desperate to save her, but powerless to do so.

“‘Let her go,’ I demanded more quietly, once I realized my fury only frightened her more. ‘She's not the one you are angry with. I am. She's done nothing to you.’

“‘Perhaps not,’ Jacques conceded with a smile. ‘But as her brother has done much to displease me, and it is her brother's yielding I seek, it would seem she must be the one to pay.’

“‘Just let her go, and I will do anything you ask--willingly!’

“‘I fear that's not possible just yet. Oh, I shall let her go, after she has fulfilled the part she is meant to play. You see, I promised my men that if they helped me take you, they could have her. And, of course, I am a man of my word.’

“With a simple snap of Jacques' fingers, six men fell on Genvieve at once. She tried to scream, but one of them clamped a meaty palm over her mouth to silence her as all six shoved her to the floor. Two of them pinned her flailing arms down while another two pried her legs apart and a fifth ripped open her once-white nightgown from neck to hem. Before she could even catch her breath from the rough tumble to the filthy stone floor, the sixth was thrusting himself between her legs. She screamed then, not at them, but to me, begging me to help her. Only I couldn't. My wrists were raw and bloody from my efforts to get to her, but I couldn't break the chains. By the time the last one had her,

she'd been raped every way imaginable for a woman to be raped, and she no longer resisted.

"I was her older brother. I was supposed to protect her. Instead, I unknowingly condemned her to the worst degradation a woman can suffer."

* * *

His grip tight, Robert escorted his captive into his apartment, not entirely sure why he'd agreed to bring her there. Once inside, she pulled free of him with an unexpectedly easy twist and looked about her.

"You have a very distinctive taste in furnishings," she admired, running her hand along the back of his ivory brocade sofa. "I can't tell you how pleased I am that you invited me in."

"Why were you looking for me?" Robert asked again, watching her stroll toward the window that led to the fire escape. His apartment was on the fifth floor of an older building in a well-established neighborhood that liked to conceal its more utilitarian aspects, like wrought iron scaffolding, on the side away from the main entrance.

The window faced an alleyway, yet the young woman gazed at the view it offered as if she beheld an ocean side vista of the French Riviera. "I told you why I wanted to meet you," she answered simply.

"What you told me was bull, Sybill," he replied, stepping toward her, only to stop when she finally faced him. Her green eyes had taken on an iridescent glow and her canine teeth were too pointed to be normal.

"I'm not Sybill," she replied with a smile that was more unsettling than provocative.

An icy shiver of dread trickled down Robert's back. "Just who are you?" he asked in an uncertain whisper.

"Don't you mean what am I?" She raised a finger to gently trace his lips. "I am afraid, dear Robert, that I am your personal angel of death," she murmured, tapping a long, crimson nail against his upper lip. The intensity of her gaze burned into his mind like a glowing poker. He tried to pull away only to find he was unable to so much as blink unless she allowed it. "Now be a good boy and turn off your alarm, then open this window for my two friends--so they can greet you properly."

Through no will of his own, Robert turned and gazed at the two red-eyed specters staring back at him. He felt hot and cold simultaneously, then he felt nothing at all. Walking over to his control panel, he opened the door and switched off his two thousand-dollar security system.

* * *

"Now that your men are through," Germaine ground out between gritted teeth, "at least have the decency to permit my sister the care of a physician."

“Why?” Jacques asked, his expression guileless. “She is scheduled to be executed at the end of the week, if she lives that long. What good could a doctor possibly do her?”

Germaine lunged at him, but was brought up short by his chains. “May God damn your black soul for eternity, Jacques Guvasier. And may I be there to watch.”

Jacques merely smiled. “Return the girl to her parents, and bring in the boy.”

“No!” Germaine protested. “Have pity, Guvasier, he's only nine. Leave him be.”

“And what have you to offer me in exchange?”

“Whatever you want of me, without struggle or resistance of any kind. In return I ask only that you allow a physician to attend my sister, and that you leave my brother untouched.”

Jacques' smile widened. “And if you don't please me, my handsome aristo? What then?”

“I'm sure you'll think of some way to punish me, should I fail in that regard.”

“Perhaps.” This time when Jacques spoke, his lips were less than an inch from Germaine's. “Only there are more ways to fail than a mere show of reluctance.” His fingers curved gently about the parts of Germaine that determined him male. “Here for instance. Can that extraordinary will of yours make him obey me as well?”

Germaine closed his eyes and tried to imagine it was a woman's hand that fondled him so intimately, but even that image failed to evoke his desperately needed response.

Jacques was curiously patient, however. Rather than taunt Germaine, he continued to stroke him. “Tell me what titillates you, my reluctant noble. Perhaps the caress of my tongue will coax life into this reticent limb of yours.”

With an internal shudder, Germaine tried to conceal his revulsion. “Whatever pleases you,” he answered mutely.

“Sweetly said, only I am not the one in need of pleasing. My body already yearns to join with yours. I could take you as you are now, chained and helpless, with very little difficulty.”

“Then do it,” Germaine snapped back.

Jacques laughed. Squeezing lightly, he kissed Germaine on the lips. “You are far too impatient, mon ami. These things take time, days even. True, I could have your body easily enough, but it is your passion I seek. When you yield to me, I want you to give me the essence of your life as you would to a woman. I want to hear you cry out, not in pain, but in ecstasy.”

Germaine doubted such abandonment would ever be possible, but only the slight rise of his eyebrows gave hint of his skepticism.

Jacques' eyes seemed to glow with an unholy light as he moved even closer to Germaine. “Answer me one thing. Are you sure you're willing to sell your soul simply to

save your brother from knowing me intimately?”

“If I weren't, then I wouldn't have much of a soul to sell, would I?”

“We shall soon see.” Turning from Germaine he said, “Take this one back to her family and have the physician attend her. Then bring in the sweet young thing you two were admiring earlier. You know which one--de Ceci's daughter, Eugenia Gavelle.”

* * *

“Get in here, you two fools,” Sybill ordered, yanking at Heinrich's arm. “Stop gaping at him as if he were your next meal.”

Max gazed at her through blood-rimmed eyes. “You promised--”

“And I will keep my promise, but you'll not have one drop from him until I'm finished, understood?” She tossed them each a small length of rope she pulled from her handbag. “Strip him and tie him up. Hands in the back, ankles crossed.”

“Why?” Robert asked hoarsely when the two creatures began grabbing at his clothing.

“Justice and pay back, Robert. Why else?”

Robert tried to fight the lethargy sapping the energy from his body and his mind. “I did nothing to you,” he protested, wincing at the roughness with which they jerked his hands behind him.

“I know, and that's part of the problem.” Sybill stepped close to him and ran a sharply tipped nail from the edge of his collarbone down to his navel. Once there, her other fingers joined in as she continued her journey even lower. “Perhaps you'll find me more attractive now.”

Robert tried to jerk away from her touch, but his body refused to obey his mind. His only consolation was that his body did not obey her mind any better.

Her hand continued to tease him the way a cat toys with a mouse before devouring the hapless creature--whole.

“If you showed me just a little interest, I might choose to keep you for a while.”

“Why are you doing this, Sybill?”

“Sybill is dead, Robert. Forget her. She was nothing anyway. I've taken a new name for myself. Seraphim, the angel of fire. And I mean to inflame you until you burn away to nothing. Whether this brings you endless pleasure or indescribable agony fully depends on you.”

Then sinking to her knees, she took him into her mouth.

* * *

“No!” Germaine cried out. “Your men have had their sport, leave Eugenia out of this!”

“Is there someone else you'd prefer?” Jacques asked silkily.

“What do you mean?”

“Eugenia is for you, my fine hero, not my men. You are engaged to her, are you not?”

“What if I am? She's done nothing to you.”

“She, like all the others brought here, is condemned to die. Oh, there'll be a trial, but we both know such hearings bear little resemblance to justice beyond that of France's liberation. The innocent will lose their heads along with the guilty. All that really matters is that the blood spilt is blue. The same goes for citizeness Gavelle. Do you know her well?”

“We have met,” Germaine answered tersely.

“Is she in love with you?”

“I never asked her.”

“Then ask her now. Try to view this little ritual as a celebration of sorts--a wedding night consummated a trifle earlier than is customary. If you like, we will even perform a brief ceremony for you and the lady, and you'll certainly have no lack of witnesses for the grand finale. Assuming, of course, that your gentlemanly part can rise to the occasion.”

When Germaine refused to respond, Jacques gripped his chin. “Passion, St. Justine. Are you capable of passion, or are you already dead?”

His eyes fixed on Guvasier, Germaine moved his wrists. The metallic links clinked ominously like the rattling of a ghostly apparition's earthly chains. “I fear your choice of jewelry robs a man of all passionate thoughts, except, perhaps--murder. I shudder to think how an innocent young lady might regard them.”

With an offhanded shrug, Jacques withdrew the key from his jacket pocket. “Your brother's life and future well-being rest upon your conduct and parole. Have I your word you will do nothing but that which is absolutely necessary for you to perform your duty to me and the young lady?”

“I have already given you my word, Guvasier. I am not fool enough to think my family would escape retribution should I harm you.”

Germaine was attempting to cover his bleeding wrists with the shredded lace still clinging to his shirt cuffs when two guards led a terrified Eugenia into the room. She spotted him and ran directly into his arms.

He flinched, but did not try to pull away even when her frightened fingers clutched his wounded back. It was she who slowly drew back to gaze in horror at her blood-smeared palms.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. “You're hurt,” she whispered. “I thought you had come to rescue us, but you are a prisoner yourself.”

“Easy, Genia,” Germaine murmured, drawing her close. “I can't make any promises, but

I ask that you trust me all the same. Can you do that?"

"Of course, only--" His kiss cut off the rest of her reply.

Eugenia met his gentle wooing with innocent tentativeness, but even a tremulous response was enough to convince Germaine that the task Guvasier had set before him was not impossible, merely difficult. For not only would he have to overcome Eugenia's self-consciousness, he would need to overcome his own.

* * *

When the creature "Seraphim" sat back on her heels, it was Robert who was smiling.

"It looks as if even you can't command everything," he said snidely.

Seraphim rose smoothly to her feet. "You're doing it on purpose, aren't you?"

"No, but only because I don't have to."

She slapped him, and Robert flinched from the pain. The entire side of his face burned as if it had caught fire.

"Remember, Danielson, it was your choice," she murmured softly before motioning Heinrich to take her place. "See what you can do with him, only don't pierce his flesh. I want that privilege to be mine."

* * *

Germaine jerked suddenly.

"What is it?" Claire asked. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I felt a sudden pain as if..." He hesitated, then gave Claire a reassuring smile.

"It's gone now. I guess recalling the past hurts more than I thought it would."

"For me, too." Claire had hoped Germaine's catharsis would be liberating--that it would enable her to understand him better--that they would grow closer together because of it. She wanted to exorcise the demons of his past, but now she was no longer sure she was equal to the task. She gazed at him with a love shadowed by regret and sorrow for all he'd endured. She wanted to reassure him, but words seemed too pale and shallow for her feelings.

"You don't need to say anything, Claire," he reassured her, sensing her dilemma.

"I keep asking myself what I would have done if I'd been with you instead of her."

"Knowing you, you would have challenged the lot of them and rescued me."

She laughed even as she shook her head. "I'm not that strong, Germaine. I doubt I possess even Eugenia's strength."

"You do, Claire. Few women are brave enough to face the challenges you faced today, much less meet them with the temerity you showed."

His words warmed Claire, filling her with the courage she needed to continue. Despite two centuries of healing time, Claire knew Germaine's past continued to fester inside him like an unwholesome wound in need of excising. Reaching for his hand, she prayed her love was fierce enough to cauterize the festering and tender enough to heal the wound.

“So, was Eugenia able to rescue you with the strength of her love?”

“Yes and no,” Germaine answered, taking a deep breath. “Her love was strong enough to let me do what had to be done. At least I'd like to think it was her affection for me and not fear of the others that had her yielding to my advances. But it was fear alone that drove my seduction. I've always been a private man,” he added quietly. “Despite my engagement to Eugenia, I did not enjoy taking her while others watched.”

“I'm surprised you were allowed to . . . complete the act.”

“I wasn't. At least not to its final conclusion. The moment I started to climax, Guvasier yanked me off Eugenia and took me.” Germaine winced. “I can still feel the wet roughness of his tongue and the sharp points of his teeth as he stroked me while my body pulsed with--”

Germaine stiffened, then inhaled sharply through his teeth.

“Are you all right?” Claire asked.

He nodded a little uncertainly. “I hated him then, and myself. No longer in control of my own body, I screamed even as I climaxed in a way I never had before, and in that instant we were bonded forever--or at least as long as I chose to live.

“He entered my mind almost as easily as he pierced my flesh, and he worked me the way a sculptor works clay--tugging, plying and molding. In my mind, he ordered me to hold nothing back. He wanted my love, my passion, even my hatred. Telling me that to him they were all one in the same, he commanded me to give him everything I had to give.

“Even when my mortality began to show, and I started to weaken from the blood loss, Guvasier kept at me. His voice booming with unbearable loudness within my head, he commanded me to fight the lethargy until even my breathing was labored.”

Germaine drew a ragged breath. “I was caught between this world and the next--in neither place, yet in both at once, while he took over my mind and body, offering me promises of eternity and immortality. Gathering all the energy that remained me, I lifted my head a fraction and saw the fangs that had drained me of all but the last remaining ounces of my life, and they were coated with blood. My blood.

“Guvasier merely smiled at my shudder of revulsion. Wiping his mouth with my handkerchief, he informed me he was a vampire. I would have laughed in his face, but I lacked the energy. Only as he continued to speak of the differences between us, I slowly began to believe him. I grew weaker by the minute. My throat was so dry, I couldn't

even spit in his face, but I refused his offer of eternal life, nonetheless. I wanted no part of Guvasier or his perversions, but he wanted me, and he wanted me willing.

“When my heartbeat grew erratic, he started to curse me, telling me my death would serve no one, especially not my family, but alive, I would have the power to change things. I would be invincible, nearly impossible to kill, and I would live forever.”

Germaine's fingers closed around Claire's, and she gripped his hand. “I had no desire to be immortal. The image of subsisting on the blood of others made me nauseous. But the single thought that I might have the power to save my family and friends from the treacherous scythe of the revolution compelled me to accept Jacques Guvasier and his richly cursed blood.

“Yet all the while I drank his deadly offering, I promised myself I would never fall victim to the lure of death. I almost broke that promise during my own transformation, only Guvasier's greater strength allowed him to pull free of me. Even in that he was pleased. Laughing, he told me I would make an excellent convert, and I would undoubtedly take many lives throughout my long, illustrious career, but not his, not yet.

“I quickly discovered that a vampire's most basic need is to prey upon the weak and devour them. Second only to that is the desire to create others like himself--to procreate. Unfortunately, I did manage to kill my share of people when I was younger, but I never . . . “ Frowning, he raised a hand to his neck. “I'm not imagining this. It is happening again.”

Claire gripped Germaine's fingers even tighter. “What's happening?”

In one swift movement, Germaine rose and yanked her to her feet. “It's Robert. He's in trouble. I'd better go to him before . . . Where does he live?”

“I'll go with you,” Claire insisted, running for her purse, but Germaine remained where he was--his eyes and mouth gaping while both hands grabbed at his throat as if something unseen was choking him. Then his expression grew slack, as in a deep sleep or . . .

Stunned, Claire couldn't move for a minute, then refusing to believe what she was seeing, she charged Germaine, striking him on the face and shoulders. “Stop it!” she ordered. “Damn you, don't do this to me.”

Germaine grabbed her wrists in a gentle, but unbreakable hold. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you.”

Claire merely shook her head, unable to accept the idea she may have just witnessed the death of her younger brother. “Maybe he's just unconscious,” she whispered, her eyes burning.

“Anything is possible,” Germaine conceded, but the tonelessness of his response gave Claire little cause for optimism.

“Just tell me it isn't true,” she begged quietly. Though he gazed at her with warm understanding, she found no comfort in his expression.

“Why don't you call him, Claire?”

“Call him? Why waste time? Let's just go there before it's too late,” she insisted, her brain still coming to grips with the unreality of it all as she tried to pull away from him to get her coat.

Rather than let her go, Germaine drew her closer. “A telephone call would help explain my presence to the police, should they be needed. I could say you were worried, and when Robert didn't answer his phone at this late hour, I offered to go check on him for you.”

She nodded, then walked over to the phone with Germaine by her side. Her fingers trembling, she pressed the tiny pearl-like buttons that connected her to Robert--and waited. It rang twelve times before Germaine pried the receiver from her fingers and cradled it.

Claire stared at him, then turned again to fetch her coat. “I'm going with you.”

“Not this time,” he contradicted, pulling her into his arms again. “If I'm wrong, I'll come back for you. However, if I'm right, I don't want you there.”

“He's my brother. I can't just sit here and--”

“My instincts tell me there's foul play involved. If I'm right, you're the one who's most in danger.” He didn't add because of me, but Claire knew him well enough to grasp his thoughts--she just didn't happen to agree with him. And as long as there was a chance . . .

“If I'm truly in danger,” she argued softly, “wouldn't I be safer with you, than left here alone and unprotected?”

His eyes narrowed, he stared at her for a long moment. Then releasing her, he said, “I'll get your coat.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Throughout the fifteen long minutes it took for Claire to get from her apartment to Robert's, she clung tightly to the frail hope that her brother was still alive. He had to be. She had risked too many lives for him not to be. Still, by the time the taxi stopped in front of Robert's building, Claire's only thought was to get to her brother as quickly as possible. Her fingers were gripping the car door handle when Germaine grabbed her wrist to hold her back.

"Easy," he warned softly, trying not to arouse suspicion.

Claire wanted to scream at him, but she was afraid if she did that her worst fears would come true. Germaine wanted them to appear normally concerned--not panicked, except Claire found nothing normal about this. Normal had ceased to be a part of her life a month ago. And after what she'd seen and heard lately, she doubted normal would ever be a part of her life again.

They finally reached Robert's door, which was locked with no sign of a forced entry. As Germaine knocked, he asked, "Do you have a key?"

Her fingers trembling, Claire fished in her purse. God, please don't let him be dead, she prayed silently as her fingers curled around the key's cool, serrated blade. Unable to still her shaking, she handed the thin, brass object to Germaine and held her breath while he fitted it into the lock.

The door opened easily to a dark apartment. Claire instinctively reached for the light switch, but Germaine stopped her. "Don't touch anything. Just stay here, I'll be right back."

Rather than argue, Claire simply followed him. A few seconds later, she wished she had taken his advice.

Robert was in the living room. He lay curled on one side with his wrists and ankles tied behind his naked body. His fair skin gleamed palely in the moonlight, but other than the bindings, Claire couldn't see a mark on him. She prayed he was merely unconscious, then she saw his face. His open-eyed grimace reflected such horror and agony that Claire screamed--the sound emerging choked and hollow. She gasped for air, but couldn't catch her breath. Her hands tight about her own throat, she staggered backwards in a near faint.

Germaine was instantly at her side. Placing a firm arm about her waist he led her over to the couch and insisted she sit. He waited until she regained her breath, then in a tone that brooked no refusal he ordered her to stay put while he snatched a zebra-stripped bed sheet off Robert's unmade bed. He started to cover him when Claire stopped him.

"Wait," she croaked, her throat convulsing with the effort it took to keep her stomach's bitter bile from rising into her mouth. "His neck," she managed finally, pointing at what looked to her like a tight, thin ruby necklace.

"I know." He laid the sheet over Robert as carefully as possible to preserve whatever evidence might be there.

"What is it? What's wrapped around his throat?"

"A wire garrote," Germaine answered her with toneless conviction as he picked up the phone and dialed the police. In a calm, detached voice, he advised the answering officer that Robert Daniels of 415 Edgemont Arms had been murdered.

While Germaine reported the cold-blooded facts to the police, Claire fought to still her trembling. She had nothing left. Nothing. Whoever did this had killed her baby brother. Murdered him brutally. For that they would pay, even if it meant her own death. Her resolve cloaked Claire in a quiet calmness that was neither natural nor comforting--just insulating. No longer cold, no longer afraid, she looked about her as though she gazed through the eyes of a stranger, taking in every detail, no matter how small or inconsequential. Nothing had been disturbed and she saw no evidence to suggest Robert had put up a protest. Yet he'd been stripped, bound and choked to death.

The moment Germaine hung up, she said, "You know who did this, don't you?"

Refusing to meet her eyes, he crossed to the window. "I have my suspicions, but I can't say for sure just yet."

"Then tell me whom you suspect."

"Don't worry, Claire, we'll find Robert's murderer, and when we're sure, we'll tell you everything we know."

"No, Germaine," she insisted with equal conviction. "You'll tell me everything you know, the exact moment you know it, or I'll find out the truth without you. So help me."

* * *

The police arrived at three a.m.. A weary homicide detective briefly interrogated Claire and Germaine before he concluded that Robert Danielson's murder was most likely connected to a recent series of sadistic, homosexual executions. Although both the press and the police viewed Robert as a quiet, law-abiding citizen, his political and sexual leanings were widely known. Robert's more serious writings, which he had published during the early stages of his illness, served as a banner-waving crusade against the plights and abused rights of homosexuals in a heterosexual culture.

The balding, middle-aged detective spoke in a low confidential tone to Germaine, telling him of their past encounters with the ultraconservative group, who had turned fanatical in their efforts to rid the earth of such so-called deviants.

Admittedly, the piano wire garrote combined with the revelation that all of Robert's blood had been drained from him were an unexpected twist to these Christian vigilantes' usual methods, but to the New York police--nothing came as a surprise. Luckily, Robert's apparent good health and track-free skin gave them no cause to check his

medical records, or the Big Apple's men in blue might have finally found something to surprise them after all.

The detective assured Claire they'd do everything possible to catch her brother's murderer, but she could tell by the tired man's expression that they would merely pile her brother's file on top of the steadily growing stack of unsolved cult murders. Claire was neither surprised nor disappointed by that revelation since this wasn't a crime she expected the police to solve. Her brother's murder had been a crime of passion--violent hatred. And his murderer was a vampire. She was certain of it.

The officers went through the routine of dusting for fingerprints and photographing the crime scene before they turned Robert over to the medical examiner. Claire heard brief mention of an autopsy before both the M.E. and the investigating detective unexpectedly reversed their decision, insisting such an invasive procedure would not be necessary under the circumstances. Then, in a slow, domino-like progression, each man present agreed that releasing the body for immediate cremation was best. As if each man had the same thought, simultaneously, they began to hastily scribble notes in their files to corroborate their unprecedented ruling. Claire listened while Germaine advised the M.E. of Robert's funeral arrangements. Ironically, Robert had already seen to his own provisions, opting for the cremation he'd so vehemently protested for Marguerite. The medical examiner kindly took one of Robert's suits and assured them he would contact the crematorium once all the paperwork had been signed. When they were finally done, the detective, still looking a little dazed, promised he'd be in touch the moment they had a break in the case, then he departed, leaving Claire with a stained carpet in an apartment filled with powder-coated furniture.

Numbly, Claire stared at the spot where Robert had lain only moments before. A part of her wanted to cry, to mourn the death of her brother, but the rest of her only wanted revenge.

Engrossed in her private struggle with bitterness and resentment, Claire couldn't pinpoint the exact moment when Marcus and Nigel joined them, but it seemed like only seconds had passed before she heard Marcus's deep voice harshened by anger and concern.

"It is fortunate the police were fooled, my Prince, but even a fledgling could see that this murder was in no way connected to that mortal vigilante group. The vampire who committed this atrocity wanted to be exposed. Such lack of discretion poses a danger to us all."

"Even worse," Nigel added in an undertone to Germaine, "is that anyone who's known you for anytime at all, couldn't miss your revolutionary signature on this. Whoever did this, meant for the brotherhood to suspect you."

"Except I didn't do it," Germaine insisted darkly. "I haven't used a wire since the Terror." His brow furrowed in thought, Nigel asked, "Was the garrote genuine?"

Germaine gave his friend an exasperated look. "The police had no reason to suspect me, but they might have changed their minds if I suggested they trace the wire to see if it was stolen out of Marie Antoinette's harpsichord more than two hundred years ago."

"The wire's authenticity will hardly matter," Marcus countered, "if our fellow brothers in blood learn how the victim was bound, garroted, and then drained of his blood after death to ensure against a conversion. Such potential to betray our existence would be viewed as a treason of the worst sort, I fear."

Germaine strode over to the window that looked out into the back alley. "In short, someone has gone to great pains to set me up for this murder. The question is, who has most to gain from my imminent downfall?"

"It wasn't Sybill," Nigel insisted. "Killing Robert wouldn't gain her anything. Not when she's already got everything she ever wanted."

"Are you so sure of that, Nigel?" Claire inquired civilly as she rose to join them. "As I recall, Sybill vowed to carry out her own brand of justice for what each of you did to her--St. Justine especially." Germaine looked at her, but it was Nigel who spoke.

"Yes, but that was before . . . She's immortal now, Claire, and we are linked. I'd know if she did something like this. I'd feel it."

"What if she didn't want you to know? Couldn't Sybill block her intentions from you?"

With a shrug, Nigel thrust his hands into his pockets. "I suppose, but she's still just a fledgling. I doubt she's developed the skills needed to disguise something as gruesome as this."

Claire could see that her suspicions hurt Nigel, but she refused to let pain or grief deter her. "I believe Sybill had plenty of practice deceiving people when she was a mere mortal, Nigel. She should have no difficulty employing such tactics now."

"So why don't we just track her down, throw her naked to the lions and see if they eat her? That ought to prove the little she-wolf's innocence or guilt," Marcus proposed dryly as he leaned toward Claire. "We will find Robert's killer, Claire, and we'll bring him or her to justice."

"Your justice, Marcus? What good can your mock trials, whippings and torture do for my brother now? It's your secret code of justice and honor that has caused all this misery from the start. Sybill's dissatisfaction, my mother's death and even Robert's murder can be tracked back to your antiquated rules and laws. Isn't it about time you admitted your mistakes and faced your own guilt?"

Seeing the gladiator's mouth thin to a disapproving line, Claire marched past the brooding giant, grabbed her coat and jerked her arms into it. "In case it matters, I'd like you to know that I hold each of you at fault for this. Everyone that is, except Germaine." Fighting to keep her voice from wavering, she turned to face him. "It is your intolerance toward transformations that I blame most of all." He didn't answer her, but then she

really didn't expect him to.

Snatching her purse from the couch, she headed toward the door where Marcus stood blocking her exit. Claire struggled to stare him down until he raised his hands to her arms. Reacting instinctively, she jerked free and slapped his hands away. "Don't ever touch me again," she warned, rubbing away his touch. "Any of you!"

Marcus offered her a slight nod. "Forgive me, but we cannot let you go, Claire. It's not safe for you out there. Not any longer."

Claire glared at him through narrowed slits. "From what I've observed tonight, I think I would be infinitely safer among mortals than I am remaining among your bloodthirsty lot."

"Unfortunately," Germaine interceded, "your bond with us is one that cannot be broken."

Deadened to everything but a desire for revenge, Claire whirled to face the man she so badly wanted to hate. "Until death do us part . . . Right, St. Justine?"

"So it seems."

"Tell me, just how many deaths does it take?"

His eyes burned into her like twin yellow lasers. "Just one," he answered softly. "Yours."

Claire bit her lip to keep from screaming out loud, but she was already screaming inside.

Grief and pain flowed into her with the prickling awareness of newly awakened feeling, and she hurt almost more than she could bear. To keep from shattering, she swathed her emotions in a bandage of faultfinding. If Germaine had made Robert immortal, as she'd asked, her brother wouldn't be lying in the morgue. And if he had loved her mother a fraction more than he hated Jacques Guvasier, Marguerite would still be alive.

Germaine's stubbornness had resulted in Claire losing the two people closest to her. And neither of them deserved to die the way they had.

Afraid she'd say or do something she'd only regret if she remained with them a moment longer, Claire strode over to the Roman barring her way. "Do what you will, Gladiator," she challenged, "but I'm leaving. Try to stop me, I'll make sure this entire building knows it."

Marcus cast a sympathetic look at Germaine, then stepped aside. Claire stormed out the door without looking back. She didn't expect they'd let her leave without an escort, but she was determined to try. Reaching the front door, she halted at the sight of the press gathered outside like vultures, waiting to pounce on their prey. She considered the journalists for a moment, wondering if they could help her in ways the police couldn't.

"That would be a mistake," Marcus warned from behind her. "They won't believe you, but they will still hound you."

"I can make up my own mind, thank you," Claire replied brittlely.

"I can see that," he responded with a small wave of his hand.

A reporter looked down the street. "Over there!" he called to his photographer. "I think I see someone coming out a side entrance." The rest, fearing they would be scooped, hurried after them. The front of the building was clear.

"That was unnecessary," Claire insisted beneath her breath.

"For you perhaps, but not for me. Journalists and I never quite seem to get along."

Marching out the front door, Claire tried to raise a hand to hail a cab only to discover she couldn't raise her arm. Unable to do more than wiggle her fingers, it felt as if someone or something held her arms immobile. Yet, no one touched her. With her arms pressed to her sides as if a broad band of silk bound her upper body, Claire turned and faced her accoster.

"I thought that walking would be better," Marcus explained with a slight smile.

Reduced to moving like a scale-waged extra in *The Mummy*, Claire gritted her teeth and snapped, "You're wasting your time, Aularius. So, do us both a favor and go away."

Clasping an arm to his chest, Marcus bowed to her. "You have wounded me most gravely, mistress. You see before you a broken man."

"Please, Marcus," Claire whispered raggedly. "Release me and go away."

"I can't do that, Claire. Even if such a choice were permitted me, I couldn't desert you now. Just walk with me for a bit. I won't try to influence you, and I'll even stay silent--for a while."

Left with little choice, Claire agreed. Her arms freed, she turned and strode in the general direction of her apartment, which, by luck or purpose, was in the opposite direction the newsmen had headed. It was a good half-hour's walk from Robert's to her place, but she didn't mind the exercise as much as she minded the fact it was being forced on her at four-thirty in the morning. Concentrating on her anger rather than the other more terrifying feelings that threatened to overwhelm her, Claire glanced about her in hopes of spotting a possible rescuer.

The streets were empty of all but the discards of humanity who sought refuge from the cold in hollowed out doorways and cardboard boxes. The wind had died down, leaving in its wake a cold, eerie quiet underlaid by the constant, steady hum of traffic intermittently punctuated by a screech of tires and an impatient honk of a horn.

Determined to prevail, Claire marched ahead of Marcus, and tried to pretend he wasn't following her. The maneuver was futile at best, however. Marcus was a large man, and ignoring him was rather like walking through the park and pretending the heavy-booted thug following ten steps behind just happened to be strolling in the same direction. The primary difference being that Marcus's predatory tread was silent.

After five minutes, Claire stopped and faced him. "This isn't going to work."

"I never said it would. I merely sought to comply with your wishes."

"If you'd wanted to do that, you could have transformed Robert yourself more than three weeks ago. Then at least he'd be alive."

His eyebrows arched at her tone, but his voice remained even. "That's debatable. I won't argue that Robert's death was a tragedy, but you can't seriously blame Germaine for offering him a normal life? He did everything he could to save your brother at no small risk to himself."

"Robert could have been immortal," Claire protested against the lump in her throat.

Marcus extended his arm to her. "May I?" he asked.

Accepting his escort, Claire fell into step beside him and took a small measure of comfort from his nearness despite her anger and grief.

"Living a life that never ends is not nearly as glamorous as it sounds," Marcus admitted. "Nor is the life of a vampire for everyone. For some, the blood rite is an unholy communion that fills the convert with so much self-disgust that he eventually devises his own destruction. For others, it becomes a lust that takes over their every waking thought and deed until they start consuming lives the way an alcoholic drains cheap bottles of wine.

"And that is only one aspect of the change. In addition, a fledgling has to contend with the devastating effect of daylight, the ability to see, hear and smell things way beyond mortal capabilities, and an extraordinary mental acuity to mold mortal minds. Combine these abilities with superior strength, speed and agility and you've created either a valuable ally or a formidable foe. As I said, not everyone is suited to be a vampire. And if the choice is forced upon you, the results can be even more devastating."

Although none of this changed the fact that Robert had been denied his best chance for survival, Claire found her curiosity piqued about Germaine's usually taciturn Roman guard. "What about you, Marcus? Did you choose this life, or was it chosen for you?"

"How I became immortal is unimportant. It is Germaine I wish to discuss. He never sought to be immortal, and I know he's regretted his vampirism more than once. He's not all-knowing, or all-powerful. If he were, he would have seen to it that Robert was protected."

"I know he never meant Robert any harm," Claire conceded. "That isn't the point."

"Perhaps not, yet you believe Germaine could have saved Robert if he'd transformed him."

Claire felt a knot of impotence form in her throat. "It would have given Robert a fighting chance. Instead, he ended up as a mortal trophy for Germaine and his damned policies."

Marcus didn't reply immediately, but when he did answer his voice and manner were more distant. "Did Germaine ever tell you how he killed Jacques Guvasier?"

"No," Claire admitted uneasily, recalling their conversation had been cut short when Germaine felt the garrote cutting into Robert's neck.

"Germaine hated that vampire. He only accepted Guvasier's offer because it offered him a chance to save those he cared about most from the guillotine--except the insatiable blood drinker kept Germaine at his side for nearly a week. Those six days were undoubtedly the longest in Germaine's life. To Guvasier, nothing was forbidden and Germaine's promise bound him to obey. He even drank blood from a young boy, assuring himself that he could atone for his sins once he had gotten the others safely away.

"The moment Germaine was granted his freedom, he demanded the release of his relatives only to be told they'd been executed two days earlier. Guvasier insisted he'd had no idea. However, Germaine didn't believe him, and might have killed the useless parasite right then, if he hadn't discovered the Gavelles were still alive. Germaine promptly sought out Eugenia. She was scared, but unharmed. Other than a few lewd suggestions, the guards had left her alone. Her mother and father, though still alive, weren't nearly as fortunate.

"Once assured the Gavelles were well enough to travel, Germaine procured their release and saw them to Calais. There, he arranged for a ship to take them to England. Promising Eugenia he would come to her when he could, Germaine pressed his ring into her hand as a token of his honorable intentions, then he returned to the prison to avenge the deaths of those he loved.

"Eugenia never did understand why Germaine insisted on staying in France, but Germaine refused to leave until he had personally dealt with each individual he held responsible.

"Every man he garroted was involved with either his family's death or the Gavelles' torment. Jacques Guvasier managed to escape, but not for long. Like a hound trailing the unmistakable scent of blood, Germaine tracked Guvasier over the countryside, vowing to see the vampire paid for the dark pleasures that had cost so many, so much, so quickly.

"Though young, Germaine was extremely dedicated and exceptionally crafty. He bided his time, waiting for just the right moment, then pounced.

"Luring Guvasier away from the protection of his allies to an isolated spot, Germaine grabbed him and staked him to the ground through his heart. Contrary to your lurid Hollywood horror tales, this doesn't kill a vampire, it merely immobilizes him, albeit most cruelly.

"Then, while Guvasier screamed and begged for the mercy he was incapable of showing

others, Germaine methodically sawed off each of his extremities, joint-by-joint, until all that remained of Jacques Guvasier was a stumpless torso. An ordinary man would have died long before the last bone was severed, but as long as his head remains attached, a vampire will continue to live--and suffer. Other than an actual decapitation, no injury--no matter how severe or painful its infliction--can kill an immortal. Not even total evisceration, which is exactly what Germaine performed--stuffing the blood-pumping entrails down Guvasier's throat before he finally relented and beheaded him. Only then did Germaine feel really free, but to insure against all chances that Guvasier might resurrect himself, Germaine cremated each of the body parts separately.

“When he'd finished his task, Germaine calmly set out to destroy himself.” At Claire's involuntary shudder, Marcus added, “Not for what he did to Guvasier. In Germaine's mind, the man deserved every moment of excruciating torment he received, but because he discovered he enjoyed performing the ritualistic execution. So much so, he was nearly overcome by the desire to kill again--this time solely for the pleasure it offered him.”

Not wanting to hear any more, Claire tried to cross the street in the middle of the block to get away, but Marcus pulled her back. “The truth is ugly sometimes, Claire, but vampires relish their feedings as much as any mortal might enjoy a wondrously sweet delicacy. The act of consuming the essence of a life, until it becomes one with your own, can be the ultimate in sensual gratification. Germaine, however, was never much of a hedonist. Sickened by what he had become, he vowed to end his existence the only way he knew how--by starvation.

“By the time I found him, he wasn't looking well at all. Though still in his infancy by vampire terms, he offered me and all my noble efforts quite a battle. I'm not convinced he's completely forgiven me, but once he accepted the fact he couldn't die by starvation alone, and that I would actively hinder any other means he pursued to end his life, he gradually abandoned his obsession with death.

“Other than a brief separation during the two world wars, we've been together ever since.” Turning her to face him, he gazed into her eyes. “Don't you see? Germaine couldn't condemn Robert to our way of life, Claire. Not when he's never been fully reconciled to it himself.”

Still reeling from what Marcus had just told her, Claire couldn't handle any more talk of vampires just then, so she focused on the only point in his discussion that she could handle. “What about Eugenia? What happened to her?”

Marcus released her and continued their stroll. “She married an Englishman, had two children, and died at age fifty-six in her sleep.”

“Just like that? She didn't try to get Germaine back?”

“Of course, she did. Germaine, however, managed to persuade her to accept the man who offered her a chance for marriage and a family. The Englishman was quite smitten

with her, and Eugenia really had no other choice once Germaine discovered she was with child.”

Stopping suddenly, Claire stared at Marcus in shock. “Pregnant? Whose child was it?”

“Before genetic testing, one could never be totally certain about such things.”

“Calendars don't lie, Marcus. Whose child?”

He hesitated for a moment, then answered, “Germaine's.” When Claire started to speak, he cut her off. “A boy, and no, Germaine never saw him. There would have been little point. Nonetheless, he managed to keep informed about his son, and was singularly proud of the lad.”

“Did the boy grow up and have children of his own?”

“Two girls. Through them I guess you could say that Germaine's blood has continued to flourish, although none of them ever knew of the kinship, nor ever carried the St. Justine name.”

“That must be awfully difficult for Germaine. To know he's had a son, granddaughters, even great grandchildren, yet never see them. Never hold them, or tell them of their relationship to him.”

“It's not nearly as difficult as watching someone you love, die.”

Claire closed her eyes. “No, I suppose not,” she conceded quietly. Lifting her chin, she gazed at the man beside her. She couldn't say she understood him, but she sensed he was holding something back from her. A bond existed between him and Germaine that went deeper than a century's long friendship. It was as if he'd purposely devoted himself to protect his friend. But from what? “What about you, Marcus? Have you let those you've loved die also, or have you shared your gift with us mortals?”

He indicated the doorway with a slight lift of his hand. “This is where you live, is it not?”

Surprised they had arrived so quickly, Claire merely nodded.

“I will see you to your apartment, then I'd best go.”

“Are you trying to avoid the question, or simply refusing to answer it?”

“Neither. I just don't see any point in replying to it.” He held the door open for her. “My past is irrelevant.”

She swept past him and waited by the elevator banks. “Not to me. You are Germaine's closest friend. I want to know if you have always shared his point of view.”

“I do now, isn't that enough?” he asked, pushing the “up” button.

“No. Have you passed on your powers to others?”

The elevator doors opened and he gestured for her to precede him, then stood inside with

his arms crossed while he waited for her to press her floor. When she finally jabbed the knob, he said, "I never pretended to possess Germaine's strength of character, nor do I claim to be a saint. Throughout the centuries, I have killed my share. Some for the sole pleasure of the hunt, others simply because I believed the world would be a better place without them. Still, I have loved as well. And while caught in the midst of Cupid's thrall, I have sacrificed more than a few hundred lives in his name."

"You created more than a hundred vampires?" Claire exclaimed just as the doors opened.

"Lower your voice please," he cautioned. "Unless the prospect of spending the night in a padded cell appeals to you."

Offering a strained smile of apology, Claire retrieved her keys and led Marcus to her apartment. "Can you tell me about them?" she asked, making certain her voice didn't carry beyond them. "Where are they? Are any of them with you now?"

"To my misfortune, they did not work out. They were ultimately destroyed."

Stopped at her doorway, Claire gazed at him in dismay. "Destroyed? How? By your enemies?"

"You should know me better than that, Claire. I would never permit an enemy, or even a friend, for that matter, to destroy something I had once loved and cared for."

"You killed your own children?" she whispered, her dismay quickly turning to horror.

"They were dangerous either to themselves or to others. It was the kindest thing I could do under the circumstances. More than one hundred years have passed since one of my making has roamed the earth, and like Germaine, I have concluded that few individuals possess the special qualities needed to successfully adapt to a vampire's lifestyle. Fewer still are ever content."

"Then no one of your blood still lives today?" she asked a little disbelievingly.

"Unfortunately, that is not a claim I can make, no matter how much I might wish it otherwise," he admitted, removing the keys from her shaking fingers and opening the door.

"What happened?" Claire asked despite the growing lump in her throat.

Marcus merely gazed at her for a long moment before he guided her into her apartment and shut the door. "One of my children, a daughter to be precise, became spellbound with the power and pleasure of her transformed state. She needed to be adored much in the way the flower needs the sun. I wasn't enough for her," he conceded, tossing Claire's keys onto a nearby table. "No one man could be. She wanted at least a dozen mortal men surrounding her, paying homage to her, flattering and pleasuring her. But a week or so after she'd collected them, she complained she was bored. For a change, she would order one man to tie up the others with silken bonds. If any protested, she would use her

powers to ensure his compliance. Then after tying the last one up herself, she would bring her champions to climax one-by-one, and love each one to death--literally.

“As it neared dawn, she'd killed all but one--the one who'd brought her the most pleasure. To him she would grant her gift of blood, promising him he would be her only immortal lover.

“Except a newly made vampire rarely makes an exceptional bed partner, and my Josette was not long on patience. Usually by the next sunset, she would abandon her new plaything for some new pets that were less likely to bite.

“I was wrong to let her live as long as I did, but she was such a shy, innocent thing when I took her, I was certain she would soon grow weary of her games and come back to me. I waited more than six months--until the creatures she spawned began inciting others to one of the bloodiest revolutions known to mankind. I knew then that I would have to put a permanent end to her frolics, or spend eternity undoing her deeds.”

“How'd you do it?” Claire asked quietly, her insides twisting with revulsion and sympathy.

“As painlessly as I knew how to back then. I don't think she really realized what was happening when I showed up at her door to arrest her in the name of France.”

Claire stiffened as the full implication of his admission struck her.

“You were with the French rebellion?”

“Mortal politics mean nothing to me, Claire. I offered my services solely to ensure my bloodthirsty mate met a quick and relatively painless end.”

“But Germaine--”

“Back then, Germaine St. Justine was just another unfortunate aristocrat among a hundred others. I had no interest in him or Guvasier. I was there to behead my wife, and that's all.”

“Are you saying you came upon Germaine, entirely by accident, after he killed Guvasier?”

“No. Not--entirely by accident.”

“Then how?”

“As I said, Germaine never wanted to be immortal. He hated what he was, yet during his search for Guvasier he crossed paths with Victor Cummings. The fact that Victor was an Englishman living quite comfortably in France didn't surprise our French Comte nearly half as much as the fact that Victor was a vampire of less than two months making who actually enjoyed his new life. Germaine was in awe of Victor's serenity, despite his inability to feel the same way, and the two struck up an unlikely friendship. Victor was even willing to join his tormented young friend's quest for revenge. That is until Mr.

Cummings happened upon a sweet, young piece of fluff that blushed prettily every time he attempted to catch her eye.

“A gentleman first, vampire second, Victor abandoned his search with Germaine to pursue his heart's desire. Germaine didn't begrudge his new friend's amorous pursuits. He envied him for having seen the young Frenchwoman first, but Germaine had others to think about. Others who had died because of one man's need for sensual gratification. He intended to part amicably with Victor until the Englishman confessed he meant to make his Giselle one of them.

“Germaine argued against it, but Victor wasn't listening. His mind was made up. He was going to make Giselle his immortal wife before the next sunrise. He was convinced all she needed was a little more wooing and she would be as eager as he for their ultimate joining.

“Hearing that, Germaine postponed his departure until he had a chance to speak with Giselle himself, only she sought him out first. The rest you already know. Rather than become the creature of the night Germaine described, Giselle took her own life. Germaine, however, was unaware of that for several months. Since after speaking with Giselle, he left to pursue Guvasier.”

“But how were you involved in all this?”

“Through my blood with Victor. He was one of the twenty or so my Josette had selected to live, and one of six that still survive today.”

Claire felt her throat tighten. “Do you think Victor killed my brother?”

“No. Victor only kills in self-defense. He is a transformer, not a murderer. But he has never forgiven Germaine for Giselle's suicide, and he is obsessed with the notion of revenge.”

“Which is why he tried to abduct me earlier tonight?”

“I'm afraid so, yes.”

“And I suppose Victor is the reason you've sworn yourself to protect Germaine?”

He shrugged as if he didn't really want to discuss his reasons, then slowly met her eyes.

“I'm not proud of many things I've done, and making Josette immortal was one of my worst mistakes. Of her six progenies that still live, none of them offers a threat, except Victor. I can't alter the events of the past, but I can make certain that history doesn't repeat itself.”

“What about Sybill?”

“She's Nigel's problem. But if he won't see to her, I will.”

Claire shivered at the sudden coldness that entered his voice. Marcus could and would kill if he thought it was necessary, and without compunction. She wanted her brother's

murderer dead, but doubted she possessed the cold-blooded mentality needed to do the job herself.

“So now you agree with Germaine that no one should be made immortal,” she concluded.

“I didn't say that.” His lean fingers reached out and tilted up her chin. He gazed at her for a long while before he bent his head and kissed her lightly on the lips. Drawing back, he opened the door to her apartment and whispered, “I only know that neither Marguerite, nor Robert, would have been happy, Claire. Germaine made the right choice.” Then offering her a bow, he turned and, in what seemed a trick of the eye, became one with the darkness of the hallway.

Claire stared at the spot where Marcus had stood just moments before. In some ways, the extraordinary talents of these supernatural beings seemed unreal to her, like a surrealistic, yet terribly vivid dream. In other ways, her relationship with them was almost mundane.

But at that moment, Claire felt as if she'd stumbled into another dimension.

When she was alone with Germaine, she found it difficult to imagine him as anything but an ordinary, mortal man. Unlike Marcus, he went out of his way to restrict his powers around her, as though he wished to preserve an illusion of similarity between them.

Over the past month, she had come to view his strictly limited diet as a minor idiosyncrasy, like a man who ate nothing but steak and potatoes for dinner. His sensitivity to sunlight was not all that unusual, given the current cautions against sunbathing and the fierce competitiveness in factored sun lotions. And his superior strength reassured her, rather than frightened her.

Even his ability to read her thoughts and transmit his own seemed more of an extension of their closeness than an unusual power.

Claire gave herself a brief mental shake and locked her door. No matter what Marcus and Germaine insisted, she could not bring herself to think of them as--undead. To her they were very much alive. And the realization that their lives would never end while her brother's already had, suddenly left her feeling very much alone, and a little lost.

Shivering, Claire rubbed her arms and decided what she needed most was a long soak in a steamy shower. She made the water as hot as she could stand, then stripped and stepped into the foggy chamber. Robert was dead. And no matter how hard she wished it weren't so, she couldn't bring him back. She was truly alone now. With no one to hear or care, she stood beneath the pounding spray and sobbed for the brother she had fought so hard to save. Her legs gave beneath her and she slid along the smooth, tile wall until she sat bent-legged beneath the needle-like cascade. Sobs welled up from deep inside her as hot rain pummeled her neck and shoulders.

Claire had no idea how long she remained curled up on her shower floor, but the pads of her fingers and feet were pitted with wavy wrinkles when her sobs turned to silent tears.

Her grief spent, she needed to turn her attention to bringing Robert's murderer to justice. It wouldn't be easy. She was a single, mortal woman pitting herself against creatures who were a thousand times stronger with powers beyond her comprehension and understanding. She might not survive the battle, but she was determined to win it. Once she'd seen to a few legal and personal arrangements, she'd be ready to tackle the impossible.

Pulling herself to her feet, she finished her shower and dried off. Then wrapping the plush pink Turkish towel about her damp hair like a turban, she slipped into her robe, stepped out of the bathroom and nearly screamed.

Germaine sat on her bed, watching her through softly glowing eyes. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you."

"How did you get in here? The door was locked, wasn't it?" she gasped when she'd recovered enough to speak.

"Of course. Except locks have never been very effective in keeping out vampires, once they've been invited." At Claire's light shudder, he added. "I assumed from what you said at Robert's that it might be better if we kept apart for a bit. I was wrong, and I'm sorry."

Unable to speak just then, Claire merely nodded.

"Feel better now?"

Claire stared at him. He was wearing the same gray, turtleneck sweater and charcoal pants he wore the night she deliberately summoned him. It gave her a feeling that was both a little unnerving and oddly comforting. She had not consciously summoned him, yet she was certain he'd come because he sensed she needed him. Still, it wasn't until she saw him that she realized what it was she wanted from him most. The rational part of her brain counseled her to wait until she was rested, but Claire doubted she'd could sleep tonight anyway. She was much too tense. Her life had already been irrevocably altered this day, what was one more climatic event?

Trembling with stress and nervous energy, Claire thrust her hands deep into the pockets of her robe and said, "I had a long talk with Marcus. It wasn't his intention, but he made me realize that you probably felt Robert's death even more strongly than I did."

He gave his shoulders an offhanded shrug and rose from the bed. "Though my link with Robert was strong, it's nowhere near as intense as my union has been with you or even your mother. He was like a brother to me. I liked him, I probably would have enjoyed being around him, but I never loved him."

"Yet you felt him die. You experienced his pain."

"In a way, yes. He was of my blood, but not of my making."

"Marcus believes neither Mother nor Robert would have been happy as vampires."

"Few people are," he admitted quietly.

"Would you be mortal again, if you could be?"

"I don't know." He stepped away from her to gaze out the window. The night was clear, but the bright city lights made it almost impossible to see the stars. "Sometimes I think I have lived too long. That even being mortal again wouldn't relieve my inner unease. Then there are times when I feel as if my life has just begun. Unfortunately, those moments are fleeting at best."

"I know. Me, too. Sometimes I think I've seen and done more than one person should. Then I think about what I haven't done, and the experiences I'll never have."

His eyes barely met hers before he looked away. "Perhaps you should think seriously of marriage. A husband, a child--some normalcy in your life...."

"Considering everything that's happened over the past month, what makes you think I could lead any type of normal life now?"

"Has it all been so terrible?" he asked mutedly.

"No, not all," she admitted. "But even you've got to admit the best moments have been--unusual."

This time when his eyes met hers, she felt an odd tremor course through her. Unwilling to say what was really on her mind, she rubbed her hands along her arms. "I'm cold. I think I'd like a cup of tea." Offering him a smile, she headed for the kitchen certain he would follow. "Want anything?" she asked politely as she filled the copper kettle.

"Perhaps." He followed her into the kitchen, but waited for her to set the teapot on the stove before he said, "I sense you're hiding something from me. What is it?"

"I'm not hiding anything," she insisted, but they both knew that wasn't precisely the truth. She did want something from him, something very badly, but she knew he'd refuse her and she didn't want to risk an argument by asking.

Standing behind her, he traced the outer edge of her ear with his forefinger. And with a touch as light as a summer's breeze, he trailed a pathway to the nape of her neck. She shivered, but this time it was pleasure, not fear or cold that rippled through her.

"You're trying to block your thoughts from me. Why?" he asked, bending slightly to press his lips to the sensitive areas his fingers had so recently explored.

"Because," she gasped lightly, "you'll either refuse me outright, or get angry again."

"No," he countered, easing her robe down and pressing his lips to her neck. "It's not my anger you fear, it's something else. You want something from me, only you know I will resist giving it to you. What is it?"

She tried to pull away, but he merely tightened his hold making her feel like a netted butterfly. There was no cruelty in the capture, but she was uncertain about it nonetheless. Even more contradictory was the knowledge that she didn't really want to be released. She wanted to be drawn tighter still into the net, until even the thought of escape was impossible.

He drew back an inch to gaze at her through eyes aglow with a golden fire. Just then the teakettle released its shrill whistle. Slowly, reluctantly, he lowered his hands to his sides.

Pouring the boiling water into her cup, Claire said, "When death claims someone close to you, suddenly and unexpectedly, you start to question things you've taken for granted--such as your own mortality. The experience changes you, making you more aware of yourself and others. You become a little more grateful for what you have and a little more conscious of what you've missed. It forces you to reevaluate your priorities and take a long, hard look at your future."

"So, you do want to get married," he prodded gently.

"No, not exactly."

"What is it, then?"

Still uncertain of his reaction, Claire took a sip of her tea.

"Whatever it is, Claire, I won't object, I promise. If I can do anything at all to help, I will."

"You mean that?" she asked in a mere whisper.

"Yes, of course."

She looked at him then. And without pretense or shyness, she said, "I want you to make love to me like a man--a mortal man."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

His expression unreadable, Germaine said nothing for a moment. “Why?” he asked finally, his voice a low murmur.

“Because I've been a virgin for twenty-three years, and tonight . . . Tonight, I'd really like to change that. It might not be rational, or even make sense, but I want to know what it's like to make love the way most other women do.”

He hesitated, then closed his eyes. “You're asking the wrong man.”

Claire clamped her lips together and shook her head. She'd expected him to decline, but hoped for better. Disappointment embittering her frustration, she asked, “What do you suggest I do, then? Put an ad in the paper? Wanted: one man to take a slightly used and anemic actress and make a woman out of her.”

His eyes narrowed for a moment, then he shrugged. “If that's what you're after. I warned you there were things I'd be unable to give you.”

“Unable, or unwilling?” When he declined to answer, Claire took a moment to collect her patience and sip her tea. “It's not as if I'm asking you to get me pregnant. Being pregnant and having children were never my life's goals, but....” She hesitated, unsure how to express her feelings in words without sounding stupid. “I never imagined myself dying a virgin, either.”

“No one is going to hurt you, Claire, and you're not going to die,” he insisted testily.

His sharp response only served to spark her own ire. “Odd, but I thought that's exactly what you, Marcus and Nigel were telling me earlier.” She set her cup down with a clang.

“You're in danger, yes, but no one is going to kill you. We're making sure of that.”

“I'm so relieved,” she retorted, retrieving a fresh loaf of bread from its keeper and lowering two slices into the toaster. “Although it's too bad you three didn't think of using some of your precautions while Robert was still alive.”

“Don't bait me, Claire.”

“I told you what I wanted and why, and unless you can guarantee I'm wrong, I think I have every right to at least state my wishes.” She snatched the crisp slices from their heated racks and slathered butter onto them as if they needed a thick coating to be edible. “I knew you'd refuse me.”

“You don't know what you ask,” he muttered quietly.

“I think I do. And before you attempt one of your mind-boggling rebuttals by saying it takes too much blood, you should know that Phillipa told me it does not all have to be mine.”

“So I have Phillipa to thank for this. Did she also happen to mention such gluttony turns a vampire into a mindless, rutting beast?”

Claire flinched at his caustic tone. "Not in so many words," she confessed. "She did warn me it could make you a bit--enthusiastic."

"Enthusiasm doesn't begin to describe it. Frenzied is more appropriate."

Claire took a bite of her butter-soaked toast only to discover her appetite had withered. She still wanted Germaine, but as her lover, not some raving sex fiend. "Don't tenderness and affection enter into it at all?" she asked plaintively.

"Of course they do, only--"

"Only what? Does all thought for your partner's pleasure become suddenly insignificant?"

His eyes, burning with an inner flame, penetrated hers. "I don't know," he confessed softly.

Claire felt her heart skip a beat. "Are you saying you've never done this before?"

"Not with anyone I cared about. And the one time I did indulge in such carnality is not anything I recall with pride."

"What happened?" When it looked as if he would refuse to answer her, she added with a mixture of teasing and genuine concern, "What did you do? Kill her with passion?"

His gaze grimly earnest, he answered, "I guess you could say that. It seems when vampires disport in blood feasts, such outcomes, although unfortunate, are regrettably unavoidable."

"Blood feasts?" Claire repeated incredulously. Marcus hadn't mentioned anything about a feeding orgy. "How long ago did this happen?"

"Awhile back. Shortly after I met Marcus, in fact. He took me to a primitive island, somewhere south of Europe, where many women and a few men were purchased as food and revelry for immortals. I think he considered the pagan rite a sort of rehabilitative therapy for me. I guess it worked, in its own way. It certainly taught me the fragility of human life."

Claire swallowed, but feared nothing would rid her mouth of the foul taste Germaine's confession had given her. Female slavery. Closing her eyes, she fought back her revulsion. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt Germaine. Clearly, the memory alone was painful enough. Apparently Marcus had orchestrated their brief sojourn into mindless self-indulgence in the hopes it might ease Germaine's guilt over the loss of his family, Eugenia and his yet unborn son. Instead, it had only reminded him how much he'd had to sacrifice for his immortality.

Unable to summon the smile she hoped would reassure him, Claire said, "I'm sure you were very gentle with her."

His laugh echoed with self-derision. "Gentleness played no part in the debauchery we

reveled in, Claire. There were twelve of us to forty-eight terrified females--and only one rule. No exclusivity. We drank from each, rutted with each, and showed no favoritism to any. By dawn, none of the forty-eight women were conscious, and only sixteen still breathed with any regularity. Without a single backward glance or thought, we walked out, leaving them to the care of the men who had originally captured them for us.”

Though his words gave little clue to his actual thoughts, Claire thought she understood. “I’m sure with a little rest and care, all the women survived.”

“I’d like to believe that,” he admitted, stepping over to the refrigerator. He removed a bag and poured its contents into a large crystal goblet. With his long fingers handling the plastic and glass as if they were fragile treasures, he closed the bag and placed the goblet into the microwave. Then setting the timer, he pushed the start button.

“Only you don’t believe it, do you?” Claire asked.

“I consider it highly unlikely.”

“Why?”

The microwave’s warning buzzer dinged three times. “Because,” he answered, retrieving the warm, red fluid, “besides providing for the women’s upkeep, we also procured the services of a local Parsee for forty-eight cremations. Those women willing gave their lives so their families could eat. They were never expected to survive.” His gaze locked with hers, he lifted the glass to his lips and drank.

Suddenly uncomfortable, Claire collected her dirty dishes, scraped and rinsed them.

“Did this really happen,” she asked mutedly, “or are you merely trying to frighten me into backing off?”

“What do you think?”

She met his gaze with the confidence of inner conviction. “I think it’s a little of both. It probably happened, but I suspect you did everything you could to save one of them, if not all. You’re not the sort to abandon a person in need of help or care. I can’t picture you simply walking out on a group of dying women.”

“Then again, there’s the chance that you really don’t know me at all.”

She dried her hands. “I know you better than you think. No matter what, you can’t convince me your own needs could so overcome you that you’d kill your partner with passion.”

Germaine’s brow rose in mocking disbelief. “Isn’t that every woman’s fantasy?”

“Not mine,” she quickly informed him. “Despite our relationship’s unusual aspects, it is our deep affection for each other that keeps me drawn to you. I won’t deny I was angry and resentful earlier, but you weren’t any more at fault for Robert’s murder or Mother’s illness than I was. Nor will you be responsible should anything similar happen to me. No, please, let me finish,” she insisted when he started to interrupt her.

"I don't want you to make love to me out of sympathy or guilt, nor do I feel there's anything lacking in our love life. I want you to make love to me because it is a natural expression of desire between mortal men and women--and like it or not, I am mortal." She watched him finish off his glass then head for the refrigerator to fix himself another. "I know what I ask won't be easy for you, and I probably should find some mortal man willing to do the deed instead, but you're the man I love. You're the one I want to be with." When he still didn't say anything, she asked, "Will you do it?"

He held up his glass in a salute. "This may take awhile, so I suggest you make yourself comfortable."

Torn between relief and her own uncertainty, Claire did as he suggested and sat in the kitchen to keep him company while he drank. Though he was only complying with her request, and she still wanted to make love with him, the thought of changing into a frilly negligee then sitting and waiting while he drank three or four pints of blood seemed a little too ghoulish. It was like acting out a scene from *Bride of Dracula*--for real.

In some ways she did feel like a bride on her wedding night, yet in other ways she felt like a virgin sacrifice for a dark and dangerously handsome pagan god. It was the prospect of facing the unknown, coupled with the unsettling image of being laid out on the bed like some vampire smorgasbord. As similar thoughts continued to plague her, Claire's uncertainty grew until she was ready to admit she'd made a mistake and call everything off. It was then that Germaine reached for her hand and gently pulled her onto his lap.

His voice low and reassuring, he began talking about his childhood in pre-Revolutionary France. Despite the centuries and the vast ocean that had separated them, Claire discovered some childhood experiences were timeless and universal. Keeping secrets from adults who could never understand, teasing your younger brother or sister, demanding to be treated like an adult while in the next breath claiming the right to the indulgences granted only to children.

To Claire, it was like sharing confidences with her best friend. They chatted, listened and laughed. Then ever-so-subtly, the mood between them changed.

Sitting as she was on his lap, Claire was aware of the change almost as soon as Germaine was. He said nothing, but tipped her face toward his and kissed her lightly on the lips. It was a gentle, reassuring kiss, but it still sent a flock of butterflies aflutter in Claire's stomach. This was it, she thought. Now she would learn for herself what all the romance books raved about.

His brown eyes seemed brighter, more luminescent, and his skin had taken on a soft, reddish glow as if he'd been out in the sun all day. Ever-so-lightly, he moved his fingers from the edge of her jaw, down her neck to the opening in her robe. Claire closed her eyes, eagerly anticipating the feel of his hand upon her when a wave of intense pleasure coursed through her. It was as if he stroked every pleasure point she possessed--

simultaneously--without laying a finger on her.

Claire cried out in ecstasy and dismay. "No, not like that," she protested trying to rise off his lap, but he clasped her even more tightly.

"Did I hurt you?" he demanded, clearly unnerved by her reaction.

"No. No, of course not. It felt wonderful, but that's not what I want." He instantly released her, but instead of leaving him she grabbed his hand. "I know you can offer me a thousand incredible sensations at once using only your mind, but what I want, at least for this first time, is for the two of us to come together as the average, ordinary husband and wife. No gimmicks, no special powers, just human feelings and emotions."

"There are differences, Claire--" he warned, but she spoke above him.

"Please, just this once, let me indulge in an illusion of conventionality."

"You're sure?" he asked, his tone revealing his own uncertainty over her request.

"I'm positive. Nothing you tell me will make any difference, and I really do need a little normalcy right now. Even if it is just an illusion."

"As you wish, but I still have one question that needs addressing before we go any further."

She closed her eyes, but nodded. "Go on."

"Who gets first dibs on the bathroom?"

* * *

As the "wife," Claire opted to go first. Taking her own advice, she spent the time preparing herself as if this really was her wedding night. Scented, powdered and creamed, she emerged from the bathroom in a cloud of white organza and stepped into a wonderland of romance and candlelight.

From the light of twenty softly glowing candles, she could see he had turned down the bed, and on her pillow he'd laid a single red rose. It wasn't the flower that brought a lump to Claire's throat, being in the theater she usually had a fresh bouquet of flowers in either her dressing room or apartment, it was the gesture. By laying the rose on her pillow he was acknowledging and paying tribute to her gift to him the first weekend they'd spent together.

At her soft gasp of delight, he turned from the window to gaze at her. Even in the muted light of candles, Claire could see the appreciation in his eyes.

"You're lovely," he whispered reverently before gathering her into his arms. Yet the kiss he gave her was curiously chaste before he abruptly pulled away. Announcing it was his turn, he playfully chucked her chin, then stepped past her into the bathroom.

As she picked up the fragrant flower and pressed it to her nose, Claire began to wonder if she'd made a mistake in insisting Germaine behave more conventionally when he

emerged a few seconds later wearing only a fuzzy pink towel wrapped around his hips.

"It fit me better than your robe," he explained with a wry grin as he approached her. Despite her apprehension, Claire couldn't deny her thoroughly feminine reaction to an attractive, vigorously healthy male. To her, Germaine was the personification of Adonis. A trifle darker in personality perhaps, but just as handsome in the classic sense.

His hands were both warm and gentle when they pulled her into his arms, yet she still trembled.

"Having second thoughts?" he asked lightly before his lips brushed hers in a tentative kiss. Struck by the suddenly absurd realization that he'd used her mouthwash, she smiled as she opened her mouth to his in an unspoken answer and a silent invitation.

He accepted both and returned them with a slow, deepening fervor. His hands cupping her hips, he pulled her toward him until she pressed against the full length of his arousal. Any doubts she may have had about his ability to make love, instantly fled her mind. In their place grew a small uncertainty as to her own ability to accommodate him.

"Don't think, Claire," he cautioned, "just feel." When she nodded, but kept her hands locked onto his shoulders, he lifted her into his arms and carried her over to the bed.

Placing her gently on the cool sheets, he carefully removed the crushed rose from her fingers and reached for the hem of her nightgown only to stop when she shivered in response. "A man and wife have enough secrets throughout their lifetime without beginning them on their wedding night," he scolded gently. "Tell me what troubles you."

"Nothing . . . I don't know. I guess I'm just a little nervous, after all."

"It's not as if we haven't been intimate before," he reminded gently.

"I know, but somehow it's different this time."

He drew her hands to his chest. "Have I changed?" he asked, urging her to touch and explore him so that she could properly answer his question. She did so, freely, but without ever venturing below his waist. When her fingers hesitated at the edge of his towel, he queried, "Under or off?"

"What?" she asked, surprised at the breathlessness of her own voice.

"Clearly this band of terry cloth serves as some kind of barrier to your fingers, so I want to know if you wish me to place them beneath it, or just take it off."

Blushing with embarrassment, she closed her eyes. "Off," she answered softly.

The bed promptly shifted and Claire could hear the soft rustle of the towel being removed before the bed shifted again, but she still didn't open her eyes. His fingers closed over her wrists, and he placed her hands back at his waist.

"All barriers are gone, Claire. See if you can discover any differences now."

Claire already knew exactly what the difference was, but she accepted his invitation to

explore for herself. Her eyes tightly shut, she envisioned him through the tips of her fingers. Though his skin was smooth and cool, there he was perceptibly smoother and quite warm to her touch. When her fingers brushed the very tip of his maleness, it stirred against her palm as though begging for more.

Claire thought she heard a low moan from Germaine, but he merely leaned back on his elbows--encouraging her to discover him more fully. She did. The fact that she couldn't close her fingers about him renewed a few of her doubts, but not enough to keep her from continuing her survey.

When her searching fingers delved lower, she could feel him begin to shake. "May I touch you now?" he asked hoarsely.

She nodded. More than ready, she found she was eager for his touch. As always, it was gentle, yet subtly erotic. She could only imagine that this was how the flower felt when the bee paid it court.

His hands skimmed along the edge of her gown from her shoulders to her feet, then continued their delicate assault beneath the thin layer of silk. Long fingers brushed the inside of her thighs, which she instinctively parted for him.

"May I remove your gown now?" he asked, lifting the sheer material to her waist.

Finding it difficult to speak just then, Claire gave her consent with a nod. Whatever reservations she'd had fled in the face of her deeper need.

Opening her eyes, she saw herself reflected in his, and raised her arms in welcome. He came to her without hesitation even as he continued to touch and reassure her. His fingers trailed sensuously over her breasts, and her nipples responded instantly to his touch. It was as if her body recognized and eagerly sought his caresses as it sweetly ached for more.

His lips followed his fingers in an intimate roving from the hollow of her neck to the valley between her breasts, worshiping every part of her they touched in a silent tribute. Then, ever-so-carefully, his fingers eased toward the very center of her, searching out all her secrets. Like the bee, he courted with gentle persistence, seeking the honeyed nectar that lay deep inside the soft petals. Moaning with pleasure, Claire raised her parted knees in woman's age-old invitation to man.

Germaine's lips covered hers as he moved over her. "I don't want to hurt you," he murmured against her mouth.

"You won't," she assured him, her response little more than a breathless whisper.

He entered her slowly, carefully, allowing her body time to adjust to him. Claire could feel the muscles in his arms and shoulders quiver from the effort it took for him to keep from thrusting into her. Then she felt him pressing against the thin membrane of flesh that marked her a maiden.

He instantly stiffened. "I had hoped in your modern lifestyle that this had already been dispensed with."

"I told you there has been no one else," she insisted, a little hurt by his obvious disappointment.

"That's not what I meant."

Whatever he meant, Claire soon realized they wouldn't progress any further unless she took the initiative. Slowly and tentatively, she raised her knees to his hips only to gasp and wince at the pinching discomfort.

"Don't move," he ordered. "You're only hurting yourself."

"It's not going to disappear by itself, Germaine. I know. I've read my share of romance novels, and there's only one way to be rid of the thing."

"There's always more than one way, love. Just hold still a moment while I..."

Refusing to let what should be a simple deed drag on for hours, Claire thrust her hips up, then let out a sharp cry of pain before he slipped deep inside her.

They lay together for a moment, joined by flesh, both of them breathing heavily, and neither moving in any other way.

His lips pressed against her forehead, Germaine muttered darkly, "Are you always this determined to have your own way, or just with me?"

"Only with you," she answered, careful not to let her discomfort show in her voice. She should have known better. When he raised up to look at her, Claire could see her pain etched in his expression.

"We are joined in more than one way, Claire," he reminded simply.

She cupped his face in her hands. "I didn't think. I'm sorry. But I'm all right now, truly."

He merely clenched his jaw and nodded. "You may be, but I'm not sure I am."

"How can I help?"

He gazed into her eyes. "Continue to love me, no matter what happens."

"I think I can manage that. What else?"

"Just relax and let your body do what comes naturally. It will make this journey infinitely more pleasurable for us both if you simply let go and feel."

"I'll try," she promised, then gasped when he began to move inside her. There was no pain, but the pleasure wasn't as intense either. True to his promise, Germaine didn't try to influence her thinking, but used his body and voice to urge her toward an elusive place that seemed beyond mortal reach.

Supporting her hips with his hands, he began a deep, rhythmic thrusting while his voice coaxed her with richly sensual images into joining him. Claire did as he asked. Closing

her eyes, she gave herself over to the pleasant sensations he was creating. Then it happened. She couldn't exactly pinpoint when, but it was as if her every thought and feeling became focused on one tiny point of pleasure. Her inner muscles clenched and she gripped them even tighter to hold on to the exquisite deliciousness a little longer.

“That's it, love. Come with me,” he urged. Her breath trapped in a spiral of escalating need, Claire could only moan in delight as her body seemingly scaled upwards, stretching toward the pinnacle of desire his sweetly erotic words and tender ravishment lured her to reach. Then in a glorious burst of passion, she was there, suspended, unable to breathe or move, only feel. And feel she did. With her back curved in an arch of pure euphoria, and her nails digging into his shoulders, she cried out. Moments later her primitive cry was echoed by one of his own, and she felt his passionate release pour warmly into her.

When her heart ceased its frantic racing and her breathing had slowed to a more normal rate, he tipped her chin up and kissed her. “Next time we'll do it properly,” he promised.

Claire soon discovered that by doing it properly Germaine meant leisurely and expertly arousing her to a fevered pitch until Claire didn't think another orgasm was possible, only to discover she was wrong. By the time dawn filtered through her curtained windows, Claire felt utterly and thoroughly ravished, yet incredibly loved and cherished.

Only two things diminished her pleasure.

The first merely puzzled her at first, then slowly began to disturb her. Despite the intense pleasure Germaine took in loving her with his mouth--all over--even going so far as to gently bite her on occasion, he wouldn't let her touch him as intimately with anything but her hand. He never refused her outright, but whenever she sought to return the favor, he either distracted her or redirected her attentions until Claire finally desisted. The second, and this one terrified her at first, was the blood that continued to seep from her afterwards. Despite Germaine's tender assurances that such blood loss was completely normal, Claire was convinced something was drastically wrong. She knew virgins usually bled a little the first time, but nothing she'd ever read had them saturating and ruining a perfectly good mattress.

Gathering several towels and a washcloth, Germaine did what he could to soak up the excess, then insisted upon bathing her. Only Claire thought his concern was sadly misplaced. She didn't need a washcloth. She needed a doctor. This time it was Germaine who was determined to have things his way. Insisting she lie down and let him tend her, he bathed her entire body with tender reverence. When she finally gave herself over to his ministrations, he told her that the blood wasn't from her--it was from him, and if she hadn't been so adamant about maintaining her illusions, he could have prepared her for it.

Chastened, and feeling more than a little foolish, Claire turned away to hide her embarrassment, but even that small deception was denied her. His fingers firm upon her

chin, Germaine tilted her face up and kissed her. Gently at first, then with more passion until she forgot everything but her desire for him to make love to her again.

He hadn't killed her with passion, but Claire was perilously close to expiring from exhaustion when Germaine finally let her sleep. Though she wouldn't label his lovemaking frenzied, he had been accurate about his increased sex drive. They spent the entire weekend in each other's arms, with an occasional pause for Claire to eat and use the bathroom.

They were the most romantic days Claire had ever known.

Monday morning finally intruded, however, bringing a strong dose of reality and their next quarrel with it. Despite the unusual aspects of their relationship, Claire knew she could never be happy with or love anyone else, and she wanted to be with him as long and as often as she could. Germaine, however, viewed things differently. To him, Claire's life was all important, and if being apart awhile to insure her safety was better for them, so be it. And, of course, Germaine was supremely confident his way was best.

Fortunately, their lover's tiff was not put to a test. Germaine had no intention of leaving Claire's side until he could be assured she was safe. Which meant he planned to go everywhere with her, except to the bathroom. Only Claire had other plans. She had given a lot of thought to Robert's murder and knew it would take a great deal of skill and deceit to expose the individual responsible. She was fairly certain Sybill was the fiend who committed the hateful act, but was wise-enough to keep her thoughts to herself in Germaine's presence. However, that afternoon both Claire and Germaine found out just how difficult their self-appointed tasks were going to be when they attended Robert's funeral.

Claire knew Robert had more than a few friends, but the crowd attending her brother's crematory service numbered in the hundreds. The Gothic chapel was filled with mourners lined up in the back and along the stairs with the overflow spilling out onto the paved walkway.

His fingers gripping her elbow, Germaine escorted Claire inside. "What's going on?" he demanded, his voice so low, Claire wasn't sure if he spoke aloud or just in her mind.

"I don't know," she confessed, scanning the gathered throng to see if she could spot a familiar or friendly face. It wasn't until she neared the front bench reserved for the family that Claire spotted a familiar, but hardly friendly-looking face. And the curvaceous blond attached to his arm had the predatory look of a snake that had sunk its fangs into a rat.

When Claire stepped into a private viewing area, Harry wasted no time in approaching them. "It seems your brother has become quite a celebrity," he announced, not bothering with pleasantries, "with the gay community deciding to make him a martyr to their cause."

"I wasn't aware you even knew he was dead," Claire answered coolly.

"Really? I sent you flowers, and I've been trying to call you all weekend long. The operator said your phone was off the hook." He glared at Germaine. "Now I see why." Claire's cheeks warmed as she recalled the way Germaine had marched about her apartment in unabashed nakedness, muttering angrily about modern "conveniences" which had absolutely no sense of propriety, while he systematically unhooked all the phones. Her blush didn't go unnoticed by Harry.

"I'm surprised you managed to get out of bed long enough to attend Robert's funeral."

Claire gave a small gasp. Hearing it, Germaine gently squeezed her fingers before he released her to grab Harry's lapels. "You've paid your condolences, Collins, now I suggest you leave before you suffer a timely, but unfortunate accident."

"I'm not afraid of you, St. Justine," Harry answered, jerking free of Germaine's grip.

"What's more, I think the police might be very interested to learn the things I've discovered about you." He turned back to Claire. "Are you aware you're sleeping with a murderer?"

"You're wrong, Harry," Claire insisted quietly, but firmly, when she finally recovered her voice. "Germaine didn't kill Robert." She glared at Sybill. "However, someone went to a lot of trouble to make it look as if he did."

"You're the one who's mistaken, Miss Daniels," the pale, but nonetheless lovely, young woman murmured. "And you'll end up suffering for it even more dearly than Robert did."

"Touch her, Sybill, and you'll wish you were really dead," Germaine warned silkily.

Smiling, Sybill merely lifted her shoulders in unconcern. It was then that Marcus and Nigel joined them. Marcus barely spared Sybill a glance, while Nigel never removed his gaze from her.

"Trouble?" Marcus asked affably.

"Nothing I can't handle," Germaine replied with equal equanimity.

Sizing up the situation in a glance, Marcus placed his hand at Claire's elbow. "Perhaps I should take the lady for a short walk so you two gentlemen can settle this."

"No!" Harry protested. "Claire, at least give me a moment alone, so we can talk."

Although Germaine's eyes remained masked behind dark sunglasses, Claire sensed he wasn't pleased, but she also knew he wouldn't interfere with her having a private meeting with Harry--if that was what she wanted. "I don't think you and I have anything left to say to one another, Harry," she answered softly. "I'm sorry."

"Why, Claire? You know I still love you, and this man is a monster--a fiend from hell. He will destroy you if you remain with him. Please, come with me now. Let me show

you what I've learned, and if you still want to go back to him after that, I won't stop you. I promise."

"Nothing you can say or show me will change anything, Harry. I'm sorry," she repeated, knowing her rejection would hurt him, but believing the hurt was kinder than a lie. Still, she was surprised to see tears fill Harry's eyes.

"I wanted to protect you, to live with you and love you until we grew old together. Instead you chose him. An unnatural creature that will use you up, then toss you aside for someone less wrinkled and aged. A fanged aberration that will suck you dry until all that's left of you isn't fit for the worms to feed upon." Drawing a pair of sunglasses from his pocket, he put them on. "Someday you'll realize I was right, and on that day you'll beg me on your knees to take you back. Except that day, may just be too late."

With a final sneer at Germaine he turned and walked away. Sybill started to follow him when Nigel gripped her arm and pulled her aside to speak to her in private. After a few minutes, they too parted in anger and Nigel walked off by himself.

Uneasy with the crowd, Germaine wanted to leave, but Claire felt she owed her brother the final tribute of delivering his eulogy. Stepping away from Germaine, she went over to stand beside the minister. Perhaps because they recognized her, or perhaps because they understood her sorrow had no political bias, the assembled crowd respected Claire's grief and dispersed at the end of the service without incident.

Determined to avoid another confrontation, Germaine promptly whisked Claire back to Illusions where he could be assured of her safety. There, he took immediate command and went off to form a contingency plan to ensure Claire's protection from Victor Cummings. Suddenly finding herself alone, Claire strolled through the deserted nightclub, unaware that concerned and caring eyes were observing her every movement.

Sam offered to fix her something to eat, which she politely refused as she stood staring up at the stone-faced gargoyles that would never grow old or wrinkle with age as Harry reminded her she would. Francis and Maurice practically begged her to sing again for them, except Claire didn't feel much like singing. She'd just buried her brother, and with him some small piece of herself had gone six-feet underground as well, but then funerals had a way of sinking even the best of spirits. Auguste tried to flatter her with eighteenth-century gallantry, and Gregory offered to play a baroque chant on the organ for her, but Claire only wanted to be left alone.

Harry's offhand comment had disturbed her more than she'd like to admit. Though she'd accepted her mortality on an intellectual level, until now she'd never fully considered the implications of her eventual aging. She would become wrinkled, brittle and bent, while Germaine, if he stayed with her, would continue to look as if he were her robust, healthy and handsomely sexy, thirty-year-old grandson.

Marcus found her sitting before the coffin-shaped bar staring at her own reflection. "I think you should tell Germaine what you're feeling," he advised gently.

“You can read minds, too, Aularius?” she asked, struggling to hold back her tears.

“Only when the thoughts are as obvious as yours presently are.” Stepping behind her, he gently pulled her hair back from her face. Her haunted image stared back at them.

“You're lovely, Claire, and to Germaine you will always be lovely. Does anything else matter?”

“I don't know. Doesn't it bother him to watch the women, he's supposedly loved, wither and perish before his eyes?”

“As I said, you should talk to him. Your fears aren't that uncommon, you know. Nor are you the first one who's had them.”

She met his darkly glowing eyes in the mirror. “They aren't fears, Marcus, they are reality. I'm going to die.”

“I think you'd best leave us now, Marcus,” Germaine commanded from the doorway.

Though he wasn't unduly hasty about it, Marcus lowered his hands from Claire's face. Offering a nod to Germaine, he strode out of the room.

“I'd like you to come with me for a moment,” Germaine requested, his hand already helping Claire from her seat, but Claire clung to the handrail, refusing to budge.

“I'd rather go home, instead.”

“Later, if you insist. Right now, you're coming with me.” When Claire merely stared at him, he lowered his hand to the small of her back. “As you wish,” he said softly, and without further comment he bent slightly and swept her up into his arms.

“Put me down!” she commanded sharply.

“When I'm ready,” he answered as if speaking to a child, adding, “And if you think screaming will bring your many gallant supporters dashing to your aid, you should know that I have a way of dealing with that as well.” From the gleam in his eye, Claire could well imagine what that way was. Refusing to give him the satisfaction of having her wilt in his arms like some overheated posy while he kissed her senseless, she clamped her lips together and let him carry her where he would.

Her interest stirred, however, when they entered a small corridor through a revolving panel in the day room, climbed a long winding flight of stairs, then traveled down a hallway decked with tapestries and old paintings that reminded Claire of an eighteenth-century manor house. When they approached an ornate double doorway, he asked her if she would do the honors. Her curiosity piqued, she leaned forward to turn the polished brass handle.

They entered a room dominated by a large, four poster bed curtained with crimson velvet bed hangings that draped from the ceiling to the floor. But other than the bed, a tall mahogany wardrobe, a chest, a night table and one chair, the room was bare of furnishings. No paintings decorated the paneled walls, no mirrors and no windows.

“Is this your room?” Claire asked when Germaine finally set her down on a brilliant red, blue and gold patterned Persian rug.

He lit the single candle on his night chest, which, Claire noticed, was also the only source of light for the bedchamber, other than the bright light spilling in from the hallway. Smiling at her, he asked, “What was your first clue?”

Not wanting to tell him the two-hundred-year-old furniture looked like him, she merely shrugged, but her gaze involuntarily returned to the massive bed.

“Not everyplace I've lived in contained a room without windows, so those hangings serve a very utilitarian purpose.” Reaching for her hand, he added, “They also make a warm and cozy love nest.”

Though she scowled at him, Claire willingly followed when he led her to the far wall and pressed an unseen button in the ornately carved baseboard. A door immediately swung inward on silent hinges. Ordering her to wait, Germaine disappeared into the Stygian chamber and lit whatever candles he kept in there as well. “Come in,” he invited.

Claire couldn't say what she expected, but what she saw took her breath away. The room, which couldn't have been more than ten-foot-square, contained a small writing desk, a chair, and four walls covered with dozens of sketches, paintings and even full length portraits--all of women.

“You asked whether it bothered me to see those I loved die. Rather than answer you, I thought I'd simply show you. Each of these likenesses represents someone I've loved, whom I've had to let go--in more than one way.”

Spotting a framed picture of her mother stationed on the small writing table, Claire went over and picked it up. Marguerite looked so young, no older than Claire was now, and from the glow lighting her eyes, Claire knew her mother had been incredibly happy when the picture was taken.

“Was everyone in this room your mistress?” she asked, a little uncomfortable with the thought of him being intimate with so many women.

“No.” He pointed to the full-size portrait hanging mid-wall in a gilded wood frame.

“That was my mother, and next to her is my sister. Bordering them are my father and brother.”

As she took a closer look, Claire could see that not all the portraits were women, but he had enough of them.

“Which one is Eugenia?” she asked. Following the direction of his finger, she stepped closer to examine the portrait he indicated. The young woman, seated with a spaniel pup at her feet and a small boy standing in military attention at her side, couldn't have been more than twenty years old. The boy's striking resemblance to his father was immediately evident. Had Claire not already known the lad was Germaine's son, she

might have asked how they were related. Instead, she continued to study the diverse collection.

In some ways it was like any prestigious family portrait gallery that encompassed two centuries, but the knowledge that he'd been with each of these individuals personally left Claire feeling a little awed. She took some consolation in the fact that her portrait wasn't among them--at least not yet.

"I didn't mean to upset you, Claire. I only brought you here because you seemed to think I was oblivious to the pain of losing a loved one. As you can see, even centuries do little to lessen the grief death brings. Unfortunately, the alternative always seemed even more detestable to me."

"Because of Guvasier?" she asked softly.

"In part," he admitted. "Mostly because of me. Despite our aura of humanity, vampires are unnatural, Claire. We are essentially highly-skilled, intelligent predators."

"You could say the same for mortals," she argued. "Yet I wouldn't call us--unnatural."

"Perhaps not. But then mortals don't evolve into creatures that feed upon their own kind like cannibals, who, you must admit, are considered unnatural in western cultures."

Realizing there was little point in continuing the discussion, and not sure what she had hoped to gain anyway, Claire took one last look around Germaine's personal memorial, then quietly mentioned it was past time for her to be leaving for the theater.

Germaine led her out of his room. As they descended the long flight of stairs, he said, "I have some work to do tonight, so I'll have Marcus escort you."

"That's not necessary. I can take a cab," Claire answered, the words barely out of her mouth before Germaine jerked her around to face him.

"You are to go nowhere, that's nowhere, without Marcus, Nigel or me as your escort. Is that clear?"

"But--"

"No, Claire. If you won't obey me in this, I'll simply call the theater, tell them you're indisposed, and keep you locked in my room until you either change your mind or all threat of danger passes. It will be no great hardship for me, I assure you."

Both angry at his high-handed manner and touched by his obvious concern, Claire begrudgingly gave him the promise he demanded, certain she could discover what she needed to know with Nigel and Marcus's help if necessary. As an answer, he gently drew her into his arms and kissed her in a way that almost had Claire wishing he would lock her up in his room--if he stayed with her. When he finally drew back, Claire could see he had the same thought.

His expression both heated and intimate, he bent toward her. "I shall personally come to

the theater after the play and escort you either to my place or yours--your choice.”

Wishing the play was already over, Claire smiled intimately at her autocratic lover. “It is the person, not the place that matters, dear heart. Wherever we are, and wherever we choose to go, I’ll be ready and eager for you.”

Only when the knock sounded on her dressing room door around midnight, it wasn’t Germaine waiting for her--it was Nigel, and he didn’t look happy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“What's wrong?” Claire asked, convinced something terrible had to have happened for Germaine to send Nigel rather than come for her himself.

Nigel's scowl immediately softened. “Nothing,” he assured her. “Germaine mentioned he had some paperwork to do, so I offered to escort you back to the nightclub for him. I was going there anyway and it'd save him a trip.”

Claire felt a surge of disappointment that she struggled to suppress. After seven years with Harry, she should be used to having her expectations built up for a romantic evening, only to be left hanging when he got wrapped up in his projects. That's one of the reasons it never worked out between them. She'd expected more from Germaine, and a small part of her resented him for letting her down. It might make sense for Nigel to accompany her, but practicality wasn't very romantic.

Collecting her belongings, Claire followed Nigel out the stage entrance where the evening's current crop of stage door Johnnies awaited them. Surprised Nigel didn't attempt to protectively whisk her past the autograph-seeking crowd, Claire accepted the compliments, signed the Playbills, and handed the half-dozen flower bouquets over to Nigel for safekeeping. The few who recognized him, asked for Dr. Van Helsing's autograph as well. Though Nigel wasn't rude, he appeared distracted and impatient with the public display. After brusquely signing a few programs, he said, “Sorry ladies and gentlemen, but Ms. Daniels and I have an engagement to keep.”

Then taking Claire by the arm, he escorted her over to a waiting limo.

Claire gaped at him in open astonishment. “A limousine? What's the occasion?”

“Germaine thought it would be safer,” he replied a bit tersely. “Get in before those autograph hounds decide to stop being gentlemen and follow us.”

Smiling, Claire did as he directed, but waited for the driver to pull away before she asked, “What did you and Sybill talk about at the funeral yesterday?”

“What?” he asked testily, clearly irritated by her interruption into his private thoughts.

A little unnerved by Nigel's abruptness, Claire babbled out her explanation. “Sybill was with Harry yesterday, and I saw you pull her aside to talk with her. I thought, maybe, she might have said something to you that would give us a clue as to Robert's murderer.”

“I don't recall.” He leaned forward and told the driver to take Fifth as far as Central Park before heading back.

“Isn't that just a little out of our way?”

“Not tonight.” He looked at her then, and Claire shivered at the coldness of his expression.

“I've done some pretty foolish things in my life,” she admitted softly, “but I didn't think

trusting you was one of them.”

When he didn't answer her, Claire grew increasingly uneasy. Then she heard Germaine's voice in her head.

Claire love, I don't know where you are right now, or what you're doing, but when we get together again, you and I are going to have a little talk about what I mean when I say that you aren't to go anywhere without me.

Confused, Claire glanced over at Nigel. Germaine's warning had specifically included Marcus and Nigel in her escorts, and if Nigel had told her the truth earlier, Germaine should know exactly where she was--he supposedly paid for the limousine. Afraid she may have made a fatal mistake, Claire began to mentally calculate the driver's speed and her chances of injury if she were to jump. As if reading her mind, Nigel reached out to place a restraining hand on her arm.

“I assure you that is both unnecessary and unwise. Germaine is one of my closest friends, but if you weren't in love with him, I'd be tempted to pursue you myself. I'd never hurt you, Claire.”

“I want to believe you, Nigel, I really do, but something tells me you're not being totally honest--either with me or yourself. Are you really taking me back to Illusions?” she asked finally.

“Eventually, yes, but not right away.”

“Where are we going?”

“Back to the theater. We need to wait until everyone has left, then....” He hesitated for a moment, then asked, “What's more important to you--your love for Germaine, or your desire to catch Robert's killer?”

“I don't consider them opposing goals,” she answered, mentally struggling over whether she should call out to Germaine for help. Nigel, like the others, had always tried to protect her, and she wouldn't put it past him and Germaine to have plotted this little episode as their way of frightening her into realizing just how vulnerable she really was. Claire shuddered. If that was the case, they were doing one hell of a good job of it.

“But if they were opposing goals,” Nigel pressed, “which would you choose?”

The quiet wistfulness of Nigel's tone alarmed Claire more than his words, but she knew in her heart what her answer would be. “Robert's dead, and I can't change that. If faced with a choice, I would have to pick Germaine.”

Nigel nodded in silent concurrence. “The love for a brother is strong, but it rarely compares to the love for a mate. Friendship, honor and love. How much more convenient life would be if our values were always in concert. Unfortunately, you sometimes have to make a choice.”

“And where do I fit in with your choices, Nigel?” Claire asked, feeling her stomach

churn with the notion that this trip wasn't just one of Germaine's lessons.

He looked surprised by her question. "You are the catalyst. You always have been."

Claire's churning stomach lurched. "By catalyst, do you mean sacrifice?"

"No!" he assured her, clearly horrified by her conclusion. "Germaine loves you beyond all else, and Victor covets you as his eternal mate. Everything Sybill's done has been because Germaine and Victor both want you. Don't you see? You hold the key to ending this feud forever."

Claire didn't understand at all, but she did latch onto one thing. "Are you saying Sybill killed Robert because she was jealous of me?"

"All I'm saying is that Sybill is a woman of great pride. Germaine simply didn't understand her as I do, and he treated her badly. Once she's got a measure of her pride back, she'll realize that you are no threat to what she really wants, and she'll forget all about you. I'm certain of it."

"Her pride? What about me, Nigel? I suffered the loss of a brother because of her. Isn't that enough? I'm sorry if the council's ruling caused her some discomfort, but at least she's still alive. My brother is dead. If killing him didn't give her what she wanted, why'd she do it?"

"I'm not saying she did, but if Robert had simply given her what she needed, he wouldn't have died. I aim to see you don't meet a similar fate. Don't worry. I've no intention of martyring you."

For some reason Claire didn't find that very reassuring. "What do you intend to do with me?"

"Joe's locking up now," he announced, reaching for her hand. "I don't want to force you, Claire, but I need you to follow me with as little fuss as possible. Can you trust me a bit longer, or will I need to take measures to ensure your cooperation?"

Harboring no doubt over what those measures would be, and wanting all her wits about her, Claire agreed to go willingly. Besides, a part of her wanted this meeting as much as Nigel. Although he refused to admit it outright, his words practically accused Sybill of Robert's murder. All Claire needed was proof, and she would seek her own measure of justice. Heartened by the prospect of catching Robert's murderer, Claire calmed her racing heart and blocked her thoughts from Germaine.

Assisted by Nigel's casual but firmly placed hand at her elbow, Claire got out of the car and followed him through the theatre's service entrance, down below the stage where the extra props were kept. It was a cavernous area, stocked with a reserve of minor set decorations, such as: gravestones, wooden coffins and the requisite supply of stakes to accompany them, with a miscellany of the more substantial furnishings used in the play. Only a few sparsely placed light bulbs lit the area, so entire sections of the vast storage room remained shrouded in darkness. It was not the sort of place for holding a

lighthearted discussion, but it was an excellent setting for a murder.

A foreboding chill ran down Claire's spine, and she instinctively clutched Nigel's hand. Patting her whitened fingers, he called out, "I've brought her!" Claire didn't see anyone and was tempted to suggest they leave, when Sybill emerged from the shadows like a ghostly apparition.

Her lips so dark, they appeared almost black against the unnatural whiteness of her complexion, she smiled at Nigel. "Thank you. I didn't think you trusted me enough to do it, but I'm very pleased that you did," she purred, sliding up to him. Then, as if Claire wasn't standing at Nigel's side, gripping his arm, Sybill pulled his head down and ran her tongue over his lips before thrusting it in and out of his mouth while she tugged at his overcoat.

Fascinated and repelled, Claire was unable to look away even when Sybill tore open Nigel's shirt and sank her fangs into his neck. His eyes closed in ecstasy, Nigel let her feed off him like a parasitic remora.

"Lovely sight, isn't it?"

Surprise causing her heart to skip a beat, Claire whipped around. Harry stood just a few feet away. His chin on his palm and his elbow propped on a gravestone, he stared at her. His eyes glowed with an eerie reddish light, and Claire took an involuntary step back. Then his lips drew back in a rictus of a smile, and she could see his teeth. Among them were two newly grown fangs.

"I told you you'd come back to me, Claire, and I was right, wasn't I?"

Claire could only shake her head. It was her worst nightmare come true.

His smile widening, Harry approached her. "Look at them. Aren't they magnificent?"

Unable to help herself, Claire glanced back at Nigel and Sybill. He was feeding off her now while she writhed against him in uninhibited lust. In a moment they would be on the floor, biting and sucking each other like a pair of sex-crazed bats. This wasn't at all what Claire expected, and she had no intention of salving Sybill's pride by playing witness to her orgy. She would find some other way to prove Sybill's guilt. Claire turned away just as Harry drew her into his arms.

"This is what you wanted, what I couldn't give you, but now I can. Now I'm just like them, and I did it all for you."

The knowledge that he'd willingly become a vampire simply to lure her back filled Claire with horror-tinged regret. She loved Germaine in spite of what he was, not because of it.

Claire stiffened when Harry bent toward her, then pushed him away when he pressed his cold, bloodless lips to her throat. "I'm sorry, Harry, but this changes nothing. Now, let me go."

His expression deeply sorrowed, Harry reached out to touch her hair. "I can't let you go, Claire. Not back to him. You're mine, now. We belong together--for eternity."

"You would take me against my will?" she asked, desperate to reach the part of him that was decent and kind. The part that would never hurt her.

"Of course not," he assured her. "Haven't I always given in to your wishes, Claire? I've never insisted upon asserting my rights with you, not even when we were engaged."

"We were never engaged, Harry."

"Yes, Claire, we were, only you refused to accept it. Now you will. Just as you will learn to accept and admire the differences in me." When she shook her head, he pressed a finger to her chin. He didn't apply great force, but the restraint of a single finger was enough to hold Claire helpless. "See? I'm not the same old Harry. I've even taken a new name--Balthory. Do you know who the Countess Balthory was?" Claire didn't answer, but she doubted Harry really expected her to.

"Balthory wasn't a very nice woman," he confessed, "but she did like the blood of young women--virgins especially. So, in that, I thought we had a lot in common." The light in his eyes grew brighter. "I want you, Claire, and I intend to have you." He gripped her hand, not hard enough to hurt, but firm enough she couldn't pull free. "Come with me, I want to show you something."

Struggling to keep a level head about her, Claire suppressed her immediate impulse to resist. This was her fight, and she meant to finish it, but she would have to rely on her intellect, not her instincts. They may be immortal, but they weren't infallible. Still, if she was to escape with her life and body intact, she'd need to know what she was up against.

Unhindered by the pit-like darkness, Harry started to lead Claire away when Sybill called out, "Where are you taking her, Balthory?"

"To bed," Harry answered, giving Claire's arm a tug.

Sybill was instantly at their side. The sight of several small rivulets of blood running from livid marks on the other woman's throat and breasts had Claire turning away in disgust, but Sybill paid her no attention.

"She's not yours, count. She's mine. You can take her when I'm done. You can even be the one to transform her, if she survives, but you can't be the first to have her."

Harry's eyes narrowed and his face took on a menacing expression. "That's not what you said before, Seraphim."

"Of course not, love." Sybill patted him consolingly on the cheek. "I said whatever was necessary to get you to convince Claire to come with you, but you failed. So, I got Nigel to help me instead. You should be grateful that I've allowed you here at all." Smiling she reached for Claire's other arm. "And you, my dear, are about to discover the heights of agony a vampire can dispense to a mortal through denial." As Claire's eyes widened with

sudden understanding, Sybill smiled and added, "It's too bad your lover isn't here, he's really quite good at this."

She started to pull Claire behind her, when Harry jerked on the arm he held, making Claire feel like a prize bone caught between two snarling mastiffs.

"Let her go, Balthory," the woman now called Seraphim demanded.

"On two conditions. You let me take part in the ceremony, and I get to be the one to have her immediately afterwards. I want her to beg me to take her." Claire knew that would never happen, but Sybill looked uncertain.

"I'm still not convinced I can trust you, Harry. When she begins screaming, you may start to feel sorry for her and want to release her, and I can't let you do that. She's going to pay, if not with her life, then with her torment. I intend to do to her exactly what Germaine St. Justine ordered done to me, and for not one minute less than the total time he sentenced me to suffer."

Claire shuddered, recalling Germaine's small demonstration and the desperation she'd felt. If he told her the truth, the drug would intensify those feelings until they were unbearable.

Nigel grabbed Sybill's arm in immediate protest. "You can't do that--not in one session. It'll kill her!"

"Yes," she murmured regretfully. "I'm afraid it just might." Then looking at Claire, she smiled in a way that made death seem warm by comparison. "Oh well, there could be worse ways to go, I'm sure. Although I'm hard pressed to think of any right this minute."

Knowing it was self-defeating, but no longer caring, Claire screamed and continued to scream until the creature called Seraphim slapped her, striking with such force that Claire's head crashed through a painted, foam gravestone and hit the floor, nearly knocking her senseless. Though momentarily deaf and blind from the blood rushing into her head, Claire knew that whatever was once human about these creatures had died with their mortality. They were true monsters.

"Keep her quiet," Seraphim growled at Balthory, "and I'll consider your request. For now, I want you to take her over to that draped platform, gag her, strip her, then tie her down."

"Platform, why not Lucy's bed? I saw a replica of it over by Dracula's crypt."

"Wherever, then. The place is not important if she can be secured to it. And tie her tightly, she's going to do everything she can to break those bonds, so they need to be secure."

Barely conscious, Claire moaned when the vampire Balthory lifted her into his arms. In the back of her mind, she sensed Germaine was reaching out to her, but she couldn't focus enough to answer him. Her jaw was on fire, and her head ached so badly she could

only see shadows and outlines shimmering about her like a mirage. She feared she would either pass out or throw up until the Balthory creature tried to force her mouth open with a gag. Pain hotter than molten metal laced through Claire's jaw and she let out a high shriek of agony.

Balthory drew his hands back and looked at her in surprise. "I think her jaw's broken," he called out to his new partner, but it was Nigel who came over to examine Claire.

"I'm sorry," he whispered as he gently felt for the break. "I didn't know she would do this." Unable to talk, Claire merely stared at him.

"Can you fix it?" Seraphim queried as she watched Nigel tend to Claire.

"I don't know. Perhaps if I inject my blood directly into her jaw...."

"Do it," Seraphim ordered, thrusting a small bag into Nigel's hands. "I don't want the pain of a broken jaw interfering with what I intend for her to suffer."

Reluctantly, Nigel released Claire to rummage through the bag. When he withdrew a large bore hypodermic needle, Claire wanted to scream but found terror had blocked her throat.

Unable to vocally protest, Claire did all she could to physically thwart their efforts, but to them her struggles were as feeble as an infant's were to an adult. Though Balthory had her pinned to the bed with only one hand, Claire managed to grip Nigel's fingers.

He squeezed back. "This is going to hurt a little, Claire, until the blood can heal the broken tissue. Then you should be fine. Good as new." Claire tried to shake her head, but Seraphim grabbed it and held her motionless in a viselike grip.

"Just do it, Nigel. You can coo to your heart's content to her afterwards."

Whimpering part in fear and part in pain, Claire closed her eyes, then screamed as a white-hot agony erupted in her jaw. She fought to escape the torturous pain, but was unable to move. She would have begged, pleaded with them if she could have talked, but all she could do was feel and suffer a pain so intense, so mind-robbing, it literally blinded her before it slowly began to recede.

Claire! Germaine shouted in her mind. Where are you? What's happening?

Finally able to focus her thoughts, Claire still hesitated to answer him. What if she was simply Seraphim's bait to lure Germaine into an elaborate trap? Could others like Max and Heinrich be laying in wait for Germaine to come to her rescue? Could calling him to her merely seal his fate?

"Try to move your jaw, Claire," Nigel instructed gently.

With the needle still in place, the movement was uncomfortable, but not agonizing.

"That's enough," Seraphim determined. "We don't want her to start growing fangs before she's earned them."

Damn it, Claire. Answer me!

Nigel carefully removed the needle, but stayed at Claire's side.

“Are you still with us, Nigel?” Seraphim asked softly. “Or are Balthory and I going to have to take steps to render you incapable of threatening us further?”

“I'm still with you,” he answered quietly.

Just answer me, and I'll find you.

“Good. Then you can see to the removal of her clothing while his excellency and I discuss what to do when her saviors finally show up. I want no surprises, tonight. Everything has to be perfect.” At Balthory's protest, she added, “Don't whine, my newly-born count, you'll have plenty of opportunities to disrobe her later, if she lives.” The sinister sound of her humorless laughter made Claire's flesh crawl.

“Sit up, Claire,” Nigel ordered in a low voice.

“If you intend to strip me, Nigel, you're going to have to fight me to do it.”

“I'm going to get you out of here,” he corrected. He was reaching out to help her off the hard mattress when he suddenly stiffened.

Claire, I can't track you if you don't answer me. Now, where the hell are you?

“Sorry, Nigel,” Seraphim apologized sweetly from behind him, “but I guess we couldn't trust you after all.” Red tears rolled from Nigel's eyes and a small trickle of blood coursed down his chin, but it wasn't until he partially turned to face his attacker that Claire saw the wooden stake protruding from his back. Without a word, he crumpled into an unconscious heap on the floor.

“Too bad,” Seraphim lamented with regret. “He really was a very good lover. Strict, but in a wonderfully imaginative way when he was angry.” Bending to kneel beside him, she ran a single finger along the line of his lips, then drew the blood-tinged tip into her mouth. “He tasted good, too,” she admitted with a sigh as she slowly rose to her feet. “Drag him over there, out of the way, Balthory, then come help me rid this precious, sweet thing of her mortal raiment.”

Claire, please . . .

“Why are you doing this?” Claire asked, fighting the urge to answer Germaine's summons as she tried not to envision Nigel bleeding to death in a dank, dark corner. What if that had been Germaine instead? Marcus told her staking didn't kill vampires, it just immobilized them. She held onto that small reassurance as she tried to bargain with the she-wolf bending over her. “Torturing me gains you nothing.”

“Are you really that naive, dear, or merely stupid?” Seraphim asked, as she reached for the buttons on Claire's blouse.

Claire slapped the other woman's hands away and began undressing herself. “I must be a

little of both to be caught in this predicament, don't you think?" she asked.

"I suppose you must be at that, and I suspect you will be a little less of both once I am through with you." She watched Claire for a moment to make sure she wasn't going to attempt anything foolish. Reassured, she began setting up the intravenous solution.

Inwardly shuddering, Claire tried not to think about what they intended to do to her.

Claire, if you don't answer me, right now, so help me I'll . . .

Would you please stop pestering me. I'm fine, she answered Germaine silently. She knew a trap when she saw one, and this was definitely a trap. She'd done enough to Germaine without his death or injury on her conscience, too. Despite her fear, she had to keep him away.

You're lying, he insisted bluntly.

Why would I lie? I just want to be left alone for a while. Now, go away! she answered, blocking him from her thoughts.

Seraphim gazed at her through knowing eyes. "He's calling you, isn't he? We're expecting him, so go ahead, tell him where you are. He can't save you, but I'd like to see him try. Tell him, and I'll even consider letting Balthory offer you some relief. That's more than Germaine ever offered me, but I'd really enjoy watching him suffer while another gives you pleasure."

Claire didn't say anything. Germaine had done what he could to protect her, the rest was up to her. As a mortal, she was highly outclassed, but she still had a chance to get to the truth before she died. Stripped down to her bra and panties, she crossed her arms over her breasts and shivered.

Seraphim shrugged at Claire's decision not to call for help as if it didn't matter to her either way, but glanced pointedly at her bra. "Everything comes off."

When Claire refused to move, Seraphim called out, "Oh, count, your little dove is in need of your assistance."

Claire tried again to reason with her. "What do you hope to gain by torturing me?"

"If you've any stamina at all, at least an hour's worth of entertainment."

"I'm serious. Can't you tell me even that much?"

"I can tell you everything, dear. It's certainly no secret, and should even be obvious. I'm after eternal vengeance, and you're my means of achieving it. By making you pay for what they did, I manage to hurt them all far more deeply than I ever could if I went after them myself." When Claire tried to deny it, Seraphim simply unhooked the front opening of Claire's bra with a flick of her fingers. She didn't try to stop Claire from covering herself, but the vampiress's smile showed no mercy or compassion, simply satisfaction.

“If you survive this, an unlikely but not impossible outcome, you are going to be pleading, begging actually, at the top of your lungs for one of your former friends to put you out of your misery. To do that, they would have to transform you--or kill you. Either outcome would tear Germaine apart inside. If Germaine refuses to permit a transformation, there's a very good chance the others in the group will simply overrule him--perhaps even kill him, which could result in a blood feud unlike any that has occurred before in vampire history. Imagine immortals stalking each other in revenge. If, perchance, Germaine wins and refuses to kill you, you'll most likely take your own life. And, as loved as you are by that collection of sentimental bloodsuckers, your death would most likely split them up--permanently. But, if you were to die before they could even dispute saving you, Germaine's life wouldn't be worth a vial of tap water. Either way, I win. Brilliant, wouldn't you say?”

Claire refused to say what she thought, but she could tell by the glow in Balthory and Seraphim's eyes, that her fate was sealed, so she had nothing to lose. “You killed Robert, didn't you? You killed him in a way that you hoped would make everyone suspect Germaine.”

Seraphim merely sighed. “True, but unfortunately no one did. I might have even spared Robert had he proved the least bit cooperative, but he was defiant and stubborn to the very end.”

“But why Robert?” Claire asked. “Why not Harry, or one of my friends in the cast?”

Seraphim smiled. “Harry is much more helpful to me as he is now, and no one else in your precious cast meant as much to you as Robert, or carried Germaine's blood. I wanted that vampire to suffer the same torment and pain he made me suffer. Now I mean to ensure he will.”

“I can think of a fourth scenario you didn't mention,” the vampire Balthory interjected as he reached over to remove Claire's bra. Claire instinctively stiffened, and amazingly enough he stopped. That gave Claire her first inkling of hope. She didn't want him to touch her, but she was wise enough to realize he was the weakest link in Seraphim's plan. She knew Harry, the man, still wanted her, but if he acted too soon, Seraphim would most likely incapacitate him, too, taking Claire's only chance of survival with him.

Closing her eyes, Claire forced herself to relax, praying she wasn't making a worse mistake.

The vampire Balthory spoke softly, as if seeking to reassure a scared child he just happened to be undressing. “Claire knows she has only to turn to me and I will make her mine.”

“Of course, dear,” Seraphim conceded. “But we've agreed, you'll wait until I'm done with her. Right?”

Instead of answering, Balthory simply tied Claire's wrists and ankles to the metal supports. Unlike most stage beds, this one had been constructed to hold the weight of two male actors leaping upon it in heated combat, therefore it was even sturdier than a hospital bed, and much, much firmer.

Once Claire was secured, Seraphim warned her she would have to hold very still. "I don't have Auguste's skill at this," she admitted, "and if you move, I will only have to stick you again. Now relax, and this won't hurt a bit."

The needle wasn't small, and though Claire did her best to relax--it hurt. Balthory reached for her hand and she instinctively gripped his fingers as she let out a low whimper.

"There," Seraphim pronounced proudly, releasing the clear blue fluid into Claire's neck. Claire tensed, expecting the drug to burn, but it didn't. It was warm, almost soothing. Within seconds she felt a light tingling sensation in her shoulders, chest and breasts.

"Feels good, doesn't it? They say it's an extract from vampire blood. You know that rush of pleasure you feel before your body becomes completely paralyzed. Only this doesn't paralyze you, nor does it offer you relief--just desire. And enough of that to kill you."

Claire tensed as the tingling sharpened.

"Don't try to fight it, dear," Seraphim warned. "It's a battle you can't win, I promise you." She picked up two feathers and brushed them lightly across Claire's lips. Claire turned away, but not before her innermost parts tightened with unmistakable need.

"Still, the drug is not without it's more benign functions," Seraphim murmured quietly. "I used to insist Arthur give me a shot of this before I'd let him feed off me. It was the only way I could get any pleasure off that vampire. He was extremely inept as a lover, and I can't say I was sorry to hear he left the group." She handed Balthory a feather. "Use this to stroke her stomach and thighs, but don't touch her between her legs, not yet."

The tingling grew more insistent, like an itch she couldn't scratch, and Claire squirmed. She gasped at the feel of the feathers stroking her breasts and thighs. It was similar to, but not quite as intense as Germaine's mind caresses. Every nerve in her body was sensitized, and she felt as if she teetered on the brink an exquisitely liberating orgasm, but couldn't quite reach it.

She arched her back. "Please, I want--" Cutting off her own words, Claire bit her tongue. She would not beg.

"What dear, what do you want? Do you want your lover, now? Why don't you call for him, dear? Beg him to come and rescue you." When Claire clamped her lips together in stubborn silence, Seraphim turned to her confederate. "Go ahead, touch her lightly between her legs. Just a quick flick of the feather."

Unable to help herself, Claire cried out. She was in so much need that it hurt. Despite

her valiant effort to hold them back, tears poured down her cheeks as her hips continued to grind up and down in a desperate search for even a tiny measure of relief, but no relief was given or found.

“You suffer exquisitely, Claire,” Seraphim complimented. “Less than five minutes have gone by, and you are already peaking. I wonder what you will be like in an hour?”

Claire moaned. She tried telling herself it was merely a drug, and that she couldn't die of desire, but her heart fluttered erratically in her chest as her body writhed on the mattress--seeking release. She was burning alive inside, and despite her every intention not to, she began to beg.

“Please, help me, Harry, I need you.”

He applied another light flick of the feather and she cried out. “More, Harry, please. Oh, God, just a little more.”

“She's had enough,” Harry decreed. “Release her to me, now.”

“No. She's only been under for ten minutes. I was under for a total hour. I warned you about this. If you cannot stand to watch, then leave. I'll call you when her time is up.”

Tears streaming down her cheeks, Claire continued to plead. Though she really wanted Germaine, by this point it no longer mattered who offered her relief, as long as someone did. Germaine was right. The drug made you willing to sell your soul for pleasure, and Claire would do or say anything they wanted if only . . .

Harry stepped back. “Five more minutes, Seraphim, then I release her whether you agree or not. She's mine, now. No one else will tell me what I can or cannot do with her.” Tossing his feather to the floor, he walked away.

“Men are such stupid creatures, don't you think?” Seraphim asked as she used her fingers to gently part the hairs sheltering Claire's femininity. “They are incapable of appreciating the beauty of suffering. I know exactly how you feel, Claire. I've been there myself. I know where you ache, where you itch, and where you feel on fire. And with this knowledge, I can make you scream.” Her face alight with an angelic smile of pleasure, she proceeded to do exactly that.

Claire was still screaming when Seraphim's blood spurted over her from a slowly widening slice in her neck. Scowling, Seraphim turned to face her attacker and blood gushed out of the open wound in a fountainous spray, splashing down on Claire's chest like crimson rain. A red-tinged knife gleamed in Balthory's hand. He had snuck up from behind and slit Seraphim's throat. Then, before she could retaliate or heal herself, he drew back the knife in a perfect arc and sliced off her head. Still spurting blood, Seraphim's decapitated body crumbled to the floor. With his lips pursed in distaste, Balthory took a step back and watched his creator exsanguinate with cold, soulless eyes. He kicked the inert form a couple of times, then tossed the disembodied head into a darkened corner. Leaning forward, he curved cold, slippery, blood-glistening fingers

around Claire's arm and smiled down at her.

“Better now?” he inquired, his features etched with solicitous concern.

Although her skin felt as if a thousand tiny insects crawled over it and her innermost parts were wracked by a need that threatened her very soul, Claire could only stare at him in horror. The Harry she'd known disliked killing bugs, yet this Balthory creature had no compunctions against taking the life of the woman who had created him.

“You want me, Claire. I can see it in your eyes. You're hurting and you know I can bring you the relief you crave. Now tell me that you want me to make you mine. Beg me to take you.”

Despite Claire's inner revulsion over her own need, and her disgust over everything he represented, her neck and back arched toward him in silent invitation. “I'll say anything you want, Harry. Only, please, please, help me.”

His smile victorious, he bent over her, but instead of removing the IV, he ran a finger along the line of her neck. “Here?” he asked. “Did he like to bite you here?”

“Oh God, Harry, don't do this to me. Please! I need you now--only you.”

“In a moment. Tell me first where he took you. I looked you over, but I couldn't see any bite marks, and it's important to me. I have to know where he bit you, so I can erase all memory of him from your mind. I must be the only one, Claire.”

Even in the depths of her desperation, Claire couldn't do that. “Please, Harry,” she sobbed, yanking futilely at the ties on her wrists. She would have torn her itching, burning skin to shreds had she been able to free herself. It felt as if every inch of her body was being stroked by a colony of soft-winged butterflies with tiny poison-tipped claws.

Harry hesitated for a moment, then quickly stripped off his clothes before he climbed on top of her. Nearly mad with need, Claire began frantically rubbing herself against him. Then his fangs pierced her neck and she moaned even as she continued writhing against his cold, hairless body. She needed Germaine's special touch. She needed him to love her with his mouth. She needed . . .

Harry withdrew from her. “Where, Claire?” he asked again, this time biting even harder into her breast. Claire cried out both in pleasure and pain. Some of her desperation left her as the effects of his vampiric bite began to counteract the drug. Except as her desperation lessened, her revulsion increased. She wanted to push him off her, but she lacked the strength. It was then that she heard a cry for help followed by several inhuman screams of agony as a battle raged somewhere above them. Harry heard the commotion, too. Growling low in his throat, like a starving animal protecting its meal, he began devouring her. Not caring how much he drank from her or where, he sank his fangs into her again and again, tearing her flesh each time he did. He fed from her breasts, arms, stomach, thighs, until Claire lay still and uncaring beneath him.

When his mouth settled again at her neck, Claire was grateful he hadn't discovered Germaine's favorite place, then she felt him pressing between her legs, trying to enter her. That he could and wanted to do that told her two things. One that he had drunk a great deal more than he needed, and two--she was going to die.

Though still tied down, Claire was already too weak to protect herself from the assault, but not too weak to suffer from it. Unable to even raise her hips, she moaned in pain, but he merely covered her mouth with the flat of his palm. Obsessed with his objective, he continued forcing his way into her unprepared body until her torn and bleeding mortal flesh finally yielded to his stone-cold immortal persistence. Their two voices cried out in unison: one in ecstasy--the other in agony.

He began thrusting and feeding simultaneously, leaving Claire battered, bruised and empty. With the last of her defenses gone, death seemed a welcomed relief. Closing her eyes, she willed herself to a place where pain, torment and degradation didn't exist. She could see it, feel it, and was reaching for it when Balthory was yanked off her with an enraged roar and tossed like a rag doll across the room. Phillipa and Marcus bent over Nigel while a livid but calm Germaine bent over her to take her pulse.

She couldn't look at him. Not now. Not ever. "Please, let me die," she whispered through bleeding, teeth-ravaged lips.

He didn't answer her. Instead he deftly replaced the drug sac with a bag of whole blood and unfastened the ties securing her wrists and ankles. Careful to speak low, he ordered a badly frazzled Freddie to fetch Victor Cummings and quickly.

Claire didn't move, not even when he covered her with one of Dracula's red-lined black capes. She was cold, past shivering to numb and could no longer feel either her legs or arms. However, those parts she could feel, hurt beyond imagining. All she wanted to do was die.

Marcus came to stand on the other side of her. "How is she?" he asked when she refused to look at him either.

"Not good. How's Nigel?"

"Alive, for the moment. Shall I kill him?"

"No," Claire protested weakly. "Too many dead. Help him. Please."

"Do what you can to see he survives," Germaine answered tightly.

"What about Claire?"

"I'll see to her. You just tend to Watkins and Collins."

When Marcus left them, Germaine placed a hand on Claire's forehead, but she drew back from his touch. "No. Leave me. Please."

"I can't do that, Claire. I won't touch you, if you don't want me to, but I can't leave you."

Freddie rushed in, announcing, "I brought him, though I think he was already on his way."

Germaine rose to greet his fellow leader. "I wanted you to see this, so you will understand why I mean to demand your death along with the execution of any of your minions involved in this diabolical scheme."

Claire opened her eyes to catch a glimpse of the monster who had been at the root of so much disharmony and was surprised to see a tow-headed young man, no older than twenty, who looked more like a cherubic Adonis than a blood-sucking fiend.

"What happened?" Victor asked, his blue eyes narrowing as he took in the gruesome blood-spattered spectacle.

"Ask your new recruit over there. He's the only one still in any condition to talk."

Victor Cummings stepped over to speak with his follower for a moment while Germaine sat back beside Claire. "I want him to see what Collins did to you."

"No," Claire objected instantly. "I don't want--"

"I don't want him looking at you either, Claire," he said over her protest. "But I want him to know why I mean to take his life. And I will kill him for this, believe me."

Claire started to protest, but she was too weak to get the words out by the time Victor stood beside her again. "Show me," he said simply.

Claire? Germaine asked silently, leaving the decision to her.

"Do it. Then let me die."

Germaine gently drew back the sheet to show Victor. Claire knew her body had to be an unholy sight, but she didn't expect the other vampire to react with such horror at her condition.

"On my honor, Germaine," he vowed, his expression pale. "I knew nothing about this."

"Your honor, Victor? Give me one reason why I should believe you have any honor?"

Claire struggled to speak again, but her mouth was too dry and she couldn't force the words past her constricted throat. Marcus bent over to offer her ease and she heard his soft reassurances in her mind. She realized then that they were linked. He'd never let her know, but from the time he helped insert the shield into her wrist, he'd been linked to her. Claire would have sobbed in gratitude if she'd had the strength. Instead she poured out her arguments to save Victor's life. She felt no great love for the man, but she also knew in her heart that Victor had no knowledge of Seraphim's plan.

At her urging, Marcus straightened and said, "Victor is innocent of this, Germaine."

Germaine whirled on his friend. "How can you of all people call this man innocent? Did you see what they did to her?"

“I did more than see, my friend, like you I felt it. Each torturous minute.”

Germaine stiffened slightly as his eyes glowed with a blood-lusting fury. “And you still say he's innocent?”

“Only that he is innocent of this. Not of attempting to steal Claire away from you. His orders were that she was to be left untouched.”

“Did he tell you this?” Germaine asked, unwilling or unable to accept Victor's innocence.

“You should know that I need no words to see into the heart of one of my blood. Besides, it is not for me or Victor that I say these words, but for Claire. Sybill promised her a war would come of this, and that is one promise she does not wish to see fulfilled.”

Germaine shook his head while his hands trembled with rage. “It's not enough, Marcus. I felt her pain and torment as they tortured her. I could feel that cretin raping her as he drained the life out of her. Then I saw him doing it before I tossed him off her. As Harry's leader, Victor is responsible for this abomination, and I demand justice. I refuse to let him just walk out of here as if nothing happened.”

“Please,” Claire murmured softly, despite the pain it cost her to speak.

Germaine gripped her hand and closed his eyes. He shook his head until Claire gently squeezed his fingers in a silent plea. When he looked at her again, his eyes glowed with the fires of an internal hell. “Get him out of my sight,” he ordered, but Victor refused to move.

“This was not my doing, St. Justine. Yes, I wanted you to suffer the loss I suffered, but not this way. Never this way. I would like custody of the one who did this.”

Germaine looked at Claire who gave an almost imperceptible shake of her head. She knew what Victor intended, and she didn't want Harry to die, either, because of her.

“Leave Watkins and Collins for us to punish as we see fit. Take Sybill's remains and cremate them, then see that your ghouls never bother another living soul and I will consider letting you live. Know this, though. If I ever see you again, I will kill you just as I killed Guvasier.”

“I wouldn't expect anything less.” Victor took a step, hesitated, then placed a cool hand on Claire's forehead. Germaine surged forward to attack, but Marcus held him back.

“I am truly sorry this happened to you, little one,” the vampire leader crooned softly. “I never meant you any harm and ask only that you let St. Justine heal you. The love he has for you is great enough to do it.”

Claire didn't answer, but she knew no amount of love could save her now. Even if her body lived, her heart and spirit were already dead, and nothing could restore her soul.

Victor's gaze switched with pointed earnestness to Germaine. “I may not always agree

with you, and I can recall a time when I would've liked to kill you, but I always respected you for adhering to your principles. There comes a point, however, when such dogmatism becomes fanatical. Don't let your vow blind you from seeing what is really important." Turning from Germaine's stony countenance, Victor offered Marcus and the others his apologies and his services, then gathering up Seraphim's remains, he left.

Are you in much pain? Germaine asked her silently. Gentle concern etched his face as he leaned as close as he could to Claire without touching her.

It is lessening, Claire answered closing her eyes again. It wasn't a lie. Her wounds no longer throbbed and a peaceful sort of lethargy was slowly taking over her body. Undoubtedly the blood he was giving her was in some way responsible.

"I know you still hurt in places, and I want to help you. Will you let me do it?"

Claire shook her head, but tears flowed from her eyes. The pain wasn't physical anymore, but it still hurt her deeply. She didn't want Germaine touching her, not after...."

"Hey now," Phillipa scolded gently as she walked over to them. Giving Claire's shoulder an understanding squeeze, she gazed at Germaine. "Why don't you go over and check on Nigel while we girls talk privately for a minute?"

Germaine didn't move.

"I think he needs you to assure him you won't die if he leaves, Claire," Phillipa prompted.

"Go on, Germaine," Claire said softly. "I'll be fine."

When Germaine finally left them with grave reluctance, Phillipa clasped Claire's hand in both of her own--her touch was surprisingly warm. "I know how you feel, and I know nothing I can say will make any difference, but Germaine doesn't love you any less for what happened. He blames himself. If you die, he will be destroyed and I think you know that." She gripped Claire's fingers. "Can you honestly say you'd prefer death to immortality?"

"Yes," Claire answered almost vehemently.

"Why? Because you were raped, or because the thought of being a vampire is so revolting to you, you would rather die?"

"I don't think I could ever let Germaine touch me again," she replied a little more hesitantly.

"Because he's a vampire." It was a statement, not a question.

"No! Because...."

"Because another took what you believed to be his alone, because you begged him to? Look, Claire, I've seen what that drug can do. I've even experienced the effects myself--once. Trust me, you were not responsible for what happened in any way."

Claire started to argue, but all that emerged from her throat was a sob, then another and another. Germaine was instantly at her side. "You were supposed to be helping her, not hurting her," he chided, cradling Claire in his arms as he gently dried her tears.

"I am helping her, now stop mothering for a moment and let us sort this out."

Germaine hesitated, but when Claire didn't say anything, he carefully laid her back down and left them alone again.

"He gets upset when you shed a few tears, can you imagine how impossible he would be if you died? I thought you'd gotten to like us a little?"

Claire smiled, her despair eased by Phillipa's offbeat logic. "I do like you, only...."

"Only not enough to join us, right?" When Claire didn't answer Phillipa said, "There isn't one of us who wouldn't offer his or her life for you, you know?"

"Germaine is against transformations," Claire reminded her.

"Right now, Germaine wants whatever you want. He's not allowing himself to feel either way, but he will not ask you whether you want to be immortal. If that's your wish, you must ask him. Or, if you prefer, you can ask any one of us instead."

Claire shook her head. "Thank you, but...."

Phillipa rose. "If you die on us, Claire. I may never forgive you. Furthermore, if you die, your cringing, naked friend over there will be tortured to death, I can promise you that."

Claire knew what Germaine was capable of, both in tenderness and cruelty. He wouldn't hesitate to torture the creature that was once Harry Collins if she wasn't there to stop him, but that wasn't what made her consider Phillipa's warning. It was the knowledge that if she died, Germaine was likely to goad Marcus, or one of the others, into killing him as well, after he'd disposed of the vampire he held responsible.

When Germaine sat beside her again, she looked at him. "I'm scared," she admitted.

"Of dying?"

"And of living. I no longer know what I want. Balthory hurt me, and--"

"What Collins did was unforgivable, Claire, but only you matter to me."

"There is no way I can continue as a mortal, is there?"

"You've lost a great deal of blood, and you've been badly injured. I can stop the bleeding, and perhaps even heal the injuries, but...."

"But you don't think you can do it without transforming me?"

"No, I don't," he admitted with deep regret.

"Are you willing to take that chance?"

"No, I'm not."

Claire understood. He was telling her in his own way that he wouldn't risk the possibility of changing her. She hadn't expected him to answer any differently, but his refusal cut more deeply than her wounds.

He tilted her chin toward him, then bending down, he kissed her. "I won't take any chances with your life," he vowed against her lips, "unless you agree to the consequences first."

"What if I agree?" she asked softly. "Would you do it then?"

He hesitated only briefly, but the pause was long enough for Claire to change her mind. She didn't want him to go against his principles. "Never mind. My life's not worth--"

He gripped her chin, hard. "Don't ever say that to me again. Never. Understand?"

Claire tried to nod, but she couldn't free her chin from his grasp. Speaking as she had when her jaw was broken, she addressed him through gritted teeth. "I can't talk when you grip my chin like that."

He instantly released her. "Sorry." He watched her tentatively move her jaw, and gently massaged it for her. "I love you. The thought of living without you leaves me empty inside, and the thought of condemning you to a lifetime of darkness, blood, and eternal hunger makes me miserable." He lowered his hand from her jaw. "But to hear you say your life is not worth anything to me--"

"I know." She clutched his hand. "That just makes you angry." Linking her fingers with his, she said, "After Balthory attacked me, I no longer wanted to live, only now . . . Now, I don't know how I feel. The thought of dying terrifies me, but considering your policy on transformations--"

"Claire, Victor's warning was not only unnecessary, it was redundant. I'd already reached the same conclusion myself the night you pressed me to you and refused to let go. Why do you think I was so angry with you? Just the thought of your death terrified me so much that I knew then if I could prevent it, I would." When she didn't say anything, he reached out to stroke her hair. "Besides, for every rule there exists at least one exception. And I think we both know that you are mine, and Marcus's, Auguste's, Freddie's . . . Even Francis and Maurice would make an exception for you. It's your choice alone."

"I would rather it be ours, together. Eternity is a very long time."

"Only forever," he reassured, easing down beside her. "I will ask this just once. Are you sure?"

When she nodded, he gathered her into his arms. "I want this to be as easy on you as possible, to do that I will need to bring you to the point of death before I give you my blood. Do you understand?" When she nodded again, he added in a low voice. "I'd like to give you as much pleasure as I can while I do that, but I also want to hold and touch you when you reach your climax. If we were alone, with no one else around, would you let me do that?"

Claire hesitated. Harry's assault had broken something inside her, and she wasn't sure . . .

“Don't think of him, think of us. Do you remember when you asked me to make love to you your way? Well, now I'm asking you to let me make love to you my way. I promise to be very gentle, since I know you're hurting, but I want our last joining to be a union of bodies and minds.”

When Claire agreed, Germaine ordered Marcus to clear the area. Marcus didn't question, he simply obeyed and within moments they were completely alone.

Germaine carefully positioned Claire on her side, then lay down facing her. Drawing her leg over his hip, he touched her lightly between her legs. When she stiffened, he withdrew his hand and pierced his finger on the sharp point of his fang, then touched her again. Claire closed her eyes as a familiar warmth replaced her discomfort. Then his movements changed, and she gasped as another familiar feeling took over. She had not thought she would ever welcome desire again, but apparently her body did not suffer the scruples of her mind. Her eyes closed, she gave herself over to the sensation. A second later she felt him gently pierce her just above her right breast and she was lost in the ecstasy he alone could give her. And it was ecstasy. No pain, no guilt, just a tremendous welling of love and passion.

Caught in an upward spiral of pleasure, Claire didn't feel her heart falter, or hear her breathing grow ragged and uneven, but Germaine did. With barely a second's pause he withdrew from her and bit into his wrist.

“Drink, Claire. Drink now,” he urged, pressing his bleeding flesh to her lips.

Claire didn't hear him. All she could do was feel. If this was dying, it was glorious. It was as if she floated above herself--free of pain, and lighter than air. Then her lips parted and she tasted something that was so delicious, so sweet, that she instantly craved more--enough to drown in it. She drank, and drank, and drank. Each sip feeding her desire until she began making small whimpering sounds because she couldn't consume it fast enough.

“Easy,” he murmured beside her. “Drink all you need. I won't take it away, I promise.”

Something in his voice reminded Claire that as delicious as this was, each drop she took was another drop stolen from him. If she drank too much, she could hurt him, yet it seemed he would let her drain him dry if she wanted. She immediately pushed his hand away, then gasped at the sharp and sudden pain the withdrawal caused her.

“Drink more,” he urged. “I'll be fine.”

She immediately shook her head. “I've had enough, haven't I?”

“Are you still hungry?”

“Yes.”

“Then you should drink more.”

She stared at him, then winced. Her heart started to flutter painfully and it felt as if she needed to . . .

“Let me up,” she ordered, trying to push him away when she could barely manage the strength needed to lift her hands. “I have to get up.”

“No, Claire. Just let it go.”

“You don't understand....”

“Yes, I do. Your body is dying and needs to rid itself of all mortal waste. Just relax and let it do what it needs to do.”

“Not here, not like this.”

“You're too weak to move right now. I will stay right here, and I will hold you. Nothing you or your body does will disgust me. Now close your eyes and let go.”

Tears fell from her tightly closed eyes as Claire's body betrayed her once again. She clung to Germaine, letting his love and encouraging words sustain her as her body slowly, painfully shut down. After one last gasping breath, she fell silent.

No longer aware, no longer in pain, no longer alive.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Germaine closed his eyes, murmured a small prayer, then called out, "Time."

"Three a.m.," Marcus called back. "Do you need help?"

"No, but I'll need soap, water and fresh linens. When she awakens, she'll have enough to contend with without being reminded of her death."

Marcus collected the supplies, but Germaine decided he wanted to move Claire away from the carnage, violence and pain associated with her assault. Carrying her upstairs, he carefully laid her on the bed where she'd performed her nightly love scenes with a fictional vampire. It was on this bed that they'd made love the night he proposed to her, so it would be on this bed that she would awaken to her new life.

The move cost Germaine some valuable time, and births such as these, where the mortal had sustained a fatal injury, were often unpredictable. Added to that was the effect of the solution, which could complicate things even further.

As he bathed Claire, Germaine watched her body change and heal. Scars old and new vanished as if they'd never existed. Her skin took on a satiny luster of pale, white silk while her nails took on a transparent sheen that would make them strong enough to score metal. Her short, golden-red hair shined with an unnatural health as it curled into soft, golden waves on her head. It would never grow longer or shorter, but remain as it was for eternity.

Germaine was washing the inside of one perfectly turned elbow when Claire started to awaken. Covering her so she would not be embarrassed, he gently grasped her shoulders and coaxed her back to life. Claire's eyes and mouth snapped open, but she couldn't move. She couldn't talk, couldn't cry, and one terrifying second later, she also realized she couldn't breathe.

"It's all right," Germaine crooned, lightly massaging her throat. "Just relax."

Claire gasped, struggling to fill her lungs yet unable to catch a breath.

"Easy," he coaxed. "There's plenty of air here. You won't suffocate, I promise."

"I'm choking," she finally managed to croak.

"Because you're trying to breathe like a mortal. Vampires don't require air to survive. It's how we can exist being buried for centuries in a crypt or coffin." His hand moved from her throat to her ribs. "Try to accept the changes as they occur and let your body adjust." Gently laying her back down, he continued bathing her hands and arms with clean water and patting them dry.

His reassurances finally penetrating, Claire discovered he was right. She could breathe without actually taking in air. It was as if her body functioned like a sponge, taking what it needed from its surroundings and discarding the rest. Relaxing, Claire gave her lover an accusing look. "You didn't--" Horrified by the frog-like sound of her own voice, she

grabbed her throat in dismay.

“That too, will change,” he assured calmly. “In fact, once you're fully adjusted, your voice will be capable of greater subtleties in range and volume beyond the scope of mortal hearing and tolerance. You will be able to sustain notes longer and without losing your breath.”

Unable to move or talk, Claire resigned herself to lying there like a paralyzed invalid while Germaine attended to her. Her eyes adjusted and she began to notice she could see in the dark as well as she could in the light. Better even. Colors were brighter, more vivid, and images were clearer even at great distances. It was as if she had binocular lenses fitted in her eyes. Looking about her in amazement, she began to examine her surroundings with a new curiosity. Recognizing the lace frilled bed she'd been placed upon, she smiled at the man tenderly bathing her. His eyes were fixed intently upon her face, watching her acknowledge and accept the changes he already took for granted.

“What happens now?” she asked, her voice still husky, but not abnormally so.

“We wait until you're strong enough to get up, then we go back to Illusions.”

“What have you done with Nigel and . . . Balthory?” she asked, no longer able to think of the man who did this to her as Harry.

“Nothing--yet. You were the one they harmed, so I thought I should at least ask what you wished done with them first.” Moving to her legs, he glanced at her briefly, before asking, “Have you considered whether you want to change your name?”

“Is it required?”

“No. That is, not for a couple of decades at least.”

“Why does my life have to change at all? Can't I continue as I was?”

“If you're careful and discreet, possibly. Within reason. I'll call the theater tomorrow and put you on a two-week minimum sick leave. We'll see how well you've adjusted, then.”

“What happens if I haven't--adjusted--by then?”

“We'll give it more time.”

“Marcus said he destroyed his own children. Was it because they couldn't--adjust?”

“Claire, you need to learn to crawl before you can walk. Give yourself a chance. Some individuals adjust very quickly to the changes while others become overwhelmed by them. I will help you in every way I can, but you're going to have to listen to me. Much better than you did before.”

“Before I died, you mean?”

He hesitated, then nodded. “That's exactly what I mean.” When she didn't say anything, he ordered her to bend her knees and part her legs for him. She gave him an uncertain look, but tried to do as he asked only to find her legs refused to move. Frustrated by her

own feeling of inadequacy, she clenched her hands into fists and gripped the sheets.

“Careful, or you'll rip them,” he warned, firmly massaging her legs. Claire gaped in surprise at her hands. He was right. A second later she would have torn the sheets right off the bed.

“See. You're getting stronger by the minute. Now bend your legs for me.”

It took awhile, but she managed to pull her knees up before she collapsed back on the bed feeling as if she'd just run a mile.

“I thought vampires were supposed to be so physically superior, they were invincible,” she muttered dejectedly.

Laughing, he gently parted her legs. “We are. We just aren't always born that way.”

Exhausted, Claire struggled not to cry. She'd never felt more inept, and Germaine's patient solicitude wasn't helping. It was as if he no longer saw her as a woman. He bathed her tenderly and thoroughly, but without any sign of passion--the way a parent might bathe a bedridden child. She was about to ask him whether he still loved her when he asked, “Do you hate me for what I did to you?”

“No!” she answered, more than a little stunned by the question. “It's just that I'm afraid everything has changed. I'm no longer sure who or what I am, or what my 'adjustment', as you call it, entails. I feel like I'm taking the test of my life, yet no one told me how to study for it.” Rather than enlighten her, he merely finished drying her, then covered her up.

“Marcus has gone to your apartment to bring back some of your clothes,” he told her, changing the subject.

Claire sensed his unease, but she couldn't tell what was bothering him. Clutching the sheet about her, she slowly sat up. He started to protest, but closed his mouth into a tight line instead. “Do we change now, too, Germaine?” she asked quietly. “Do we just stop loving each other?”

“No. That is, at least I hope not.”

“Can we still be lovers, in the physical sense?”

“It's possible, but not recommended. We would have to be careful.”

“What do you mean--careful?”

“As long as we both continue to drink mortal blood, we can occasionally drink from each other. At least you can from me, if you want. However, I am proscribed from drinking any of your blood for a year.”

“A year!” she exclaimed, forcing her legs to move as she edged to the side of the bed.

“Are you saying you can't make love to me for over a year?”

“Not the usual way. However, I'm not forbidden from taking you as I did this past

weekend.”

She instantly stiffened. “That won't be necessary.”

He lightly gripped her fingers, entwining them with his. “We are a part of each other, Claire. You of me, and now me of you. There's no reason for Collins to make this a threesome, unless you wish him to. He's from another place, another time, and another life. It's your choice.”

Claire cleared her throat which seemed unusually dry. “What other changes have you neglected to tell me?”

“Nothing of import, except....” He gave her an odd look. “Are you hungry?” he asked casually.

“A little,” she admitted, suddenly uncertain.

He placed his thumb on her chin. “Open your mouth for me.” When she obeyed, he reached in with a forefinger and stroked one of her canines.

“Ouch!” She jerked back and scowled at him. “That hurts!” She worriedly ran her tongue over the tooth to check it and winced. “Is it supposed to?”

“Cutting teeth is usually painful, Claire. Once you've extended and retracted your fangs a couple of times, it gets easier. They'll always ache a bit, unless you're feeding, that's when you'll know true bliss. Now open your mouth again.”

She shook her head. “I'd rather not do this just now,” she mumbled beneath closed lips.

“Waiting won't make it any less painful, and once we're through, you can begin your life as a vampire. They say your first drink is the best.”

“My first drink from whom?” she asked, not sure she'd like his answer.

“Me, to start. I can sustain you for the first couple of days, then we'll have to wean you onto someone a little more nourishing.”

“Like Hugo or James?” she asked with a grimace of distaste.

“Or someone else if you prefer. You may even want to take a mortal lover.”

“What if I don't?”

“You and I may disagree for a bit, but I won't force you.”

She relaxed at that. She knew she'd suffer some physical changes if she didn't consume fresh blood, but a minor loss of body hair seemed less traumatic than sinking her teeth into another living being. That thought alone made her teeth ache, and she winced.

“Open your mouth,” he ordered firmly.

Claire hesitated, but the truth was he did know more about this than she, and it only made sense to listen to him. Reluctantly, she opened her mouth, then holding her breath, she gripped the sheets while he coaxed her fangs into extending. Once they were fully

down, she immediately pulled away. With her mouth feeling as if someone had shoved two obscenely long spikes into her gums, she mumbled more than asked what he expected her to do next.

His reasonable suggestion that she retract them was not what Claire wanted to hear.

“Just how am I supposed to do that?” she asked, fighting back tears of pain.

“Open your mouth and I'll show you.”

Knowing the pain of retraction was going to be ten times worse than extension, Claire did as he asked with a show of grave reluctance. Giving her fang a small push, he ordered her to draw it back in, explaining they were similar to cats' claws. Although it felt as if she was having a tooth reset without Novocain, Claire managed to draw both canines into their recessed sockets.

Germaine regarded her with a measure of sympathy. “By the end of the day, this will all be second nature to you,” he reassured. “Your fangs will respond to mental and physical stimulation. When you're hungry, threatened or aroused, they will extend, but, unfortunately, not always at an opportune time. So you need to monitor yourself carefully. You should never let your fangs extend unless you need them to feed or defend yourself.”

When Claire gave a resigned shrug, he said, “Now I want you to extend them again.”

“Again!” she exclaimed in horror. “You must really hate me!”

“No, Claire, I love you beyond anything else on this earth, which is why you are here and we are doing this.”

Chastened, Claire bent her head and stared at her folded hands. “I'm sorry,” she murmured, but before she could say more he pulled her onto his lap and kissed her. His kiss, which was not in the least brotherly, did much to restore Claire's plummeting spirits.

When Germaine finally drew back, his eyes were filled with all the desire she could ever hope to see, along with a hint of regret that he was presently forbidden to satisfy it. When she tentatively smiled back in response, he cocked an eyebrow and asked, “Ready to try again?”

Shuddering lightly, Claire closed her eyes and opened her mouth. This time, he drew her face toward his and coaxed her fangs out with his tongue. She moaned slightly, but didn't pull away. They emerged much easier, but ached even worse than they had before. Using his tongue again, he signaled for her to retract them. When she hesitated, he spoke into her mind.

I know you're hurting. Just one more time, then I'll let you feed, I promise.

Pleasantly startled, Claire did as he asked, then broke their kiss. “I didn't know you could still do that,” she admitted.

“Neither did I, but it's nice to know not all links between us have been severed.”

“Some have?”

“I think so. I can tell you're in pain, but I don't experience your discomfort with the same intensity that I did when you were mortal. On the other hand, I suspect you can feel my pain now as well, since we are linked on another level.”

“How will we know?”

“Drop your fangs for me one last time and we'll test it.”

Though far from enthusiastic about the idea, Claire obeyed and found the aching had turned into an urgent, painful throbbing. Germaine merely positioned her head near his neck and ordered her to bite him. When she hesitated, he said, “You need sustenance, Claire, and if you refuse to accept me as your host, I'll have no choice but to bottle feed you.”

His threat had her promptly pressing her lips to the vein in his neck, but the thought of biting him made her queasy. She drew back, knowing he would be disappointed she had failed her first test, but he merely smiled.

“I love you, too, but we have to face realities here.” He lifted his wrist to his mouth and bit himself. Claire winced, both in thought and feeling, but the smell of blood made her instantly ravenous. Her instinct was to snatch his wrist to her mouth and begin sucking, but she didn't move, not even when he pressed his bleeding wrist to her lips.

“Go on, Claire. It's all right. I swear. You won't hurt me.”

Closing her eyes, she opened her mouth and pressed her teeth to his wrist. Her fangs instantly extended to sharp points and sank into his immortal flesh like a needle piercing silk. He tasted even more delicious than she remembered. The feel of his blood entering her fangs was pleasantly erotic, like being intimately and lovingly caressed. Held against his chest, she felt him stroke her hair while she took what she needed from him.

Marcus announced his presence by clearing his throat, then entered with Claire's clothes. She briefly opened her eyes to acknowledge him, then shut them again, lost in the pleasure of her task.

“How's she doing?” Marcus asked.

“Reluctant but compliant for the most part. She has a strong will, which is good, even if it is annoying at times, and she cares more about others than herself, which is also good, but unexpected in one so young. I suspect she will adapt without difficulty.”

His words of praise gave Claire a warm, glowing feeling.

“What's the decision on Watkins and Balthory?”

Reluctantly, and very carefully, Claire withdrew from Germaine, then winced at the discomfort her separation had brought both of them. “What punishment would you

normally assign to crimes like theirs?” she asked, once she'd managed to get her fangs back in.

“For betrayals, such as Nigel's, we usually extract the feeders and banish the individual for eternity,” Marcus informed her, ignoring her sympathetic wince. “For Balthory's treachery, a long, lingering, painful death is prescribed.”

“Germaine said I could choose their punishments, but I worry that the others won't agree.”

Marcus scowled at Germaine, but nodded. “If Germaine promised you the choice, then you have my assurance the others will abide by it.”

“Nigel nearly died trying to protect me, so I want him spared. I believe a stake in his back was punishment enough. For Balthory . . . This extraction, it's not permanent, is it?”

“Unfortunately, no,” Marcus answered.

“If I request it, can they give him an anesthetic to dull the pain?”

Marcus seemed to mentally wrestle with that request for a moment before he answered, “If, and only if, you request it, I will personally see to it he is given every consideration he is entitled to.”

“I wouldn't like to learn he suffered unduly, Marcus, so I will trust you to see the matter is attended to as humanely as possible.”

His face lighting up with a broad smile, Marcus bowed, “Your wish is my command, mistress. However, if you happen to hear him howl a little, please understand that even the most humane treatments can regrettably cause some discomfort.”

* * *

True to his word, Marcus very humanely applied a choke collar to the vampire Balthory's neck so he couldn't scream, then even more thoughtfully kept the sentenced man's writhing body secured while their resident dentist examined him. Then, with a show of great regret, he informed both his prisoner and the executioner that every ounce of the clinic's anesthesia had mysteriously vanished, so they would have to continue without it. Minutes later Marcus discovered that even a choked vampire could make a harrowingly, high-pitched shriek. But he had absolutely no regrets.

* * *

Claire never heard Harry's screams, and he was escorted away before she had a chance to see him again, so she was spared the sight of the whimpering, pain-racked, pathetic creature he had become. But on the eve of her initiation onto the council, one year to the day of her transformation, she couldn't seem to get him or the other events of that night out of her mind.

Despite the bliss of ignorance the council tried to keep her in, Claire was convinced Marcus had punished Harry in his own way. It saddened her to think of Harry in pain, yet she couldn't really blame Marcus. Harry undoubtedly deserved a few years of discomfort for what he did. At least he was still alive. Others weren't so fortunate. Her brother, Sybill, Nigel . . .

Nigel wasn't dead exactly, at least she didn't think he was, but to Germaine he might as well have been. Physically, he'd healed with no sign of injury. Vampires were lucky in that way. So it was pain of the mind, not the body, that finally killed his spirit. Claire forgave him, but Germaine and the others could not. And three months after the attack, Nigel could take no more of the anger and mistrust surrounding him. His meager possessions already packed, he came to say goodbye.

Claire knew he regretted everything that had happened that night, especially his failure to save her. She accepted that, and was sorry to see him go, but she also knew it was for the best. Finding it painful to lose a friend, she suggested the possibility of them all being together again someday.

"No, Claire," he answered quietly. "Even if we do see each other again, Germaine will never accept me back as his friend." He kissed her on the cheek, then walked out of Illusions and out of Claire's life. It had been a sad moment, but not an unexpected one. She suspected Nigel was leaving when he opted not to renew his contract with "Dracula," while she and Nick agreed to stay on.

Claire considered the signing of that contract an important milestone. It had taken her a little over a month to "adjust" to her new life and return to the stage, and it hadn't been easy. Not that she wanted to sink her fangs into everyone she met, but her view of mortals had changed significantly. To her, they were lovely, warm creatures full of life and energy. Beings to be cherished and cared for like any valuable treasure.

Occasionally, she suffered an almost irresistible craving to taste one, but that usually passed quickly. For ten months, she'd been perfectly satisfied getting her sustenance from bags, and spending her nights loving Germaine--but even that was changing, now.

Over the last eight weeks, Germaine had been exceptionally short with her. Snapping at her without provocation, leaving the room if she entered it unexpectedly, doing everything he could to avoid her. At first Claire thought it was because he wanted her, but was forbidden to drink from her. She tried to assure him she would not suffer any ill effects, reminding him that Nigel and Seraphim had been drinking from each other within weeks of her transformation. Unfortunately, that reminder did little to appease him.

Giving her a frosty glare, he'd said, "I doubt that couple did anything we'd want to emulate. I'd hardly consider them the Tom Sawyer and Becky Thatcher of the vampire set."

"No, but it was clear Seraphim survived Nigel's attentions. So, why can't we do it, too?"

Leaning toward her, he growled, "Because it's better for you if we don't. However, if you are so intent upon having your own way in this, then by all means, call the seducing Casanova back here to service you. You won't even need to use the phone, since you're already his."

"What are you talking about?" she asked, her confusion and dismay genuine.

"You carry his blood, Claire. Had he given you just a little more than he did when he healed your jaw, he could have transformed you. As it is, you are linked for eternity. Just seal your union mentally, and you'll be as close to him as you are to me."

"How can you say that to me?" she demanded, hurt and angry at the same time. "I may carry Nigel's blood, but I have never loved him. And it isn't Nigel I want to make love with, it's you!"

His face clearly expressed his skepticism, but he didn't argue any further. "We will wait," he'd decreed, then strode away from her, ending all discussion on the matter.

Other than Germaine's dissatisfaction, and her own uncertainties, the last twelve months had been a fantastic learning experience for Claire. Only two things really upset her. The first, and most disastrous, was her one and only visit to the group's dentist.

She had thought herself free of such mortal concerns, but had been told that even vampires occasionally have tooth problems that threaten their vitality if not their actual life.

To make certain Claire's fangs were free of imperfections, Germaine insisted she be examined by the doctor. It was not an experience Claire looked back on fondly. In fact, they would have to knock her unconscious before she'd ever submit to such an agonizing ordeal ever again. It also gave her a strong appreciation for what Germaine went through when Marcus catheterized him.

The second event that had Claire threatening to leave the group, occurred only two days after the first. Claire had been a vampire for less than a week. Her teeth ached constantly, she was having difficulty adapting to the changes in her body, and Germaine was insisting she start drinking mortal blood. She was not in the best of moods.

Phillipa, who had been transformed just a little more than thirty years before, was the most sympathetic. She could still remember what her own first year was like, and being a woman she could help Claire understand and control her basic instincts and needs--like her steadily growing desire to bite and chew someone's neck.

In the old days, such cravings usually ended in a mortal being horribly mauled to death. Claire had no desire to hurt anyone, but her instincts were almost too strong for her to control. Phillipa was the one who suggested she try one of Sam's pacifiers, and handed Claire an object similar to a baby's teething ring. It was a hollow circle of resilient plastic that lay at the end of a long tube attached to either a bag, or inserted into a bottle of chilled blood.

After a great deal of coaxing, Claire tried it. She disliked the coolness at first, since it was unnatural, but cold blood had an additional anesthetic effect and tasted fresher than warmed blood. Once she got accustomed to the rings, she was loath to be without one for long. She'd sink her fangs into it, close her eyes, and practically purr.

The only thing that felt or tasted better to her was Germaine, but spending hours attached to him like a leech was more than impractical, it was obscene.

Claire's gratitude toward Phillipa made her more aware of her friend's activities than she normally would be at her stage of development, so when the council approached Phillipa dressed in their official robes, Claire took notice.

It was the thirty-fourth anniversary of Phillipa's transformation, the date on which every year, for fifty years, she was obliged to surrender herself for punishment. Claire could tell from Phillipa's expression that whatever the council had in mind for her would not be pleasant.

Unable to simply watch her friend be escorted away to a room where ten men would vote on her punishment, then coldly and systematically carry it out, Claire took an immediate stand.

"No!" she protested, when Phillip came over to escort his wife into the council's chambers.

"It's all right, Claire," Phillipa soothed. "I agreed to this many years ago, and I have only a few more years left to endure. I should be fine in a day or so, maybe sooner."

"It's not all right." Claire glared at Marcus. "Have you learned nothing in the past few months? How can you do this after what happened to me?"

"This doesn't concern you, Claire," Germaine intervened.

"The hell it doesn't. Phillipa is my friend. She's been one of you for nearly half a century. How can you deliberately hurt her this way?"

"Her punishment is considerably lenient for what she did."

"Just what crime did she commit, Germaine? She wanted to be immortal, she wanted to be with you forever, and for that you torture her? Why not torture me, too, then? I'm just as guilty."

"Your circumstances were different...."

"Not in intent. I was dying. Luckily I was still young in mortal years, so I didn't have to spend eternity as a shriveled old crone, but Phillipa knew if she did not take drastic measures that she would be an old lady before any of you would transform her. I wasn't forced to decide. She was. I don't think she deserves a fifty-year punishment for that."

"What do you suggest?" Marcus asked. "That we go back to allowing anyone become immortal who wishes to? What will happen when the ratio of immortals outnumbers the

number of humans required to sustain them? Without checks and balances, Claire, we could very easily become a threat to the entire human population.”

“I agree there has to be some sort of regulation, but....”

“How do we enforce these regulations? Slap the offender on the wrist and send them to their coffins for a century or more?”

“No, of course not. But a month shouldn't be too long.” She could tell by their expressions and mumbling that they didn't agree with her. “It doesn't have to be a coffin. A room will do.”

“Are you suggesting we build a dungeon for immortals?” Auguste asked.

“I'm suggesting solitary confinement, not prison. Trust me. The first week of immortal life is no picnic. I don't think I'd enjoy spending it alone with only a caretaker to see I didn't starve.”

“Thank you anyway, Claire,” Phillipa interrupted, “but I enjoy my freedom too much. I'd rather suffer a day or two of discomfort than be locked away for a week, let alone a month.”

Marcus scowled at Phillipa. “Are you saying you'd prefer each of us laid a whip to you fifty times rather than shut you up in your room?”

“Yes,” Phillipa answered, and Claire could tell she was completely serious. Claire knew very little about vampire life, but she knew she would prefer confinement to being flayed raw with a whip.

“Perhaps a month is too long....” she suggested.

“The length of confinement should be relative to the severity of the offense,” Germaine ruled. “For Phillipa, I would consider trading a day of punishment for a day of confinement.”

“Wait a minute,” Phillipa protested. “I agreed....”

“You agreed to submit yourself to the council for punishment. We decide its form.”

“For one day a year,” she corrected, “not thirty days in a row. I won't do it.”

“You will if we say you will,” Germaine countered. “And you'll do it with a smile.”

Phillipa glanced at Claire, then clamped her lips shut. Claire didn't know what to do. She thought she was helping her friend, but from Phillipa's expression she felt as if she'd just given the last bit of evidence needed to condemn her to death.

“Maybe I was wrong to interfere. Maybe your way is better after all.”

“Maybe you should just keep your mouth shut,” Germaine suggested, holding a new ring to her lips. “Why don't you bite on this for a while?”

Claire accepted the rebuke and the ring. If she'd made things worse, Phillipa might never

forgive her.

The council voted and it was unanimous. Phillipa would be confined to her chambers for sixteen days--the total length of time remaining in her punishment. Marcus added the stipulation that she would not be eligible to join the council, however, until her sixteen years were up. No one under punishment was permitted to join the council, and to him a sixteen-day confinement was not equal to sixteen years. They agreed upon that, too.

The council appointed Phillip caretaker of his wayward wife. He looked exceptionally stern when he escorted her away. Phillipa merely looked miserable.

With Germaine angry with her, Marcus displeased, and Phillipa upset, Claire felt friendless. It wasn't until Phillip came down and kissed her cheek that she realized she hadn't alienated everybody.

"Thank you," he whispered. "You don't know how difficult taking part in Phillipa's punishment every year was for me. I dreaded it, but I knew it had to be done, so I always played my part. Now I have her to myself for over a fortnight, and I intend to do everything I can to make her fall in love with me. She may not be happy about this now, but I promise you, she will thank you when she eventually gains her release."

They stayed in that room for more than three weeks. When Phillipa finally did emerge she looked tired, but very happy, and the first thing she did was thank Claire.

To Claire, however, that seemed a lifetime ago instead of only a year. Everyone had changed since then. Germaine was avoiding her, Marcus was distant, and Nigel was gone. Auguste was the same, but then he was the eternal flirt. Francis and Maurice were thinking of leaving the group and starting an order of their own. They even had a name for it--"Knights of the Queen's Realm." Only Phillipa and Phillip seemed to retain any real affection for her. And tonight she was to be the first woman initiated into the "Order of the Silver Chalice." An honor sought by many, but granted to few.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Alone in her room, Claire stared at her reflection. Outwardly she didn't look much different. Her skin had a slight pinkish glow from her most recent feeding and her eyes were a richer, deeper blue--almost violet. Inside, however, she felt like a person newly awakened after a hundred-year sleep. Her heightened perceptions made her much more sensitive to her surroundings--and herself. Vampirism had made her stronger--not braver.

Swallowing back her uncertainty, Claire stood. Though the robe they'd given her was soft and warm against her cool, bare skin, it only reminded her of her vulnerability. She was not permitted to wear anything beneath it, not even underwear. She was to go to them naked as a newborn child. And having lost all her womanly hair more than eleven months ago, she felt a little like a child.

What she was about to participate in was a blood rite, pure and simple. She was to take blood from each of them, one at a time, then they were to take it back from her. They would be a part of each other then. Although the process uncomfortably reminded her of Harry's dream, the disturbing similarity wasn't the reason Claire didn't think she could go through with it. Germaine had barely spoken a word to her for over a month now, and she had the distinct impression he didn't want this initiation ceremony to occur. It was as if he no longer wanted her near him.

Claire made up her mind. Prior to the ceremony, she would confront him, and if her suspicions were correct she would leave him and the group before the act of separation became too difficult. Resolved, she ran a quick brush through her hair, drew up her hood and stepped out the door of her chamber. Auguste stood outside, waiting.

"Ready?" he asked, his smile reflecting his masculine appreciation of her.

"May I speak to Germaine first?"

His smile instantly faltered. "He is with the others, waiting for you. Can't you wait to talk to him later? This won't take long."

"Please, just ask him if he can spare me a moment alone first."

Auguste released her hand and went to do as she asked. A moment later Germaine appeared in the doorway. Claire wanted to run to him, but forced herself to stand where she was.

"Can we talk?" she asked softly.

"It's better if we don't," he stepped back, holding the door open for her. "Come in, Claire. It's time."

Claire could tell by his set expression that he would not change his mind. Lifting her robe so she wouldn't trip over the hem, she stepped past him, just inside the door. The only light in the room came from the glow of ten black candles. Each man held one in his hands. The eleventh, a white one, stood in the center of the dark chamber, unlit. And

on a tall, thin pedestal beside it sat a silver chalice chased with gold.

“Enter, Claire Danielson, the hour is nigh for you to join us in flesh as well as spirit,” Marcus intoned. When she didn't move, Germaine took her arm and escorted her to the center of the room, then left her there while he joined the others in a circle surrounding her.

The clock in the day room struck midnight.

“You have lived for a year among us, to learn our truths, embrace our ways, and accept our rules,” Marcus continued. “Have you anything you wish to say at this time?”

Her head bowed and hands folded before her, Claire answered, “No.”

“Is there anyone among us who feels this fledgling is unworthy of the honor we are about to bestow upon her?”

Claire swallowed, certain Germaine would denounce her, but no one spoke.

“Would the individual who is responsible for this initiate, please prepare her now?”

While the others set their candles into floor length holders, Germaine approached Claire and handed her his. It was white, the same color of the one unlit beside her. Standing in front of her, he slipped her robe off her shoulders, allowing her time to change hands with the candle before he pushed the warm velour to the floor. Claire shivered. She shouldn't feel cold, but she did.

Germaine took a red silk scarf and symbolically bound her hands. Then taking the candle from her, he made a small design of the chalice in candle wax upon the blood red cloth. “This is the symbol of the cup that holds our life,” he told her as if they were alone instead of in a room with nine other men gazing at her standing naked before them. “It is a chalice of blood, not wine. All those who stand before you now are sworn to protect you, as you will be sworn to offer your life for them in return. As proof of our sincerity, we will each give you a portion of that which is most precious to us, a portion of our very life, and you will drink it all without stopping. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she replied quietly, unprepared for the sight that greeted her when Germaine finally stepped back. Each man stood before her, as naked as she was, but blindfolded. From the way Germaine stopped and looked around, Claire gathered this was as unexpected to him as it was to her. He was the only one who saw her, the only man who'd ever seen her as she was now.

Germaine removed his robe and carefully laid it over hers. Then reaching past her for the chalice, he removed a small silver knife from its base and went over to stand before Marcus.

Marcus promptly extended his wrist to him. “I believe I speak for each of us when I ask if you would perform the task required to do this properly. We are a bit--hindered--right now”

Germaine merely directed his friend to lay his wrist over the cup, then making a quick, neat incision at the wrist, he held the blade in place until the proper amount was let. When he withdrew the knife, the wound healed instantly. He repeated the process until the last man was bled. Then handing the chalice to Claire, Germaine performed the same service upon himself, filling the cup.

“Without stopping,” he reminded, tilting the goblet to her lips.

Claire did as she was bade, realizing as she drank that she was absorbing a part of each man into herself. Amazingly, the blood did not mix. She could separate them by taste, beginning with the achingly-sweet, familiar essence of Germaine and ending with the strong, heady spirit of Marcus.

When the chalice was emptied, she returned it to Germaine's waiting hands. He set the ornate goblet back on its pedestal, then gently clasped her shoulders. “Are you ready now to give back to us that which we have given so freely to you?”

She nodded, then extended her bound wrists to him and closed her eyes. However, instead of cutting her, he drew her into his arms, and pressed her cheek to his chest. “This is not how I would have you, Claire Danielson,” he murmured privately into her ear. “However, it is the only way I will take you with others in the room, whether they can see or not.”

Then gently, with great care, he bit her neck. She gasped at the pleasant sensation, and had to suppress the urge to press her lips to his breast and make their joining complete. He withdrew from her after only a few seconds, but she could tell by the glow in his eyes that a taste of her had only whetted his appetite. His hand upon her bound wrists, he led her over to Marcus.

“I ask to be permitted to go last,” Marcus murmured tightly.

Germaine didn't answer him, but led her instead to stand before Auguste. Auguste reached out for her and found her bound wrists. Lifting them to his lips as though he meant to kiss her hand, he pressed the tip of one fang into her finger and drank his due. When he released her, Claire was taken to Freddie next. He, too, chose a finger to take his measure from. So it went, each man touching nothing other than her hands and taking his portion from her fingers.

Each man, that is, until she stood again before Marcus. Marcus also reached for her hands, but made no move to take her blood. His voice was low and so soft she wasn't entirely sure he spoke aloud. “I gave you my blood, so that you would know I will always be there to protect you should you need me. I do not require the same allegiance from you, nor do I desire it. The truth is, my lady, I desire you too much to remain in your presence as a brother or friend to you, and I dare be nothing else. For that reason, I announce my resignation tonight, and take my leave of you now.” Fumbling for his dropped robe, he blew out his candle and left the room without ever removing his blindfold.

“Go after him,” Claire urged Germaine, but he shook his head.

“If I were he, I would have done the same thing. In fact, I was surprised he stayed as long as he did, but now I think I understand why. Come, finish the ceremony,” he ordered, helping her back into her robe. “I’ll go looking for him later, if it’ll make you feel better.”

When Germaine announced she was ready, the others removed their blindfolds and donned their robes. Each retrieved his candle, and Germaine gave Claire the unlit one to hold before her. In a single motion, all nine men touched their candle to hers at once. Her candle burst into a bright blue flame and they pronounced her a full-blooded council member of the “Order of the Chalice.”

* * *

It was nearly three a.m. before Germaine finally sought out Claire in her room. She was beginning to wonder if she'd imagined the desire she'd seen reflected in his eyes, but the look he gave her just before he shut the door did much to allay most of her concerns.

He undressed quickly and got in bed beside her, pulling her into his arms to kiss her as he did.

“I was beginning to think you'd forgotten me,” she confessed when he finally released her.

“I have wanted to be here for the last twelve months, whatever would make you think I'd forgotten you?” he asked, his hand seeking a soft, silky haven.

Claire promptly snapped her legs together. “When you lie alone for a couple of hours, you begin to think strange thoughts. Besides, you never told me you wanted to be with me. In fact, you did everything you could to avoid me.”

Undaunted, he playfully nibbled her ear. “That's because I only have so much willpower where you're concerned. Now do you want to quarrel, or make love?”

“I want to make love, after you tell me where you've been.”

He raised himself on one elbow to gaze at her. “So it's to be torture, eh? No mercy for a love-starved man?”

Claire fought hard to hold back her smile. “That depends on why the love-starved man chose to keep the equally love-starved woman waiting.”

Using just the tips of his fingers, he began trailing circles from the line of Claire's jaw, along the edge of her neck, to her collarbone, the circles moving progressively lower and lower. “It never occurred to me that the lady might be as eager for this as I was, or I would have abandoned my quest entirely. As it was, it took me longer than I liked to find our errant gladiator.”

Claire sat up, giving no thought to the sheet, which slipped to her waist. “You saw

Marcus?"

Distracted by the lovely view she presented, Germaine, reached for what he'd denied himself for a year--almost to the hour, and paid homage to it. Closing her eyes, Claire gave in to the pleasure of his sweetly drugging kiss for a moment. Her need wasn't as great as his, but it could be if he continued tantalizing her much longer. "Germaine," she prompted softly.

"Uhm."

"What did Marcus say?"

Reluctantly removing his mouth from her breast, he said, "Marcus told me you were the most delicious thing he'd ever met. He warned me, in rather blunt terms, that if I didn't rush back here and make mad, passionate love to you--he would lock me up, throw away the key and take my place. So I suggest you'd best let me do what our good friend suggested."

"Is he coming back?" she asked softly.

Lightly pressing his lips to her temple, he shook his head. "No, Claire. At least not for many years. Perhaps one day, after he's found what he needs, he'll return. Until then, we both agreed it was better he stayed away."

Placing her hands on his shoulders, she slid lower on the bed and pulled him down with her. "I'll miss him," she admitted, lightly biting her lover on his ear.

"I will too," he confessed before his mouth returned to the softly rounded place that had beckoned to him earlier. To Claire, his touch was as potent as the drug they used, yet the only pain she suffered was that of sweet anticipation. Before she begged, before she even told him she was in need, he was gently nudging her thighs apart, seeking her secret sweetness there.

Claire wanted and needed him, but she shook her head in denial. "Together," she murmured huskily. "At the same time."

He tensed, and Claire knew why. He'd never let her kiss him there before, but it wasn't Claire he was denying, it was Jacques Guvasier. Only Claire selfishly wanted Germaine all to herself, without a French, sadistic vampire coming between them.

"You once said we were parts of each other that joined when we made love, and no one else needed to be with us, unless we wanted them there. Do you really want Guvasier with us forever?"

She could feel the bed tremble with his inner struggle, and knew the prospect of doing what she asked really terrified him. She almost told him it wasn't important, but in actuality it was. He had given her life, yet if he couldn't trust her to protect him, trust that she would treasure him the same way he treasured her--their love was a hollow shell.

He sat at the edge of the mattress, refusing to look at her. Sitting beside him, she held his hand. "We don't have to make love, but when we do, I'd like it to be free from all ghosts of our past. I trusted you, and you made me feel whole again. You took away the terror and replaced it with love. I'd like to do the same for you, but I'll understand if you tell me it's not possible yet."

He looked at her then. "I don't know if it'll ever be possible, and I don't want you to be hurt if I find I can't do it. It's not that I don't love you, or trust you, I do. It's just the memory for me is so horrible that I do everything I can to avoid it."

"It won't hurt to try, and we can stop anytime. It's just...."

"I understand," he said, placing a finger over her lips. "I'd feel the same if our positions were reversed." Drawing her onto his lap, he kissed her again, deeply, before he shifted toward the head of the bed leaving her pillowed on his thighs near the foot. He shuddered a little when she touched him, but didn't pull away. Gently nudging her legs apart, he began coaxing her toward her climax. When she placed her lips on him, his hips gave a small jerk, but he didn't pause in his attentions to her.

He hadn't fed much in the last weeks, so she suspected he wouldn't be able to respond to her at all, but at the brush of her tongue he stirred enough for her to take him into her mouth. His legs and back instantly stiffened, not in pleasure but in wariness. She pretended to ignore his reaction and continued her gentle laving as if his reaction was nothing unusual. Slowly, he began to relax again, and finally he eased enough to continue his pleasuring of her.

Taking his movements as her cue, Claire followed his lead. When he slowed, she slowed. When he fondled, she caressed. When he thrust, she tugged. But when he gripped her thighs and began the quick erotic stroking that never failed to send her spiraling into a whirlwind climax, she momentarily forgot herself and bit down. It was not a gentle piercing, but a hot need that demanded a response. He cried out her name, then gave himself to her seconds before he claimed her for himself.

To Claire, the pleasure was so unbelievably sweet, so exquisite, she was afraid she would die if either of them stopped, yet she was the first to break free. Releasing him, she cried out her rapture in a long, keening howl as she climaxed repeatedly until he finally released her.

The moment he did, he swiftly swept her into his arms. Hugging her tightly, he murmured, "You have no idea how free I feel. All I could remember was the pain. Now, I'll lie awake for days reliving the incredible pleasure. It's a good thing you're already immortal, my sweet," he added with a wry chuckle, "or you would be in serious danger of dying right now."

Smiling, she snuggled against him. With the ghosts of the past behind them, and only a future of shared experiences ahead, Claire knew real peace for the first time. Until this moment, she still wondered if Germaine would have taken her if she hadn't been dying.

Now, she had her answer.

No doubt their future path would be paved with rocks and stones now and then. Claire was much too independent, and Germaine was far too autocratic for them not to squabble occasionally. But she would always know whatever happened, that he'd chosen her to share eternity with him--as his equal in a blood-linked fellowship whose members joined and remained by invitation only.

The End