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Blood and Tears

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ENCOUNTER

August

Marie's heart raced as she stepped off the tour bus onto the rich Romanian soil. If rocks could speak, would the stones by the side of the road tell of blood spilled in battles of long ago? Or perhaps a mysterious Prince? She smiled and chastised herself for being so immature. It was just a castle, a rickety old castle at that. Who was she kidding? It was barely recognizable as a building. Back home it would have been condemned, boarded up, and a dozen winos would be living in the basement. Its dark facade contained more history than all of the buildings in America put together could ever hope to hold. For this dilapidated pile of rubble had once been the infamous Castle Dracula.

So far, this tour had been kind-of disappointing. Marie had been expecting peasants with crucifixes prominently displayed around their necks to cross themselves and refuse to answer her questions, whispering, "Don't go near the castle! The count awaits!" Instead, she found people all too willing to talk about the castle, and its most famous occupant, Vlad Dracula, Prince of Wallachia. After all, he was a local hero. A religious hero, no less! She thought one of the indignant locals was going to beat her with his cane when she called Dracula 'Count'. She was promptly informed that the great man had not been a mere Count. He had been a Prince! No, things were definitely not as she, with the help of innumerable old movies, had imagined they would be.

Marie hated to admit it, but vampires were her obsession. Since the first grade when Tommy White, her first love, had shown up at school on Halloween with plastic fangs and red-food-coloring blood drops staining his bottom lip, Marie had seen the vampire as the ultimate lover. Dark, mysterious and dangerous, he was a knight in caped armor who could offer an eternity of passion.

Now, in the enlightened '90s, she thought it was great that the rest of the world was finally catching up with her. Christopher Lee and Bela Lugosi, operators who had done nothing for the romantic aspects of the vampire, were a thing of the past. Now Hollywood actually looked around for handsome leading men like Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt to play a vampire for the modern age. Books about the children of the night were pouring off the presses and she had read every one of them. Yes, the world had figured out what she had known since grade school - Vampires were sexy, all consuming,

fantasies.

Marie had always wanted to come to the heart of vampirism, the 'Old World' of Europe, and visit the sights that had inspired the first, most widely known, of all the vampire novels: Bram Stoker's Dracula. Transylvania - the land of mystery, where packs of wolves still roamed the mountainside. Well, at least she thought they did. And the peasants were still superstitious enough to make the sign of the cross at anything they didn't understand. But, her dream had seemed out of reach until...

Beth, dear Beth, she had been her best friend in the whole world since time immemorial; since childhood, when boys didn't matter; since puberty, when boys were the single most important things on the face of the Earth. Those were the good old days.

Beth worked like a dog (her words) for a travel agency. Since the day she had started there, she had been keeping an eye out for a tour that Marie could afford. After a frustratingly long search, one had fit, barely, into Marie's budget. Who was she kidding? She was going to eat a lot of tuna casserole in the next year.) Finally she found herself on her way to the home of The Vampire.

Thanks to the Trans-Atlantic flight, Marie was ready to sign up to protest the plight of the sardine. On the plane, her knees had gotten on intimate terms with the seat in front of her for about 12 hours. There had actually been a line for the bathroom, she suspected the coffee had gone off, and once she had reached it, she wondered why Stephen King hadn't written a novel about one of those creepy little cubicles eating people.

Once she had arrived in the picturesque town of Budapest, she realized why people used words like 'picturesque'- a picture would be the preferable way to see them. Bathrooms were considered new-fangled ideas, therefore difficult to find and not the most pleasant experience when she did. The beds were left over from the days when a tall man was five-four, so her feet dangled over a hardwood floor on which she had no idea what might crawl at night while she slept. The food was extremely spicy, maybe to keep the many monsters that American movies claimed walked the countryside at bay. Marie wouldn't want to get close enough to anyone who smelled like that to bite their neck, or any other part of them, for that matter. In short, the romantic ideas that had filled her imaginative mind when she had arrived on this continent were slowly being squashed under the weight of reality.

Castle Dracula had been her last hope. Now, here she stood, surrounded by about twenty other curious people, mostly camera-necklaced Japanese, waiting to see some ghostly apparition appear before them. Their guide droned on in barely discernible English about the war back in the fifteenth century between the Christians and the Muslims that had made the great Prince Vlad, son of Dracul 'the Dragon', such a hero. Cameras clicked left and right. What they were finding interesting enough to

warrant lasting memories Marie couldn't imagine. All she could see were piles of rocks, remnants of stone walls, that looked terribly precarious.

Her yawn ended in a frown. This was not the experience for which she had paid her hard-earned money. With a furtive glance around to see if anyone were watching, she quickly stepped behind a pile of rubble and let the tour group pass by on their way to some particularly fascinating rock. She listened as their voices faded into the distance. Taking a deep breath she realized with no little trepidation that she was alone in Castle Dracula.

Marie looked around, wishing something - different - would happen. She exhaled a soft chuckle. What did she expect? Was Vlad the Impaler supposed to step from behind the nearest boulder and, with a grand gentlemanly gesture, offer her his hand?

"Well, yeah, that would be nice."

She giggled to herself, realizing she had winced in fear of someone hearing her talking to herself. After all, who would be listening? Looking around at the dark, forbidding stones, she shivered, deciding to move on before her imagination got the better of her and had her running for the bus.

As she perused the remains of the castle spread out around her, she noticed what looked to be an opening in the ground. 'Oh, great,' she thought, imagining criss-crossing tunnels riddling the earth beneath her, 'the ground may give way at my feet any minute now.' Still, her curiosity got the better of her and she stepped closer to see where the passage might lead; or, she thought with a frown, what might be in the hole. On closer inspection she found it wasn't a hole at all, it was the opening to a stairwell. Stepping carefully, knowing she had lost her mind to do this at all but too curious to miss this opportunity to explore that which the mere tourist never saw, Marie began to descend the stairs. Considering the year they were probably carved from the stone, they were in quite good repair. The edges were deteriorating, but not to the point of health department condemnation. She didn't think she was in deadly danger. Yet.

After about 10 stairs, the staircase took a right-angle turn, with more stairs disappearing into the darkness beyond. Marie knew she should stop, return to her party, go home with her interesting - who was she kidding? Rather mundane, actually - memories. But each step seemed to call out to her, urging her on to the next. Before she realized it, darkness had begun to close in behind her. When she could no longer see the stair beneath her foot, she decided it was time to retreat to the safety of known reality.

"Don't go."

The whispered words seemed to come from all around her. The hair on the back of Marie's neck stood straight up, her stomach clenched painfully, and her throat tightened so that she could barely

breath. She stopped dead still, hoping her imagination was playing tricks on her. There was a slight sound - the shifting of weight from foot to foot, perhaps? It seemingly came from below. Or was it behind her? The granite walls bounced the sound back and forth, up and down, till she couldn't pinpoint any direction. Logic said the words came from below, but she wasn't sure logic was a concept into which she wished to put much faith at the moment. As panic gripped her tightly in its talons, Marie chose retreat, all thought of being careful flying from her brain as visions of movie monsters ascending from the pit of Hell to grab heroines' feet filled her mind.

"Don't run; you'll fall!"

The voice was louder now, the sharp edge of command unmistakable. If she hadn't been in the throes of pure terror Marie would have found it amusing that the monster seemed concerned for her safety. She was climbing the stairs at a run now, though it was still too dark to see them clearly. Or maybe it had gotten darker. How long had she been down here? Could the sun have set, leaving the world above in darkness?

Leaving her at the mercy of whatever seemed to have mastered the dark of the lower level of Castle Dracula?

Was that a footstep on the stairs below her? Fear was stealing the air from her lungs.

Her toe caught the edge of a step, causing her to trip slightly. She put her hand on the wall to steady herself and felt something move beneath her palm. With a little scream, she jumped sideways to get away from whatever menace occupied the wall and felt her foot slide off the edge of the stair, plunging into nothingness. She flung her hands out in front of her, reaching in vain for something to hang onto, to steady her and keep her from falling to her death. 'It's no use', her mind spoke clearly, 'you're going to fall and there's nothing you can do about it.' She tried to shift her weight to the other foot, but all that succeeded in doing was twisting her body so that she was falling forward down the stairs. With a scream, she became airborne, plummeting into the darkness below.

Strong hands, their fingers long enough to nearly span her ribcage, closed on her body just beneath her breasts. Temporarily limp with fear, she was pulled tightly against the hardest body she had ever felt. Her head slid in under his chin as he wrapped her in his strong arms. Her cheek was against something very soft - velvet? One of her feet was resting on what felt like a hard leather boot.

Marie threw her arms around the solid chest against which her breasts were intimately pressed and held on for dear life. She wanted to reassure herself that she was alive, that she hadn't fallen to a painful death or been eaten by something unspeakable. The chest beneath her cheek rose, and then fell in a deep sigh. It expanded again as her rescuer buried his nose in her hair and breathed in her scent. Not

thinking too clearly yet, Marie turned her face into his chest and inhaled the musky leather scent of him.

"Are you all right?"

Oh, that voice! It had returned to a whisper, but the deep, masculine timbre was unmistakable. The words rumbled through her savior's massive chest like thunder on a clear summer evening. Marie shivered, the trembling creeping down her spine to lodge somewhere south of her belly button. Her mysterious rescuer's arms tightened reassuringly around her in response. She nodded against his chest, afraid her voice would shake and she would make a fool of herself if she spoke. Keeping one arm around her shoulders, he used the other hand to cup her chin and raise it. She knew that she would be looking into his eyes if she could see him, but all she saw was deeper darkness where his face should have been. How she wished she had a flashlight, a candle, anything to shed some light on this enigmatic man.

"You are lovely, lady."

His breath fanned her cheek. Marie thought she just might faint.

"You should be more careful, for the world to lose such beauty as you possess would be a shame."

Being a modern woman she would have loved to deny what she was feeling, maybe even to slap him for being so bold. But the truth was all-conscious thought left her as first his soft breath, then his mouth, touched her lips. His lips were strong and soft at the same time. They caressed, demanded, possessed. With his gentle persuasion, her lips opened of their own accord. His tongue slid lightly over her teeth, and then entered her mouth to touch its tip to her own. Marie shuddered as something amazingly close to an orgasm wracked her body, a rush of moisture warming that place between her legs that seemed to be quickly becoming her obsession. Her mind was flooded with images of lying beneath this man as he plunged into her, taking her to heights she had only imagined.

And yet, her fantasy still had no face to compliment the magnificent body that held her so close.

A sound, a voice calling her name, came from above. He tore his lips from hers with what sounded suspiciously like a hiss. His deep voice vibrated with passion and anger, taking it lower, adding a growling quality that caressed her ears.

"You must go now."

He turned her body in his arms and gently pushed her upward, steadying her as her foot found first one step, then the next. On the third step away from him, Marie finally found her voice.

"Wait a minute. Aren't you coming?"

She realized then that his hands had left her sides and he was no longer right behind her. His

voice faded, as he replied, "No, I have work below."

"But..."

"I will see you again, lady," the distance between them made him sound as though he were whispering again, "of that you may be certain. Be careful."

"Wait!"

He was gone.

February

Marie stared off into the distance as the plotter droned on and on, drawing up the latest set of plans for the San Marin County Court House. The darn thing had only been changed about a thousand times! All those years of night school so she could create beautiful houses for the rich and famous and what was she doing? Working for Abraham, Smith & Snyder (the employees *loved* that acronym) drawing square, ugly buildings that would fit in the County budget.

Sigh. At least all these revisions gave her lots of time to daydream.

In the six months since she had returned from vacation, Marie had run the day at Castle Dracula through her mind so many times she felt like a VCR stuck on permanent fast-forward. Over and over she remembered the feel of her phantom lover's lips on hers, his strong arms, his hard body. In her dreams, he came to her and played her body like a finely-tuned instrument. But she never saw his face.

She wondered again for about the hundredth time how he could have seen her when she couldn't make out hide nor hair of him, only dark on dark. He had called her beautiful but it had been pitch black in that stairwell. Had he just handed her a line to get what he wanted? For some reason, she was certain that was not the case. He had been *very* sincere. Maybe he was blind, 'seeing' with his hands? No, that explanation didn't work either - He hadn't felt her face. Could he have meant beautiful in an emotional sense, like a beautiful personality? Marie grimaced, wrinkling her pert little nose. Get real! Besides, he'd hardly known her long enough to comment on her personality. The only logical conclusion was the same one with which she had been confronted at the time, and every day since: He had actually seen her. But, how was that possible?

She shook her head, a look of confusion drawing her dark brows so close together they almost met at the bridge of her straight nose. Long, dark lashes fell over sky-blue eyes as she closed them to clear her mind of images that never failed to frustrate her. Behind her lids, the scene played again:

The suffocating darkness, the strong arms, the all-consuming kiss, and then - abandonment.

The beam of a flashlight had found the stairs as his last words, 'be careful', were still echoing through the stairwell. The tour guide had come up one short when counting his tourist lambs and had gone looking for the stray. Finding the stairs, he had, of course, assumed she had fallen down them, and descended to find the body.

She had informed the guide that there was a man down there doing some sort of work, but he had just smiled at her with that look that said he thought she, along with most Americans, should be locked up somewhere for her own safety.

As the guide was hustling everyone back to the bus, Marie had asked him if he were going to look for her rescuer. He had given one sharp shake of his head and Marie had seen the one thing she had expected all along on this tour - fear. It shone clearly in his dark eyes. No, he was definitely *not* going any farther down those stairs than he had ventured to find her. She had protested, wanting desperately to find her would-be lover, but the others on the tour were becoming a little perturbed with all the delay. Marie had had no choice but to get on the bus, leave Dracula's castle and spend the rest of her tour waiting for the touch on her shoulder that would put a face on the phantom. It never came. She supposed someday she would stop waiting. Someday.

The blare of her telephone rudely shook her from her musings. The LED display on the top of the phone read "Mr. Abraham." Marie's throat tightened. What had she done? What had she gotten caught doing? Her hand reached out and jerked the receiver from its cradle, but took its time getting it to her ear. She cleared her throat and answered in her best professional voice.

"Marie Parker."

"Ms. Parker?"

Oh, yuck! It was Lois, Mr. Abraham's secretary. She was the type that called everyone 'Ms.' because it was her life's work to be politically correct. For the most part, Marie hated politically correct.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Abraham would like to see you in his office at 10:45 this morning. Does that suit your calendar?"

"Just a minute, let me check."

Marie pushed the 'hold' button, looked at her desk clock and quietly seethed. 10:30, this was just like Lois. She had probably known about this meeting since 9 o'clock this morning, if not yesterday, but she loved to throw around her power, making it clear that *her* boss, and, therefore, she, to a certain extent, controlled everybody. What was Marie supposed to say: 'Sorry, I can't see the big boss this morning, I have an appointment to get my dog clipped'? Still, she would let Lois sweat on hold for a minute, thinking she might have miscalculated this time. Examining her not-very-long-but-well-manicured fingernails as she slowly lifted the phone back to her ear, Marie pushed the button, freeing Lois from Muzak limbo.

"Nothing I can't reschedule, Lois. Please tell Mr. Abraham I'll be there."

She swore she could hear the sigh of relief.

"Very well, Ms. Parker," Marie ground her teeth and imagined Lois in her underwear, something her mother had told her to do if someone she couldn't tell off ever annoyed her. The picture was so funny; she had to stifle a giggle. "We will see you at 10:45 sharp." Click.

Marie nearly ran to the bathroom. Dark red business suit trimmed in black. Check. White blouse, collar demurely buttoned with just the slightest hint of white lace chemise showing. Check. Skirt short enough to let them know you're under 30, long enough to say you're a serious businesswoman. Check. Nylons tight, no runs. Please, God, no runs! Check. Black shoes shiny, no scuffs, and two-inch heels. Check. Whip the brush out of her purse, run it through her long auburn hair, making sure it framed her face to perfection, a plump curl resting over one breast, the rest of the mass behind her shoulders falling to the middle of her back. Check. Brush back in purse, make-up bag out. Carefully reapply deep-red lipstick to emphasize the full lips with which God had blessed her. Check.

Arching her brows at her reflection, Marie decided she looked fine. Besides, rumor had it that old Mr. Abraham couldn't see beyond his nose without his glasses and was usually too vain to wear them! She dropped off her purse back at her office, picked up her briefcase - all the best-dressed businesswomen wore them - and arrived at Mr. Abraham's office at 10:43. Lois looked at her wristwatch disapprovingly. Marie wondered if she were supposed to walk through the door at *exactly* 10:45. Probably.

Lois pushed her librarian-like glasses up the bridge of her nose and picked up her phone.

"Mr. Abraham, Ms. Parker is here for your appointment."

With an imperious nod, Lois returned the receiver to its cradle, stood and opened one of the double doors that right-angled her desk. She waited as Marie passed through the door, and then pulled it closed behind her. Marie wondered if that was what the slamming of the coffin sounded like.

"Parker, come in, sit down."

Marie quickly occupied one of the three overstuffed chairs that sat, in front of Mr. Abraham's huge mahogany desk. This office screamed executive. The entire wall behind the desk was window, the plush carpet a deep chocolate brown. And the bookcases! How would it be to have eight-foot-tall mahogany bookcases in your office? Before she could peruse the place further, Mr. Abraham cleared his throat and claimed her attention, getting right to business. His authoritative tone came from years of being immediately obeyed.

"Mr. Tyler Alan wants Abraham, Smith and Snyder to design, and handle all construction details for, his residence in the Hollywood Hills. His budget is open. He wants a single architect to handle the

whole operation. He asked for you by name, Parker."

Marie's heart jumped into her throat, stuck there and stopped beating. Her own project? A house? She had the sudden urge to pinch herself to be certain she wasn't dreaming. Tyler Alan? Did she know him? Had she met him at some office party and forgotten? Had he seen examples of her work and decided she had the style he wanted for his home? Wow, what a responsibility! The whole project. Was she ready? She realized with a start that she wasn't listening to Mr. Abraham.

"...were ready to take on that kind of responsibility but he was quite adamant that you be the architect. The customer's always right, so they say. Unless, of course, you feel that you aren't ready to handle something this big, in which case I can tell Mr. Alan that you weren't comfortable..."

"When do I start?"

Though it might make life at good ole' A.S.S. unbearable in the future, Marie was not going to pass up an opportunity like this, even if it meant interrupting Mr. Abraham himself. She knew he felt she hadn't proven herself enough to run a solo project. Well, the only way she was going to prove she could swim with the sharks in the deep water of business was to jump in with both feet. She just hoped she didn't drown.

Standing up for yourself in a predominantly man's world was a touchy proposition. She didn't want to come on too strong and find herself labeled a bitch, but she refused to be the good little girl, doing everything she was told without question, or credit, in short, to be a doormat. Striking a happy medium made you a bitchy doormat. It was not a good position either. Being a businesswoman was tricky business.

Mr. Abraham frowned his disapproval at her interruption, but one corner of his mouth twitched slightly as though it wanted to rebel and turn up in a smile. Marie breathed a sigh of relief. She had done the right thing. Mr. Abraham tossed a manila folder across his desk, something akin to making a field goal. It landed directly in front of her.

"There's the basics - size and layout of the lot. A few of Mr. Alan's ideas; though, I have to admit, he doesn't seem to be too picky. Check on that before you put too much work into this thing, Parker. He might be one of those who gets all his ideas after you've worked your ass off and gotten everything under way. Then he wants to 'change a few things'. Usually means redesigning the whole damn thing from the ground up. Talk him up good to begin with and you might be able to head that off at the pass. He wants to meet you for dinner at the address on the inside flap of that folder. 8 o'clock tonight. Any problems?"

Marie had begun studying the stats, visions of Scarlett O'Hara's Tara dancing in her head. She

now realized that she was being dismissed. She stood and shook Mr. Abraham's outstretched hand. The firm handshake told her all she needed to know about his confidence in her handling this project. She was about to open the door when Mr. Abraham's quiet, for him, "Parker," made her turn back to face his desk.

"I don't know why Alan asked for you specifically. I hope it's your talent; you've got plenty of it. If it's not, if he tries anything funny..."

He dropped his eyes to the ground, a man used to knowing exactly what to say at a loss for words. When he raised them again, he looked slightly angry.

"Abraham, Smith and Snyder will not pursue any project at the price of the dignity of one of our employees. And our lawyers will be happy to sue the bastard if he thinks differently!"

With that, he sat and turned to his computer, his embarrassment at the subject matter he had just addressed apparent in the dark red coloring his face and neck. Marie quietly said, "Thank you, Mr. Abraham," and left his office. She managed to get through Lois' office and into the hall before her maturity deserted her. As soon as the door closed she pulled her elbows into her sides and said, "Yes!" Stomping her feet, she turned in a little circle, resembling the cartoon character Snoopy.

"Yes, yes, yes!"

She sailed on air to her office where she closed the door, sat down her briefcase, and then broke into a rousing chorus of James Brown's 'I Feel Good'. After a couple minutes of dancing and singing, she sat behind her desk, put her feet up, leaned back and began imagining what it would be like to have a wall of glass at her back and giant mahogany bookcases at her side.

DISCOVERY

Chapter 2

Meeting a client for dinner had proven trickier than meeting the pope at the Vatican. It was a quandary. Should she dress like she was going on a date, or treat the whole thing like a regular day at the office? Marie had finally decided to go with her instincts and dress up. She wore a black slipdress, black nylons and black heels. A tiny black evening bag, 'condom and credit card bag', as one of her more cynical friends called them, completed her ensemble. It was simple, understated and short. Still, she frowned at herself in her vanity mirror.

"You do not look like an architect. You look like a high-priced call girl."

Her frown inverted, becoming a satisfied smile.

"No. I look like a very confident architect who doesn't feel she has to sacrifice her femininity to perform as well as a man."

She picked up the ever-present briefcase and, with a confident nod to her reflection, left her apartment.

She had been going crazy since she got home from work. She had showered, shaved, and done her hair in the time it normally took her to get from the front door to her bathroom. She must have held up at least a dozen outfits in front of her full-length mirror before deciding what to wear. Then she tried on five more before settling on the black dress.

She left early because she wasn't certain about finding the address of the restaurant. As she drove through the posh areas of Los Angeles she began to realize she was in trouble. This was a residential area. Pulling to the side of the road, she got out her map, an absolute necessity for anyone who hadn't lived in LA all their life, and tried to discern where she was and where she wanted to be. She had been so certain that the restaurant would be somewhere ritzy that she hadn't really concentrated on the exact address. Now she realized that she must have driven right past the place. But she hadn't noticed anything even vaguely resembling a restaurant in that area. She decided to turn around and look again.

After backtracking a bit, she pulled up in front of a rather small - for this area anyway - two-story house. The address hung in wrought-iron letters from the eaves of the porch. She thought there must be some mistake, but she figured she'd ring the bell and see if the owners had had this happen before. It was a chance, a slim one, but the only one she had at the moment. She didn't want to have to call Mr. Alan to

verify the address. She'd look like a country bumpkin and, besides, he probably wouldn't be home. She definitely didn't want to have to admit to Mr. Abraham in the morning that she hadn't kept her appointment with the client because she couldn't find him.

The house was done in a Scandinavian motif, with little carved shutters on the windows and dark exposed beams supporting the eaves. It was very quaint, and not at all LA. Marie admired the beams as she pushed the button to summon the inhabitants. A woman Marie would have cast to play Mrs. Santa Claus in any Christmas movie-of-the-week opened the door. She was about 5 feet tall with gray hair pulled into a tight bun that perched on top of her head. She wore a black dress that almost reached her ankles, and a white bib apron over that. Her smile was warm and welcoming, her eyes twinkling, as she wiped her hands on her apron.

"You must be Miss Parker."

Her heavily-accented voice was as warm as her smile.

"Please, come in. Excuse the flour; I was just putting the finishing touches on dessert. I have always felt that fresh-baked is best. Mr. Alan will be with you shortly."

She spoke as though they had known each other for years. Marie was still getting over the shock of finding out that Mr. Alan had meant for them to meet at his house. She didn't know whether or not she should be apprehensive but Mr. Abraham's warning about not compromising her integrity kept ringing in her ears. Mrs. Claus' voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper.

"I don't think he actually expected you to be on time, dear. In the old country, a lady will always be fashionably late, you know."

She threw her hands into the air in a gesture of distress that had Marie ready to dive for cover.

"Oh, where are my manners?"

She held out her still-slightly-floured palm.

"I am Mrs. Schwartz, Mr. Alan's maid, cook and chief bottle washer."

Marie obeyed the rules of etiquette and shook the maid's hand. She was still a bit nervous. Who was she fooling? She was so nervous she could shake a martini just by holding the glass in her hand. She had to fight the urge to jump and squeak when a bell sounded in the distance. Mrs. Schwartz' smile turned apologetic.

"The bell tolls for me, I'm afraid. While I check on dinner, please make yourself comfortable."

She saw Marie safely through the door and closed it behind her, then scurried off into what Marie assumed to be the kitchen. The smells coming from there boded well for dinner. Now if the butterflies in her stomach would cease their F-16 test runs and just fall asleep so she could enjoy it.

Wanting to keep her mind on something, anything, other than the impending meeting with her first real client, Marie decided to snoop a little. She placed her briefcase on the floor beside a big overstuffed sofa and walked to a glass display case that sat against one wall. Tiny glass figurines filled the case to overflowing. Ballerinas pirouetted, horses frolicked, and flowers bloomed. Each piece was so intricate, so beautiful, with tiny flourishes of silver, gold and precious stones. Marie had never been much for trinkets, 'dust catchers' her father had called them, but these were different. They seemed almost alive.

"Do you like them?"

Marie jumped and spun around so quickly, she almost lost her balance and toppled into the glass case. With a quick prayer of thanks for her good sense of balance, she wondered what on earth was the matter with her. Hadn't she expected Mr. Alan to show up? No, it wasn't just that he had snuck up on her. It was...*that voice*, it came to her with sudden alarm, and no lack of tingling in various parts of her body. Could it be? Or had she been wishing so hard to hear it that this strange situation just naturally lent itself to her imagination running wild?

With a blush, she realized he was waiting for her to answer his question. What had he asked? Oh, yeah. Her answer was little more than a whisper.

"They're beautiful."

He dipped his chin in a nod of acknowledgment.

"Thank you. Perhaps I'll make one for you someday."

This must be the elusive Mr. Alan. He stood at the bottom of the stairs, one long-fingered, perfectly manicured hand resting on the banister. He stood easily six-foot tall, maybe six-two. A navy blue jacket, tailored to accent his broad shoulders and slim waist to perfection covered a maroon turtleneck. She found herself wishing the jacket were not buttoned so she could see more of what she was certain would be a very memorable chest. Matching blue pants molded to his hard thighs, and the shiny toes of highly polished black boots peaked from beneath them. His fashion sense left nothing to be desired.

His wavy hair was surprisingly long, reaching several inches below his collar. It was pulled into a fashionable queue at his nape. The most startling thing about him was his very close-cropped beard. He wore it only on his chin, leaving the sides of his face clean-shaven. Though the rest of his hair, and even his mustache, was a strange combination of gold and silver, his beard was snow white. It gave him a look of great wisdom, and great mystery.

As she stared, he descended the final two steps and made his way across the room to stand in

front of her. He moved so fluidly he seemed almost to glide across the floor rather than walk. Marie had once seen a martial arts demonstration where the experts had walked like that, big predatory cats seeking their next meal.

Embarrassing as it was, Marie found herself just staring, at a loss for words. It wasn't that the man was drop-dead gorgeous. He was, but that wasn't why she couldn't find her tongue. It was his eyes. In their nearly coal-black depths, she felt as though she glimpsed eternity - past, present and future. It was fascinating and, at the same time, rather saddening. This man had seen more than any man should ever have to see.

He blinked slowly, jarring Marie out of her stupor and bringing a furious blush to her cheeks as she dropped her eyes to find that he had extended his hand to her.

"I am Tyler Alan."

Recovering her smarting aplomb, she quickly reached out to practice her firm, business handshake.

"Marie Parker."

His warm fingers closed around hers and slowly, his eyes never leaving hers; he raised her hand to his lips. The brush of his lips across the back of her hand was as light as the whisper of a butterfly's wings. Shivers shot down her spine and she hoped she didn't look as blown-away as she felt.

He straightened, releasing her hand, and smiled. His teeth were frosty-white perfect.

"May I offer you a drink?"

Marie started to nod but she knew actual words, not just her name, were in order at this point. Time to take the plunge and see if her voice would completely desert her in the face of such inexplicable inner turmoil.

"Yes, please."

Not bad, at least she'd managed the proper pitch and volume.

He waved a hand toward the sofa as he strode to the wet bar that stood in one corner of the room.

"Please sit down, Miss Parker. We have a lot to discuss."

And she thought Mr. Abraham had an authoritative manner. Even though Mr. Alan had worded it as a request, there was no doubt in her mind that she had been ordered to take a seat. For one rebellious minute she considered saying she'd rather stand. How dare this man treat her like a servant! Then she remembered that this was not a date, it was a business meeting, one she really wanted, needed to go well. Annoying the client right out of the shoot didn't seem like the best move. And, after all, she was kind-of his servant, at least she was going to perform a service, one service, for him. She returned his

smile, though with a lack of sincerity, and rather ungraciously planted herself on the sofa.

He spoke as he poured Dom Perignon into two champagne flutes, the tilt of his head and raised eyebrow suggesting humor.

"Are the accommodations not to your liking? If you would prefer, we may adjourn to my office."

The familiarity of his voice was causing the butterflies already in residence in her stomach to mutate into pterodactyls. She was so nervous they had to stand in line just to get in. Could Mr. Alan be her mysterious rescuer? The best way to find out would be to come right out and ask him, but if she were wrong, she would be embarrassed to the core, besides looking like a love struck teenager. And what if he were the one? Wouldn't he have said something by now? He could have been bluffing. Maybe he couldn't see a thing in the dark of that stairwell. But wouldn't he recognize her voice? 'Hah, look at him,' she thought, 'He probably rescues damsels in distress for a hobby. Doubtful he remembers their names, let alone their voices.' She realized that he was once again waiting for an answer. Now if she could just remember the question. What the heck was this man doing to her? She took a deep breath, straightened her shoulders and imagined herself seated at a conference table. That helped. A little.

"The accommodations are fine, Mr. Alan."

That sounded good, polite, and not too aggressive. Deep breath. She was doing fine.

He seemed to appear before her, offering one of the flutes. She needed to keep a close eye on this guy. He moved so quietly he could be on top of you before you had time to think. The fantasy she had envisioned in the stairwell of lying beneath her rescuer, their bodies joined, suddenly flashed in her mind. Only this time the phantom had a face – Mr. Alan's face. She jumped and whispered, "Stop that!"

Her host raised an eyebrow in question, one corner of his beautiful mouth following suit. Marie could feel a blush start in the center of her chest and work its way to the far ends of her body. She accepted the wine, took a sip, a big sip, and then tentatively smiled up at him.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Alan. This is the first one-on-one meeting I've had with a client and I'm afraid I'm not handling it very well. I expected a restaurant, not that your house isn't beautiful, it just hadn't occurred to me that a client might want to meet at his house. I feel terribly overdressed, or maybe underdressed, and..."

He sat on the other end of the sofa, not crowding her, but still too close for her liking since just being in the same room as this man made it far too easy for her to forget her train of thought and find herself on the 5:02 to Intimate Fantasyland. When he turned to face her, his knee brushed hers. Her imagination was beginning to make her long for a lobotomy because that tiny contact sent something resembling a jolt of electricity zinging through her. He waved his palm in front of her.

"I feel that your discomfort is my fault. I should have made the details of this meeting more clear to Mr. Abraham. Please, let me explain."

He sipped his wine, his lips leaving a fleeting impression on the crystal, and then set the flute on the coffee table. Marie took another sip and put her glass next to his, grateful to rescue the beautiful crystal from the death grip of her sweaty palm.

"I travel a great deal. I have had several bad experiences in restaurants - bottled water can be difficult to acquire, pleasantly spiced food is a rarity, and even ice can become a hidden assassin."

He shrugged.

"Therefore, I avoid restaurants whenever possible. Mrs. Schwartz is an excellent cook and I can eat without fear of retribution from the food. Unfortunately, it did not occur to me that you might feel less than comfortable meeting a client, especially a male client, in such an intimate setting. I assure you, business is the only thing on my mind...at the moment."

Though said in a very businesslike tone, Marie could have sworn there was more to that 'at the moment' than met the ear, but she chalked it up to her imagination, which seemed to have gone into overdrive the moment he had walked into the room.

His explanation for his choice of meeting locations was perfectly logical. After her trip to Europe, where she had learned the true meaning of gastronomic distress, she could sympathize with his plight. Her smile genuine this time, she held out her hand to him.

"Do you think we could just start again? I'm Marie Parker."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Parker."

He started to kiss the back of her hand; then, with a sardonic grin, changed his mind and gave it one brisk, businesslike shake.

"I am Tyler Alan. I would prefer it if you would call me Tyler."

Marie reacted internally to the break in contact as her fingers slipped from his grasp with something akin to disappointment. Had she wanted him to kiss her hand again?

"Please, call me Marie."

"Marie."

His eyes caught and held hers like a spider's web capturing a butterfly. She had the feeling of drowning; no, of being engulfed in some wonderful, warm liquid that filled her so full of life that she felt like exploding. She knew with absolute clarity that she could not break the spell. She would bask in his wonderful chocolate gaze until he looked away, or Hell froze over, whichever came first.

He leaned closer to her, his warm palm sliding over her shoulder to grasp the back of her neck.

His hot, champagne-scented breath brushed her cheek. She luxuriated in warm chocolate caressing every part of her body. She was lost.

How easy it would be to take her now. She is beautiful, her smile casting warmth into a cold heart. Listen! Her pulse speeds with her excitement. She craves the darkness. She wants you inside of her, piercing her, devouring her. It would be so easy. No! Not this woman!

Tyler stood, breaking the spell, and Marie felt as if someone had thrown ice water in her face. She started to lean back against the sofa then thought better of it and reached for her champagne. A deep swallow of the cool liquid made her feel a little better. She felt as though she had just been rescued again, but she wasn't sure from what or by whom.

Tyler placed her briefcase on the coffee table that fronted the sofa, retrieved his wine from the table and sat in the chair next to the sofa.

"I assume you will need that for our meeting. I would prefer to conclude our business before dinner, if you don't mind. I find I enjoy my meal more if there is no unfinished business to disturb digestion."

Marie murmured, "Thank you," and forced her mind back into business mode. She opened the briefcase and took out a legal pad and pen. The fuzzy warmth that had seemed to engulf her just seconds before lingered at the edge of her mind, not enough to be distracting, but enough to let her know that she wanted that feeling again. Whatever it was that had held her for those few moments, she was certain it would be extremely addictive.

Giving her head a little shake, Marie told herself she was being foolish. It had been an almost-kiss, something Mr. Alan had thought better of before completing it. She had had those before. But, somehow, this one had been different. 'He's a client,' she chastised herself, 'you shouldn't be thinking about kissing him anyway. Thank goodness he had the good sense to keep things on a business level. Now try following his example, why don't you?'

"Can you give me an idea of your specific desires for this project, Mr. Alan? Do you want a split-level, traditional, pillared? How many bedrooms?"

He seemed a little distracted. Then he looked directly at her, his gaze fierce, but not like before. This was less personal, more...angry? She wasn't sure.

"I leave it completely in your hands, Marie. Build me a home, one that comes from your heart just for me." His voice softened, his eyes turning sad for a second. "I have been too long without a home." The fire returned. "I chose you because I knew it would be within you. You can give me a home!"

Marie was slightly taken aback by the vehemence of his proclamation. Her voice was pitched higher than she would have liked.

"You don't have any specifications? A budget?"

His white-bearded chin slashed the air like a silvery dagger as he shook his head once.

"Money is no object," his tone was bitter, "I have plenty of gold. My only specification is that you must design it and personally oversee that your design is followed to the letter. Do I have your word?"

The air between them seemed to vibrate with the intensity of his question.

Marie took a deep breath. She had the feeling that she was making this decision about more than a job.

"Yes, Tyler, I will design the house myself and supervise everything."

He nodded and stood, offering his hand.

"Then our business is at an end. Shall we dine?"

Marie quickly replaced the legal pad in her briefcase, and then placed her hand in his. She expected his palm to be warm and she wasn't disappointed. What she hadn't expected, although by now she should have, was the instant electricity that came from his touch. He lifted gently, pulling her to her feet. The wine must have been stronger than she thought because suddenly her high heels seemed to be three feet tall. She stumbled slightly while trying to adjust to the height. Tyler quickly wrapped his arms around her, pulling her against his solid body to steady her. Her arms seemed to slip around his waist of their own accord. For the breath of a second, she felt his arms tighten around her in a near rib-crushing embrace, and then he raised his hands to her shoulders and gently pushed her back so he could look down into her eyes, his breath fanning her cheek as he spoke.

"Are you all right?"

Marie blushed to her toes. The flush came from the fact that she wasn't completely certain she had stumbled solely from the wine. Could she have subconsciously wanted him to take her into his arms so much that she had arranged it? That was so deceptive! But it had worked!

"I'm fine."

She was breathless, her lips actually tingling in anticipation of his kiss. She dropped her head back slightly, to see him better she told herself, but she knew it was really an invitation. One he decided not to R.S.V.P. His nostrils flared and he pushed her firmly to arms' length.

"Perhaps you need sustenance to counter the effects of the wine."

He stepped away from her and around the end of the sofa. With a sweep of his hand he motioned

for her to pass in front of him. Hiding her disappointment, she complied. He placed his hand in the small of her back and guided her into the dining room.

Where the living room had been furnished in 'quaint and homey', this room was all sparse luxury. A mahogany table, no bigger than six feet in diameter, stood in the middle of the room. The chairs - there were only two - had deep red cushions on the seats and backs, the one on the back embroidered in black with a coat of arms: a rose in full bloom above turbulent waves.

A fireplace in one wall cast its soft glow into the room. A crystal chandelier holding at least thirty candles hung above the table, softly lighting the table. Four-candle candelabra stood in each corner of the room to chase away any shadows that might escape the chandelier and fireplace.

The table was set with china so fine you could see the candlelight through it. The silverware shone with the dull glow of real silver. Fine crystal, identical to the flutes, completed the picture.

Tyler guided her to a chair, which he pulled from beneath the table, waited for her to be seated, then effortlessly slid it, and her, back up to the table. He took the seat to the left of hers, a chair that was half again as large as the one in which she sat. It resembled a throne, and he took his place there as if he had been born to it.

Marie gave a nervous giggle.

"If you looked up 'intimate dinner for two' in Webster's I think you'd find this room. It's beautiful."

Tyler smiled; his eyes alight.

"I'm glad you like it. I admit I have a weakness for the finer things in life."

"Is it all authentic?"

One corner of his mouth rose in a sneer of contempt.

"At the risk of sounding like a snob, I hate replicas."

His mouth relaxed into a sensuous smile.

"I am comfortable with antiques, perhaps because I am one."

His deep chuckle vibrated the air, sending a shiver through Marie. The fire at his back bathed him in a reddish glow, almost as if he were a living, breathing candle. She knew she was a moth being drawn to that flame. Should she fight to keep from being consumed by his fire? What would it feel like to bask in that warmth, to let him burn within her body as he was currently burning her mind? A half memory flitted across her consciousness, chocolate heat all around her, inside her. She shivered.

"Are you cold, Marie?"

"Not at all."

Her desire-glazed eyes and the airy, sex siren voice in which she spoke were almost his undoing. His smile faded, his eyes narrowing as he caught the scent of her passion.

She is waiting, hot and ready for the seduction only you can give. Take her now!

He started to rise from the table just as Mrs. Schwartz entered with a large tray in her hands. Shaking his head to clear away the last remnants of the rabid lust that had almost overwhelmed him, he chastised himself. This dinner had not been one of his better ideas. The temptation was too great, his body far too desirous of the lovely lady before him. He gave an imperceptible nod to Mrs. Schwartz as she placed filled salad plates on top of the dinner plates before each of them. She placed a small turntable with several different salad dressings on the table between them, and then turned to him.

"Mr. Alan, there was a call for you from a Mr. Dylan. Since you left instructions not to be disturbed, I insisted that he leave a message. He said it was most urgent that he reach you before 10 this evening."

Tyler nodded with a slow blink of dismissal. He glanced at the gold Rolex on his wrist and frowned.

"I hope you will forgive me, Miss Parker, but I must make this call. Please enjoy your dinner. This may take a while and I wouldn't want to keep you waiting."

Stepping around his chair, he came closer to her side. Marie had to turn in her chair to look up at him, a move that made her dress ride high enough on her thigh to make him take a deep breath. He pulled a business card from his pocket and placed it on the table in front of her.

"This is a number at which I can be reached anytime. Please do not hesitate to call should you...need...anything."

Pushing his control to its limit, he took her hand from where it rested on the arm of her chair and brought it to his lips. The heat of life coursed through the veins of her tiny hand. She smelled clean, a perfume wafting from her skin that took him a minute to place. When his sensitive nose made the identification - baby lotion - his loins tightened to the bursting point. Gritting his teeth, he returned her hand to the chair and straightened.

"Once again, forgive me for cutting short our dinner."

Marie smiled up at him.

"Of course. But I really wouldn't mind waiting."

He shook his head.

"It might be hours. I'll dine after."

A secret, slightly evil grin curved his lips.

"Good evening, Marie."

He dipped his head, more of a bow, really, turned and quickly exited the dining room.

Though it was complete nonsense and Marie knew it, she would have sworn the room grew colder the minute he was gone.

Chapter 3

Mr. Alan did not rejoin her that night. Marie was a little disappointed, and, she had to admit, a little relieved. Though conversation with him was stimulating, too much so at times, it was also difficult because she seemed to have a problem separating business and pleasure. She hoped that was something that would come with experience, but, remembering the roller coaster on which her emotions seemed to ride whenever Mr. Alan was near, she doubted it.

After tossing and turning for what seemed like hours - according to the alarm clock on the bedside table it was actually about 15 minutes - Marie gave up the chase for the elusive prey called 'sleep' and called Beth. She knew her best friend would want to speak to her and give her guidance no matter what time of night it was needed. After all, that's what friends were for.

Rustling sounds. Beth sounded as if she had swallowed a large frog.

"If this is an obscene phone call, forget it, I'm too tired to enjoy it and I'll be damned if I'm gonna let you be a typical man and get your jollies without a bit of concern for your partner."

More rustling sounds warned of the phone being sent back to its cradle. Marie yelled into the phone, "Beth, it's me!"

"Me? This can't be me because me knows that I get up at six o'clock in the morning and would not appreciate a call at," rustle, rustle, "one in the morning! Are you crazy?"

Marie pulled the phone away from her ear to protect her eardrum as Beth shouted her discovery and annoyance. She warily brought it back when the other end grew silent.

"Beth?"

"Are you okay? Is this one of those middle-of-the-night something-awful-happened calls?"

She sounded reasonable now.

"Not exactly. I couldn't sleep. I had this really strange business meeting and..."

"Business meeting? Come on, Mare, you wouldn't take your life in your hands by waking me up for a business meeting."

There was more static, more rustling.

"Okay, I'm sitting up, I've reached a semblance of awake. Give."

Marie smiled. Beth was a great friend who had always come through for her. She liked to bluff and bluster, but that was just her way of letting you know that she cared enough about you to put herself out.

Marie felt like a sixteen-year-old after her first date telling her friend all the details. She mentally chastised herself. `You're twenty-two, at least get the age right!"

"You'll never believe what happened today!"

She proceeded to describe to Beth in minute detail her meetings with Mr. Abraham and Mr. Alan. Beth threw in `you've got to be kidding' and `you creep' at the appropriate times. When Marie signified that she was finished by taking a deep breath, Beth jumped in.

"He's gay, you know."

Marie exhaled indignantly.

"No way!"

"Yes, way. Think about it. He's gorgeous, rich, has no wife appendage, and doesn't seem to be in mourning. I rest my case. He has to like guys. Or he's a psycho, also not a good choice to take home to meet the parents."

Marie screwed up her nose as though she smelled something bad. Beth had a point. As her mother had always said, `If something seems too good to be true, it usually is.' But she just couldn't imagine Mr. Alan with another man. Oh, bossing them around, sure. Sitting on a throne and having them bow before him and kiss his ring, no problem. But actually holding one in his arms and... No way!

"You're wrong, Beth. I don't know how I know but I just know. Mr. Alan is definitely *not* gay."

"Girlfriend, you're thinking with your gonads. Okay, if he didn't have a date with another guy tonight, then how come he didn't stay and eat with you?"

"He had to make a phone call."

"Yeah, right. Phone calls do not pull studs from their appointed rounds. I was with you when you bought that little black number. If the guy wasn't twitchin' and droolin' after half an hour, he's not into girls. He just..."

Marie had a sudden vivid memory of the heat of his touch, the fire in his eyes. She interrupted Beth with full conviction.

"He's not gay. I don't know why he didn't eat with me. Maybe, like he said, the call was really important."

Beth made a disgusted sound.

"Yeah, and maybe he's a vampire so he couldn't let you see that he wasn't really going to eat anything. You better get a handle on yourself, friend. You've got `I'm falling for this guy' all over your voice."

Marie giggled self-consciously.

"Oh, I do not. I'm going to sleep. Some of us have to work in the morning, y'know."

"You bitch!"

They both laughed and said goodnight.

After hanging up the phone, Marie ran Beth's accusation through her mind. Mr. Alan gay? She shook her head vigorously. No way! He wasn't gay and he wasn't a vampire. Mr. Alan was a normal businessman who wanted a nice house to come home to after a long, hard day at the office. He wanted her to build it because he wanted a woman's touch. That might be a slightly archaic way of thinking, but who was she to look a gift horse in the mouth? She would do her very best, design a house for him worthy of a spread in 'Architect's Digest' and be on her way to a great career building beautiful houses. Her client's sexual proclivities would have no effect on that, and were none of her business, anyway!

With visions of exposed beams floating in her head, Marie drifted off to sleep, to dream.

She was back in the stairwell at Castle Dracula only this time she had made her way safely to the bottom of the stairs. She entered a large cavern illuminated by hundreds of candles, there soft glow warming her as she watched them flicker and flare. In the middle of the room a dais held a huge four-poster bed, covered in a blood-red fur throw. The candlelight seemed to dance over the fur, bringing forth highlights and casting shadows, until it seemed almost alive. And standing in front of the dais was Mr. Alan. He wore skintight black leather pants and a seductive smile. He raised his arm and unrolled his fingers, one by one, till his palm was exposed to her, beckoning her to him.

"Come to me, Marie."

His voice was a breath of wind and a kingly command all rolled into one. Marie had never wanted anything as much as she wanted to obey him. Still, she hesitated. She wasn't certain exactly why, just that some tiny warning bell in her brain was trying to get her attention. But he was so magnificent! He flexed the fingers of his extended hand and she made note of his slightly long, well-manicured fingernails. The thought crossed her mind that he could curl his hands into some pretty wicked claws if he so desired.

With her attention already on his hand, she followed it as it descended to the buttons at the waistband of his pants. He slowly unfastened the top button. Marie raised her eyes to meet his intense gaze and saw the promise of Heaven, and the fires of Hell, shining in his ebony eyes. She felt indecision tearing at her - Go to him or turn and run?

He spoke again, velvet over steel, and she was lost.

"I am all that you seek, my love, and more. Trust me."

As soon as Marie stepped into the room, a door slammed shut behind her. Startled, she turned

toward the noise. There was nothing but blackness behind her. No door, no stairs, no escape. Fear barely had time to register in her heart before she felt fur against her bare back and the welcome weight of a man settling over her. Her body responded immediately, her back arching to meet the hard male presence. Mr. Alan - at this point, she guessed she should call him 'Tyler' - smiled down at her as he slowly eased his way into her body. She raised her eyes to meet his and found ebony oblivion, the pleasure coursing through her veins like a bullet-train. This was all happening so fast! She screamed and pushed against him, fear of losing herself, and of not caring if she did, spurring her on.

He wrapped her struggling body tightly in his strong arms and laid his cheek against hers. His lips touched her ear, his breath feathering the tiny hairs inside as he whispered, "Don't fight me, Marie."

Marie held still so she might better hear him.

"Look at me and see your heart's desire."

Their bodies were still intimately joined and she throbbed for release, though she fought it. He raised his head, putting his face inches above hers. He parted his moist lips as though in preparation for a deep lover's kiss. Then his teeth parted slightly and Marie saw what she had known all along would be there. Sharp eyeteeth glistened longer than normal, long enough to pierce flesh and drain blood.

Her eyes flew back to meet the fire of his gaze. Her body tightened around him in a muscular spasm that sent another flash of pleasure through her. Could she really convince herself that she wanted to get away from him?

"Give your throat to me, my love, and I will lay the world at your feet. Your pleasure will be more than your mind can comprehend."

He was so intense, his eyes bored into hers as his hips performed an age-old dance of seduction against her tender flesh.

"You chose to stay with me, now choose to be mine forever. I will love you and cherish you, for all eternity. I swear it!"

The tiny bell in her brain had become an air-raid siren but it didn't have a chance of getting through the haze of passion that had filled her entire being. Her dreams, warped as they might be, were coming true, and she wasn't about to blow this chance. She closed her eyes and turned her face to the side, exposing her throat to him. He inhaled sharply, his voice a growl in her ear.

"You are mine!"

A sharp prick of pain as his teeth pierced her neck was followed by such an exquisite orgasm that she cried out his name. Heat spread outward from the place where his lips touched her neck like the ripples in a rock-disturbed pond. He was stroking her breast with one warm palm, the other holding her

to him. He thrust deeply and she felt her body building to a new peak. She wondered if another climax like the last would overtax her heart and kill her. She sighed, not caring if this night were her last as long as it went of forever. He had promised pleasure beyond her comprehension. She had no doubt that he could, and would, deliver.

Suddenly he pulled his lips from her throat, turned his face and hissed.

"...a few low clouds. Temperatures should be in the high 70's..."

Marie jumped as her radio alarm did its duty and brought her to consciousness. She quickly touched the button that would reset it for tomorrow. As she stretched, her hand automatically went to her throat. She felt for any tenderness, and then laughed at herself when disappointment met her touch. Had she really expected to find teeth marks? But that dream had seemed so real. She shook her head and reaffirmed her convictions about keeping this job on a professional level.

Tossing the dream into the realm of a nice memory, she went about her morning routine. Put on the tea, do some aerobics, shower, get dressed. As she looked in the mirror to check her hair, the vision of her vampire dream lover hissing caused her to turn quickly to the bed. She knew it was foolishness, but she had the strong desire to send her hand across her chest in the sign of the cross, something she hadn't done in years. When the dream Tyler had hissed his displeasure, it had been directly at her alarm clock.

Chapter 4

The night was dark and warm, just the way he liked it. The boulevard teemed with life. A woman of the night boldly walked up to him and opened her shirt to show off her wares. He smiled appreciatively, wondering if he could entice her into a nearby alley. As he leaned closed, he caught the taint of bad blood in her sweat. The way his prey treated each other had long ago destroyed any pity he might have had for them. This woman, with open sores dotting the skin of the arms she tried to hide beneath a cheap cotton blouse, certainly knew that to lie with a man would mean passing on her particular plague, condemning him to a long, slow, painful death. Yet her only concern was the money that would bring her a needle full of temporary amnesia. And they would call him a monster! A snarl of distaste curling his lip, he waved a dismissive hand in her direction and quickly moved on. There was plenty of game, he need not settle for something he deemed beneath him.

Sunset Boulevard. The irony in the name was not lost on him. As the sun lost its grip of purity on the world, darkness grabbed it in a stranglehold. Sunset heralded the beginning of his freedom, loosing him on the unsuspecting world until the sun returned. The dark made the prey afraid. It made them weak and stupid. And it made them want what he had to offer - a dramatic, ecstasy-filled escape from the pain of their mundane lives. And taking their worthless lives, devouring them in a frenzy of blood-lust, gave him a short reprieve from his most powerful adversary - boredom.

Occasionally, when he allowed himself such useless folly, he longed for the days of his youth, days when a strong man on a warhorse could rule the known world. When women fell to their knees before him, begging for their lives - before becoming of the blood. He had never killed a woman. Those were the days when men bowed before him and swore their undying fealty. He chuckled - a wry, mirthless sound - the good old days.

Tonight, he was dressed for the kill. His blonde locks were slicked back with sandalwood oil, turning them sleek black, then pulled into a tight queue, held at his nape with a piece of black leather. He wore a silken black poet's shirt of the finest linen, which revealed a good bit of his smooth chest, tight black slacks and black boots polished to mirror-brilliance. His long black canvas duster, an adequate modern substitute for the cape of old, brushed his ankles. He was a large, dark predator among a herd of defenseless sheep.

Searching his chosen hunting ground, his sharp eyes spotted a young black girl, maybe eight or nine, bouncing a ball against the wall of a gray brick building while the man he assumed to be her father

called to passersby, encouraging them to enter the theater behind him and experience its pleasures. He felt the excitement of the active hunt begin, his heart picking up its beat, his lungs filling in anticipation of a need for extra oxygen. Could he take the girl without her barker father even taking notice? And if the child's dubious guardian discovered him, could he control him with the power of his eyes while draining the life's blood from the girl? At last, it was a challenge worthy of him.

He moved slowly toward the girl, feeling every muscle work as it propelled him ever closer to his prey. He kept her in his sight while training his other senses toward her father. He quietly slid into the space between two buildings that the girl was using as her personal ball court. His pulse pounded in his brain as he grew rock-hard with anticipation. He slid the tip of his tongue over his teeth, enjoying the feel of the long, sharp upper canines. He was close enough to smell her now - a light sheen of sweat covered her young body from the exertion of her game - and he inhaled deeply through clenched teeth.

Her senses more attuned to the dangers of the streets than her youth should have necessitated, she must have heard his deep breath, or perhaps felt his hungry stare, because she turned and looked up at him, her eyes wide with apprehension and suspicion. His dark eyes easily caught and held her eyes. He smiled in triumph as he took her hand in his and slipped deeper into the shadows between the buildings. Her ball lay forgotten on the ground.

At the back of the rundown building, a dumpster stood against the wall. He stepped around and to the back of it, pulling the unresisting girl with him. His senses told him that her father knew nothing of her disappearance. As was most often the case with the people of the Boulevard, he was oblivious to all, even the fate of his own daughter, while in the pursuit of the almighty dollar. He wondered if, with enough gold, he could have just purchased the girl from her dear old dad. Possibly, but that would not have been a challenge, and the meal would not have been so sweet.

His predatory smile slipped to a snarl as he remembered times in the past when he had done just that, drunk the blood of purchased prey - an inconvenient child, or wife! - whose protector cared more for profit than the fate of those their honor should have dictated they protect. How worthless people had become within his lifetime, suitable only as meat upon which superior predators such as himself could gorge themselves!

He lifted the girl to his eye level, reveling in the sound of the warm blood coursing through her veins. Shifting his eyes to her throat, he broke the spell just long enough for her to begin a pitiful struggle, hoping the one whose job it had been to protect her would hear and come to investigate. She managed one squeak before his teeth pierced her throat and she was gripped in the throes of pleasure his bite gave to all victims, young or old. Her body jerked as her heart pumped scarlet eternity into his

veins. He sealed his lips tightly around the punctures so not one drop might get away.

He shivered with the effort to control his sexual response to feeding, his erection becoming painful. Though he preferred to have his dinner with a side of sex, he was not a pederast. He had taken the girl purely for the challenge. He knew he would have no difficulty finding female entertainment later, so, for now, he would enjoy the near-pain of anticipation.

Sighing as the girl's heart ceased beating, he licked the last drops from her throat and tossed her body into the dumpster.

"Hey, man, what you doin' wit' ma kid?"

He silently cursed himself for letting down his guard for even a moment, a foolish, potentially lethal mistake! Though he doubted anyone in this neighborhood would have the intelligence, or wherewithal, to become a serious threat to him, there was still no excuse for such laxity on his part.

Self-chastisement at an end, he slowly turned away from the dumpster to address the current threat. A very angry black man, the girl's father, was barreling down the alley, waving a small handgun menacingly as he ran. Inhaling the man's scent of anger and fear brought the beast within him to full glory. His voice was a deep growl of warning.

"The girl's miserable life is at an end. Do you wish to join her?"

He attempted to catch the father's angry glare but found to his disgust that it was too dark in this alley to make the connection. Though he could see well in this light, the man could not see his eyes; therefore, the spell would not take. He stepped forward in an effort to reach better light and the gun roared the father's fury. White-hot pain shuddered through his body, centered just below his breastbone. He looked down and saw the wet blossom of blood on his shirt. When he once again raised his regal head, his eyes glowed with a light of their own.

He reached out and grabbed the hand that held the gun before the man could fire again. With one sharp, seemingly effortless, pull, he tore the arm from its socket and tossed it, gun still tightly clutched in dead fingers, to the ground. As the man tried to cover the gaping wound with his other hand, it, too, was torn from its socket with unnatural ease to be thrown into the dumpster where it landed atop his daughter's body. Pink saliva dripped from the long canines of the predator as he grabbed the man's crotch. His victim's screams drowned out the sound of tearing cloth as he twisted and pulled, then dropped the mangled heap of flesh and cloth at his feet.

Reaching into the pocket of his silk pants, he withdrew several hundred-dollar bills, which he stuffed in the black man's shirt pocket. The prey had gone into deep shock by this point, no longer screaming, just watching him with wide, dead eyes. He leaned close to the victim of his most vicious

attack in years and whispered near his ear.

"She was delicious, well worth the money."

He tipped his head, listening. His slow smile was evil incarnate.

"If those sirens bring help quickly enough, you may live to be an old man."

His tone dropped lower, barely human.

"I wish them God's speed!"

A squad car came to a screeching halt at the mouth of the alley, its headlights cutting the darkness where he stood. Narrowing his eyes against the sudden increase of light and hissing his displeasure, he slipped quickly behind the dumpster. Examining his surroundings, he quickly came to the conclusion that the only way out of this cul-de-sac was straight up. His chest was throbbing, blood continuing to seep from the gunshot wound, his strength leaving with it. His powers of concentration would be affected by the pain and loss of blood, so he would have to use a method other than his first choice. Focusing his whole being on the edge of the rooftop to which he wished to jump, he bunched the muscles in his legs and sprang into the air. Landing badly, he slipped and fell back, barely managing to grab the edge of the roof. With a great effort, the ripping in his chest nearly his undoing, he pulled himself up onto the roof, then rolled onto his back and lay there panting. He had the urge to moan with the pain in his chest but, due to pride and the proximity of the police, he controlled it.

As he gained his feet and began the search for an exit, he couldn't resist a chuckle at the realization that the pain from his erection had ceased. That was one inconvenience he was rid of for the evening.

A scream of agony sounded from the alley below. He whipped around, his long hair flying, his lips curling in the smug smile of a sated predator.

Lieutenant Michael Decker had seen a lot of bizarre, and brutal, human behavior in his twenty years on the Los Angeles police force. A lot of it had happened on this very boulevard. But nothing in his past, not the last ten years in Homicide, not even a couple tours in 'Nam, had prepared him for this. This one entered the realm of what he liked to call 'the animals among us'.

Finding the body of a little girl in a dumpster was, unfortunately, not that unusual an occurrence around here. Drunks, whores and junkies didn't take very good care of their children. Most the kids in this neighborhood were accidents their mothers had turned into welfare cash cows. He made a mental note to notify the Department of Family Services about this girl's death. She had surely been used enough in life, he'd be damned if he were going to let her keep feeding her parent's bad habits for even

one more month in death.

The condition of the body was just one of the very strange facets of this crime scene. He didn't need an autopsy to tell him that the little girl, black - Uh-uh, Decker, 'African-American' - approximately five-years-old, was a few pints low. She looked like a deflated balloon, her skin lying flat against, almost sticking to her bones. The poor little thing hadn't had much weight to begin with. He figured now she'd probably weigh in at about a pound-and-a-half, maybe two.

The only wound on the body immediately visible to the naked eye was a set of puncture marks on her throat. Decker snarled, a sound of disgust coming from the back of his throat. Some nut with a vampire fixation had probably decided that tonight was the night for his coming out and this kid had been his lucky first customer. One problem with that scenario: what had he done with the blood? No way was there enough blood in that dumpster to account for the girl and the man's severed arm. No human could drink that much of the stuff without puking his guts out and there was no sign of that in the near vicinity. Had the creep siphoned it into some kind of container to enjoy in the privacy of his own home? How? Forensics had better give him a lot more to go on than he could see or he was in a heap of trouble on this one.

Of course, there was always the possibility that the witness, the kid's huckster father, would live. A grim smile flashed across his lips, and then was gone. From the description of the guy's injuries he had received from the senior patrolman on the scene, that possibility was practically nil. It looked to Decker like the guy had lost enough blood on the scene to punch his ticket. Shrugging, he reminded himself that anything was possible.

The junior patrolman, a young man no more than twenty, walked up to him. Decker felt sorry for the kid. He was slightly green, the tell-tale signs of puking written all over his face. Decker smiled and examined the scene more closely, giving the kid a chance to recover his dignity.

"Lieutenant Decker?"

Decker looked back at the young patrolman, and then took his proffered hand with a solid shake.

"I'm Decker."

Decker had a deep, gravelly voice that soothed some, and irritated others. Luckily, this kid was one of the former. The Lieutenant reminded him of his father and that made him want to do his duty to the best of his ability. He straightened his shoulders and rested his hand on his holster, presenting, at least in his mind, a picture of strength and preparedness.

"I'm Bobbie Wilson, sir. I was the first on the scene. Since you're in charge of the Homicide investigation, I thought you might want my report directly."

Decker shouldered a smile, not wanting the young man to think he was laughing at him. The enthusiasm of youth never failed to give him a little tee-hee. Withdrawing his notepad from the pocket of his suit coat, he flipped to a new page, and raised expectant eyes to the patrolman.

"At 10:45 I received..."

Decker held up a hand.

"It's late. Cut to the chase, son."

Bobbie blushed and cleared his throat; mentally running the whole incident through his mind until he found what he thought would be the beginning of the `chase'.

"When I pulled into the mouth of the alley, I saw an African-American male standing there."

He pointed to a spot about three-quarters of the way down the alley, a few feet in front of the dumpster. A large pool of semi-moist blood bore silent witness to some horrible event having taken place there in the last hour. Decker had a feeling that none of that blood would pan out as belonging to the girl.

"He was just standing there, Lieutenant. I couldn't see his wounds. I mean, I thought he had his hands in front of him, ya know? He didn't seem to be in any distress."

Decker nodded, silently relieving Wilson of any guilt he might feel at not having realized the man was a victim and not a perpetrator.

"The report had said `shots fired' so I unholstered my weapon..." Decker smiled. You could always tell a rookie by the way he talked. `Unholstered my weapon' instead of `pulled my gun'. "...identified myself and started cautiously down the alley. I told the suspect to raise his hands and turn around."

His color, which had improved considerably, started another downhill slide. Decker really didn't want to wait around while the kid lost more of his last donuts and coffee so he prodded him a little. "Did you see anyone else in the alley?"

The patrolman quickly looked away, mumbling, "No, sir." Decker had been lied to enough in his life to know one when he saw it, and Wilson wasn't even good at it. But why would this fresh-faced kid hand him a big one now? Replacing his notepad in his suit, he lowered his voice and wrapped one arm around the boy's shoulders in an attempt to incite confidentiality.

"Off the record. What do you think you saw?"

A blush once again colored the boy's pale skin. He spoke so quietly the Lieutenant had to lean closer to make out his words.

"I've been trying to convince myself that it was a trick of the light or something, but... My patrol

car's lights lit up this alley like daylight, sir. Just after I pulled up, something big and black flew from behind that dumpster up," he pointed, "onto the roof of that building."

Decker's brows drew together into a deep frown. He mentally traced the path Wilson had indicated 'something big and black' had taken. That would have been about an eight-story jump. But the kid seemed on the up and up so he'd play it straight for the time being, and ream somebody later if his leg was getting pulled.

"How big? Could it have been a bird, or maybe a cat?"

Decker grimaced. Here he was handing the kid Poe's Raven or super-pussy and telling himself he was playing it straight. God, he needed a cup of coffee!

"No, sir. It was about the size...sir; I think it was a man. A man wearing some kind of long, black coat."

He uttered a very unmanly giggle that bordered too close to hysteria for Decker's liking. His voice rose slightly as he continued.

"Or a cape. I guess it could have been a black cape."

Decker tightened his hand on Wilson's shoulder, hardening his voice to its most stern.

"Get hold of yourself, Wilson."

Bobbie took a deep breath, and then nodded sharply. When next he spoke, his voice had regained a semblance of normality.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant. Maybe you're right. I guess it could've been a big cat."

The Lieutenant nodded, releasing the patrolman and turning back to the scene.

Decker didn't buy one ounce of super-pussy. Wilson's tone had made it clear that he wanted, needed, to believe, so he would, but that wasn't Decker's style.

After telling the supervising officer to keep the scene as undisturbed as possible till forensics was finished, Lieutenant Decker walked to the front of the building. With an expression that stated clearly he would rather drink sour milk than do this, he flashed his badge at the heavy-set woman inside the ticket cage of the 'adult' theater. She smiled knowingly and licked too-red lips. He swallowed the bile that rose in his throat, reminding himself that this, too, was one of the people he had sworn to 'protect and serve'.

"What's the quickest way to the roof of this building, ma'am."

Surprise showed in her close-set, bulging eyes. Her hand fluttered near her face like a dying bird.

"No comprenez."

Decker looked at the ground, hissing through gritted teeth.

"Great, just great!"

He jabbed his index finger toward the sky, desperately searching his admittedly poor reserves of Spanish for the right word.

"Tejanos?"

The woman's blank stare twisted to complete confusion. He searched his memory of high school Spanish again, and then grimaced as he realized he had just asked the poor woman for a pair of jeans.

"Tejado?"

She smiled warily, her lack of faith in his sanity obvious, and pointed at the door to the theater, then to her left. Decker hoped he was interpreting that correctly as 'go through the door and to your right.' If not, he'd just hunt around till he found the damn stairs by himself! He nodded, said "Gracias" and walked through the door.

Bowing to the necessity of letting his eyes adjust to the dark, he stood just inside the closed door and stared straight ahead, making a point of not looking at the stage in the middle of the large, smoke-filled room. He knew what he'd see there - naked women enticing desperate men to put their hard earned dollar bills in places money had never been intended to go. He sincerely hoped he never got so hard-up for female companionship that he had to seek it out in one of these places. He'd prefer someone just shoot him.

Watching the wall on his right, he came upon a half-open door. Carefully pulling it completely open, he found what he had been seeking stairs ascending to the roof. He took a penlight from his jacket pocket, switched it on and placed it in his mouth to light his way. Always on the cautious side, he pulled his gun from his shoulder holster and slipped off the safety. With the weapon held in front of his chest, he slowly climbed the stairs.

As he climbed Decker realized he was missing the usual smells that emanated from stairwells left open for more than two minutes in this neighborhood. No urine, no vomit, even the smoke was less noticeable here. That had to mean that access to these stairs was usually restricted. So why had the door been open tonight?

In the penlight's beam Decker saw something wet on the stair above him. He leaned closer to confirm his suspicion. That was blood, fresh blood. There was more of it leading up the stairs. Keeping his bare hands off the banister so as not to destroy evidence, Decker continued to climb. He knew he'd reached the roof when he noticed light shining in through the open doorway. That set off more alarms in his skull. By law, the roof's fire door was to be kept closed at all times. Smut palaces like this were usually pretty careful about that kind of thing. They had enough chances of getting shut down without giving the law any easy ones.

He approached the exit carefully, listening for the slightest sound. There was nothing just complete silence. Just his own breathing, a little heavier than he would have liked, and the soft pad of his shoes as he stepped into the doorway.

The first thing he noticed was that the fire door was not only open, it was gone, the remains of the tattered metal doorframe glinting in the moonlight like tiny daggers. He cautiously shone his penlight on the ground at his feet, and then followed a trail of tiny red drops across the roof. By the edge that faced the alley where the attacks had occurred, there was a small puddle. Though he was too far from it to be certain, in his gut Decker knew it was blood.

His instincts, those untrained naturals that had kept him alive more times than he would care to count, telling him that the assailant was long gone, Decker holstered his gun and stepped out onto the roof. He sucked a deep, disturbed breath through clenched teeth as he saw the fire door lying a few feet from the exit. The metal door was bent and mangled, as though a furious animal had vented its fury upon it. As Decker went to the edge of the roof to get the attention of the officers below and get forensics up here, he wondered if that wasn't one hell of an accurate analogy.

Chapter 5

Marie was beginning to understand Michelangelo's plight when he painted the Sistine Chapel. Taking something from your heart and putting it on paper was kind-of like laying a little piece of yourself out in front of everyone and asking for them to criticize it. She was finding it rather difficult to separate criticism of the project from criticism about her. Another of the myriad lessons to which Mr. Alan's home had treated her. She felt like she was back in school with one heck of a crush on her teacher.

She had been working on the house practically day and night for a solid month. Finally, she had the basic design completed to her satisfaction and felt ready to show the sketches to Mr. Alan for, she hoped, approval. Sitting behind her desk, she laid the card he had given her on the smooth surface. She'd never seen a business card quite like it. It was black-on-black, very dramatic. A coat of arms, the same that adorned his dining room chairs, was embossed in darker black across the ebony card. In the center of the card, the words 'Tyler. 555-1066' stood out in dark red script.

"Oh, well," Marie spoke quietly to herself, "you knew he was a bit eccentric. Now quit stalling."

Taking a deep breath, she picked up the phone and quickly dialed his number before she could lose what little nerve she had managed to find.

It rang once, and then there was a series of clicks followed by three more rings.

"Tyler."

Memory exploded in Marie's head, causing her grip on the phone to slacken to the point of nearly letting it fall to the desk. Without his presence to distract her, only his voice, she was certain he was the man in Romania. Why hadn't he mentioned it?

"Who is there?"

His tone had deepened from mere query to threatening anger. 'Business, Marie.' She cleared her throat.

"Excuse me, Mr. Alan, I seemed to have lost my voice for a minute."

"Marie."

He said her name as though tasting a delicacy that he particularly enjoyed, his voice a deep purr. Against her will, a tiny shiver ran down her spine and lodged...Business!!

"I hope you are well?"

"Oh, yes, I'm fine. I have completed my initial sketches and I would like to submit them for your approval. I think you will be quite pleased with them."

Marie realized how odd that sounded. She barely knew the guy, what made her think she would know what he'd like? Still, she felt as though she had known him longer than their month of association. 'Stop that!'

"I thought we might meet for lunch. There's a restaurant on Vine that I've been to several times so I know it's safe. Will that fit into your schedule?"

"I regret that I am not available for lunch as I have another engagement. However, I am free for dinner. Eight o'clock at the Schwartz'?"

Marie rarely lied, and always felt terribly guilty if she succumbed to the temptation to take the easy way out, but the thought of another intimate dinner with Mr. Alan made the tiny hairs on the back of her neck stand on end, and that darn warning bell in her mind go into overdrive. If she were going to keep this on a business level, she would have to take the bull by the horns.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Alan, that won't work for me."

It wasn't really a lie, or so she kept telling herself as she imagined her mother shaking her head in that disappointed motherly way.

"Perhaps we could try for lunch tomorrow? Or perhaps you could come to my office?"

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line during which Marie swore she could feel Mr. Alan's displeasure zinging through the phone line and burning her ear. When he spoke, his tone was as she had expected - and more.

"Miss Parker, do you have an appointment for dinner this evening?"

Flat out like that Marie just couldn't bring herself to lie.

"No, I don't. I just don't feel..."

"I will be at the Schwartz' at eight o'clock this evening. If you care to continue this project, you will reconsider your refusal. Good afternoon, Miss Parker."

Click.

Marie pulled the receiver from her ear and stared at it as if it had bitten her. The autocratic, arrogance of the man! She slammed the receiver into the cradle so hard the whole thing nearly fell off the desk. Leaning back in her chair, she glared at the telephone until, in her mind, it assumed the shape of Mr. Alan's face.

"Just who do you think you are? I just work for you. You don't own me. Slavery was outlawed in

this country a long time ago, although I don't doubt you would be perfectly happy to have it reinstated. How dare you threaten me! After I work my butt off for a month, eating and sleeping your stupid house, you have the utter gall to suggest that I might not `continue this project'? You bet I'll be at your cozy little dinner Mr. Alan, *Tyler*, I'll be there with bells on. And even though I want this house so bad my teeth ache, I'm still going to give you a piece of my mind. You just see if I don't!"

Slumping in her chair, she sighed, realizing she had just given said piece of mind to her telephone. This evening she intended to be more composed, and perhaps a bit more diplomatic, but her message would be the same. Marie Parker would not be pushed around!

Tyler returned the cellular telephone to the stand beside his bed. He pulled the curtains closed and settled back into the soft warmth of cream silk sheets and matching comforter. But sleep didn't come immediately as he had assumed it would. Too much anger remained. The woman dared to refuse him the small courtesy of meeting him at his discretion. He had known working with a woman would be a problem.

The fairer sex certainly had their uses but designing and building houses was not one that he had ever attributed to them. He felt that if he wanted to remain in America it behooved him to adapt to the modern American version of a woman - Independent, educated creatures that earned their own wage and expected to be treated with equality and sensitivity to their `needs'. His lip curled derisively. He was not now, nor had he ever been, a `sensitive man'. He would protect his own woman with his life, of course, but others were to be taken and used as he willed. Frowning, he imagined the militant women he had seen in print and on newscasts in the last half-century. If they were aware of his attitude they would probably attempt to unman him.

He closed his eyes and allowed an image of Marie to play across his eyelids. The memory of her body pressed against him in the darkness of the stairwell flooded his loins with heat. Her hair had smelled of roses, her skin of country rain. He had wanted so badly to take her with him to the cavern below, to make love to her till the sunset when he would have made her his forever. But he had known that the others would come looking for her. He might have been forced to leave Transylvania (he refused to think of it as Romania, or whatever name the politicians of the hour had given it) before his business there was complete. That was one inconvenience he had known he could avoid merely by following the bus' trail later.

Tyler remembered the tiny piece of black silk that had covered her body when she had come to the Schwartz' for dinner. His rigid manhood strained against the silk sheet, causing a groan to escape his

lips. After considering all that he had felt for her in the short space of time he had been able to hold her, in the stairwell, and again in her dream, he had decided that he would never take Marie against her will. If she ever took his blood and joined him in this life, she would do so as a fully informed participant.

But she was driving him insane! He wanted her as he had never before wanted a woman. The fire in her eyes, the soft satin of her skin, the warm glow of her hair - all played havoc on his control. The very thought of her brought him to such a peak of excitement he feared he might embarrass himself like a callow youth. If only he could take her, make love to her.

Tyler sat up in bed as a self-challenge flashed across his mind. Could he take Marie into his bed, perhaps even touch her heart, without her knowing what he was, what he offered her? He shook his head, and then raised his hand to stroke his beard. The level of control he would need to plunge into her beautiful body without tasting her blood would be high, very high indeed. Was he up to the challenge?

Glancing down at the slight tent in the covers, Tyler chuckled. He did seem to be up for something. His eyes gleamed as he steepled his long fingers beneath his chin, his smile predatory. The decision was made. He would make Marie Parker his woman, his lover; perhaps, his smile widened, yes, perhaps even his wife, without telling her of his unique...lifestyle. This could indeed prove to be the most fascinating challenge of his life.

Marie arrived at the little chalet in Beverly Hills at 7:30. She was so angry she couldn't wait any longer to give that insufferable man a piece of her mind. If she had examined her motives more closely she might have found a desire to be in his presence was also part of the driving force behind her premature arrival. For this visit (confrontation?) she had worn a royal blue calf-length skirt with matching jacket and a white button-down blouse, hoping her attire would help her to keep businesslike thoughts in her mind.

Now that she was actually standing at the door waiting for someone to take notice of the bell, she felt a little of her resolve slipping.

'Oh, no you don't,' she admonished herself, 'Marie Parker, you march right in there and let that man know that you will not be bossed around like some secretary with nothing better to do with her time than stir his coffee!'

As she heard the door opening, she plastered a smile on her face to greet Mrs. Schwartz. After all, the little elf-lady had been very nice to her. There was no reason to treat her...

Her breath caught in her throat, threatening to stay there, as the door opened to reveal Mr. Alan himself, his smile as warm and seductive as she remembered. Though he remained in the shadow cast by

the eaves of the chalet, she could make out every plane and angle of his handsome face. He wore black pants that molded to his muscular legs like a silky second skin and a white poet's shirt that bared way too much of his gorgeous body for Marie's comfort. Damn, she had so hoped that the champagne had enhanced her memories! No such luck.

"Hello, Marie. Please, come in."

Did he sound smug? Why shouldn't he? After all, she was there as ordered. She'd have that smug look gone from his eyes before this night came to a close.

He stepped back and motioned for her to enter the house. As she stepped by him she caught the scent of musk. She didn't recognize the cologne but she made a mental note to snoop his bathroom and find out what it was so she could douse her pillow with it! It smelled delicious and what it was doing to her senses warranted further inspection.

'Who are you kidding, Marie. It's not the cologne, it's the hunk wearing it.'

She felt his eyes on her as she walked into the living room. As mutinous little goose bumps rose on her skin, she rubbed her hands over her arms.

"Are you cold?"

Marie jumped. He was right behind her, close enough that she had felt his breath on the back of her neck.

"No!"

It came out sounding like she was denying her guilt in a murder. Stepping forward to give herself a little space, she turned to face him. It was not her imagination; the way he was looking at her had nothing to do with business. Maybe Mr. Abraham had been right about this guy after all. Maybe he wanted a little more service than just getting his house built. Well, although she found him nearly irresistible, she was going to let him know in no uncertain terms that the only talents of hers that were for sale were architectural!

His arched brow questioned her defensive stance. Marie sat her briefcase on the coffee table, wanting her hands free to help her make her point, if necessary. Turning back, she started in surprise. In the palm of his outstretched hand rested a small box wrapped in silver tissue paper. Now it was her eyebrows' turn to raise in question.

"For you, Marie."

His voice was such a purr it was practically indecent. When he spoke her name, Marie felt a tightening in her chest and, if she chose to be honest with herself, lower. She was temporarily at a loss for what she should do. Should she let him know how angry she was about his autocratic handling of

her, then see if he still wanted to give her a gift? Or should she refuse it outright?

As though he had read her mind and understood her dilemma, he said, "Why don't you open it while I get you a drink? Then you can decide if you wish to keep it."

He sat the tiny package on top of her briefcase and went to the bar. Indecision chewed on her bottom lip for a couple seconds before curiosity got the better of her. She sank to the sofa and took the box into her hand. It had nearly disappeared in his palm, but fit nicely in hers. She carefully unwrapped the beautiful paper, doing her best not to tear it. The box inside was black, the cover embossed with his black-on-black coat-of-arms.

Looking up to see that he was still busy at the bar, she pulled open the lid. An exclamation of surprise slipped past her lips before she could suppress it. Inside, nestled on a piece of white silk, was a black crystal rose. It was about an inch long, with several small, red stones dotting its petals like drops of dew. Marie exhaled a long sigh of appreciation.

"Do you like it?"

She jumped, glaring up at him for startling her. She hadn't heard a sound warning her of his approach. How did he do that?

"It's beautiful."

He smiled as he handed her a glass of white wine, his look positively triumphant.

"Thank you."

That look, combined with the fact that she hated white wine, reminded her of her purpose for this visit. She sat the glass on the coffee table, gathered the package, pretty paper and all, into her hand and held it toward him.

"But I can't accept it."

He had come around the table to the other end of the sofa and was about to sit next to her. With the arch of one fine brow he took note of her movements. He stood towering over her, his expression not quite a glare, but definitely not friendly. Mentally she coined his expression 'a glare waiting for a reason'.

When he spoke, his tone was deeper, taking on an undertone of menace.

"Why not? I made it for you."

Since he made no move to accept the package, Marie placed it on the table next to her untouched wine. She leaned back into the sofa to look up at him, ordering her heart not to speed its beat as her eyes involuntarily lingered over his well-built thighs tightly covered by black linen pants. It didn't get any easier as her gaze climbed over his taut stomach and smooth chest, most of which was revealed by the

open neck of his white poet's shirt. Taking a deep breath to strengthen her resolve, she met his eyes. They were shooting black sparks.

Schooling her voice to reflect her business intentions and not her straying thoughts, Marie raised her chin proudly and began the lecture she had spent most of the day planning.

"Mr. Alan, ours is a business relationship. Business associates do not give each other expensive gifts, they do not have intimate, candlelit dinners for two and...", she held up her hand to stop the interruption she had seen taking form in his eyes, "...they don't order each other around like servants. I do not appreciate being commanded to meet you for dinner as though I were your serf. And I would prefer that you ask what I would like to drink before you just assume that I will enjoy whatever you're having. I do not like white wine."

He took a step backwards, casting his face and upper body into shadow. Though that move made Marie nervous, she was determined to finish this lecture before she lost her nerve.

"I have put a great deal of effort into designing your house, to the detriment of my other work, I might add, and I feel that I have done an exceptional job. I would like to see this project through to the end; however, if you are incapable of keeping our relationship on a business level, then I will be forced to recommend that Mr. Abraham assign someone else to it."

She opened her briefcase, withdrew the portfolio containing her sketches of his house and laid it on the coffee table next to the rejected gift.

"This is what I have done so far. Please look through it and let me know as soon as possible if you want me to remain on the project."

She closed her briefcase, stood and extended her hand toward the shadow that was Tyler. She had the strangest feeling that she was shoving her hand into the mouth of a tiger. Her stomach was in her throat and she hoped her palm wasn't sweating.

"Whatever your decision, Mr. Alan, we at Abraham, Smith and Snyder appreciate your business."

She stood with her hand in mid-air for what seemed like hours. She could feel his eyes on her, burning her skin, searing her soul. 'Control the imagination, Marie,' she warned herself.

Suddenly, Tyler turned walked away from her. Startled, she called to him.

"Mr. Alan?"

"Excuse me a moment."

His voice sounded very strange, kind-of strangled. She wondered if he were having some sort of attack.

"I can show myself out. You can call the office..."

He turned toward her so quickly that his hair, pulled into its usual fashionable queue, flew across his shoulders. She still couldn't make out his features; he was too deeply in the shadows created by the placement of candles. His voice was barely a whisper.

"This evening's business is not at an end, Miss Parker. I will return in a moment."

Marie was suddenly very afraid, more afraid than she had ever been in her life. Some primitive instinct was telling her to run, run as fast as she could as far from this place as possible. She knew she was being silly. Still, her muscles were tight, ready to fly at a moment's notice. Maybe she should go.

"Mr. Alan, I really think..."

"Sit down!"

The fine crystal glass on the coffee table exploded, the pale liquid contents spraying the surrounding area. Marie jumped and dropped her briefcase. His shouted command made the pane in the front window shake and for a second she wondered if it, too, would shatter. Eyes wide, she fell rather ungracefully to the sofa. She could actually feel it getting hotter in the room, the very air around her vibrating with some unseen menace. Feeling as though she were smothering, she could hear her heart beating like a speed-metal drum, each breath coming so fast her chest couldn't rise quickly enough to accommodate them. She was terrified and she knew without a doubt that Death lurked in the candlelight-created shadows.

The slam of a door broke the spell. The room cooled, the shadows lightened, and the menace disappeared completely.

Marie closed her eyes as her breathing and heartbeat slowly returned to normal. She had never had a panic attack herself, but she had read several articles about them. That, she reasoned, must be what had just happened. The pressure of the confrontation with Mr. Alan must have been too much for her. Yeah, that was it. She felt so stupid. Of all times to take her virgin ride on the panic express.

She was convinced that the whole incident had been primarily in her head until she opened her eyes and saw the remains of the wine glass. What had caused it to shatter? Although Mr. Alan's shout had been loud, she doubted it had been *that* loud. Perhaps the glass had had some flaw that had chosen that minute to give way.

`Yeah, and maybe there's an Easter Bunny.'

Marie closed her eyes to shut out the image of the broken glass and took several deep breaths. Should she leave while he was out of the room? No, that would be running away. Besides, deep down, she didn't really want to leave. Her heart wasn't the only thing that had gone into overdrive at his

shouted command. As she remembered the strength in his voice, she noticed the moisture between her legs. Her nether regions were hot and aching. She had never been in the presence of such a forceful man. He frightened her, but no one had ever made her feel more alive.

Tyler stood on the patio, staring up at the half-moon, his clenched fists tight against his sides. The remnants of his wine glass glittered like a thousand stars on the cobblestones before him, evidence of his temporary loss of control. The anger inside him threatened to explode again every time he thought about that chit lecturing *him* on propriety. The foolish wench had no idea how close she had come to getting her skirts tossed over her empty little head and... No, he thought with a snarl, she wasn't stupid. She was liberated. She didn't want to be ordered about like a servant. She wanted to be treated like an equal. Adding a growl to the snarl, he ground the glass under the toe of his black Italian leather boot. He had no equal! Certainly not an overeducated woman who refused to face her own feelings. He felt her desire whenever he was near her. She wanted him, yet she insulted him at every turn, pushing him to the brink of losing control. Tyler ran his tongue over the sharp tips of his most deadly weapons, pleased to find them receding.

Perhaps he understood his little Marie better than she understood herself. She was a cat in heat, flashing her desire to be mated yet fighting when the possibility became too real. A tight smile parted his lips. She was a handful. The way her baby-blue eyes flashed over some slight, real or imagined, showed a passionate nature that Tyler longed to see unleashed in a more carnal fashion. He would just have to find a way to break through her liberated facade to the real woman beneath. And in order to do so, he must keep his own dark nature at bay.

Firmly in control now, Tyler returned to the living room to continue his pursuit of the auburn-haired beauty.

As he entered the room to find it empty, the lady nowhere to be found, his anger returned full-force. With a roar of animal rage that shook the glass pane of the front window, he lifted the sofa with one hand and tossed it across the room to land upended near the stairs. He spun on his heel, searching for some other inanimate object on which to vent this lust-fed rage that seemed to be consuming his very soul.

He came face-to-face with Marie standing on the bottom stair.

Chapter 6

"What are you doing?"

It sounded more like an accusation than a question, not to mention the fact that he had spoken it in a decidedly raised voice. Not giving much thought as yet to her answer, Marie stood frozen, her mind trying to form a reasonable explanation for what she had just seen. The sofa lay on its face near her feet, nothing else in the room disturbed.

'What about the big guy by the coffee table?' she thought. 'He looks pretty disturbed.'

Strands of silvery-gold hair had come loose from the tie at the base of his neck, their slightly curly length framing his face and falling slightly past his shoulders. In the firelight, his eyes seemed to glow near-red as they glared up at her from beneath anger-creased brows. Sweat darkened the shirt over his chest, which was taut with exertion, and the muscles in his thighs rippled beneath his tight pants. All in all, he was magnificent in his anger. And so terrifying, her breath was threatening to stick in her throat!

"I...", she cleared her throat in an attempt to get more volume, and less air, into her voice, "I was looking for the bathroom."

In that annoyingly rude way of his, he turned his back on her. She could see the muscles of his back relax as he took a deep breath and straightened, rolling his shoulders. When he turned to face her again, most of the anger had vanished from his face to be replaced by a slightly comical combination of apology and embarrassment. He looked a little like a kid who had gotten caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

With a glance toward the sofa, he shrugged and smiled up at her. It was the most unguarded she had ever seen him, his embarrassment bringing a boyish quality to his face she never would have guessed possible. If she weren't careful, she knew she was going to fall head-over-heels in love with this guy.

"I guess that martial-arts training wasn't a complete loss."

He looked toward the fallen sofa again, and then stepped around it to stand at the bottom of the stairs, dropping his voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

"You did see it attack me, didn't you? Those couches can be deadly."

He raised one foot to the bottom step next to her feet, leaned one arm on the banister and stroked his beard in a thoughtful way. In a more normal tone, he spoke as if contemplating a great mystery of the

universe.

"I wonder if my instructor has ever considered using his training for redecorating."

He grinned at her, causing an unexpected tightening in her chest.

"Probably not."

He stepped back to the ground floor and bowed slightly.

"Forgive my behavior this evening, Marie. My only excuse might be that a business venture involving a great deal of capital is teetering on the precipice of disaster. I had not realized that I was wound quite so tightly or I would have rescheduled this evening's meeting. Please accept my apology."

Moving the sofa aside with the toe of his boot, he pointed to a door down the hall from the stairs.

"I believe you will find your needs well cared for in there. If you will allow me, I would like to take you to dinner. At the restaurant of your choice, of course."

He raised his blonde brows in anticipation of her answer. What could she say? She would look like the worst bitch if she turned him down when he was obviously trying so hard to make amends. She smiled, although a bit tentatively, and nodded.

"I accept, both your apology and your invitation."

Keeping a wary eye turned in his direction, she began easing around him, more in need of the bathroom now than ever.

"Excuse me."

His eyes were so intense, so nearly black; she found it almost impossible to look away until he cast them downward and motioned with a wave of his hand.

"Of course."

Tyler watched her as she walked down the hall. She had a very attractive walk with just the right amount of sway to the hips. She looked almost as good walking away from him as she did coming. Her sensuality was natural and a bit innocent.

Once she was safely inside the bathroom, he lifted the sofa and returned it to its rightful place in the room. The room restored to order, he stepped to the window and looked out on the brightly lit street. His reflection in the window caught his attention and he chuckled at his appalled expression. He looked like a scoundrel after a night's carousing! He could not take a lady out on the town looking like this.

Climbing the stairs three at a time, he entered his rooms and undertook a quick repair. As he put his hair to order, he wondered just what in blazes he had been thinking when he offered to take her to dinner. Had he lost his mind? Looking into the polished metal shield on the wall, he shook his head. This challenge of his seemed to have a firm hold on his mind. He wanted to please the woman. If she

thought she would feel more comfortable in a restaurant, then he would take her to one. How bad could it be?

Tyler quickly donned a snow-white silk shirt and black velvet jacket. He ran his palm over the velvet sleeve, savoring the feel of the soft material, and then pulled the lace cuffs of his shirt into view. A quick inspection assured him of his perfection. Surely, his triumph, in the form of Marie warm and willing in his bed, was but a few hours away.

Glancing toward the curtains that hid his bed from view, he shivered slightly in anticipation of carrying Marie through those curtains to her first taste of Heaven. And, perhaps, his?

Turning back to his *mirror*, he searched his own eyes in his reflection. Did he see something new in their depths, some never-before-seen aspect of his soul awakening? Blinking, he cast off such nonsense and exited his bedroom.

Marie was waiting for him at the bottom of the stairs. She couldn't help a little sigh escaping her lips as she saw him. He was truly a striking man, with his light hair and dark eyes. She had decided they were the color of chestnuts, a deep, and reddish brown. She shivered, remembering when they had seemed a lot redder, then pushed that thought aside so she could enjoy the view.

Tyler was tall; carrying himself with such pride and attitude that he seemed above everyone. She was five-six and he towered over her so she guessed she had estimated his height correctly at about six-two. He was broad at the chest and slim hiped, with long legs and long, tapered fingers. She had yet to find a flaw in his appearance.

He took her hand, pulled it through his elbow and placed it on his arm.

"Oh, my briefcase."

"Why don't you take it to your car while I call for a limo."

She turned and raised surprised eyes to his face.

"You don't have a car?"

He winced at the sound in her voice. Californians seemed to think you must come from another planet if you didn't own a car.

"I have little need of one. I travel a great deal and find it much easier to order a car and driver when I need one."

Her eyes lit with an idea.

"Why don't we just take my car? I don't mind, really. Limos are so stuffy and I would really rather be alone with you."

She could have bitten off her own tongue at that moment. Why had she said that? If this guy

didn't think she was the flakiest woman in the world, he wasn't paying attention.

"Uh...so we can talk...about the house without interruptions."

`Lame, Marie,' she chastised herself, `Tiny Tim walked better than you just talked your way out of that gaffe.'

His smile said he hadn't noticed anything amiss.

"Very well, we will take your car on one condition: I drive. I refuse to be chauffeured by my guest."

"Of course."

She handed him her keys, hoping he wouldn't notice her key chain. It was a cute little kitty with the words `pussy needs petting' across its bottom. Beth had given it to her for her birthday last year. Marie would have forgotten it in a drawer if Beth hadn't said she was too much of a coward and prude to actually put her keys on it. If Tyler read it, she would simply melt into the woodwork from embarrassment.

She said a silent prayer of thanks when he took the keys without even looking at them. He picked up her briefcase, replaced her hand on his arm and escorted her out the door to the car.

Perfect! She had admitted that she wanted to be alone with him. His plan was progressing quite well. He knew this dinner would be a good idea. All he need do was let her natural honesty work its way to the surface. Soon she would admit to herself, and then to him, how much she desired him. It was just a matter of time.

He could be a patient man when necessary.

Opening the car door, he held her hand until she was settled, then carefully closed it. A quick look up and down the street as he rounded the vehicle assured him that all was well. The pampered cat down the block was stalking the same mouse she had been after for the past week. She was much too fat to ever catch it. He doubted she would know what to do with it if she were ever to be successful. At the other end of the street, the neighborhood's peeping Tom - he wondered if all streets in LA had their own - prepared to complete his rounds. Tyler's teeth showed for the barest second in the smile of the predator. He was saving that sick little man for some night when he was too lazy to hunt. All was as it should be.

It had been years since he had driven an automobile but he was blessed with a flawless memory that rarely let him down. He was a little uncomfortable with the way the seatbelt slithered its way around his chest and neck. He'd never cared much for those things. After all, he didn't worry much about dying in an accident. He winced as his knee hit the shaft of the steering wheel, eliciting a nervous giggle from

Marie.

"I guess you need a little more leg room. There's a lever at the front of the seat..."

He reached forward, immediately finding the seat adjustment lever of which she spoke. Straightening, he let a look of confusion wash over his handsome face.

"I can't seem to locate it."

As he had hoped she would, Marie leaned over and slid her hand between his knees, groping for the lever. Tyler breathed deeply of her clean scent and let his mind take its desired path. He imagined her beautiful lips on his shaft - stroking, sucking, and lifting him to a peak of ecstasy.

The seat slid back with a jerk, smacking the back of his head against the headrest. He felt as though he had been doused with ice water at a most inopportune moment. Marie sat back and smiled up at him.

"Oops, sorry. Is that better?"

The mischievous look in her eyes clearly told him that she knew exactly what she had just done. He arched a brow, grinned and nodded.

"Much, thank you. I fear you will have to give me directions, I am a bit unfamiliar with the city."

"No problem. It's not very far from here. And don't worry, I've eaten there several times and nothing ever came back to haunt me. And they're really good about customizing."

"Customizing?"

"You know, hold the pickle, extra special sauce, that sort of thing."

He tilted his head, trying to surmise if she were kidding. Her broad grin admitted her joke.

"Indeed."

As she directed him to the restaurant, Tyler took in the sights and sounds of the streets, his sensitive nose wrinkling at the stench that permeated this city. It was the most difficult thing for him to ignore about Los Angeles, that horrible smell of too many automobiles, unbridled industry and rotting ocean life.

As they drove along, Marie pointed out various points of interest. He nodded and made appropriate responses, all the time enjoying the sound of her lyrical voice, the way she emphasized things with the movements of her hands and body. She was so beautiful, so wonderfully alive and vibrant. Soul searing desire flared within him yet again - desire to hold her, to taste her, to claim her as his own.

Following her directions, he turned into a small parking lot and parked the car. He was pleasantly surprised when she waited for him to come around and open her door. Most women in this era of

independence felt insulted by this display of protection and respect. It would seem that Marie's insistence on equality did not extend to the social graces. That was a definite point in her favor.

Besides, it gave him a great view of her shapely ankles and calves as she climbed out of the car.

She smiled at him as she took his proffered arm and walked alongside him into the restaurant. That smile reached into Tyler, past his calculating mind, past his loins, to a place that he had long doubted still existed. This was a dangerous woman, dangerous to his security, dangerous to his well-ordered life, and, most importantly, dangerous to his heart.

What if he found himself falling in love with her? Would that further tax his already overburdened control, snapping it like a twig in his hands? Or would he, perhaps, find himself too afraid to face her possibly negative reaction, leaving her behind rather than chancing the worst?

And what of her reaction? How would she respond to the realization that her lover was not as she assumed him to be, as he presented himself? What would she do when he eventually told her the truth? Would she run from him in fear? Would he some day have to destroy her to protect his further existence? Could he?

Tyler shook his head to clear such premature thoughts from his brain. The challenge was the only thing that should concern him at the moment.

As they walked through the door, Tyler realized his mistake immediately as the strong odor of garlic hit him like a punch to the abdomen. Italian. He clamped his teeth together tightly to keep from snarling as a waiter hurried by carrying a tray heaped with plates of spaghetti and garlic bread. Every muscle in his body tensed, preparing to retreat from the threat. But he couldn't just bolt and leave Marie wondering if he had lost his mind. How the hell was he going to get out of here gracefully?

"Two?"

Jolted from his thoughts, Tyler recoiled as a little woman in a red-checkered uniform spoke to him. Marie glanced up at him questioningly, and then nodded at the hostess, who turned and led them to a booth. Trying desperately to keep the strain he was under from showing on his face, he saw Marie seated, and then slid into the booth across from her. He began to sweat quite profusely as he fought to resist the urge to retch brought on by the garlic.

"Would you like to see our wine menu?"

He dared open his mouth for only short responses. Perhaps some wine would help.

"Yes, please."

He sounded much more desperate than he had intended. Again, Marie looked at him with a question in her powder-blue eyes.

"Tyler, are you alright? You look ill."

He forced his lips into the best semblance of a smile he could manage at the moment. He sincerely hoped it looked less like a snarl than it felt. His voice was forced and rough.

"I don't have a great fondness for Italian food."

"Here you go."

Tyler's near-black eyes flared at the interruption. He gave the wine menu a quick perusal, grimacing at the lack of truly fine wine being offered, then ordered the best red available.

As the waiter acknowledged his order and left, another passed by carrying a tray filled with garlic-laden food. Tyler felt as though he might explode if he remained seated in this torture chamber for one second longer.

"Would you excuse me a moment?"

He didn't wait for Marie's response as he rose from the table and bolted for the restroom, feeling his rudeness would be more easily forgiven than would his losing the contents of his stomach at the table. Once safely behind the refuge marked 'men', he splashed his face with cold water and took several deep breaths of the disinfectant-scented air. Though it tweaked his nose a bit, it was heaven compared to the overpowering garlic of the restaurant.

Damn it! What was he to do? If he told Marie he wished to go somewhere else, it would look as though he disapproved of her choice of eating establishments, a slight that might renew the friction between them. He didn't want to chance a return of her hostility, which would not further his cause. But he wasn't sure how long he could stay in this repulsive atmosphere before he lost control and ran screaming into the night!

In the polished metal of the paper-towel dispenser, he looked into the eyes of his reflection and firmed up his resolve. He would tough this out, of that there was no question. Defeat was never an alternative within his consideration. Sighing, he dabbed water from his face with his handkerchief - he hated the rough squares of paper they laughingly call towels in these places - and took one last garlic-free breath. Though his pride might force him to tough this out, his body was definitely not going to enjoy it.

Returning to the table, he found the wine had come and someone, he supposed the wine steward, had poured two glasses. He knew Marie had sampled hers by the soft-red lipstick smear on the rim. His sense of propriety flared: The man should sample the wine to see that it was worthy of his lady. Oh, well, this was, after all, the nineties. Coming up behind her, he placed his hand on the booth at her back and leaned close to her ear, inhaling her womanly scent as he spoke.

"Is the wine to your taste, milady?"

She jumped slightly, startled because she hadn't felt him there, and then turned toward him. Their lips were scant inches apart and they were both instantly aware of that short distance. Without a thought to anything but his sudden need to feel her soft lips joined with his, Tyler slowly leaned closer, ever watchful for a hint of rejection, an indication that he was moving too quickly. His blood pounded in his temples as he felt her acceptance.

Their lips came together, first tenderly, then with increasing passion. His sweet lady responded with such desire and lack of restraint, testing his control to the limit. Her lips parted slightly and he quickly accepted the invitation, sliding his tongue slowly over the tender flesh on the inside of her lip, testing the sharpness of her teeth. He allowed just the tip into her mouth to meet and caress her tentative tongue. God, she tasted so sweet! Like honey and Heaven.

He caressed her cheek with his fingertips, enjoying the feel of her baby-soft skin. His loins flooded with such heat he felt as though he were on fire, and her scent bore witness to the fact that the same fire was singeing her. He slid his hand down her throat, his fingers barely brushing the tiny hairs on the back of her neck. She shivered and he knew he had to have her. Here. Now.

"Excuse me?"

Tyler heard nothing but he felt Marie stiffen, a blush adding more heat to her already quite-hot skin. Her palm against his bare chest nearly undid him until he realized that she was gently pushing him away. He straightened and turned on the waiter.

"What?"

The waiter - he couldn't have been more than sixteen years old - stepped back, fear clearly evident on his young face.

"I c-c-could come back i-i-if you'd like."

Tyler narrowed his eyes and his voice dropped to a near whisper.

"Good guess."

"I'll just leave this for you to munch on while you decide."

The boy quickly placed a little cloth-covered basket on the table, and then beat a hasty retreat. Tyler released his breath in a hard sigh and took his seat across from Marie. He had begun to think this evening might not end in disaster after all. If the little minx did everything with as much enthusiasm as she kissed, he was likely to be very tired by the time the sun rose, which suited him just fine.

He admired her face as she tried to compose herself. She was obviously quite embarrassed and he found her self-consciousness appealing.

Marie felt like a teenager who'd been caught necking in the car. What a kiss! The minute his lips had touched hers, she had lost all track of time, location - everything! The restaurant could have burned down around her and she wouldn't even have heard the sirens. His hand on her face had felt so good; the feathery caresses sending little shivers up and down her spine. When he slid it to her neck, she had just wanted him to keep going, keep touching her, anywhere he wanted. She had never been so completely enthralled by a man in all her life. It was kind-of scary, but it felt so right, so perfect.

When the waiter appeared, she had wanted to slip under the table from the mortification. She felt sorry for the kid when Tyler snapped at him, but it was gratifying that Tyler seemed to have lost his composure. She must be getting to him as much as he was driving her crazy. That was nice to know.

She was fumbling for something to say, or do, to get his intense regard off of her. Food should be a good distraction. She pulled back a layer of the napkin in the basket and withdrew a piece of bread. With a smile, she offered it to him.

"Would you like some garlic bread?"

His face lost all color and she could have sworn that he retched. He pulled his napkin to his mouth, coughing, and nearly flew from the table. Marie stared after him bemusedly as she bit into the bread.

"I guess not."

She waited fifteen minutes, putting off the waiter twice in that time, before she started to worry that something might be seriously wrong. Maybe he was sick. She wasn't sure what she should do. She could hardly go into the men's bathroom and call for him. She could go to the door but she knew from experience how embarrassing that could be to both parties.

She smiled fondly as her mind drifted back in time to her father, standing at the bathroom door of the fine restaurant, calling her name, his voice thick with embarrassment. He had taken her out for a special father-daughter lunch to reward her for her improved grades. She hadn't felt well that morning but she was much too stubborn to allow that to interfere with her plans to spend the afternoon with Daddy. Halfway through lunch she had run from the table much the same way as Tyler had this evening. She had barely made it to the john before she lost her lunch. Her poor father, his face the color of ripe tomatoes, had put his arm around her shoulders as she left the bathroom and helped her to the car, all worry and worship. How she had loved that man!

She snapped back to the present as the hostess stopped in front of the table, a confused look on her face.

"Excuse me, ma'am? The gentleman requests that you meet him in the car."

Her color rose a little as she held out her hand, palm up.

"He also asked that I give these to you."

A bemused frown furrowing her brow, Marie accepted the little box, her face flaming when she saw that it was breath mints. The nerve! The waitress shrugged and walked away, her expression clearly questioning Tyler's sanity, and perhaps Marie's for being with him. Marie considered calling for a cab and leaving him to stew, and then she remembered that they had come in her car. Popping one of the little white mints into her mouth, she rose from the booth, her anger evident in every movement of her body, and quickly walked out the door and to her car.

He was standing by her door, an indecipherable expression on his handsome face. She walked up to him, close enough to see make out his almost femininely long blond eyelashes, and spoke directly into his face.

"If you didn't like Italian, why didn't you just say so before...?"

She stopped talking in complete astonishment as he took several steps back, bringing his hand up to cover his nose and mouth. She had never felt so insulted in her life. Her eyes throwing icy-blue sparks beneath eyebrows raised in indignation, she very deliberately reached down and opened the car door. Some of the ice had migrated to her voice.

"I think we should go back to the Schwartz', Mr. Alan."

As he reached out to assist her into the car, she climbed in and slammed the door, nearly catching his hand in the door.

Tyler stood at the rear of the car for several minutes trying to think of a way to recover this night from the garbage heap into which it had fallen. As always, his inner self had an answer.

'You could take her, right here in the car. Feast on her precious life. Relish the death spasms of her beautiful body.'

He shook his head sharply. No, he wouldn't quit so easily. Looking at the stiff-backed figure in the passenger seat, he smiled. He had wanted a challenge. As the saying goes, 'Be careful what you wish for.'

He got into the car and looked at her. She was studying the car on her right as if it were a science project she found particularly interesting. He started the engine and began the drive back to his house. She said nothing. Slowly, the lies, and half-truths, began to take form in his devious mind. By the time he reached his home, he had his story pretty well down.

He started around the rear of the car to open her door, but as he had thought she might, she exited the vehicle unassisted. She was obviously going to circle the front of the car and leave without speaking

to him. Though he knew he should keep his temper in check, he let it seep out just a little.

"Why do you always run away, girl? Why don't you stand and fight?"

Marie stopped dead in her tracks, unable to believe what she had just heard. She felt like a bull with a red cape flashing in her face! Stand and fight? She'd show him fight! She turned and gave him a narrow-eyed glare over the top of her car. Nodding his head in acceptance of the challenge, he motioned for her to follow him into the house. Since she didn't want anyone else to hear this argument - she had a feeling the whole block would get quite an earful if they stayed outside - she walked ahead of him into the house, her every move illustrating her anger.

She assumed the Schwartz' had returned, since the door was unlocked. That concerned her a little. She didn't want to disturb the nice elf lady and her husband.

Nonchalantly, she said, "the Schwartz' must have come home."

He answered in the same conversational tone.

"They are out of the city for the evening. This house is equipped with a very efficient anti-crime device."

He smiled to himself as he sampled the air. No one who didn't belong had entered here this evening. He liked leaving the house open at night, the chance that some unfortunate fool might be stupid enough to enter without his permission exciting him. How he would like to return from a night's amusements to find another bit of entertainment on his own doorstep. The possibility raised the sharp tips of his teeth.

He quickly cast his thoughts back to the problem at hand. Said problem was glaring at him, a look of unquestionable challenge in her sky-blue eyes. She was even more beautiful in her anger, her cheeks an attractive pink, even her hair flashing deep red sparks in the firelight. He grew hard in anticipation of the evening ahead.

Her tone was ice over a simmering volcano.

"Would you care to explain - not that I think you can - your actions at the restaurant?"

He motioned toward the sofa.

"Perhaps you like to have a seat?"

She shook her head sharply, her auburn hair flying about her shoulders, her narrowed eyes in flames. He imagined he could feel the sparks hitting his skin. Her voice rose as she spoke.

"No, I do not want to sit, speak or roll over! I don't want a drink and I've completely lost my appetite! What I want is an answer to my question!"

The chocolate of his eyes began to darken and redden as they narrowed. She knew he had heard

the demand in her words and hadn't liked it. Fine! She hoped it made him mad as hell, since she was already there. His quiet tone showed the strain of holding his temper.

"There is no reason to raise your voice, I have perfect hearing."

The anger over his treatment of her on the phone returned to mate with her current fury over his actions this evening. Together, they pushed her into a reckless pique.

"When I'm *fighting*," she emphasized the word to let him know she had accepted his challenge, "I sometimes raise my voice. I have no intention of lowering it just because it annoys you. I assure you, Mr. Alan, if we were to match annoyances, you would be the loser. You talk to me on the phone as if I'm your lackey. You expect me to do exactly as you say, when you say, and thank you for saying. Then, when I let you know - in a very diplomatic fashion, I might add - that I do not care for your autocratic attitude; you have the temper tantrum of a five year old and start tossing around the furniture. If you were my child, I'd spank you!"

Her lack of respect was making him furious, the fire of her anger hardening him to the point of pain. He pulled his chin close to his chest, looking at her from under blonde brows drawn tightly together. His voice was barely above a whisper.

"If you would like to try, by all means, be my guest."

She recognized the warning signs - face like a thundercloud, voice soft as silk over steel - and thought better of ranting at him further. With a dismissive sigh, she sat in the chair by the sofa, clasping her hands primly in her lap. Anger kept her teeth gritted but she lowered her voice.

"I'm waiting for an explanation."

It had been a very long time since he had felt the need to explain his actions to anyone. He was superior, the predator. And yet, if he wanted to be successful in this challenge that he had issued himself, he must pacify her a bit. He vented a bit of his anger on a harsh breath and took the seat on the sofa adjacent to her. He deliberately kept his tone on a conversational level.

"I am sorry, I should not have attempted to stay at that restaurant, but I did not want you to think that I disapproved of your choice. At the very least, I should have asked what kind of food you liked beforehand, but it never occurred to me."

'Because I was too busy thinking of all the ways I wanted to make you mine,' he thought wryly.

"You see, I am extremely allergic to garlic. Just the smell of it brings on a rather violent nausea. The residue on your breath was enough to make my illness threaten to return."

He smiled lopsidedly and flipped his eyebrows, a very endearing expression.

"I'm afraid I was too proud to tell you the truth."

Marie suddenly felt like the lowest form of life on Earth. He was deathly allergic to garlic and she had offered him a piece of garlic bread! She was probably lucky he hadn't started scratching and gasping for air. Still, it wasn't her fault he hadn't told her. And there was still the question of the phone call. Again, he seemed to read her thoughts.

"About my request that you join me for dinner this evening."

Tyler took a deep breath, feeling as though he were about to plunge into a deep pool with absolutely no idea of the temperature of the water. Suddenly, practically against his will, he found himself telling the truth.

"I found your refusal as discourteous as I am sure you found my subsequent demand. I explained to you my aversion to restaurants, and I assure you, Marie, I explain myself very rarely to anyone. Being as you had come to the Schwartz' to meet with me before, I didn't feel that my request was out of line. I am investing a great deal of money, not only in your company, but also in your untested abilities. I feel the least that you can do to repay my faith in you is to grant me a modicum of civility. To avoid future problems I will state that all future meetings will be held here. If that does not suit you, then I will have to look for another architect."

He watched as several emotions passed across her pretty features, anger, outrage, fear and, finally, comprehension. She held his gaze for a moment and he realized with appreciation that she was trying to stare him down. When she dropped her eyes to the hands held so demurely in her lap and nodded, he knew he had won this round.

"Then there will be no further difficulty in arranging evening meetings here?"

Marie looked up and he saw that a little of her anger still remained, or had returned. He supposed he shouldn't have pushed, but his pride was still stinging from having to explain his orders. He wanted no further questions.

"This makes an adequate meeting place, Mr. Alan. But why do our meetings have to be at night?"

Just when he thought he could relax and work on a more personal relationship, she still questioned him. Before he could stop himself, he snapped, "Because that is the way that I prefer it!"

The narrowing of her eyes informed him quite clearly that he had just taken a large step backwards in their negotiations.

This challenge of his was becoming more difficult than he had ever imagined. Was she worth it? Looking into her anger-fired blue eyes, he thought about releasing all that passion in his bed. Certainly she would prove to be worth all this and more.

"I have a great many business meetings, Marie. My days are always completely scheduled."

He smiled at the near-truth of that statement.

"I prefer to conduct my personal business - and I consider my house to be quite personal - in the evenings."

The grandfather clock in the hall chimed midnight. For some unknown reason, it seemed to break the tension between them. She giggled nervously.

"My friend, Beth, will have a great time with this."

He arched a brow, enjoying her smile and lightened attitude immensely.

"Really, why?"

"Because she thinks you might be a vampire."

He held his face in the proper 'you must be kidding' pose while his heart raced.

"I know that sounds strange but it's really my fault. I've always been kind-of a fan of vampires, I even went to Romania, that's Transylvania to us vampire nuts, on my vacation this year. Oh," her eyes lit with curiosity, "that reminds me. Have you ever been there?"

Caution was definitely advised here. He nodded.

"I am involved in some business in that country."

"Really?"

She was becoming quite animated now. He nodded.

"Were you there this summer?"

Now he saw the cunning in her pretty face. She was trying to trip him up somehow. The little minx. Was she aware that he had been the one to come to her aid in that stairwell? How could she be? And yet, the challenge to deny something, to explain his way out of something, was shining in her eyes as she waited for his answer.

"Why, yes, I was."

She sat forward in her chair, the predatory gleam in her eyes bringing a sudden rush of blood to his loins, which he had not expected. She dared to attempt to prey on him? His lips pulled back from his teeth in what could barely be called a smile. She dared a great deal. And he was finding that he liked it.

"Were you at Castle Dracula in August?"

He leaned forward till their faces were mere inches apart, experiencing a strange rush of pride when she did not retreat even though her eyes showed that she was acutely aware of his nearness. He lowered his voice to caress her senses.

"Am I on trial? Of what am I accused?"

Her voice dropped to a sultry whisper and it had the desired effect. He hardened to the point of pain as he realized that she was meeting him thrust for thrust in this battle of discovery and seduction.

"Did you hold my body against your own and keep me from falling to my death in the bowels of the Castle, Tyler?"

He was so caught up in the moment he didn't even think to act surprised. He was drowning in her eyes with no desire to be saved. It had been so long since he had felt this way. He was young again, wanting to please a woman, wanting to hold her in his arms. Not just any woman, this woman. Marie.

His lips nearly touching hers, he whispered, "Yes, my beautiful lady, I held you. And you have haunted my dreams every day since you slipped from my arms."

He ran his hand up her arm to gently fold around the back of her neck and felt her shiver.

"I have yearned to feel your body against mine once again since that moment on the stairs."

She licked her lips and left them slightly parted, an invitation he knew he could not resist for long. Her breath was warm on his lips, stirring the tiny hairs of his mustache. The sensation was thrilling, sending little shivers down his spine. The feelings this woman caused in him were so strong they were almost frightening. Wishing to seduce her second-by-second, he touched his lips to hers in the barest ghost of a kiss.

His other hand slid up her arm till he held her slender throat in his palms, his thumbs and forefingers framing her jaw. He lightly ran a thumb over her bottom lip and found himself nearly undone when the tip of her tongue darted out to caress his thumb. Mesmerized, he watched as her small fingers wrapped around his thumb and held it captive as she first licked just the tip, and then engulfed it with her red lips. As she sucked his thumb into her mouth, sensations shot through his body, setting it on fire with longing. Her lips were moving over his thumb, devouring it like a starving child.

She raised her eyes to his and he saw that they were dilated with passion. He could smell her primal scent of desire. She reached forward and touched his chest, bared by the open collar of his shirt. Her caress was like a torch setting his skin aflame. He pulled his thumb from her grasp, her tiny sigh of regret pushing him higher. Cupping her face in his palms once again, he plundered her lips with his own. This kiss, unlike the one in the restaurant, was filled with unbridled passion. Though their lips would surely be bruised tomorrow, neither minded. Marie was no shrinking violet. He reveled in her response as she gave as she received.

Without breaking the contact of their lips, he stood, placed a knee between hers on the chair, and leaned over her. He held her face more tightly so that he could nibble her lips; kiss the tip of her nose, her cheeks, and her forehead, even her closed eyelids.

Marie had never felt like this before. She was so alive, so aflame with desire. Each kiss, each caress, was like a step on the path to Heaven and she wanted to climb all the way to the top. His caresses made her want to do things she had never done before. Normally she would have been appalled at her sucking on his thumb, but it had felt so natural, so right with him. She didn't ever want him to stop touching her. She impatiently undid the buttons of his jacket and shirt so she could reach more of him. She wanted all of him - to touch him, taste him, and devour him.

Tyler gave himself over to sensation. Marie ran the fingertips of both hands over his chest and stomach, igniting tiny fires wherever she touched. As he kissed the fine line of her jaw, she let her head drop against the back of the chair, exposing her throat to his kisses. He accepted the invitation, passion pushing him beyond sense. As his lips moved over her throat, he could feel the blood coursing through the artery below her ear. He opened his lips and licked her neck, feeling her shiver, as he tasted her lust-tinged sweat. Turning her so that he could minister to the other side of her neck, he raked his front teeth across her skin. She moaned and arched to give him better access. She was so sweet, so warm. Her hands slipped over the waistband of his pants and ventured lower. He kissed her ear, running his tongue over the lobe. He followed the natural path of her blood with his tongue, then closed his lips over the exact spot the blood pumped the hardest. At the same moment, she brushed a hand over his crotch, bringing him very near to orgasm with her light caress.

His control broke. He pulled her more tightly against him, raising her out of the chair. The strength of her passion made her limp in his arms. He could do with her as wished. His teeth began their downward plunge into her waiting throat. He wanted to feel her climax in his arms as her life pumped out...

Releasing her, he let her fall back into the chair, as he roared, "No! He quickly took several steps away from her, putting the sofa between them and casting himself in shadow. His harsh breathing was loud in the quiet room.

Marie sat up, slightly dazed, and turned questioning, and hurt, eyes toward him.

"Marie," his voice was the growl of a predator but he could do nothing to tame it, "you must go now."

"But..."

"Now!"

As she jumped at his shouted command, the hurt in her eyes increasing, Tyler felt a tightening in his heart like he had never before felt. He lowered his voice, though none of the growl left.

"Marie, I care too much for you. I do not wish to take you like this but your beautiful responsive

body has pushed me nearly to the brink. Please, lady, forgive my lack of control. I want you so badly I can barely form a coherent thought. Leave, now. I will call you tomorrow."

"But, Tyler, I want to be with you. Why..."

Though she hadn't seen him move, the slam of a door heralded his exit from the room. Angry, hurt, confused, and aflame with frustration in certain regions of her body, Marie had no choice but to show herself out, vowing to have nothing further to do with the insane man who set her body on fire and tore her emotions to shreds.

Chapter 7

Tyler was angry, furious at himself for his failure to maintain better control, at Marie for being so beautiful and desirable, even at fate for dealing him such a strange hand in life. Were he a normal man, he wouldn't have to arrange meetings at night or avoid Italian food. He would court her at her office, her home, wherever she might be whenever the opportunity arose. With such constant contact, she would have fallen to his charms long ago and she would have been his by now. Yes, he was almost unhappy with his plight. Almost.

Unlike most modern fictional vampires, he never regretted what he had become on that long ago winter night. He never plummeted into a melancholy state of self-loathing and longed to take a stroll in the sunlight, nor did he feel sorry for the prey.

Occasionally the voice of his dark feelings, speaking as clearly as a long-lost friend, would nearly overpower him, testing his control. It usually encouraged him to take some action that, though immediately gratifying, might endanger him in the future. It was at these times that he must infuse steel into his will.

The passion and anger that Marie stirred in him made him feel as though he were skating on very thin ice with no land in sight. He had never wanted another as he wanted her.

His dark thoughts, those which all people have but to which men such as himself listened more closely, told him to take her, plunge into her beautiful body, drain her life and move on. But he had issued himself a dare and he never backed down from a challenge. Tyler smiled as he pulled the curtains around his bed, shutting out all light, and prepared to sleep.

Who was he trying to fool? This thing had gone way beyond a challenge. He wanted this woman because of what he had found her to be - vibrant, funny, brave, beautiful, responsive - he could fill a book with adjectives that he felt she embodied, not to fulfill some idiotic self-dare. He wanted to make her his woman, his wife, his eternal lover. He had no idea how long he would live, he had already walked the earth for more than four-hundred years, but he thought that Marie would be interesting, challenging, enough to keep him coming back for more for at least another four-hundred.

Indeed this challenge of his had become a great deal more.

Marie awoke long before her alarm clock but decided to give up since she hadn't been sleeping well anyway. She was edgy, cranky - horny, if the truth were known - and she didn't much look forward

to facing her office today. She briefly considered calling in sick but thought better of it. She might as well be at work feeling miserable but doing something useful as sitting at home feeling equally out-of-sorts and dwelling on the horrible failure of yesterday.

As she ran the events of last evening through her mind she wondered why she kept letting this Alan guy jerk her chain. He was obviously disturbed, or, at the very least, had a lot of hang-ups. Why had he suddenly decided that they shouldn't make love? Had he remembered he was out of condoms? She hated to admit it since she had always thought it a rather slutty thing to do, but she carried one in her purse. As Beth said, 'You never know when you might get lucky'. But he hadn't even asked.

Marie slammed her fist into the pillow beneath her head, telling herself she was fluffing it, not taking out her frustration on an inanimate object, as that would be very immature. Deep down, she knew it wasn't a lack of protection that had sent Tyler flying from that room. Something had kept him from making love to her, something inside himself. She had felt as though he were afraid to continue, but afraid of what? Smacking her pillow again, she made a sound of disgust and tossed the covers aside. She wasn't going to get any more sleep tonight. She might as well get an early start on the day.

As the shower's warm water cascaded down her back, Marie let her thoughts drift to Tyler. His handsome face, mysterious, often unreadable; eyes, soft chocolate to deep reddish brown to black in the breath of an instant; blonde hair that nearly touched his broad shoulders bound tightly at his nape, perhaps to tame the wave that still showed quite clearly in its length.

Strange, he wasn't her type at all. She had always responded best to dark men with their olive complexions and dark hair. At least he had dark eyes. And she had never cared for long hair on a man, it seemed too teenage-rebel immature. But Tyler wore it well, like a warrior from the days when men tied their hair back to keep it out of their eyes during swordfights. She sighed and shook her head. Good old imagination, always willing to supply a romantic image.

Yet, she had to admit that there was something unusual about Mr. Alan. Even with his light good looks, he seemed somehow dark, mysterious. Maybe it was her imagination, maybe not. She just didn't know.

A sudden thought struck her. Of course! What she really needed was a second opinion - Beth. She had proven herself time and again to be a good judge of character.

Marie smiled sadly. Beth could see clearly the flaws and strong points in other people's choices for mates but not for herself. She was always going out with deadbeats that she was certain were diamonds in the rough. Marie had once told Beth that she wouldn't live long enough for the earth's pressure to force the guy she was dating to change from his current existence as a lump of couch coal

into a bright, shining diamond. Beth had laughed off her comments. Two nights later Beth had called her at three in the morning to say that Mr. Soon-to-be-a-half-carat had left with a sixteen-year-old and Beth's VCR. Still, she had 20/20 vision about other people's paramours and she was usually right.

Marie stepped from the shower and began vigorously drying herself, letting the idea fill itself out in her mind. First, she had to call Beth to see if she had plans this evening. Knowing Beth's love of intrigue, she'd probably cancel them even if she did. Then, Marie would call Tyler and ask him to meet her at a steak house. No, wait a minute. He didn't have a car. That might pose a problem. Okay, she would pick him up at the Schwartz' and they would go to a steak house where she would just happen to run into her best friend. Of course, Beth would invite herself to join them for dinner and that would give her plenty of time to form an opinion of Tyler. Marie nodded. This was a great idea. She would get a fairly unbiased second opinion about this man who was slowly driving her to the funny farm, and get the chance to show off her gorgeous almost-lover.

Her decision made, she drove quickly to the office and called Beth.

"Hanson travel agency. Go north to Alaska without freezing your assets off."

Marie giggled.

"Did you make that up?"

Beth snorted.

"Are you kidding? I wouldn't say something that stupid unless my life depended on it. There's no Mr. Right on the immediate horizon so food is my life and I need this job to buy food...well, you get the idea. Where were you last night and don't you get your messages?"

Marie smiled. She knew the accusation and hurt in Beth's tone were not real. She just liked to play the martyr once in a while.

"I was at a business meeting with Tyler."

"Tyler?"

Beth drug the word out till it sounded indecent. Marie blushed and became slightly defensive.

"Yes, Tyler. He wants me to call him that and I see no reason...Oh, leave me alone!"

Beth laughed.

"Touchy, aren't we? So how is he?"

Marie was glad she had anticipated her friend's raunchy question so she could razz her back.

"Better than food."

"You pig!"

"Do you think I could get to why I called you before we have to break for lunch?"

"Humph. It's your quarter. What's up?"

"How would you like to meet Tyler?"

Excitement immediately colored Beth's voice.

"Name the place and I'll be there with bells on. Are you through with him so I should wear my sexy little blue number, or is this a tell-me-what-you-think-about-him-girlfriend meeting?"

Marie chuckled.

"Hands off, he's mine. I'd just like to know...well...if you think he's worthy of me."

Through the lame attempt at levity, Beth heard the confusion in her friend's voice. She dropped the boisterous tone and lowered her voice.

"What's going on, Marie? You sound kind-of funny."

Protective feelings for her friend fired her words with anger.

"Did he do something?"

Marie smiled. Since seventh grade she and Beth had shared each other's loves and hates, dreams and nightmares, hopes and failures. Beth always knew when something was wrong and Marie needed to talk. It was nice to know that things hadn't changed.

"Calm down, mama lion, it's more me than him. I mean, he didn't actually *do* anything to warrant a real mad. When I told him on the telephone that I didn't feel comfortable conducting business meeting in such a private place, he ordered me to do as I was told like some kind of servant. I wanted to give him a piece of my mind, so I went to the Schwartz' last night to meet with him one more time. You would have been proud of me. I told him in no uncertain terms what he could do with his high-handed attitude."

"Good girl!"

"Thanks. Anyway, you wouldn't believe what he did. After he walked out of the room without so much as a by-your-leave, I wasn't sure if he were going to return, or if I'd been summarily dismissed. I decided to find the john and give him a couple minutes to drop from full boil to simmer. When he came back to the room and found me gone, he went ballistic!"

"Regular or nuclear?"

"He tossed the couch across the room."

"You're kidding! Are we talking an honest-to-goodness couch here? Seven feet, cushions, the whole bit?"

"That's the one."

"We're talking twenty megaton warhead, here, girl."

"He told me he's trained in some kind of martial art."

"I think he gets an `A' in strength training."

Marie realized that she was positively beaming with pride, as though she had accomplished something wonderful. This must be how it felt when your husband got a promotion or won the Congressional Medal of Honor. She grimaced and reminded herself that she and Tyler hadn't even had a real date yet. She really should keep the `H' word out of her thoughts.

"He apologized and invited me to dinner. You don't even want to know what happened at the restaurant."

"Don't you dare do that to me! I want every last juicy detail."

"We're barely even seated and he heads for the john. When he came back, he...well, I didn't hear him coming and he kind-of startled me and..."

"Come on, give."

Marie sighed as she remembered the feeling of Tyler's lips on hers. How to describe heaven in a kiss?

"He kissed me, okay? But it wasn't like any other kiss I've ever had. It was like time stood still and all there was in the world was our lips. It felt like fire."

"Oh, boy, have you got it bad."

Marie blushed furiously.

"Cynic. Anyway, the waiter interrupted the moment and Tyler turned on him like a rabid pitbull."

She giggled.

"The poor kid practically threw the little basket of garlic bread in his haste to leave before he could be fatally wounded. Now two minutes later, Tyler bolts from the table, again with no explanation, and this time he didn't come back. He had the hostess come tell me that he was waiting for me in the car. And - get this! - she hands me a box of mints and says he requested that I eat one before joining him."

Caught off-guard, Beth choked on her coke. In between gulps of air, she blurted, "He what? I would have put that little box, with its sharp corners, where the sun don't shine!"

Marie giggled again.

I figured you'd say something like that. Turns out, he's allergic to garlic."

"Why didn't he just tell you that before you got in the place?"

"He said he was too proud, which I kind-of liked. At least he'll admit it, which is more than you can say for a lot of guys. Anyway, I was teed off, so when we got back to his place, I went in to let him

know how I felt about the whole fiasco."

"Who you tryin' to kid, girlfriend? You were hopin' to get laid."

"You are so crude! I was going to tell him off, I really was. But something...happened."

Marie was silent a moment, trying to sort out in her mind exactly what had happened, and more importantly, why. Beth's breathy voice interrupted her thoughts.

"I'm on pins and needles here, Mare!"

"He kissed me. It was even better than the restaurant kiss. When I kissed him back, we just seemed to melt into each other. I couldn't even tell you how long we were there, kissing, touching..."

She sighed.

"It was wonderful."

Falling silent again, Marie felt the memory warming her as though Tyler were in the room looking at her.

"We were so close, Beth, I really wanted him. I think I would have done anything he asked just to make the night last forever. I thought..."

The hurt she had felt at the time once again invaded her mind, and spilled into her words.

"All of a sudden, he just dropped me like a hot potato and told me I had to leave."

"What?"

"That's about how I felt. He said he cared too much for me to go on. I don't get it."

"Maybe the guy can't get it up and didn't want you to know."

Marie remembered brushing the hard bulge in the linen of Tyler's pants just before he had shattered the evening.

"Believe me, that's not a problem."

Disbelief sounded in Beth's voice.

"You got close enough to get to know 'Rocky'? You really do like this guy."

Marie blushed to her toes at Beth's use of their nickname for a man's private parts. That was one of the things she liked about Beth. She was so...earthy.

"I barely touched him but it was enough. 'Rocky' was ready to come out and play."

"Then why...this must have something to do with why you're calling me. Do you want me to recommend a good sex therapist?"

Another giggle erupted from Marie.

"No. I want you to 'accidentally' run into us tonight at the Chuckwagon and invite yourself to dinner so you can get to know Tyler a little."

Marie's voice took on a desperate tone and Beth realized that her friend might be in trouble.

"I need to know if you think he's a nutcase. I mean, he's been acting a little strangely but there may be a perfectly logical explanation."

"Are you falling for this guy, Marie?"

There it was, the question that, deep down, Marie had known Beth would ask. Was she falling for Tyler, or had she already taken the plunge into what might be a bottomless pit?

"This is so crazy! I barely know the guy. He's gorgeous, rich, intelligent, a good catch. But he's blonde, light, not my type at all. He's even got long hair, and you know I can't stand men with long hair. He's arrogant, autocratic, even temperamental. And those are his good points! But I think about him constantly. I dream about him. For Heaven's sake, I've even been doodling his name while we've been talking! Am I losing my mind or what?"

"You don't really want me to answer that, do you?"

Beth joked because she was concerned about her friend. Marie was usually so level-headed, not the kind to fall for a guy she hardly knew. Levity could heal a lot of hurts, but this situation needed more than her Joan Rivers imitation. She needed to meet this guy, to see if he were taking Marie for a ride. If so, Beth intended to let him know, in no uncertain terms, that he had better hit that road alone.

"So what time is dinner?"

"How about eight?"

"Eight? I'll starve to death by eight! Let me guess - Mr. Wonderful prefers to eat late."

"Yeah."

"Okay, for you, I'll eat pretzels till eight, but you're buying dinner."

Marie laughed, feeling some of the tension ease out of her shoulders as Beth worked the magic of long time friendship.

"Fine, but you better order a hamburger. I'm still paying for that wonderful tour of Transylvania you arranged."

"Hey, is it my fault Dracula had a previous engagement? He was probably vacationing at his summer place. Here comes old lard-ass, I'd better look busy. See you at eight."

"Bye."

Marie hung up the phone feeling sure that Beth would be able to shine some light on the enigma that was Tyler. An objective opinion was what she needed to clear her mind and help her make a decision about her further association with Mr. Alan. Now all she had to do was get him to agree to dinner.

Before she could lose her nerve, which, where Tyler was concerned, seemed shaky at best, she picked up the phone and dialed his number. It was ringing when she realized that it was eight o'clock in the morning. Oh, well, maybe he would be more agreeable if he were a little sleepy.

After ten rings Marie was about to hang up when his deep voice vibrated across the phone lines and made her nerves tingle.

"Tyler."

He sounded somewhere between angry and groggy. He must have been asleep. That surprised Marie since she had figured that he would start conducting business early in the morning. He must be a night person.

"Tyler, it's Marie. I'm sorry I woke you. I thought you'd be sealing some important business deal by now."

There was a pause then a long sigh made her wonder if he were angry with her.

"What can I do for you, Marie?"

Marie decided it must take him a while to reach full awake. His voice was soft, slightly slurred and quite appealing. She found herself wanting to just listen to him but remembered she had an important purpose for this call.

"I would like to meet with you for dinner this evening if that would be possible. I made a couple of revisions on your house and I would like you to see them. I thought we might go to the Chuckwagon restaurant on Mulholland. They serve good old American cuisine, no garlic. I could pick you up at 7:30, if that would be okay?"

Silence.

"Tyler?"

Another long sigh. Yet, when he spoke, he didn't sound angry, just sleepy.

"7:30, steak house. That will be fine, Marie. I am eager to see you again."

His voice, or perhaps his hold on his consciousness, seemed to be fading away.

"I...miss...you."

Click. The connection was broken.

Marie looked at the receiver, confusion knitting her brow. She didn't think Tyler would be rude enough to hang up on her on purpose. It sounded as though he had just drifted back to sleep. 'Poor guy must have had some night,' she thought as she returned the receiver to its cradle. She smiled with wicked glee at the thought that he had tossed and turned as much as had she. The thought gave her hope that she was under his skin, maybe even worming her way into his heart. As visions of white veils and bridal

bouquets threatened to dance in her head, she gave it a sound shake and set about making a couple of revisions to Tyler's house.

Lieutenant Decker stood next to the hospital bed of Mr. Rodney Cage, the black African-American, hawker who had been critically injured when his little girl had been killed and tossed into a dumpster. Decker couldn't imagine how this guy was holding on. In the month since the incident, they had pumped what seemed like gallons of blood into him, performed surgery to try and reattach his arms and watched him like hawks over a mouse hole. Nothing changed, he didn't improve, and he didn't die. He just stared at the ceiling the same way he had the first time Decker had come to get a statement from him.

Doctor Carter, the man unlucky enough to get stuck with his case, said Cage was in a shock-induced coma. Decker sneered at that. He knew gut-clenching fear when he saw it and it was shining bright and clear in this guy's eyes. Cage was staying inside his own head so that whoever, or whatever, had touched him in that alley couldn't get him.

Decker couldn't figure out why he kept coming to this hospital, talking to the guy even when he wasn't getting diddly in response. After all, this wasn't exactly a high priority case. Lord knew he had plenty of other cases to work on. Still, this one stuck in his craw. He had the feeling that he really needed to solve this one, find the guy who had done this, or a lot of people would wind up like that little girl, or worse, like her father.

His gut, usually a better detective than he, told him others had already died, their bodies never to be found. With the number of dumpsters emptied in this town each day, their contents buried under tons of other garbage, a body could disappear without a trace. Junkies, hookers, street people. Who would care?

He cared. He cared because this son-of-a-bitch was breaking the law in his precinct!

Knowing it would be fruitless because it had been every three or four days for the last month, Decker nonetheless spoke to the pathetic man in the hospital bed before him.

"Mr. Cage, I'm Lt Decker of the Los Angeles Police Department. I'd like to ask you a few questions about the night your daughter was killed. If you can hear me..." Decker's frustration with days of repeating these questions to little more than a zombie got the better of him. He grasped Cage's shoulder, careful to avoid the bandages on his upper arm, and leaned down so his face was only inches away from the injured man's eyes. There was no response but Decker wasn't leaving until he tried one last time. He kept his voice low, knowing how easy it would be for him to start yelling at this pitiful

human being who had given up before doing everything he could to see the murderer of his baby girl brought to justice.

"Listen to me, Cage, the maggot who did this to you, who snuffed your little girl like she was nothing, is still walking around out there, free as a bird, 'cause we've got nothing to go on. You're dyin', man, you're already dead. Give me something to work with, anything! Don't let this bastard walk. Did you know him? Have some kind of beef with him? What did he look like? Come on, man, help me!"

Suddenly, Cage jerked as though an electrical current had shot through his limbs. He blinked once, then turned eyes that Decker would never forget toward him. The detective shivered involuntarily, wondering if he would ever come face-to-face with whatever had sent Cage to the Hell that shone so darkly in his eyes.

"White..."

Cage's voice was so ragged and full of air, Decker had to lean over until his ear nearly touched Cage's lips.

"White...monster...Killed my Becky...Threw her away...Shot 'im."

Decker felt Cage's shoulder move. He figured the guy was trying to make some gesture but his ruined arms weren't cooperating. In a soothing voice, he whispered, "That's okay, man, don't try to move. Just tell me what he looked like."

"Long teeth...black coat...slick hair, tied back like them pretty boys...voice like the Devil."

Decker didn't want him to slip into the realm of delusion so he prodded him in a more logical direction.

"Was he tall?"

Cage nodded once, his strength ebbing.

"Didn't belong walkin', too fancy...even talked fancy."

A spasm shook his body. He raised fear-filled eyes to Decker, his voice gaining the strength of the damned.

"Vampire! That's what killed my little Becky, cop."

Tears streamed down his face, but he didn't notice.

"He sucked her dry like a can 'a beer, then just threw her away like she was garbage. His teeth was drippin' her blood when he came at me. I showed that bastard. I put a bullet right through his chest."

The haunted look once more returned to his eyes. Decker felt his collar grabbed by a hand suddenly grown strong as a prize-fighter's as he was pulled against the bed. Cage's shoulders raised slightly off the bed and Decker stared into the eyes of a man possessed.

"I stayed here to tell you, Decker. Now you get that vampire bastard who did this to my Becky and me! Look for his pretty house in the hills, only it ain't finished, it's just dirt. Find him, cop! Find him and kill him!"

Cage released Decker and fell back to the bed. Decker didn't need all the bells and whistles of the equipment to tell him Cage was dead, the dull glaze of his eyes bore enough witness to that fact. He quickly stepped out of the room to clear the way for the medical personnel he knew would spend the next fifteen minutes on the futile mission of returning Mr. Cage to the land of the living. Deep down, Decker had a feeling that Mr. Cage had left that land over a month ago, returning this evening to give Decker the key to catching his Becky's murderer, then leaving for good.

As Decker headed out of the hospital, he swallowed hard as he straightened the collar that had been pulled askew by Cage. There was one mystery he did not intend to further examine. He knew Cage hadn't grabbed him; the poor guy couldn't have grabbed air. So what had grasped his collar and pulled him closer to Cage?

Decker shook his head to clear it. As they say 'That way lies madness' and he had no intention of heading down that path. As far as he was concerned, Cage had wanted to make a point so he'd grabbed his collar for emphasis. Case closed.

As soon as he returned to his office, Decker intended to start a search of all the building permits for the nearby hills to see if anything raised his hackles. He knew he was chasing the proverbial wild goose but if it were the only bird around, by damn, he'd give it a run for its money! He'd had less in the past and still made a pretty good showing. And he had never felt quite so motivated as he did in his quest to catch this perp.

But first, he was gonna get a good, stiff drink to clear Cage's haunted eyes from his mind.

Chapter 8

The drive to the restaurant went well enough. Tyler and Marie made small talk about the house, Marie's day at work, Tyler's business. They purposely avoided speaking of the night before, neither wanting to open that particular can of worms. They were seated in the *Chuckwagon* restaurant, perusing the menu, when Beth came to their table.

"Marie? That is you! Long time, no see, Amigo. Who's your friend?"

Marie attempted to look suitably surprised, at the same time noticing that Beth had indeed dressed for the kill. She hadn't worn the little blue number, that would have been a little tacky for a steak house, but she had worn a short, green slip dress over a dark blue T-shirt. With the crystal heart earrings Marie had given her for Christmas two years ago, dark nylons and four-inch heels added to the package, she made Marie feel like a bum. Marie had chosen to dress casually in black stirrup pants and a low-necked red tunic top. For just a second, she had the urge to strangle her best friend. Then it passed as she remembered the purpose for this 'accidental' meeting. She stood and hugged Beth, playing up the we-haven't-seen-each-other-in-ages, how-could-we-possibly-have-planned-this angle. As one they turned toward Tyler.

"Tyler Alan I would like you to meet my friend, Beth Davis. Beth, Tyler is a client."

Beth turned her face away from Tyler for a moment to roll her eyes sarcastically at Marie's introduction. Turning back, she extended her hand. Tyler gave her a look that could melt steel, then stood and took her hand with all the politeness of a diplomatic cobra. If you asked her, his soft voice even dripped venom.

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Davis."

Beth looked into his eyes and decided right then and there that Marie needed a good talking to. This guy was trouble with a capital T! She wasn't sure why she felt that way, but then she rarely knew why she reacted to people the way she did. She just had feelings. And her feelings about Mr. Tyler Alan were all bad.

He held her hand a little longer than she would have liked. She realized that he was trying to scope her out. He stared deeply into her eyes, giving her a case of the willies she was likely to feel for a week. Politeness be damned! She pulled her hand from his grasp, taking note of the surprised raise of his eyebrow, and turned back to Marie.

"Is this a private party, or can an old friend butt in?"

Marie saw Tyler's frown and wondered if she should take heed of his warning look. But if she did she would have arranged all this for nothing. Casting him an apologetic smile, she motioned for Beth to sit.

"Of course. Tyler and I would be happy to have you join us for a glass of wine."

Marie considered that on-the-spot compromise a stroke of genius. One look at Tyler's thunderous countenance told her he did not agree. Beth took the seat on Tyler's right, while Marie sat on his left, effectively surrounding him.

Tyler knew from the moment of Beth's appearance that this meeting was no accident; the women had definitely planned it. Marie was a dreadful liar, although her little friend excelled at it, causing him to assume she participated in the game of deception with great regularity. Though his chest filled with pride as he realized that Marie must have wanted to show him off to her friend, he still did not care for subterfuge of any kind in his woman.

Setting aside his anger at the women's deceit, he studied Beth as she made herself comfortable. She had an ability to resist him, to look away from his eyes even when he sought to hold her. He had encountered the trait a few times in the past. He hypothesized that it was some sort of psychic ability, perhaps part of some long forgotten survival instinct. It removed his ability to control the person with the power of his eyes, which never failed to annoy him. Ah, well, if he couldn't control Marie's little friend, he would simply have to convince her to leave using his superior intelligence. He smiled smugly. No problem.

"May I call you Beth?"

Beth smiled, feeling her heart slip into her throat as he turned the full force of his attention upon her. She could tell by the look in his eye that they hadn't fooled him for a minute. He knew he was being inspected, didn't like it and was going to do his best to get rid of her in record time. Well, if war was what he wanted, it was what he'd get! She did *not* trust this guy and as soon as she could get Marie away from the table she intended to tell her so. She pulled her lips away from her teeth, more snarl than smile, and saw the expression repeated on his face. Only his snarl sat so comfortably upon face, it set her teeth on edge!

"Sure, and I'll call you Tyler."

He nodded, a very imperious gesture, as though he were allowing her some great privilege. The urge to strangle him was beginning to make Beth's hands tingle.

"What do you do, Beth?"

"I work for a travel agency."

She cast a secret glance in Marie's direction.

"Making wonderful travel arrangements for people who are never appreciative of my immense talents. And you?"

One nostril flared and she knew that she had annoyed him with her impertinence. After all, you weren't supposed to ask rich men what they did. Either it would be too complicated for a woman's little brain, or it was illegal.

"I'm a businessman."

Like that was supposed to answer the question! 'To top it off', Beth decided, 'he must be into something shady.' She narrowed her eyes, letting him know that she would not be put off that easily, but kept her tone light as a feather. 'Like the one he thinks passes for my brain,' she thought.

"Oh, what business are you in?"

He straightened slightly, both nostrils flaring like an angry stallion testing the wind, yet his voice showed no strain as he continued this battle of words.

"I'm involved in several businesses in several countries. Antiquities, precious stones and metals, stocks & bonds. Would you care to see my portfolio?"

Beth laughed lightly.

"Do you have it with you?"

It was Tyler's turn to laugh as though this were the friendliest of conversations.

"Not at the moment."

The waiter interrupted to ask if they would like to order drinks. Tyler picked up the wine menu, gave a quick perusal, then ordered an expensive red wine. With a look of challenge toward Beth he instructed the waiter to bring three glasses, that they would not be ordering dinner for a few minutes. The waiter nodded and left.

Marie sat stunned in her seat as she watched her friend and the man she hoped would someday be her lover and the father of her children waging verbal war before her very eyes. She felt like a spectator at a tennis match, only her future was the prize. It didn't take a genius to figure out that Tyler did not favorably impress Beth. That was one of the reasons that Marie had wanted her to stay in his presence for a few minutes. She knew that Tyler didn't always give a good first impression, especially to women. He was such a chauvinist! But he kind-of grew on you after a while. She was sure Beth would have said fungus grows on things and a good disinfectant will fix that. She watched helplessly as Beth loaded for another volley. With a sigh, she wondered if this dinner had been such a good idea after all.

Tyler turned his wintry smile full blast on Beth. She shivered before she could catch herself. His

eyes were calculating as a stalking tiger's.

"Are you meeting someone for dinner, Beth?"

She knew he was pushing her to dig deeper into the lie that she and Marie had concocted. Maybe he wanted to catch her in it, or maybe he just wanted to see her squirm. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction. Instead, she ignored the question altogether, a move she thought, correctly, would annoy the hell out of him. She doubted he had much experience with being ignored.

"I arranged a tour of Romania for Marie this summer. Has she told you she's a vampire enthusiast?"

Tyler dropped his eyes to the table for a moment. When he raised them to again meet Beth's expectant gaze, they were blazing Hell's fire. She imagined she could feel a hole slowly burning through her skull. For once, she had the good sense to get frightened. To bolster her courage - she was *not* going to let this guy make her sweat!, she took a sip of water from Marie's glass. Marie gave her a worried look, but Beth smiled as though nothing were amiss.

"She mentioned something to that effect. Do you share her interests?"

Beth had never given two hoots for the bloodsuckers of women's fantasies, considering them to be a one-trick pony with a trick that didn't interest her, but she could tell he wanted to avoid the subject so she lied.

"Oh, yeah," Marie choked on her water, but quickly recovered, hoping Tyler hadn't noticed her surprised reaction, "I think they're extremely cool. Come to think of it, Marie tells me you insist on always meeting at night. You don't, by any chance, sleep in a coffin during the day, do you?"

Marie piped up, unable to play Switzerland any longer in this war of words.

"Beth!"

Tyler turned to Marie and laughed, a deep, sensuous sound.

"It's all right, Marie. I find your friend quite amusing."

He returned his regard to Beth, humor still shining in his eyes. Oh, yeah, she could see what Marie saw in this guy. When he didn't hate your guts. He was a real looker. And he had the intensity of a man who could make you really happy to be a woman.

"I assure you, Beth, I do not sleep in a coffin. I conduct my business with Marie at night because my money-making ventures usually capture my days in their entirety."

He blinked slowly and nodded, closing the subject.

"I must say, it's nice to find two such modern women who still believe in such things as vampires. I feared all of the imagination had deserted our fine country in the wake of the industrial

revolution. Ah, here's our wine."

He waved the waiter away, opened and poured the wine himself. As he held the glass aloft for a toast, he smiled at Beth and she had the feeling she had somehow lost the battle.

"I do drink wine."

He lightly touched her glass, then Marie's, with his own before taking a sip. Beth would have preferred sitting down to supper with a hungry alligator but she did the proper thing and took a sip of her wine. She had to admit it was pretty good. As a thought dawned, she tossed back the entire contents of her glass. Tyler's disgusted expression made the chance of intoxication worth it. Obviously he felt this fine wine should be sipped, not sloshed down like a Bud. Deliberately burping behind her hand, she stood.

"Mare, you know how booze goes right through me. Let's check out the can."

Marie winced. Why was Beth being so crude? She smiled apologetically at Tyler.

"Would you excuse us?"

He nodded, renewed anger glowing in the depths of his near-black eyes. His response echoed the ice-cold soul of propriety

"Of course."

Marie followed Beth to the ladies' room, apprehension making her clutch her tiny purse like a life-jacket on raging sea. Once there, she couldn't wait to find out exactly what was going on in her friend's mind.

"Beth...?"

But Beth didn't give her time to voice her questions.

"Where did you find that guy, Mare? I mean, he's great to look at, and I can even see where you might find him sexy. But he has zeroed in on you as his grade A prime property and he doesn't want anyone trespassing, not even your girlfriend."

Marie frowned in confusion.

"What do you mean?"

"Wake up and smell the coffee, Mare. He wants you all to himself. He thinks he's got ownership papers and you just met the guy. I may like a little possessiveness in my men, but this guy could teach a class. And those eyes. If I were going to cast the part of Satan in a movie, I wouldn't have to look any further than that table out there."

"Oh, come on, Beth, he's not that bad."

"I guess that would depend on your definition of 'bad'. Seriously, Mare, I think there's something

wrong with the guy. And I mean lock-your-doors, pull-the-covers-over-your-head bad."

She paced across the room and back.

"I can't put my finger on it. It's like he doesn't belong here, like he isn't quite what he seems. Maybe," she turned back toward Marie, "Oh, hell, Mare, maybe he really is a vampire. He sure could play one."

"He isn't dark enough."

"Tell that to Christopher Lee."

"He was never a very convincing vampire."

"Hammer films would disagree. Anyway, back on the subject."

Beth sat on the fake leather couch the restaurant supplied for customers with the vapors and employees with cramps. She patted the seat next to her. Marie took the hint and sat. Beth was more serious than Marie had ever seen her.

"Mare, you asked me to give you my opinion. Well, at the risk of losing your friendship 'cause I can see you're really crazy about the guy, here goes - He's bad news. He chews people up and spits them out and I think he's an old hand at it. He'll hurt ya bad, Mare, maybe beyond fixing. He's not worth the risk."

Looking into Beth's eyes Marie could see that her friend was really worried about her. But it was the other thing she saw shining so clearly in Beth's eyes that made her take her friend seriously. Beth was afraid. Of Tyler? Why?

"You really think he's dangerous?"

Beth raised her eyebrows and nodded. Marie took a deep breath. She had always trusted her friend's instincts in the past and they had always been right on. Not to do so now would be stupid, crazy. Tyler's face shone behind her closed eyelids, the heat in his chocolate gaze warming her even in memory. She remembered his touch, how his caresses had stirred feelings inside her she had never known existed. How could she fear him?

Maybe Beth was right; maybe he wasn't entirely stable. Did she really want to give her heart to a man who might tear it apart with unreasoning anger and jealousy?

Shaking her head, she smiled at Beth.

"Okay, girlfriend, maybe you're right. I have to work with him, but I don't have to get personally involved. Besides," she rationalized in an attempt to ignore the first painful stirrings of a broken heart, "it's terribly unprofessional of me."

Her chest was beginning to hurt and she felt as though she might burst into tears at any moment.

`For Heaven's sake,' she chastised herself, `you practically just met the man. You can't possibly be madly in love with him.' Could she?

Needing to lighten the moment, she joked with Beth.

"But you better not be saving him for yourself or I will *not* be your maid of honor at your wedding!"

Beth grinned lopsidedly, not sure how to alleviate the pain she could see written all over Marie's face.

"It's a deal."

After an uncomfortable moment of trying to think of something witty and healing to say, Beth settled for raised eyebrows and a question.

"So, what do we do now?"

Marie shrugged, then planted a smile she hoped looked genuine on her face to hide her misery.

"We go back to the table and make a *graceful* exit."

Beth noticed the emphasized adjective and knew it was for her benefit, meaning Marie didn't want to engage in any more verbal battles with Tyler. She shrugged nonchalantly and spoke in a hurt tone both women knew was phony.

"Hey, not a word. My lips are sealed. Far be it from me to interfere in my best friend's..."

"Is this the full Shakespearean soliloquy or the abridged version?"

Beth stopped talking, crinkled her nose and `humphed'.

Looking like a two-woman funeral procession, they returned to the table. Tyler had grown extremely impatient, not to mention indignant at being kept waiting, but he immediately perked up when he saw Marie approaching. However, his expression changed to one of wary interest when he saw the deceptive smile that perched like a lie on her lips. He stood to hold her chair and, leaning close to her, whispered softly near her ear.

"Is something wrong?"

His warm breath stirring the fine hairs of her ear was nearly Marie's undoing. Trying in vain to hide a tiny shiver, she side-stepped away from him. Pulling her car keys from her purse, she dropped them into her briefcase, snapped it shut and handed it to Tyler.

"Not a thing."

She swallowed, unhappy with the air that had invaded her words. Pulling her eyes from his, she achieved the businesslike tone she sought.

"I hope you won't mind, Mr. Alan, but Beth and I have a lot of catching up to do and we've

decided to have a girls' night out. The revisions are in my brief case, please look them over at your leisure. I wouldn't dream of leaving you stranded so feel free to take my car. We'll use Beth's."

With another hard swallow, she made note of the white knuckles wrapped around the handle of her briefcase. She wondered briefly how much stress the heavy plastic could withstand before it shattered into a million pieces. The strain in her voice was becoming a palpable thing.

"I'll come by the Schwartz' tomorrow morning and retrieve my car and briefcase. Please don't hesitate to make any comments you might have directly on the drawings."

The dark red of anger slowly seeped into the pale skin of his face. She could see his cheek jump as he ground his jaw, his eyes blazing hot chocolate fury. The air between them crackled with electricity. She had a feeling she had better get out of there quickly if she wanted to avoid a scene that would make even jaded LA sit up and take notice.

Beth, sensing the Armageddon building behind Tyler's cool facade, came to her friend's rescue, her voice fluffy as a valley girl's hair.

"I'll catch the drinks, since I'm the one who interrupted this little shindig. Nice meeting you, Mr. Alan."

Stone cold black eyes assessed Beth as though she were a particularly hated science project. Arctic ice-fire burned through every pore of his body, heating and chilling the air around him in equal portion. He spoke so softly they had to strain to hear him.

"I will pay for the drinks, Miss Davis."

Beth felt true fear tickle her spine and tighten her throat, for once making a comeback impossible.

He returned his attention to Marie.

"Any comments I have, I assure you, will be made in person."

He nodded to each of them, his eyes the blackest black of a shark on the prow in a night sea.

"Good evening."

Back straight as a spear, fists clenched at his side, he strode briskly from the table. Menace emanated from him so strongly that several people stepped aside as though pushed, yet he touched no one.

Marie and Beth looked at each other, then, as one, reached for their glass of wine. At a temporary loss for words, yet needing to hear something friendly, they both giggled nervously.

After giving the wine a minute to do its thing, Beth raised her eyebrows and whistled softly through her teeth.

"Boy, he sure knows how to make an exit."

Marie nodded with a sad little smile and finished her wine, the pain tearing at her chest making it difficult to breath, let alone talk. She stared at the half-filled glass that had been Tyler's until she imagined she saw the imprint of his lips on its rim. She would never again feel those lips brushing her own, sending sensation flaring through her body. She would never...

"L-Let's go, Beth. I just want to forget this whole rotten night."

Hearing the pain in her friend's voice, Beth frowned, wondering what she could do or say to cheer her up. She wrapped her arm around her shoulders and tried humor.

"It'll be okay, Mare. Let's go to a movie. How about 'Interview With the Vampire'?"

Marie did her best to laugh, but it was a weak chuckle at best. No, she didn't want to go to a movie. She just wanted to go home, climb into bed and cry her heart out.

"I'll meet you at the car, Beth."

Beth nodded, realizing Marie needed a little time alone.

"Okay, I'll be waiting."

Beth headed for her car, hoping she was doing the right thing leaving Marie alone. Sometimes pain was better dealt with alone, sometimes better shared, and it was difficult to determine which was best in each situation. She decided to compromise. She'd give Marie five minutes, and then go looking for her.

As she approached her car, she got the strangest feeling she was not alone. Looking around, she saw no one in the parking lot. Shrugging, she put it down to her imagination.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, in an ominous flutter of black, Mr. Tyler Alan appeared before her.

Chapter 9

He was wearing a black duster, the kind with the elbow length over-cape that all the cowboys wore. The coat billowed out behind him like the wings of a dark angel. His black boots shone as though they had just received an Army spit-polish, matching the shiny black glow of his eyes as he settled in front of the woman who had become his nemesis this evening.

To say he startled Beth would be an understatement. A small squeal of fright slipped past her lips as she took a step backward, losing her balance and nearly falling off her high-heeled shoes in the process. Tyler's hands clamped around her arms like a vise grip, lifting her off the ground as though she were a child's doll and smashing her up against the side of her car. She bit her tongue and tasted the rusty essence of her own blood.

A deathly fear settled over Beth like a veil, making her more terrified than she had ever been in her whole life, as she wondered if this night would be her last.

Tyler held her at his eye level and spoke in a deep, demonic whisper.

"You foolish little wench! Did you honestly think to tangle with me and win? Look closely at what you have engaged in battle and I believe you will remove yourself from my presence and remain absent. If you do not, you will live to fight no more battles."

Beth fell back on the survival instincts her brother had taught her when she turned twelve and started to develop curves. Kicking out, she aimed for a man's most vulnerable spot. But Tyler was a warrior from long ago, having been trained, and counter-trained, in every debilitating blow known to man. He side-stepped her assault, and her kick bouncing nearly painlessly off his upper thigh.

With a growl that resembled no sound a pure human ever made, Tyler raised his prey higher bringing her throat to the level of his teeth. She looked down at him; her muscles now frozen by stark terror, shock beginning to widen the depths of her eyes.

Too soon! He didn't want her to slip too far away before she could see what he had come to show her.

"Look!"

He snarled, the full length of his wicked canines shining in the moonlight. Her eyes widened till it looked as though they might pop out of their sockets. Lowering her, he once again put her eye-to-eye with Black Death. He leaned closer, his mouth against her ear, bare inches from her throat. He could

smell the fear emanating from every pore of her body, the scent sweet in his nostrils. His whisper was two-thirds growl, one-third seduction.

"I could take you now, pierce your throat and suck you dry while you hung helplessly in my arms, writhing in pleasure. Your body would disappear. You would cease to exist. And no one," he gave her a little shake for emphasis, "no one would mourn for long!

"Marie will be mine and no mere slip of a girl such as yourself can change the inevitability of that. Release your hold on her. Tell her you were mistaken, that whatever you said to convince her to avoid me was said because you were jealous. Tell her you lied so you could have me yourself. Tell her whatever she will believe. Then take a vacation, Beth. A nice, long vacation."

He exhaled a hiss that slithered up Beth's spine like a cobra.

"If you do not do as I say, I will find every person in this world who has ever meant anything to you and see that you attend their funerals before I send you to your eternal rest."

Tyler smelled the salty-sweetness of her tears as they streamed, unchecked, down her cheeks to blend with her running nose. Good. Her state of emotional distress would make her confession of deception to Marie that much more believable. He licked her ear and smiled approvingly when she whimpered her fear. Realizing his victory, he allowed his voice to lose most of its menace, becoming more that of a stern businessman than that of a deadly predator.

"Do you understand me?"

She nodded quickly, her head bobbing loosely as though her neck muscles had lost their elasticity.

"Good. If you tell Marie about this..."

She shook her head, another whimper escaping her throat. Her teeth were chattering, she was openly crying and shaking with fear. He leaned back and once again captured her eyes.

"Get in your car and wait for Marie. As soon as she arrives, confess your lie. I will be listening. You are no match for me, little girl. Do as I say!"

He released her and waited to see if she would sink to the ground in a heap of ruined humanity. She surprised him by calmly reaching into her purse and rummaging for her keys. When she pulled her hand from her purse he wondered at her strange key chain. However, after examining Marie's kitten key chain, little would surprise him in that category.

Too late, Tyler realized that it wasn't a simple key chain Beth grasped tightly in her hand. It was a miniature canister of assailant repellent. Pepper spray, most likely, or mace, if his luck were really bad.

Before he could respond, she aimed the little can directly at his face and sprayed.

All of Tyler's senses went into overdrive as the acid-hot pepper covered his face. His nostrils and sinuses burned as though coated with napalm, making breathing nearly impossible. His vision was a white blur as he flailed about, smashing into several parked cars. He was gasping, trying desperately to draw a breath. He rubbed at his dry eyes, trying to clear the pain from his brain and restore his vision. With his mind numbed by pain and fury, he was unable to properly compensate when he stepped on a rock, twisting his ankle. He fell flat on his back on the ground; the blow to the back of his head adding sparks to the already raging fire in his system.

For just a moment, he wondered if he might be dying.

Slowly, his vision began to clear, his lungs inflated fully once again and the pain dulled, becoming manageable.

As his senses slowly returned to normal, Tyler's anger flared brightly. The foolish little wench had sealed her fate! She would surely die for this. He only regretted that the death he gave was not slow and painful. Perhaps he would make her suffer before he killed her. No, he doubted he could control his fury that long.

Using a nearby car to steady himself, he stood and turned a slow, full circle to get his bearings. He growled deep in his throat as he saw Beth's car in front of him, the little witch nowhere in sight. A quick glance toward the restaurant told him that she had sought safety in numbers. She stood just inside the glass door, staring out at him with a mixture of fear and triumph on her face. She actually thought she had triumphed. The stupid chit!

Beth had finally stopped shaking, though her teeth were still smacking against each other every so often. And she was actually quite proud of herself for maintaining bladder control. There had been a couple minutes there when she had doubted the future of these pantyhose. She mentally patted herself on the back for her quick recovery. After all, she had thought her life was about to end on the teeth of a creature that, up until about five minutes ago, had been a figment of Marie's imagination.

As soon as she had let loose with the pepper spray, she had broken the record for the hundred yard dash to get into the restaurant. Once safely - she hoped! - behind the closed door, she had watched with unbridled glee as Tyler writhed in agony in the parking lot.

When he had fallen behind a parked car out of her line of vision, she had sincerely hoped him dead, or at least unconscious. Paralyzed, maybe? No such luck. She had nearly swallowed her tongue when he had risen from behind the car and turned a slow 360, obviously a little disoriented. As soon as he had laid eyes on her, all confusion had vanished to be replaced by a narrow-eyed promise of death.

He glared at her for several seconds - they seemed like hours to Beth - as though he could kill her

with his eyes. They did look pretty lethal. Then he was gone, disappearing behind another car, and Beth backed into the restaurant, fear tightening her throat once again. Would he actually attack her in a crowded restaurant with all these witnesses? No. He wouldn't. Would he?

Slowly, she inched up on the glass door. Where was he? Could he get into her car, wait for her crouched in the back seat like in every bad TV movie she'd ever seen? Okay, so she'd take a taxi home.

After a couple of frustrating minutes staring anxiously out the door for some sight of him and seeing nothing, she convinced herself that he had given up. Not that she really believed that, but sitting here like a frightened rabbit wasn't accomplishing anything. Beside, it was giving her pride quite a beating. And there was something important she needed to do posthaste.

It was time for her to have a long talk with Marie.

Beth didn't think her friend would believe her right off the bat - heck, Marie would probably suggest that Beth seek counseling immediately - but she had to make Marie see that she was telling the truth. If she didn't... Beth was not going to stand by and let that creep make an entree out of her best friend!

She strode through the restaurant to the little enclosed hallway that held the restrooms. She knew this wasn't going to be easy. Standing outside the door to the ladies' room, she tried to organize her words so she wouldn't sound quite so much like a raving lunatic. With a deep, fortifying breath, Beth nodded and reached for the door.

She felt an arm slip around her midsection like a lover's embrace. With a single, swift pull she was yanked away from the door and into the shadows at the end of the hall. She opened her mouth to scream, but a hand suddenly covered most of her face, blocking the passage of sound and air. She was being held so tightly against her attacker's body that she could feel warm breath on the back of her neck.

Beth struggled with all her might, using every dirty trick her brother had ever taught her, but to no avail. The arm at her waist was as strong as a steel band, the hand over her mouth too tough to bite through. Kicking his legs only seemed to annoy him, judging from his grunts. It was like fighting against the Terminator.

She was pulled out the back door of the restaurant into an alley where she was tossed; face first, against the wall. She tried to scream and turn around, but an arm slammed across her shoulders, knocking the breath from her lungs and pinning her against the wall. A tug at her waist, the rip of nylon, and the cool breeze on her backside made clear the fact that her nether regions were exposed. With a strange relief, she realized that this was some sicko who wanted to rape her. Not that she was pleased with that, but at least he didn't want to make a meal of her.

Her relief was short lived.

"You should have obeyed me."

It was him! Oh, God, it was Tyler! She renewed her struggles, fear's adrenalin giving her strength she had never known she possessed. He chuckled, a dark growl of triumph, as he entered her from behind. Holding her against the wall with his own body, he pulled her hair aside and whispered in her ear, "Because of Marie, I will spare you pain. You have never known such ecstasy as you are about to experience."

Beth couldn't believe this was happening to her. Her best friend's boyfriend was actually raping her. This only happened on soap operas. Maybe, when it was all over, she could get on Oprah.

No. Deep in her heart, Beth knew she was going to die here in this alley. Her futile struggles had shown her there was nothing she could do about it. As he thrust deeply into her body, the tears coursed down her cheeks and, realizing she had nothing to lose, she gave in to the urge to beg.

"Please, Mr. Alan, Tyler, please don't kill me! I won't tell Marie, I promise. I'll go away, like you said. Please!"

The rhythm of his thrusts was increasing. One of his hands braced them both against the wall and Beth saw the brick giving way beneath his fingers as he closed his hand into a fist. With his other hand he still held her hair so that she couldn't turn her head, keeping her throat bared to him. His breath against her neck was hot, speeding with the rhythm of his thrusts.

Beth felt the slightest pinprick of pain in her neck and her mind cried out that this was the end. Then everything else was forgotten as her body exploded in the most intense orgasm of her life. Pleasure roared through every pore of her body. She screamed but there was so little strength left in her by then that it was a meager sound. She was slipping into wonderful black warmth, spasms of pleasure leading the way. Beth's last thought pretty much summed up her attitude in life.

`What a way to go.'

Decker had finally decided that even a finely tuned machine, which, at 45, he was proud to consider his body, needed fuel to run at its best. He needed a dinner break. The Chuckwagon had good food at a decent price. And, cholesterol be damned, he was in the mood for a big old steak with all the trimmings. He'd order a little rabbit food to go with it and maybe the doctor would forgive him at his next physical. Probably not, but high cholesterol hadn't become an off-the-force-with-your-butt sin yet. He chuckled. If it ever did, they'd have to invent no-cholesterol donuts!

His saliva glands went into overdrive the minute he opened his car door outside the restaurant

and caught the scent of beef not too long off the hoof. He hurried to the door, slowing as he reached it so no one would think he had waited till the last minute to eat and was now ravenous. That may be the case, but it was such a typical bachelor thing to do and Decker hated to be typical of anything.

He expected to be met at the door by one of those perky teenage girls who worked as hostesses in these places to earn money to buy their makeup and whatever other mysterious things teenage girls needed. Sure enough - short skirt, pigtails, little socks with lace around the cuffs, the whole nine yards. Decker smiled politely and answered "just me, ma'am" when asked how many in his party. Even though it made him feel like a lascivious old man, he enjoyed the view of slightly rounded upper thigh as she led him to his table. She placed a menu on the table, recited, "Your waitress will be with you shortly," gave him a vapid smile and walked away.

Lieutenant Decker resisted the urge to watch the teeny-bopper's departure, deciding he had used up his quota of dirty old man thoughts for the day, and instead surveyed the restaurant. He always liked to get his bearings before settling in to eat.

Scanning the restaurant, he saw pretty much what he had expected to see. Couples on an uncommitted date who wanted somewhere fancy enough to impress the girl but cheap enough to keep the guy happy if a goodnight's kiss was all he got for his trouble. Parents with several nearly uncontrollable children trying to eat as fast as they could so they could get the kids out of there before they embarrassed them further. A few singles like himself who were probably workaholics in desperate need of nourishment so they could go back to being workaholics undisturbed. Not that he considered himself belonging in that category, but...

Wait a minute. Decker's cop instincts did a double-take as he saw a pretty young woman sitting on one of the padded benches at the front of the restaurant. Her face was streaked with the residue of wiped-away tears, she was wringing her hands in her lap and she looked like a five-year-old who had lost her mommy. Pretty and needy, two things Decker had always found it impossible to ignore. Gritting his teeth against the rumblings of his stomach, he walked to the front of the restaurant, pulling his badge wallet from his jacket pocket as he approached her.

"Ma'am?"

Large doe eyes the color of a summer sky raised to meet his, a silent plea in their depths tugging at his I've-seen-a-lot-of-rotten-things-in-this-world-so-I'm-made-of-granite heart.

"Did you find her?"

Decker sat next to the damsel in distress on the bench, keeping enough distance between them that she wouldn't feel threatened, but close enough that she could draw reassurance from his presence.

"I'm Lieutenant Decker, LAPD. Who is it you're trying to find?"

Her pretty face collapsed as she tried desperately not to start crying again. Decker discreetly looked away, allowing her a minute to compose herself. When he heard her softly blow her nose he figured the worst of the waterworks were over, at least for the moment. When he turned back to face her, he realized how much she reminded him of his niece. She was about the same age and build, but Susie had hair the color of used dishwater. Susie was the closest thing he figured he'd ever have to a daughter. Shaking his head, he wondered what the hell was the matter with him, thinking about family while on a case. And his gut was telling him loud and clear that this was a case.

He spoke gently, as though to a wounded child.

"What's your name?"

The familiar subject usually helped the victim to get a grip on reality.

"Marie, Marie Parker."

She politely extended her hand, which Decker gave a firm shake. Her voice shook slightly but she was a real trouper, trying to give the impression of composure even as her bottom lip shook with close-to-the-surface tears.

"Did the restaurant call the police?"

"I don't know, Miss Parker. I was here for dinner and I couldn't help noticing your distress. I thought I might be able to help."

Marie nodded, a little animation returning to eyes that had gone dull from too much emotion and too little sleep. Her voice told Decker that she was one of the few who still believed that the police could do just about anything, the kind that made him want to work his tail off till he solved their case.

"Thank you, that's really nice of you. And please, call me Marie."

Decker dipped his head in acknowledgment and smiled.

"Marie, what seems to be the problem?"

"I can't find my best friend. Her name is Beth Davis. We were...uh...we had a drink together and I went to the bathroom. After a few minutes I got worried because Beth didn't come get me out of the bathroom. She never has been the patient type. She said she'd wait for me in the car, but her car is gone. I asked the hostess if she saw her but she can't remember. She said she'd get the manager, but I don't know what good he can do. I just know something awful has happened, Lieutenant Decker. Beth wouldn't leave me stranded. We didn't have a fight; she talked about maybe going to a movie or something. Do you think she was carjacked?"

Decker laid his hand gently on her arm.

"Calm down, Miss...Marie. Your friend probably had some short errand that she decided to run while she was waiting. I'm sure she'll be back any minute now. Have you tried calling her at home?"

She shook her head.

"She wouldn't have left me, Lieutenant."

Her pale skin took on a becoming blush and Decker wondered just how much she really reminded him of Susie.

"I was upset. I had a fight with my...well, not exactly my boyfriend, he's kind-of a business acquaintance that I was considering..." she shrugged and sniffed, impatiently flicking a tear from her cheek with one fingertip, "...whatever. Beth knew how upset I was. She only let me get away with going to the bathroom without her because she knew I needed to cry alone."

She smiled softly, a very becoming expression.

"Sometimes I think Beth knows what I'm thinking before I do."

She turned her pleading eyes to the detective, her tone climbing with emotion.

"You've got to believe me, Lieutenant, something has happened to her. Please help me find her!"

Decker sighed, knowing his dinner was going to have to wait. This woman seemed pretty level-headed and she was adamant that her friend was in trouble. Besides, he was starting to get that feeling, the one that always warned him when someone was in trouble. Or beyond trouble. He hoped for the former. He didn't want to see those beautiful blue eyes fill with the kind of pain that would come if he had to tell Marie her friend wasn't coming for her, ever.

"Humor me and give your friend a call. If she's not at home, I'll call this in and get a couple uniforms out here to investigate."

He saw the disappointment in her eyes just before she looked at the floor and nodded. Damn!

"While we wait for them, I'll ask a few questions myself."

Her hopeful smile was reward enough for his growling stomach. As Marie started to rise to make the phone call, a thought struck him.

"You said she didn't come get you out of the bathroom. Is there some reason you think she should have?"

"Beth isn't one to let someone stew for very long. I think she would have left me alone for about five minutes, then come and told me that was enough sulking for one man. Why?"

Decker didn't want to tell her what he was thinking. He would check it out himself before worrying her. He shrugged with what he hoped resembled nonchalance.

"Just thinking out loud."

He stood and, with a gentle hand in the small of her back, led her to the cashier desk. He flashed his badge at the hostess, a move that gained him a wide-eyed, what-did-I-get-caught-doing look. He smiled reassuringly.

"This lady needs to use your phone - police business."

With an audible sigh of relief, the hostess handed Marie the cordless phone.

"Sure, no problem."

Leaving Marie to make her call, and hoping to hell she got an answer, Decker investigated his hunch.

Back in the Ice Age when he had been a uniformed patrolman, Decker had worked a case where the perp, a rapist, had waited at the back door of a restaurant till some likely looking woman had to use the john. He would drag her out the door into the alley behind the place and do his thing. Restaurants are always noisy, with plates breaking and people talking, so nobody ever heard a thing. They finally caught the guy because the poor bastard grabbed some transvestite body-builder who beat the crap out of him, then sat on him till the police arrived.

Sure enough, there was an exit at the end of the hallway that held the restrooms. Decker exited the restaurant and stepped into a small alleyway that served mainly as a garbage pickup area for the restaurant. A dumpster stood against one wall of the restaurant, its side almost touching the wall of the building on the other side of the alley, forming a `U' that would be perfect for an unpleasant rendezvous with a pervert.

Slipping his hand into his jacket, Decker slid his gun out of the shoulder holster, his hackles on full alert. There was something - familiar - about the feel of this place though he knew he'd never been here before. It wasn't exactly the place, it was... He couldn't put his finger on it but he knew if he thought about it long enough, he'd get it.

Surveying the area, he noticed a place on the wall where the brick seemed to have been peeled away. On closer inspection, he could tell that it was no natural erosion, and the speckles on the ground testified that it had happened in the last few hours. The smell that met his nostrils this close to the wall told him he was right on the money. Somebody had done the wild thing in this alley not long ago, and he'd bet his pension that the lady had been named Beth and had not been willing.

Decker scanned the area for the woman, hoping to hear a moan coming from the far side of the alley, but he knew he was putting off the inevitable. He knew she was in that dumpster as well as he knew his own name.

Dumpster! Suddenly it clicked as his mind's eye saw the little girl lying lifeless on the trash. That

was when he had last felt this goose-walking-over-his-grave sensation. As he ran to the trash bin, he swore and prayed in one breath, hoping against hope that he was wrong or that he might be in time, that just this once maybe the good guys could win. As he looked over the high rim to the pile of garbage below, he exhaled something uncomfortably close to a sob.

The girl had been pretty when life had shone in her green eyes and her short blonde hair had framed an animated face. Now she was lying on her back on top of a pile of garbage, staring up at him with unseeing eyes. Her dress, once a pretty little come-hither number, was smudged with brick dust and spots of blood, her nylons in tatters about her upper thighs. From the scuffed toes of her shoes, the experienced detective could tell that she had put up one heck of a fight, kicking the wall in an attempt to throw her attacker off balance, probably battering his shins in the process. There were bruises around her mouth probably caused by a hand pressed tightly over her pretty lips to keep her screams private. The only other marks he could see were the two puncture wounds on her throat, a tiny trickle of blood trailing from each.

Some might say she looked peaceful in death, but Decker knew better. She wasn't at peace, and she never would be until the sick bastard who had done this to her was behind bars. Or rotting in some garbage heap like the one in which he had left her. Rodney Cage's eyes flashed in his mind, accusing him of blowing it, of not stopping this guy soon enough.

"Lieutenant?"

Decker jumped and turned, gun in hand, to face whatever foe had snuck up behind him. His gut clenched as he saw Marie standing in the doorway of the restaurant, a look of curious concern on her pretty face. He quickly holstered his weapon and stepped toward her, doing his best to keep his voice light and neutral.

"Have you finished your call?"

She nodded, trying to see behind him.

"Did you find something?"

She sounded hopeful and terrified at the same time. Damn! He should have known she might come looking for him. Please, God, don't let her see that body.

"Did your friend answer?"

Marie was not one to be put off easily. She could tell something was wrong with the lieutenant. As she stepped into the alley, something crunched beneath her foot. She shifted her weight so she could lift her foot and see what was beneath it. She gasped as if in pain. In two pieces on the ground was a crystal heart earring. She bent to pick it up but Decker caught her hand before it could close around the

shattered jewelry.

"Don't touch that, Marie, it's evidence."

Eyes that were slowly filling with tears pleaded with him to tell her something she wanted to hear. She could manage no more than a whisper.

"Evidence of what?"

Decker took a deep breath, wishing in all his years he had found a better way to say this, then answered simply, "Your friend was murdered."

Marie pulled away from him with unexpected strength. She was around him and at the side of the dumpster before he could stop her. Her scream shattered the cool night.

"Beth! Nooo!"

She had climbed halfway into the dumpster before Decker wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her back to the blacktop of the alleyway, using only as much force as necessary to restrain her. She struggled and hit at him a couple times, but her heart wasn't in it. Her full weight was suddenly in his hands as she collapsed, her sobs tearing at him like none had ever done before her.

As Lieutenant Decker turned Marie in his arms and held her limp, sobbing body against his own for comfort, he made himself a silent vow: He would find the sick bastard who had done this if it took him the rest of his life. And when he did, his badge would not get in the way of justice!

Chapter 10

Tyler paced his bedroom like a caged animal at feeding time. What had he been thinking? Shaking his regal head, he disgustedly answered his own question. As usual where Marie was involved, he hadn't thought, he had just acted. Or, in this case, reacted. So the little fool had wounded his pride. It had been wounded once or twice in the past and he had lived. Why hadn't he just left well enough alone, let the two women talk about him while he took out his anger and - what, hurt? - Tyler sharply shook his head, refusing to admit that Marie could inspire pain in his hardened heart. He completed his thought, as he preferred: Why hadn't he taken out his *anger* on some transient, feasting on someone who mattered to no one? He could have spoken to Marie tomorrow and convinced her that whatever her little friend had said about him had been the accusations of a jealous or, at the very least, uninformed, woman. After all, the foolish chit didn't know him. They had just met. How could she possibly give adequate advice about a stranger? Yes, he could, should, have used the logical approach. Instead, he had let his temper reign supreme and sent Marie's friend to her death.

"Idiot!"

He swept his arm across the top shelf of his armoire, sending his brush, comb and small casket of hair accessories flying. A low growl escaping his throat, he surveyed his surroundings, looking for more objects on which to take out his anger. Like a wolf spotting prey, his eyes alighted upon the small black box sitting on his bedside table. It still held the black crystal rose he had made for Marie, the one she had so succinctly rejected. With a snarl, he stalked to the table and wrapped his hand around the cardboard offender. He pushed aside the curtain that protected his bed from the light of day and sat on the side of the bed.

Looking at the tiny glass bud nestled in tissue inside the box, he remembered Marie's face when first she saw it. Surprise, admiration for his talent and a desire to hold it forever had all flitted across her delicate features before her pride had demanded that she reject the gift.

Of course she had not realized that the present represented much more than some trinket to place upon her dresser. It was Tyler's crest, his name, and therefore, himself.

He held the box close to his face and inhaled the scent of her that still remained trapped in the tissue. A vision of Marie on the stairs in Transylvania shone in his mind. The memory of her soft curves pressed so intimately against his hard body brought a pulsing rush of desire to his loins and a longing to his heart.

'Why this woman?' he asked himself for about the thousandth time since that day in Europe, 'is it her beautiful auburn hair, her eyes of the clearest blue known to man? Her soft body so perfectly formed to mold to mine?' Though he knew the answer, he continued this foolish denial because the truth put him in danger of falling into a chasm of irrevocable emotion, all directed at one mortal woman. It wasn't a part that drew him to Marie; it was the sum of her parts. She was a unique individual, a woman he was beginning to want more than life itself.

With another snarl of self-disgust, he remembered his actions of the evening. After he had completely lost control of his temper, killing Beth and tossing her empty husk into the dumpster so conveniently located in almost every alleyway of this city, he had quickly regained his senses, realizing he needed to cover his tracks. He had driven Beth's car to a despicable part of town and left it, tearing the tape deck from the dashboard and the antenna from the hood to make it look as though some young hoods had stolen the car with Beth in it. The police would assume that her raped and broken body was lying in an alley somewhere near the abandoned vehicle. Several miles away, he had dropped the articles he had taken from Beth's car, enjoying the crash as they hit the ground. He doubted anyone would even recognize them for what they had once been.

He had then returned to the restaurant and taken Marie's car home so that Marie, and the police, would have no cause to wonder how he had gotten home, or why he hadn't taken her car. After all these decades of practice, he had gotten very good at protecting himself from suspicious minds. Though he found local police efforts to catch him to be mainly amusing, he wasn't quite egotistical enough to assume himself completely above the law.

As the antique grandfather clock that stood at the foot of the stairs chimed four times, a terrible realization struck Tyler like a punch to the abdomen. In his temper and haste to protect himself, he had abandoned Marie without masculine protection or transportation. When his temper ruled, he was most efficient at covering his own handiwork, but obviously not so skillful at caring for his lady. That would cease tonight!

He quickly dialed Marie's number on his bedside telephone, certain she would be awake waiting for word from Beth. As the sixth ring began, his concern for Marie neared panic. Had she stubbornly taken some public transportation and found herself alone and in need of him? As the ring ended, she picked up the phone and Tyler released a breath he hadn't even been aware he was holding.

Her voice thick with unshed tears, Marie spoke barely above a whisper.

"Hello?"

The pain in that simple word cut Tyler's heart nearly in two. She was not waiting for word. She

had received it. He felt his shoulders droop, his eyes cast to the floor. In his many years on this Earth, he had never before hung his head in shame over his actions. He had injured Marie and for that he was deeply sorry, regretting his temper more than he had ever done in the past.

But how could he tell her, how could he apologize without explaining his true nature? And that was totally out of the question at the moment. Not until she was completely his, body and soul, her heart her only conscious, could he risk telling her the truth. Even then, what he had done this night might take her from him. He would just have to continue as planned and let the future tend to itself.

"Marie, this is Tyler."

She sniffed and he could tell she was holding the phone away while she cleared her throat.

"Marie, I would like to see you."

A sob escaped her and tore across the phone lines to wrap itself around his throat, making it constrict painfully.

"Marie, what's wrong?"

"Beth...she...um...she's dead."

His gut clenched at the shock tingeing her voice. Feeling like a vulture circling his own carrion, Tyler nonetheless pushed forward.

"Dead? What happened...? Never mind. Sweetheart, you shouldn't be alone at a time like this. I will be with you very soon, Marie."

"Okay."

The connection on her end broke just as her sobs slipped free of her restraint, sinking the talons of regret more deeply into Tyler's conscience. She had sounded like a frightened, lonely little girl. A surge of protective instinct fired his heart; an instinct he had never known existed. Pulling his black duster over his shirt - he didn't want to waste time to put on his jacket - he nearly ran to Marie's car. With little concern for the speed limit, he raced like a madman for her apartment.

He had known her address since the day after he had arrived in town. Though his possession of that knowledge might be difficult to explain, he doubted Marie would think anything amiss in her current emotional condition. If the question presented itself later, he would come up with a reasonable explanation then.

Flashing lights in his rearview mirror, accompanied by a shrill siren that made his lip curl back from his sharpening teeth, told him that the local police had taken exception to his traveling at eighty miles-per-hour on a street where the limit was half that speed. With a growl, he yanked on the wheel, pulling to the side of the road. He had no driver's license and this was not his automobile. He sincerely

doubted the officers would understand if he told them he was in a hurry to get to his girlfriend. His eyes narrowed and he felt the first stirrings of the hunt begin.

Opening the door, he started to exit the car. An authoritative voice sounded from the police car.

"Stay inside the vehicle."

Marie's whispered 'okay', so full of pain and need it had been nearly palpable, echoed in his mind, pushing him to hurry to her. Tyler ignored the order and stood with his hands in front of him, open palms toward the police car. He spoke to the officers as if they were old friends.

"What seems to be the problem, officers?"

They both exited their car with guns drawn, a move that put him on wary edge. He did not wish to get shot tonight, and he had little time, and less patience, for a dance of power. The officer on the passenger side of the vehicle spoke as the driver advanced on Tyler.

"Keep your hands where we can see them and don't make any sudden moves."

Tyler stood stone still, his concentration centered on the officer advancing on him. The badge on the officer's shirt identified him as 'Hansen'. As soon as Officer Hansen was close enough to make eye contact, Tyler pinned him with near-black oblivion. Tyler spoke quietly, so the other officer who had remained closer to their vehicle couldn't hear.

"Officer Hansen, give me your weapon."

With no hesitation, a slight smile touching the corners of his lips like a child who wishes to please his parent, Hansen handed his gun to Tyler. Before the other officer could react to such a strange move on the part of his partner, Tyler raised the gun and fired. He pulled Hansen in front of him, a precaution against the dying man firing his weapon, but there was no need. Tyler's shot had pierced his heart, the force of the shot sending him sprawling to the ground where his last thought was to question why his partner had gone nuts.

Tyler wiped the gun on his shirt to remove any trace of another's fingerprints; then, never breaking the eye contact that kept him in control of his victim, he held the weapon with its butt toward Officer Hansen.

"Take it."

Obediently, the officer took the weapon and held it at his side.

"Put the end of the barrel against your temple."

Officer Hansen did as he was told as though it were as natural as breathing.

"Step back."

The officer took several steps away from the car. Tyler kept pace with him, maintaining eye

contact. He made sure he was at enough of an angle that the officer's demise would not stain his clothing.

"Pull the trigger."

With the same childlike smile, Officer Hansen, a ten-year veteran of the mean LA streets, pulled the trigger of his service revolver, sending a bullet searing through his brain to exit the other side of his head and embed itself in cold black asphalt. Without a sound, he crumpled to the ground.

With a quick look around to make sure that no one had taken any notice of the two loud reports, Tyler stepped to the police vehicle. Careful not to touch anything with his bare hands, he used his duster to access the police radio. He did a fair imitation of Officer Hansen's voice.

"Officer down! Oh, my god, I shot him! Please, we need help! Officer down!"

Dropping the mike, Tyler stepped over the body of the fallen officer and returned to Marie's car. With one more quick glance around to make sure that there were no loose ends he might have to tie up later, he started the car and resumed his high-speed race to his lady's side.

Marie heard the chime of the doorbell as if it were coming from some distant planet. It sounded so far away and alien that it actually frightened her for a minute. Then her senses cleared enough to identify it as nothing dangerous, just the signal that someone wanted to see her. But she didn't want to see anyone. Only Beth, and she would never again impatiently ring Marie's bell, trying to play a song she never quite mastered.

Before the dam inside her mind could burst yet again this evening, Marie untangled herself from the comforter that had been giving her little comfort, laid down the pillow she had nearly soaked with her tears and rose from the couch. It seemed as if it took her several minutes to cross her small living room and reach her front door. Everything was in some kind of sadistic slow motion, forcing her to live each minute of this horrible night to its fullest. Choking back a sob, she wondered how much more of this she could take.

Ever since moving to LA, Marie had made a point of peering through the little glass spy hole in her door before opening it. But tonight, she didn't really care if Jack the Ripper were waiting outside. At least death would end this awful pain burning in her heart.

For a single heartbeat as she opened the door, Marie thought she saw Beth standing on her doorstep. Then, with a painful sigh, she realized it was just part of the passion play of death acceptance. She wondered for how long she would look for Beth in all the familiar places. She blinked in a somewhat vain attempt to clear the veil of tears from her eyes, and Tyler came into focus.

At this moment, Marie wasn't at all sure how she felt about him, she just knew that she wanted someone, anyone, to hold her, to lie to her and tell her it was going to be all right. Forcing the corners of her lips to rise in what she hoped was a welcoming smile; she commanded her voice to be light.

"Tyler..."

She sounded like a frog croaking its last. Shrugging, her sick smile slipping even further, she stepped back and motioned for him to enter. He stepped in just far enough to push the door closed behind him. His duster fell from his shoulders to the floor as he swept Marie into his arms and carried her to the couch where he sat with her in his lap. She squeaked a tiny protest as her feet left the ground but when she felt his muscular arms wrap around her, his strength enough to carry her - and perhaps all her troubles? - away, the hurricane trapped inside her broke free. She was safe now. Tyler would protect her. Wrapping her arms tightly around his neck, she tucked her head beneath his chin and gave in to the maelstrom of emotion attempting to shatter her heart and mind.

Marie thought she had cried herself out at the restaurant, then again on her couch, but she cried now like she had never cried before. Great sobs swelled her chest and tore their way through her throat, dragging wave upon wave of mind-numbing pain with them. She knew nothing, saw only the blackness behind her eyelids, felt only her overpowering grief and loss.

Tyler hated this feeling of helplessness. This woman's pain was tearing him apart and there was nothing he could do to ease her pain. Each heaving sob that escaped her lips tore at him like the teeth of a rabid wolf. He wanted to defend her, to tear apart whoever had caused her such agony. To destroy anything, or anyone, who brought his lady grief!

But he could hardly do that, could he? He was the retched beast who had taken her friend from her, leaving her alone and grieving. As he rocked Marie in his arms, he vowed that she would never be in such pain again if it were within his power to stop it. And there was very little that was not within his power.

After what seemed like hours, but logic told him was only a few short minutes, her sobs subsided. She coughed, hiccupped a few times, and then, putting her hand beneath her running nose, pulled back from him. She blushed when she saw his shirt. Between makeup and the product of her profusely runny nose, she was pretty sure the silk had seen its last days. She raised her eyes to his and was taken aback by the heat - the fury! - She saw in those near-black orbs.

Eyes widening in surprise, she sniffed in an attempt to slow down her nose. In a very unladylike move that would have appalled her mother, she wiped her hand on her robe, and then slowly raised the newly cleaned hand to touch his face. Her finger came away wet from the single tear that had found its

way down his cheek.

"You're crying."

Tyler looked at the moisture on her finger and visibly flinched. His voice held a mixture of surprise, skepticism, anger and fear.

"I can't cry, love."

"Of course you can."

Marie started to perk up. A logical discussion was just what she needed. As she spoke, she pulled several tissues from the box on the coffee table and tended to her eyes & nose.

"Men *can* cry, you know. You may be told practically from the womb that you won't be men if one drop of moisture leaks from your eyes that isn't caused by some boulder lodging itself in one of them, but that's just macho propaganda. I won't think less of you because you cry once in a while. I can't imagine that any woman would."

A smile slowly lifted the corners of Tyler's finely chiseled mouth. She had misinterpreted his statement, but he was glad of it. He couldn't explain that it had been hundreds of years since he had shed a tear. He had been convinced that the legends were true, that those of his blood could not cry. Until now, until Marie's sobs had broken away the last of the hard steel shell in which he had encased his heart for all these years. He pulled her tightly against his chest and tightened his arms around her, wanting to pull her into his body where he could keep her safe for all time.

"Tyler!"

She gasped his name and he realized that he had become a bit too passionate. Releasing her, he chuckled.

"I'm sorry, sweetling, I guess I don't know my own strength."

She smiled at him and he was pleased to note that it reached her eyes. However, as soon as they started to light, the tiny spark was extinguished. She stood, taking several more tissues with her, and sat on the couch next to him. After blowing her nose again, she studied her terrycloth robe where it covered her thighs. She spoke quietly but he was glad to hear, with her emotions in check.

"I should tell you what happened."

He laid his hand over hers where it rested in her lap. The warmth of her thigh, so close, covered only by a thin layer of light blue cloth, burned his mind. With an effort, he kept the hunger from his voice.

"It can wait. You look tired, love, you need rest."

She shook her head, auburn waves catching and reflecting the light of the room. With an effort,

he resisted the desire to comb his fingers through the silken mass.

"No, I should tell you now, before the police call you."

It was difficult to keep from stiffening at that statement, but Tyler managed. Still, his reply had more growl in it than he would have liked.

"Why would the police call me?"

Cloudy blue eyes, quickly raised, then just as quickly lowered, told him that Marie had noticed his strange reaction to the mention of police but was far too stricken by the events of the evening to give it more than a moment of her attention. He decided the truth, or at least a piece of it, in this instance would serve as adequate explanation for his show of temper.

"Please forgive my uncivil response, Marie. You see, not all of my business is strictly legal in the countries in which I conduct it. As a result, mention of the authorities tends to raise my hackles a bit."

She gave a little distracted nod and he mentally patted himself on the back for slipping past that minor faux pas.

"Lieutenant Decker said they would want a statement from you."

"Lieutenant Decker?"

Marie took a deep breath, swallowing hard. She didn't want to cry anymore - she thought she might be sick if she did - but it was hard to talk about Beth without falling apart. Maybe thinking of it as business would help. Lord knew she was going to have to find ways to keep from bursting into tears every time she thought about her friend. She might as well start now. She imagined she was seated at a conference table, discussing a project.

"Lieutenant Decker is the homicide detective in charge of the investigation."

She was quite pleased with the strength in her voice, with only a slight stumble over 'homicide'.

"He had come to the restaurant for dinner and, when he saw I was upset, he offered to help me find..." another slight catch, but she moved on, keeping her tears in check, "...Beth. He was very nice. After he...we...found her, he stayed with me."

She gave a short, mirthless laugh.

"I think I ruined his shirt, too."

She shrugged, trying to smile and failing miserably.

"Maybe not, I doubt policemen wear silk. Anyway, after he took my statement, he said he would be contacting you to get yours. I told him you couldn't have had anything to do with it, but he said it was just routine."

"I see. Did you give him my number?"

She nodded and Tyler saw red, though nothing of his emotions showed on his handsome face, his expression remaining solicitous. He didn't much like the idea of his sleep being disturbed by some police detective looking for answers that he wouldn't accept if they were laid at his feet wrapped in a big red bow. Still, Tyler understood that Marie had had no choice, and no reason not to surrender the number.

"Do you want to know what happened to her?"

Her quietly asked question cut through his thoughts. He squeezed her hand and looked into her eyes. It would be so easy to wrap her mind in sweet numbness, to take her pain away. But that would be senseless; she would have to feel it sooner or later. To give her the oblivion available in his eyes would be but a temporary kindness.

Giving himself a mental shake, breaking any connection that had begun to form, Tyler spoke softly.

"I don't want to push you, Marie. Tell me what you wish, when you wish. I can be patient."

The corners of his mouth lifted minutely at that statement. Since when? He asked himself wryly.

Marie took another deep and, she hoped, fortifying breath. She had no idea how many times she might have to say this, how many times she would have to relive this horrible night in the future. She had to address this in some way that would keep her control intact. Once again, she imagined the conference table, the business discussion, just the facts, no embellishment, and no emotion. 'Come on, Marie, you can do it.'

"She was in the garbage behind the restaurant. Lieutenant Decker said she had been raped. The only marks on her that looked lethal were two puncture marks on her throat. He thinks all her blood was drained through those punctures and that's how she died. He said she probably didn't hurt..."

The conference table melted away to be replaced by a dumpster in a dirty back alley. Beth's sightless eyes stared at her, no sign of her indomitable spirit left in their green depths. The dark red blood on her throat filled Marie's mind, and all she could hear were Decker's comforting words, 'Loss of blood is a fairly painless way to die, like going to sleep. She probably didn't feel any pain.' Fairly. Probably. Raped. Dead. Dead, dead, dead.

That was the extent of Marie's control. She looked away from Tyler, not wanting him to see her control crumbling like a stale cookie.

As gently as if she were a tiny, frightened child, Tyler slid his hands onto her shoulders and pulled her around to look at him.

"You need some rest, sweetheart."

Her deteriorating control showed in her wide, dilated eyes, and the roller coaster pitch of her

voice, shifting from shrill to near-whisper in a single breath.

"I can't, Tyler. Every time I close my eyes, I see her face. Sometimes, I hear her talking to me. I think I'm going crazy! Oh, Tyler, I wish I could just forget. I wish I had stayed and had dinner with you. Maybe, if I had, Beth would still be alive. Maybe...I'm so tired."

Her shoulders sagged as she proclaimed her exhaustion and Tyler feared she was on the verge of a complete emotional collapse. Placing a fingertip under her chin, he raised her face till her eyes met his. Slowly, gently, he reached into her mind and took command. He spoke barely above a whisper.

"You are safe, my lady. You feel no pain, no sorrow."

In his mind, he felt all her resistance slowly ebb. Her mind opened like the petals of a spring flower. He inhaled deeply, fighting for control as his body began hardening in response to her surrender.

"Yes, my sweet little girl, give yourself to me. Rest, my love, I will protect you."

Chapter 11

Tyler's mind gave but a token resistance to the desire that flared within it like hellfire. Invasion of privacy would be a mild term for what he was contemplating and he was quite certain that were Marie to discover his trespass, a near impossibility, she would be furious. And yet, he also knew that if Marie responded in some way other than he expected, his ego, and perhaps some other part of him, a much more vulnerable part he chose not to name, would be crushed. Still, he had never been one to care about breaking the rules. He made his own rules.

In a strong, soothing voice, he spoke to his lady.

"Marie, put aside your foolish, useless concepts of right and wrong. Slip the moorings of your pride. Pursue the secret yearnings of your heart."

Her restraint left her with a slight shiver that quickened her pulse as it thickened the already straining flesh of Tyler's loins. With no further hesitation, she leaned forward and slid her arms around his neck; dropping her head back to offer up her slightly parted lips. Though she closed her eyes and broke the visual connection, an action he allowed without even realizing it, her true desires had begun to rule her now.

The blazing heat exploding through his loins making him shake with the need to be inside her, Tyler placed a hand on either side of Marie's face, marveling at the softness of her skin. She waited patiently, suspended in time and his embrace.

Warning lights flashed in his mind's eye, reminding him to keep his heart's distance as he had done for so many lifetimes. He must always remain in command, the superior being. His continued existence might depend on it. Yet, even as he thought it, his heart told him it was too late. Whatever fate loving this sweet mortal would bring him was already on its way.

He studied the exquisite woman before him, her lightly closed eyes, flaring nostrils, flushed complexion. She was even more beautiful when filled with lust. As he slowly caressed her cheeks with his thumbs, her breathing and heartbeat accelerated. Attuned as he was to every nuance of her body, he could smell the tiny beads of perspiration breaking out all over her skin, the light, musky scent driving him nearly insane. Then he caught the scent of her passion and something deep inside of him gave way with an almost audible 'snap'. The control of which he was so proud slipped from his grasp and he became as much a prisoner of lust as any mere mortal human had ever been.

Marie was floating in the most wonderful haze of desire she ever could have imagined. She was

so comfortable and relaxed, everything was right with the world. She was acutely aware of every place her body touched Tyler's. She wished her robe would come open where her thigh pressed against his so she could feel the smooth material of his pants against her bare skin.

She couldn't remember why he was here in her apartment, how they had come to be pressed together so intimately, but it didn't seem terribly important. She vaguely remembered going to dinner at...the Chuckwagon? And she was going to meet...Marie's eyes fluttered and tiny furrows appeared on her forehead. A black hole seemed to open inside her mind as she tried to recall the events of the evening. There was something...

Then Tyler's warm breath was fanning her lips and nothing mattered but this moment.

As his lips touched hers ever so gently, Marie thought how nice it would be if time would just stand still. Feeling the liquid fire seeping through her veins, she quickly changed her mind. She wanted to live every minute of this night to the fullest, not missing a single one.

His lips slid slowly over hers, like silk-on-silk. His fingers tangled in her hair as he pulled her ever closer to him, as though he wanted to devour her whole. He pulled her head back, gently scraping his teeth over her passion-sensitized lips. She shuddered as tiny contractions set her lower body further ablaze. His passion ignited and until now unknown passion within her and she felt as though she were being consumed by their joining. The moan that emanated from deep in her throat brought an answering sound of lust from him. He leaned forward, pressing her back against the couch, and kissed her deeply, destroying every last ounce of resistance within her beleaguered mind. When he ran his tongue over her lips, gently forcing them apart so he could explore the tender skin within at his leisure another shudder raced through her tortured body.

In a realization that seemed to come from a far-off place, Marie knew her robe had come open. She felt the cool air on her hardened nipples and sensitive thighs. Oh, how she wished he would...He seemed to read her mind as his hand left her face to trail sparks over the sensitive skin of her neck. As his fingertips traced the heat of the artery at the side of her throat, his breathing became increasingly heavy. He was nearly panting as he laid his palm over the crest of her breast. She arched into his caress, her breast fitting into his hand as though they had been created two halves of one whole.

With a groan and what seemed a great effort, he lifted his head and kissed her with a fever that surprised her. She couldn't help wondering what had happened to that steely composure he maintained most of the time. It was quite flattering to think that she had somehow broken through his guard. Or had she? Was he just slaking his lust, or did he want something more from her than just her body? Would...?

"Oh!"

Marie had become so involved in her musings she had temporarily lost track of Tyler's movements. The explosion of sensation that zinged through her as he rolled her nipple between his thumb and forefinger caused her exclamation of surprise. Tyler raised his head, along with one eyebrow, to question her reaction.

"Did I hurt you?"

He sounded so much like a growling animal that Marie shivered. She shook her head, unsure of her own voice. Immediately upon her unexpected reaction he had ceased his exploration of her breast. With a feeling close to awe, she saw his hand tremble as he returned his attention to her erect nipple. Then she saw nothing as she closed her eyes, wanting no unnecessary senses in use so she could fully concentrate on the exquisite sense of touch.

Tyler dipped his head to Marie's breast. The arch of her back like a tightly strung bow as his lips closed over her nipple was almost his undoing. He ministered to the other breast with his hand as he caressed her nipple with lips, teeth and tongue, absorbing each shudder of her body into his own, glorying in each expression of her rising passion.

His eyes ventured lower to the dark triangle at the peak of her thighs. As she writhed with pleasure, he caught a glimpse of moisture on her upper thigh. He swallowed hard on the need to be inside her. Though she was obviously wet and ready for penetration, he had learned in his many years upon this Earth that women wanted more than sufficient moisture. Sufficient attention was much more important to a woman.

A wicked idea tickled his mind. Even as he wondered if he could stand the strain, he acted on his self-challenge.

Capturing her eyes once more, he easily took command of Marie's mind. He was shocked to find how pleasant he found being mentally joined with her, almost as if he were completing himself. He quickly cast aside such a foolish notion. He needed no woman to feel complete. He was a superior creature, a predator. This was pleasure, and he intended to experience it to its fullest. That was all there was to it.

"Marie, you have no inhibitions. Nothing stands between you and your pleasure."

As he spoke, he slid his hand between her legs, which opened immediately to allow him better access to the center of her pleasure. Using two fingers, he spread her open, and then slowly slid his center finger into her welcoming heat. He had to hold her head with the other hand to keep her from throwing it from side to side. Her woman's muscles closed tightly around his finger bringing a growl from deep inside him. God, how he wanted to thrust into her sweet body! Tyler ground his teeth,

actually enjoying the near pain that this game was bringing him. Not only had he always loved a challenge, but also he found that he experienced nearly as much pleasure filling this woman with rapture as he would if he were feeling it himself.

He slowly slid his finger in and out of her body, enjoying the little muscle spasms that occurred with each thrust. With his thumb, he found the hardened nub that he sought. Wetting the tip of his thumb in the sweet honey of lust that poured from her with each spasm, he began rubbing the tiny bud. She arched, raising her upper body completely off the couch, and screamed her pleasure.

At her unexpectedly wild reaction, Tyler tightened every muscle in his body, using every last ounce of control he had left to avoid embarrassing himself. It just wouldn't do for him to spill his seed inside his pants like a callow youth! His body was shaking with need; his shaft so hard he thought it might shatter. He had pushed himself to the limit. Though he had thought to bring her to a climax with the power of his mind, he found that all he wanted at this moment was to use the power of his body. He wanted to be human, just human.

Tyler broke the mental contact with Marie. Strangely, she didn't really seem to notice. Though she blinked slowly, there still seemed some connection between them, a connection Tyler had never felt before. His voice barely resembling that of a man, more a wolf, he spoke.

"Marie?"

Sensing the impending loss of a pleasure she had waited all her life to find, Marie pleaded.

"Please don't stop, Tyler. Things seem so complicated sometimes, but right now, with you, everything is so simple. I just want you to wrap me up inside your arms and keep me safe forever. I've never felt like this. I want to be part of you, Tyler. For once in my life, I don't care about tomorrow, or next week, or what my friends might think."

She laid her palm against his bare chest and he would have sworn her touch burned the flesh beneath her hand. As her fingertips brushed his sensitive male nipple, he groaned, pushed her from him and stood. Before she could do more than sigh a protest, he had once again swept her into his arms.

"Where is your bedroom?"

She smiled, a most becoming blush creeping slowly over her cheeks, and pointed to an archway. He carried her through it, down the short hallway to her room and laid her on her bed. Then he stepped back, unbuttoned his shirt and let it fall to the floor. Marie thought she might pass out from an inability to breath as she watched him undress. He smoothly slipped off his shoes and socks and then, in a move she would never have thought so sexy, pulled the tie from his long hair and shook his head to free the wavy mass. He looked like a lion with a long mane about to pounce on his prey. When his hands went to

the waist of his pants, she obeyed the overpowering urge to turn away.

"Look at me, Marie. Know me."

She raised her eyes and watched with a combination of embarrassment and wonder as he dropped his pants to the ground. With more boldness than she thought she possessed, she looked him over, starting at the ground where his bare feet were firmly planted apart. They were well-formed and manicured, his toes curling slightly where they dug into the carpeting for balance. His legs were heavily muscled and covered with waves of fine blond hair. His muscles were pumped and grew even more so as her inspection reached his thighs. The muscles there stood out in total definition, shadow and plane glistening with blond highlights.

Marie cast her eyes quickly over the thoroughly pumped muscle in the center of a nest of blond fur. She wasn't exactly an expert on the size and shape of male genitalia but she was certain he measured up quite nicely.

Blushing furiously at her own thoughts, she continued her perusal of his magnificent body. His stomach and chest rippled with taut muscle. He had very little hair on either and she wondered fleetingly if he waxed. No, he wasn't the type. Everything about him was the real thing.

When her eyes finally reached his face and met his brown-black gaze, he was smiling with sweet humor.

"Your blush is most becoming, as is your honest appraisal. I trust you found everything to your liking?"

Marie nodded, feeling the heat of her blush grow even hotter with the knowledge that he had caught her appraising his naked body like a used car. Inspired more by a need to do something than a desire to be undress, she busied herself removing her robe. With a quick thrust of her hips that deeply intrigued Tyler, she pulled the robe from beneath her and tossed it to the floor beside his clothes. Realizing she was completely exposed, she reached for the rumpled covers that she had deserted what seemed like ages ago. He caught her hand and she looked up at him in surprise, a question shining in her azure eyes. The depth of his passion shone in the molten lava of his gaze, his tone a hot chocolate caress.

"Don't cover yourself, love. Let me look at you. I want to memorize every inch of your beautiful body."

Caught once again in his spell of seduction, she blinked slowly as she lay back on the bed. A bit self-conscious and wanting to look her best, she slipped her arm under her head and used it to fan her hair out over her pillow. She found herself nearly gasping for air once again as she watched him crawl on hands and knees up from the bottom of the bed like a wild beast stalking its prey. He placed his

palms on the insides of her legs and gently pushed them apart. Knowing it would have been a hypocritical, not to mention futile, gesture, she gave no resistance.

Slowly, he moved over her, the great predator savoring the moment of victory. As he had promised, he examined and touched every inch of her body. With long, slender fingers he drew lazy circles on her thighs, over her stomach, along the underside of her breasts. She couldn't hold back the moan any longer when he drew the same circles around her nipples, which grew even more erect in response to the attention. Everywhere he touched seemed to catch fire until, at last, he traced one fingertip over her lips and her incineration was complete.

Tyler slowly covered her body with his own. Careful not to burden her with too much of his weight, he kept most of it distributed between his hands and knees. He wanted her to feel possessed and protected, not suffocated.

As his lips touched hers, she shifted slightly and his erect shaft pressed against her moist cleft. Though he had intended a gentle lover's kiss, that contact chased all thoughts of gentleness from his mind. He had to have her. Now!

His muscular upper arms framed her shoulders and neck as he lowered himself to his elbows. Holding her face in a lover's death-grip, he took her mouth, plundering it with his own. His tongue slipped between her lips and caressed the tender flesh inside, eliciting a moan from deep in her throat that increased the heat of his passion so he thought he might burst into flame.

She raised her knees, opening herself to him with a silent invitation that he could resist no longer. When he thrust against her, the underside of his shaft rubbing her tender bud, she arched her back, raising her hips from the bed, and uttered a near-scream of pleasure. She tangled her fingers in his long, golden hair, pulling and caressing.

"Tyler, please, I can't stand it!"

She slid her hands from his hair and ran them down his back to close around the hard, rounded muscle at the juncture of his thighs. With a move that might have drawn his blood, he neither knew nor cared at that moment, she dug her nails into him and pulled. Reaching between them to guide himself, he gave her what she so desired and slid into her welcoming warmth.

Tyler wanted to pace himself, to remain inside Marie for eternity. His overheated body, however, long since pushed beyond its limits, had other ideas. Thrusting hard and fast, he felt the volcanic heat building inside him. Never in his life had he felt such intense pleasure in the arms of a woman. The blood in his veins seemed to boil as he plunged into her writhing body. Her moans and whimpers drove him on to greater heights until he knew he was standing on the precipice of total surrender.

In some small corner of his mind the realization that the sharp tips of his feral teeth had extended to their fullest flashed a red light of warning. He clenched the muscles of his jaw, grinding his teeth together in an attempt to regain control. He might even have succeeded if Marie's most feminine muscles hadn't begun climactic contractions around his shaft. She screamed his name, wrapping her legs tightly around his hips as she dug her fingers into the flesh of his back.

Tyler growled deep in his throat, no semblance of human left in the sound. He was so painfully aware of the woman beneath him, her scent, the taste of her lips, the blood pumping furiously through her veins. Suddenly, he was on his knees, grasping her hips and plunging, thrusting as the world exploded around him in bright sparks of light. As his seed spilled into her, he pulled her into his arms facing him, perched on his lap. Her head fell back, exposing her beautiful throat, and his lips descended to it as naturally as he drew breath. She was his!

The fires of Hell raged in his veins, clenching his gut and threatening to tear his brain to shreds as, shaking with the effort to control his need for her blood, he sheathed his teeth with his lips and placed the lightest of kisses upon her lips.

Marie would never know what he had given her this night. His entire being cried out for her blood, yet he denied it. Someday he would offer her his eternity, but he would never force upon her a life, which she might not desire. He tasted blood and realized that he had bitten his own lip in an effort to keep from giving in to his dark nature. God, how he loved this woman!

A night fraught with powerful emotional realizations still held in store for Tyler one more powerful than all the rest. It found him as he shifted his weight to lie beside Marie, her deepening breathing telling him she had at last found the peace of sleep. The sudden sickening warmth in the pit of his stomach brought his head up, his dark eyes scanning the room to find the rays seeping through the blinds at the window. He had cared so for his lady that he had allowed the dawn to catch him far from the life-preserving safety of his home!

Sunrise had come to claim him.

Chapter 12

Marie awakened feeling as if she had slept for several days. She felt rested and renewed, ready to face the day.

That lasted about three minutes, how long it took for her to glance up and see the picture on the wall of her bedroom, the one of her and Beth at their high school graduation. Her spirits plummeted as wave after wave of memory flowed over her, the scene at the restaurant with Tyler and Beth. Her feelings of abandonment when it seemed as though Beth had deserted her. The hope that had surged through her heart at the unexpected appearance of lieutenant Decker, only to be mercilessly smashed as she stared into the dead eyes of her best friend, lying discarded like a piece of garbage.

Expecting to drop right back into the depths of depression in which she had been wallowing last night, Marie was surprised to feel her spirits take a definite upward turn as Tyler once again entered the night. She smiled at the memory of him standing at her door, a knight in black silk armor, a man with a mission. She giggled even as a blush crept over her face and neck. If his mission had been to make her feel better, he had succeeded beyond her wildest dreams.

But then, knowing him only as well as she did, she would bet her life savings that he always succeeded when he set his mind to something.

Sitting at the foot of her bed, looking at the picture, Marie thought about the woman who had been her best friend since God was child. Beth had always been a breath of fresh air in a stuffy room. She knew Beth wouldn't have wanted her to be sad, she hadn't believed in long-term mourning.

When Marie's parents had been killed in a car accident five years ago, Beth had allowed her to cry and generally stop living for three days. After the funeral, she had sat next to Marie, wrapped her arm around her shoulders and spoke her wisdom on the subject of death and grieving.

'Mare, the dead have got it covered, they're on to the next mystery.'

She had given Marie a hard hug, then stood and faced her with arms akimbo.

'It's time for you to get on with the business of living. So, up and at it, girl!'

With a deep breath, Marie decided to honor Beth as best she could by following her instructions and trying not to mope around. She would do her best to get on with it.

The ringing telephone brought her out of her musing and off the bed.

"Hello?"

"Miss Parker?"

She would have recognized that deep, gravelly voice anywhere. Hope sprang to her mind and filled her voice.

"Lieutenant Decker, have you found something?"

Apology tinged his words.

"No, ma'am, nothing new. I'm calling to verify that number you gave me for Mr. Tyler."

With crisp precision, he repeated the number she had given him the night before.

"That's right, lieutenant."

"He gave you the impression that he could always be reached at that number?"

"Yes."

"I get no answer, Miss Parker. Could he be out of town?"

Marie could hear the suspicion in the lieutenant's voice and she didn't like it, not one bit. Did he actually see Tyler as a suspect? For some reason, that really teed her off.

"Why are you so insistent that Tyler might have been involved? It seems to me that you should be concentrating on finding the low-life that hurt Beth."

She swallowed hard, realizing her tone had become less than civil.

"I'm sorry, lieutenant, I didn't mean to growl at you. It's just..."

Decker interrupted her apology, his tone less business, more friend like.

"I understand, Miss Parker. I need to talk to Mr. Tyler to find out if he saw anything when he left last night, anything out of the ordinary, which might help in the investigation. He isn't a suspect, just a possible witness. Do you have any idea of his whereabouts?"

Marie blushed to her toes, but held to her policy of honesty being the best, not to mention easiest to remember, policy.

"He was with me last night. He didn't wake me when he left. Maybe he just hadn't gotten home yet. Or he might have his phone turned off so he can get some sleep. Maybe you should try him later?"

"I see."

Marie's blush deepened at the censure in those simple words. She would have sworn the lieutenant wanted to say something more, that he was struggling with it.

"Lieutenant?"

A heavy sigh met her question. When he spoke, his tone had returned to all business.

"I'll try him later. If he should contact you, please give him my number and ask him to call me. Thank you for your cooperation, Miss Parker."

Click. Marie held the receiver away from her face and stared at it in consternation.

"Well, who sneezed in your Wheaties?"

She giggled at her version of a much more crude saying Beth had used occasionally. Shrugging off the lieutenant's rather rude dismissal, she hung up the phone and considered what to do with the rest of her day.

Marie wished it weren't Saturday. She usually liked the weekend, but today she would have preferred work to fill her thoughts and keep them from Beth. Oh, well, she would just have to fill her mind with other things.

Of course, the first 'thing' to come to mind was calling Tyler, which brought on its heels a self-deprecating laugh. Why would he be any more likely to answer her call than one from lieutenant Decker? Besides, what would she say to him? Ask him what his plans were for the next, oh, twenty or thirty years?

"Give the guy a break, Marie, he needs his rest."

She smiled as she spoke to herself, breaking the grip of a silence she had never liked. Turning on the radio next to her bed, she busied herself with her morning ritual. Shower, do her hair, dress. Then, on Saturday, clean. Wrinkling her nose, she tried to convince herself that she really needed to get out of the house, maybe go shopping.

"Nice try, but the stores will be there after you clean this filthy place."

She looked around and giggled.

"New stores may have opened by the time I get this place clean."

She set about moving various pieces of furniture so she could vacuum. Deeming everything moved that could be without giving her a hernia, she walked to the hall closet where she kept the vacuum and other cleaning supplies. Her thoughts drifting to calculations of quick vacuuming leading to more time for shopping, she turned the doorknob and pulled. The door remained closed. Frowning, she wiggled the knob to make sure the little thing in the door had come out of the doorframe. The knob moved freely in her hand. Planting one foot on the wall at the side of the door for leverage, she pulled with all her strength. The door wouldn't budge.

"For Heaven's sake, it hasn't been that long since I cleaned! Has it? Have the hinges petrified?"

Shaking her head with puzzlement, she went outside to her storage closet, one of the 'perks' that came with her apartment.

She didn't store anything she really needed in the little space by her front door because she knew for a fact that at least three families of spiders had set up housekeeping in there. She just didn't have the heart, or maybe the courage, to squish them. So she tried to live in peaceful harmony with the spider

community. That meant she didn't put anything too close to the walls, and she shook everything really hard before she took it into her living space.

She found the tube of sewing machine oil she sought, and, with a quick glance around to see if the community had grown much, retreated back into her apartment.

Squirting a liberal amount of oil onto each hinge of the stubborn closet door, she realized her mistake too late.

"Shoot!"

She ran to the bathroom for some toilet paper to catch the oil that was now running down her door. As she scrubbed the oil from the wood, she berated herself.

"Clever, very clever. Like I don't have enough to clean up around here. Now this door's going to have a clean spot. Everyone will want one. Okay, there. Now, you're clean, you're oiled, you will open."

She turned the knob and, taking a deep breath of encouragement, pulled. A very unladylike curse slipped from her lips before she could catch it. She covered her mouth and looked around guiltily, then, realizing there was none to hear her, smacked her hand down to her side. Childishly, she kicked the door and pulled again. The door held as though super-glued in its frame.

With a snort, and one last half-hearted kick, Marie stalked away from the door and threw herself onto the couch.

"Fine! Now I have to call the manager and tell him my closet door is stuck, wait around here for him to deem fit to honor me with his presence, watch him act like he knows what he's doing for an hour or two, then wait some more while he calls someone who actually does know what they're doing. All this so I can vacuum a floor that will just get dirty again? I'm going shopping."

With barely a twinge of guilt, she returned the furniture to its normal position. Though she glared at the closet door every time she passed it, she decided not to do anything about it until Monday when she could use work as an excuse. The manager could let himself in - she really didn't have all that much worth stealing - and handle the problem while she worked away, blissfully ignorant. She changed out of her old work clothes and into something comfortable enough to withstand a full day of shopping and still look nice. Then she was off for a day of spending money she would make next week.

When he heard the front door close, Tyler felt he could finally relax. He knew that women could shop from dawn till dusk and, in that, he hoped Marie was no exception. He retracted his fingers from the wood of the closet door and adjusted the pieces of Marie's clothing that he had fitted all around the frame to keep out any sunlight that might worm its way down the hall. Coughing, he pulled his duster

closer around his face in an effort to lessen the nearly overpowering smell of the cleaning supplies stored in this closet. These arrangements, though crude, had been the best he could contrive under the circumstances.

For the hundredth time since realizing the dawn was upon him, he chastised himself for having lost track of time. What had he been thinking? This slip in caution could have proven deadly for him. And yet, when he remembered how Marie had looked, her head thrown back in ecstasy, and, later, her long lashes laying softly upon her cheeks in sleep, he quickly forgave himself. Though he would spend an uncomfortable day, he regretted nothing. With a contented sigh, he curled into a tight ball on the floor of the closet, adjusted the duster to better cover him, and let himself drift away into a dream-filled slumber.

Walachia was a land under siege. The Turks were everywhere, swarming like pesky insects. When a small army of them had dared to invade Florescu lands, he had gathered his men and ridden out immediately to rid his world of their pestilence.

In his dream, he was back on the battlefield, fighting to protect his lands and people. The smell of blood and death was everywhere, so strong that a less experienced warrior might have retched. Lord Tylerian Alain Florescu paid the terrible stench little heed as he had lived with it for most of his adult life.

Training since the age of eleven, lord of his lands at sixteen when his father was killed in battle, Tylerian had been the ultimate power in this region for the past twenty years. He was considered by all to be a just, if hard, lord and an unbeaten warrior.

The muscles of his great destrier bunched between his legs, telling him that the beast sensed some danger nearby. He tightened his knees and looked around to find the source of his horse's concern. The field was littered with the bodies of the godless heathens. Few moved, and those of his men that had survived the battle unwounded quickly sent those that did to whatever afterlife awaited them. He saw nothing unusual, but knew his well-trained warhorse didn't spook easily. Something was amiss.

A furtive movement in the nearby trees caught his eye. So, one of the little cretins was trying to sneak up on him from the safety of the trees. A sinister smile slicing across his handsome face, Tyler pressed his knee against his horse's side, his heel against the opposite flank, signaling the destrier to make his way with caution toward the enemy.

The sun had just dipped behind the mountains that surrounded his lands, taking with it the protecting light of day. Tyler hesitated but a moment. He didn't need sunlight to destroy one more Turk!

With a soft pat to his neck, he quieted his horse's fear of the dark woods and urged him on.

Somehow the treacherous Turk had managed to climb into one of the huge trees that filled the forest to the south of Castle Florescu. Tyler's warrior instincts served him well as the small body launched from above. Though his enemy's body hit Tyler squarely in the center of his chest, he held his seat in the saddle. A sword was useless at this close range, so Tyler dropped it and pulled the dagger from his belt. Tyler was bigger and much stronger than his attacker. He easily held him off while he slid the sharp blade between the man's ribs and into his heart. He died without a sound.

Too late, Tyler realized his mistake as, without warning, the stallion beneath him lurched into the air, screaming his fury and fear. Another of the enemy had buried himself beneath the loose peat of the forest. In the darkness, Tyler had been unable to see him there. While Tyler had been busy killing his comrade, he had used Tyler's dropped sword to fatally wound the great warhorse.

Midair, the horse spasmed in death, tossing the Turk's body, Tyler's dagger still buried deep in his chest, against Tyler. As he had not done since being a lad of twelve, Tyler felt himself flying through the air, unseated from his horse. The great warrior hit the ground a bare second before the stallion, its one-ton body crashing to the ground across Tyler's lower back and legs.

As the great weight descended on him, Tyler heard a snap and felt the white-hot lance of pain sear through his entire body. He gritted his teeth against the scream that threatened to unman him, heard it escape through his clenched teeth. The body of his loyal steed jerked several times, its muscles unwilling to accept death without a fight. As the spasms stilled, the forest became deadly quiet.

For a space of time he could not measure, Tyler fought against the blackness that crossed swords with his will, trying to overcome him. He swore he would not lose consciousness like an untried squire bearing his first battle injury! Eventually, he pushed back the dark cloud trying to numb his brain, winning what he feared might be his last battle.

With the detachment of a mind from shock, Tyler surveyed his situation: His warhorse lay dead atop him, a weight it would take at least five men to move; he could feel his heart beating in his chest, but his body below that had gone completely numb, no pain left to remind him he was wounded, or even, God help him, a man; he was deep in the forest where none would think to look for him till morning when the last of the battle would be cleaned up and it would be noticed that he was missing; he had no weapons, his dagger planted deep in the heart of his last kill, his sword nowhere in sight.

Giving serious thought to his next move, Tyler knew immediately what it must be. He had no children as both of his wives - worthless, weak women - had died in childbirth. His closest male relative was his cousin Radu. A more weak-willed, wine-loving sot one could not hope to find! He owed his

people a strong ruler to take his place. He set his mind to remaining conscious until he was found so that he could name his successor before he died.

Hearing the sound of movement nearby, Tyler turned his head toward it in time to see the Turk that had killed his horse slinking off into the trees, Tyler's bloody sword still in his hand. With a war-cry that could wake the dead, Tyler pressed his hands against the dead weight that was slowly crushing the life from his body. The muscles of his arms all that were currently at his command, he nonetheless lifted the body of the dead warhorse two feet into the air before the anger within him cooled, taking with it the last of his strength. It caused him considerable distress to find that the great weight returning to his body caused him so little pain. With a sickened heart, he accepted the knowledge that his back was broken.

He lay quietly for a time, listening to the night sounds of his forest. How he loved these lands - the forest, the mountains, the fields made fertile with the blood of his ancestors. He watched mind pictures of his lands play across his closed eyelids until the darkness came, a peaceful darkness he stubbornly refused to accept. Each time he would begin to drift into blissful sleep, he would bring himself back to consciousness, afraid that if he once gave up his tenuous hold on it he would ascend to his place in Heaven without protecting his lands and people from the rule of his useless cousin. Still, as the hours passed, breathing became more and more difficult and sleep beckoned like a willing woman.

"Lord Florescu?"

Tyler opened his eyes with a start, immediately angry with himself for having fallen asleep for even a moment. By the light of a full moon he saw a woman crouching above him, her beautiful face filled with surprise, concern, and then a deep resignation that disturbed him. At first he thought her an angel come to take him to Heaven. He was about to argue, or, at the very least, bargain, with her to let him stay until he was able to name his successor. However, as his senses fully returned to him, he recognized the woman. She was a serving wench at the local tavern. Several of his men had taken their pleasure of her and spoken of her kindly. As he looked upon her golden-haired beauty, he wished that he had gotten around to tasting her himself.

"What do you here, girl?"

Tyler winced at the weakness of his voice, his words barely above a whisper. She placed a finger to his lips.

"Save your strength, milord. I have something to offer you, a gift. But you must think long and hard on accepting it."

Tyler smiled, thinking the girl planned to offer him her services. After all, what else could she possibly possess that would be of interest to him? Thinking of his ruined body beneath the horse, he

motioned her away.

"Go, bring my men."

She shook her head.

"Your men will do you no good now, Lord Florescu. You are very near death. There is little time left so I must speak quickly and give you time to decide."

She threw back her head, the moonlight glinting off her unnaturally long, sharp teeth. What little breath Tyler could draw hissed through his teeth and he would have crossed himself had any strength remained in his arms. She brought her eyes back to meet his, ageless wisdom shining in their glowing red depths.

"I can give you back your life, heal your body, make it stronger than it has ever been. You will never grow ill, never get old and never die. But you must pay dearly for my gift. You will never see the sun, never again walk in the daylight. You will drink the blood of your prey to live, and that prey will be the humans you once called your brethren."

She saw the look of hope that had touched his handsome face slowly blend with one of horror as she detailed the drawbacks of the life she offered. Hoping he would choose to live for he was truly a great leader, and those had proven to be few and far between in her long life, she gave him the blunt truth.

"I will drink my fill of you either way, milord. It is for you to choose whether my hunger will give you eternal life, or mercifully end your suffering."

She placed her palm on his chest.

"Your heart slows. You must choose now."

Tyler tried to draw a deep breath but found that a luxury no longer available to him. Was the woman insane, delusional? No, her teeth were all too real. Was she a demon, come to offer him eternal life in exchange for his soul? He had never believed in such things, thinking the church merely used warnings of their existence to keep sinners in line. Was she truly a vampire, feeding on the blood of his people? And could she share her cursed life with him if he but requested it? Or did she want him to give himself to her so she could laugh as he died believing her lies? There were too many questions and too little time to find the answers.

In one thing, he knew, she spoke the truth. He was dying. He would not live to name a worthy successor to rule his lands. All that he, and his father, and his father's father before him had lived, and died, for would drain into the cup of that buffoon his uncle had sired.

Using the last reserves of his strength, Tyler curled his hands into fists at his sides and brought

the strength and command of the warrior lord to his voice.

"Give me your gift, woman."

She smiled, a look in her eyes that told Tyler she was much older than her fair skin appeared. Raising her pale wrist to her lips, a tiny gasp escaped her as she sank her teeth into the tender skin there. She quickly placed the bleeding wound against his lips.

"Drink, milord."

It was the whispered command of a lover and Tyler obeyed without hesitation. The blood was sickeningly sweet as it flowed down his throat. He thought he might choke or retch, but he didn't have the strength for either. Instead, he suckled like a newborn babe at its mother's breast, marveling at the warmth that began to spread through his limbs. When she pulled away, he growled and reached for her hand, wanting more. As his strength was not yet fully returned, she easily pushed his arm aside. Her brow furrowing in a stern frown, the tavern wench shook her head in an imperious way that had his noble hackles rising.

"That will suffice. Now, I will drink from you."

She placed her cool palm against his cheek and gently turned his face, exposing his throat to her hungry eyes. Her hot breath fanned his neck and Tyler closed his eyes, wanting to feel every sensation left to him. As her sharp teeth sank into his flesh, his brain exploded with feelings that his body was unable to share. Bright lights flared behind his closed eyelids and he experienced bliss the likes of which he had never felt. He was floating in a pool of darkness, his body as light as a goose's feather. Then he slipped deeper into the black void and found dreamless sleep.

When he awakened, he was in the greatest pain of his life. His back was on fire with the agony of a million demons. Without thinking, he pushed against the weight pinning him to the ground. The dead warhorse seemed to take wing as it nearly flew from atop him. Tyler jumped to his feet and crouched, ready to do battle with whatever foe might come near.

As he searched the darkness to find that he was alone, the events of the night came flooding back to him, dealing him a nearly physical blow that caused him to stagger. Warily, he slowly raised his fingers to his throat, and then pulled his hand away to stare at the red stain on the tips. He straightened and felt the muscles in his back and legs respond to his commands with no hesitation.

The woman had spoken the truth!

A moan caught his attention; his blonde head whipping around like a striking snake. His dark eyes sought the source of the sound; his night vision much sharper than it had been before he had accepted her `gift'. His newly-keen hearing picked up a small movement to his left. Crouching low, like

a wolf stalking its prey, he moved toward the sound, his mind too full of the hunt to realize the great speed at which he ran. Within seconds, he came upon one of his men who had been wounded in the battle and crawled into the shelter of the trees for safety. A dark gash across his chest seeped blood into the pool of that life-sustaining liquid that had already soaked the ground around him.

The smell of blood hit Tyler's sensitive nostrils, causing them to flare like an animal's. More disturbing still was the saliva that began freely flowing down his throat, a sensation he had felt often when smelling meat cooking over an open campfire.

He was hungry!

As he ran his tongue over his parched lips, it made its first contact with the lengthened canines of his dark gift.

"Lord Florescu?"

Tyler started, and then turned his eyes back to the dying man. He stepped forward and crouched beside him. The fallen soldier breathed a ragged sigh of relief, then gasped and grabbed his wound.

"Did we win the battle, Milord? Are we victorious?"

As he bent over the man, Tyler spoke with great conviction, "Yes, I am the victor!"

Weakened from blood loss, the man gave little resistance as Tyler placed his lips on his throat. A virgin in the art of penetrating a throat, Tyler tore the man's flesh as he tried to close his jaw in a normal bite. He held the soldier's shoulders to keep him still, while he searched his memory for the tavern wench's method. Hers had been not a bite to feed but more a kiss with penetration. He pushed the man's face to the side, exposing the other side of his throat. This time, he placed his parted lips on the man's throat and forced his sharp teeth into the pulsing flesh there.

Holding still as the soldier shuddered and moaned in his grip, Tyler felt the warmth spreading throughout his body once again. He surmised that the unnatural teeth that grew when he hungered had a sort of reservoir in them. Later, much later, when he had more scientific methods at his disposal, he would find that his first speculation had been fairly accurate. His sharp canines had a small hole in the end that seemed to transport the life-giving blood directly into his system.

As he drank his fallen man's blood, Tyler experienced the first of many predatory orgasms, embarrassment combining with fulfillment as the dark stain of his pleasure bloomed in the crotch of his pants. With experience, he would learn that drinking the blood of his victims was as satisfying as having sex with a beautiful woman. Depending on the battle put up by his prey, sometimes more so.

He dropped the dead soldier to the ground.

"Your suffering is at an end."

A dark smile crossed his face.

"You served your lord well."

Lord Florescu returned to the relieved welcome of his men. Within days, he had named the captain of his guard, a good man and trusted friend, to be his successor in the event of his death. And, just to be certain there would be no questions, he arranged a fatal accident for his cousin, Radu.

His people seemed to give little thought to the fact that they never saw their lord in the daylight, never saw him eat his fill of a feast as he had in the past. But Tyler knew that he couldn't remain for long. Their religion and superstitions would soon have them asking questions, the kind of questions that could find him on the business end of a burning stake.

So he had succumbed to the first of many 'deaths', falling from a cliff during a night walk, his body dragged off by wolves before it could be recovered. Moving on to other lords' lands, he had hired out his sword, killing Turks wherever he found them.

He had even served Prince Vlad, the great Dracula, for a time. Such irony.

As times changed, he had learned new skills, always striving to keep up with the times. He found that being a warrior suited his predatory needs. In war, few cared how the enemy had died. He reeked of nobility; never having any difficulty convincing people he was their superior.

Wherever he went, he stored away valuables, never leaving his future to chance. In every country on the globe he had a stash of gold and jewels on which he could call at a moment's notice.

He was always the aristocrat from another country, picking up languages easily and speaking with little or no accent. He found that he could imitate people perfectly with very little study. Between his looks, noble air and fortune, women were his for the asking.

He saw little curse to this life.

After the first few years of learning, he found, he needn't kill his victims to satisfy his hunger, though it was usually more prudent to do so. For a time in France, he had a wonderfully compliant mistress who knew how to keep her mouth shut. He had felt a small pang of regret upon leaving her. Very small.

Technology had become his best friend and his worst enemy in the space of one short century. When the computer age had begun to raise its ugly head, he had found it necessary to establish identities for himself that would stand up to computer scrutiny, no small task. He became his own son, grandson and so on. Rather tedious, but it served its purpose. With the advent of faster and faster planes, he found he could follow the darkness, making the night last for 24 hours at a time. Although, to his consternation, he had also found that he would become fatigued and need to sleep even if the sunrise

didn't command it.

Now, he was Mr. Tyler Alan, a well-to-do international businessman with contacts all over the world. He had homes in several countries, bank accounts in even more. He was building a house in the foothills of Los Angeles.

And, for the first time in all his years on this Earth, he was in love.

No matter how long your life or how great your powers, Fate, with assistance from its wicked sister Irony, is your master.

Chapter 13

Marie was proud of herself; she had managed to get home before the sun went down. That was a pretty short shopping trip for a woman in mourning. Of course, she hadn't really needed anything and she had spent a little over thirty dollars on it. The new dress was pretty though, and it had been on sale at a price that made it nearly a steal. Then she had to stop at the grocery store for a quart of chocolate ice cream. That was one thing a possibly depressed woman never wanted to be without.

After stowing the in-case-of-emergency ice cream in the freezer, she headed down the hall to hang up her new dress. As she passed the obstinate hall closet that had betrayed her earlier, she knew she would have to try one last time to open it herself, just as soon as she put away her booty. Hope springs eternal.

The rays of the setting sun softly lit her bedroom as she carefully arranged the dress on a hanger in her closet. Her mind wandering to her favorite subject of late, she wondered if Tyler would call this evening. Maybe he had already called and left a message. She wondered if he'd sound as sexy on a recording. If so, she might be tempted to start saving her messages.

Humming to herself as she thought about seeing him again, Marie mentally cautioned herself to slow down. She really wanted to keep from falling head over heels for this guy. What if he were just playing the field, chalking up proverbial notches on his gun? What if...? She shook her head to rid it of the plethora of self-defeating worries swarming like a disturbed beehive in her mind. If he broke her heart, she'd just have to figure out how to live with it. And how to afford a hit man! Marie laughed at herself and returned to her cleaning closet for one last try at independence.

Tyler felt the first stirrings of darkness in his blood as he heard footsteps approaching the tiny closet in which he lay. There was no time to sink his fingers into the door and keep it closed. With the only effort at self-protection time had left him, he curled his body into as tight a ball as possible, hoping his duster covered him, and held as still as a newborn deer in a forest full of wolves.

To say Marie was surprised when the door came open as easily as slicing butter with a hot knife would be a great understatement. She pulled so hard she nearly fell against the opposite wall. Regaining her balance, she raised both eyebrows and examined the inside of the door, hoping to find some explanation for its earlier recalcitrance. The only unusual thing she found were four marks near the bottom of the door. Crouching to inspect them more closely, she realized they weren't just marks, they were gouges in the wood. Her brows drew together as she ran her fingers over the mysterious punctures.

Spreading her fingers a little apart, she inserted each tip into one of the holes. They fit.

Marie stood rather suddenly, feeling goose bumps run over her arms and neck. She shivered and peered into the dark closet, running her hands over her arms as the first stirrings of true fear chilled her skin.

"Call me crazy, but I prefer to feel safe in my own home. Maybe it's rats. Oh, good, Marie, that would be an improvement over," she glanced at the bottom of the door and shivered once more, "...whatever."

Thoroughly spooked now, she nearly bolted for the front door when she saw the black shape lying on the floor of the closet. She didn't recall putting anything like that in this closet. And was that her red blouse lying just inside the door? Fearing she was losing her mind, Marie searched for answers to questions that didn't make sense.

Some inner sense whispered that the answer to this mystery lay beneath that dark veil in the middle of the closet. Slowly, wishing she were just about anywhere else in the world, she leaned over to touch the black shape that was beginning to seem familiar. As her fingers closed on the heavy canvas, she swallowed hard and slowly lifted...

Marie screamed and dropped the mysterious black invader, as her telephone shrilly demanded her attention. She quickly slammed shut the closet door, promising herself that she would return to do battle with lots of light and a broom just as soon as she answered the phone. She gave a silent prayer that whoever was on the phone would give her a reason not to keep that promise.

"Hello."

"Miss Parker, this is lieutenant Decker. Are you all right?"

Marie realized her shaky, slightly breathless voice was probably the cause of his worry. She smiled, flattered and touched by his concern, and forced her tone back to normal.

"I'm fine, lieutenant, I just ran to the phone. Did you find Tyler?"

"No, ma'am, I haven't been able to reach him. But that isn't why I called you. Did you tell me that Mr. Alan took your car last night?"

Marie frowned at the strange change of subject. What did her car have to do with anything?

"Yes."

"Do you have any idea where it is now?"

"It's in my parking place outside my apartment. I've been in it all day. Why? Did it get reported as stolen or something?"

Now it was Decker's turn to frown. What the hell was going on here? It was way past time to do

a face-to-face with this Tyler Alan.

"Your car was involved in an incident last night, Miss Parker."

Marie sighed in mild frustration.

"Please, lieutenant, call me Marie. That way I'll know when you're mad at me."

"I beg your pardon?"

She gave a soft laugh that did things to Decker's insides he didn't care to examine too closely.

"If you call me Marie most of the time, you'll probably call me Miss Parker when you're angry with me."

Decker returned her soft chuckle.

"All right, Marie. Your car was pulled over last night on what we think was a routine traffic violation."

"Did Tyler get a ticket?"

For some reason, that thought amused her. She could just imagine how angry that would make the aristocratic Mr. Alan.

"No, according to their books there was no citation issued by either officer. But they called in your plate just before..."

The way he hesitated made Marie uneasy. What was he keeping from her?

"Before what, lieutenant?"

Decker took a deep breath. She'd read about it in tomorrow's paper anyway. Might as well tell her now so he could gauge her reaction, though he would have preferred telling her in person. Just one of many things he'd rather do in person, he thought with uncharacteristic lechery.

"Both officers were killed, it appears with their own weapons."

Marie gasped in shock.

"Why...wh..what happened?"

Decker spoke more to himself than to Marie, but she was a rapt audience.

"I don't have the foggiest idea. Evidence at the scene would suggest that one officer killed his partner, and then shot himself. But that just doesn't make any sense.

Hansen was a ten-year vet. Why would he all-of-a-sudden lose it? No problems with his wife or kids, no complaints from his partner or his commander. What the hell makes a guy go crazy?"

Decker shook his head, and then realized that he still had Marie on the line.

"Sorry, ma'am, uh, Marie, I was just doin' a little thinkin' out loud. Did Mr. Alan mention anything about being pulled over last night?"

"No, nothing."

He didn't say much at all, she thought with a blush that tingled clear to her breastbone.

"It's possible they called in an incorrect tag, but I'd still like to have a forensics' team go over your car. If you don't mind?"

"Will they leave a bunch of fingerprint powder all over the dashboard?"

Decker chuckled. Trust a woman to worry about the mess.

"I'll see that they clean it up real nice before they return it. If you'd like to bring it down to the station I'll be happy to give you a lift back home. As a matter of fact, I haven't had dinner yet. Would you like to join me?"

Marie bit her bottom lip, casting a quick glance at her answering machine. No flashing light to indicate a message. Tyler hadn't called. Maybe he was out of town. It could have been a sudden, unexpected trip. He was a busy man. 'Or maybe he got what he wanted and isn't interested anymore,' her mind taunted. She liked lieutenant Decker even though he was probably old enough to be her father. But May-December romances sometimes worked out really well.

She could just hear Beth. 'It's dinner, Mare, not a marriage proposal. Take the free food.'

"I'd love to, lieutenant."

"If we're gonna go out to dinner, do you think you could call me Michael?"

Marie sighed a giggle.

"All right, Michael, it'll take me about an hour to get ready and make the drive to the station. Is that okay?"

Decker smiled and marveled at the butterflies dive-bombing his gut. What was he - a kid going on his first date?

"That'll be just fine, Marie. Come to the gate at the west side of the building, I'll tell the guard to be expecting you. Just show him your ID and he'll tell you where to park. Then come up to the third floor, homicide division and ask for me."

"I've never had dinner with a policeman before."

"I'm glad I'll be your first."

Decker nearly choked on his innuendo. At least she hadn't taken offense like some of the liberated, over-muscled women in his precinct would have.

"See you in an hour, Michael. Bye."

Decker hung up the phone, then, with a wide smile of male triumph, slapped his palm on his desktop, drawing some curious glances from the other people in the room.

Marie flipped on the light in the hall and approached the cleaning closet with a great deal of trepidation. Hadn't she closed the door when the phone rang? She really couldn't remember. She had been so startled and shaky at the time. Since she had to walk past the closet to get to her room, she decided she would look inside. After all, she was going on a date with a policeman. If she didn't show up, he would surely come looking for her.

"Yeah, and find me in pieces on the floor like in all the gory monster movies. Oh, well, here goes."

Before she could lose her nerve, she pulled the door wide to allow in as much light as possible and stepped into the doorway. Eyes wide, she saw a perfectly normal closet. The vacuum sat in one corner, cleaning supplies on the shelves. The bogeyman on the floor was an old towel she used to soak up the water when the toilet overflowed. But she could have sworn the thing on the floor had been black canvas, and the towel was a dingy gray terrycloth. She shrugged. Gray might look black in the dark she rationalized. And her senses had been anything but clear when she had touched the mysterious black thing on the floor. She must have been imagining things. Everything was normal.

Not quite everything, she realized as her eyes strayed to the holes at the bottom of the door. She had hoped those had been a figment of her overactive imagination also, but there they were, as enigmatic as ever.

Deciding she didn't have time to ponder the mysteries of the universe right now, she closed the door. She'd give it more thought tomorrow, during the daylight. At the moment, she had to get ready for dinner.

She was just stepping into the shower when the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Marie."

A shiver started at her heart and worked its way to all her extremities at the sound of that deep voice. Tyler.

"Hi."

Oh, did she have to sound like a schoolgirl with a crush? He would have to have good ears just to hear that whisper. She couldn't help it. He made her feel so good; she just wanted to purr.

"I want to see you again, Marie. Tonight. Come to my house as soon as possible. I'll be waiting."

She realized he was about to hang up. She had forgotten what an autocratic man he could be.

"Wait, Tyler, don't hang up!"

She could hear his breath on the line.

"I can't tonight, Tyler, I've made other plans."

"Cancel them."

There he went again, telling her what to do as if she were his servant. Would he never learn? All semblance of schoolgirl disappeared from her voice, to be replaced by righteous indignation.

"That would be rude, Tyler, and *I* am not a rude person. By the way, lieutenant Decker has been trying to reach you all day. You should probably give him a call."

Tyler crushed the empty coffee cup he held in his hand, pieces of fine porcelain dropping to the floor at his feet as his temper neared its boiling point, a situation that was becoming all too common where his little auburn-haired lady was concerned. His voice remained deceptively calm.

"I'm sure he'll keep trying until he contacts me. Surely, police business won't take long. I can wait an hour or two to hold you in my arms again."

Goose bumps rose all over Marie's body at the memory of Tyler's warm, muscular arms wrapped tightly around her. She wanted to see Tyler again, maybe for the rest of her life, but she had made plans and she didn't feel it would be fair to lieutenant Decker to rush their date just so she could run off to see another man.

She flinched at her own thoughts. The whole thing was beginning to sound so tawdry and soap-opera like, dampening her anticipation.

And why had Tyler decided she was seeing Decker on police business? She hadn't said anything to that effect. She decided to set him straight as diplomatically as possible.

"I didn't say it was police business. Actually, the lieutenant asked me out to dinner and I accepted, since I didn't have other plans."

She should have resisted that opportunity to dig at Tyler for not calling her earlier, she really should, but it felt so good.

She could have sworn she heard a growl on the other end of the line. She fleetingly wondered if Tyler had a dog, then she remembered his growl of passion the night before. He was a very strange man.

"Fine! Good evening."

With that nearly whispered dismissal, he broke the connection. Marie slammed the phone into its cradle.

"Oh, you are the most irritating person I have ever had the dubious pleasure of dealing with, Mr. Tyler Alan!"

Tyler was in the process of throwing the cellular phone across the room when it rang. Snarling at it, he flipped open the phone and answered in a businesslike tone he definitely did *not* feel.

"Tyler."

"Mr. Alan, this is lieutenant Decker, LAPD homicide. Marie, uh, Miss Parker," Tyler gritted his teeth - his very sharp teeth, he noted with some surprise - at the lieutenant's slip, "thought you could always be reached at this number but I've been trying all day with no luck."

Tyler realized the man was actually waiting for an explanation of his absence. He really didn't like this police detective.

"I conduct business during the day and am, therefore, often unavailable for long periods of time, lieutenant."

"I need a statement from you about an incident that occurred at the Chuckwagon restaurant last night."

An evil thought began to take form in Tyler's active mind. Perhaps there was a way to see his will done, after all.

"Very well, I have no appointments this evening. If you would like to meet with me now?"

"Tonight's no good. I'll be off duty in about thirty minutes."

Was that gloating Tyler heard in the little mortal's tone? He was beginning to feel an actual craving for this man's blood.

"A pity. I'm going out of the country for several days. My plane leaves at 5AM tomorrow morning so I'm afraid this evening is my only available time for at least a week. Would you care to make an appointment for a week from Monday?"

`Damn, this joker's running me a merry chase!' Decker knew he didn't have enough evidence to force Alan to stay in the country - Hell, he didn't have any evidence against Alan! - but he was getting the worst gut feeling he'd had in years just talking to him. Tyler Alan was wrong in a big way!

And sweet little Marie was up-to-her-eyeballs involved with the jerk! Jealousy aside, and Decker had to admit he was feeling a lion's share of that at the moment; she could be in danger. Deadly danger, he thought, as a picture of her friend's limp body lying on a pile of garbage flashed through his mind. If he didn't stop Alan, Marie might be next. But the last thing on Earth he wanted to do was stand her up.

Maybe there was a way he could do both, beating Alan at his own game.

"I'll tell you what, Mr. Alan, I'll meet you at your house in fifteen minutes."

Tyler smiled wide in triumph.

"Very good. My address is..."

"That's okay, Marie gave me your address. Fifteen minutes."

Tyler would have replied if the connection hadn't been broken. Once again, the life of his cellular

phone was temporarily in danger. With another fierce snarl, he snapped it shut and tossed it onto his bed. Replacing it would be one more nuisance he didn't need to add to a life that suddenly seemed full of them. He would need the phone later to call Marie. Once the Lieutenant had informed her that their date had fallen victim to his profession, then he would give her the chance to redeem herself by hastening to his side. Now, he must prepare for Decker's visit.

As Decker raced through one more yellow-lighted intersection, the `cherry' on top of his unmarked police car flashing, siren blaring, he wondered if he'd get busted if his superiors found out he used such means to keep a date. He doubted it since he didn't know of a single cop who hadn't used his siren to impress a girl at least once in his career. Besides, he thought with a smile that warmed his blood clear to his hardening loins, Marie was worth the risk. He had asked Ray, a fellow homicide detective and friend, to stall her if she got there before Decker could return, tell her he was temporarily delayed. He hoped she wasn't the kind to take off in a huff if a guy was a few minutes late.

The unmarked screeched to a halt in front of the address Marie had given him for Mr. Alan. Seeing the smallish house, Decker wondered if he had gotten it wrong. This didn't look like the kind of place that the profile on this guy would have placed him. According to Interpol, he was one connected - not to mention filthy rich - José. Decker double-checked the address in his ever-present pocket notebook. Yep, this was the place.

Jumping from the car, the lieutenant nearly ran to the door, and then collected himself on the doorstep. He didn't want to appear harried or in any way off his guard with this guy. He rang the doorbell and waited.

A sweet little old lady - the kind who was usually the serial killer's mom in the movies, Decker thought with a smile - opened the door. She smiled up at him and spoke in the grandmother's voice he had expected.

"You must be lieutenant Decker. Please, come in. Mr. Alan will be with you in a moment."

She ushered him into a room right out of Victorian England.

"Make yourself comfortable while I get you a cup of coffee and some cookies. I just baked them this afternoon and they're still warm."

Decker found himself being nearly overpowered by a little old lady. She was pushy in an old-world way that nearly threw him off the scent. Just in time, he caught himself.

"No, thank you, ma'am. I'm in a hurry, so if you could just tell Mr. Alan I'm here, I would appreciate it."

His no-nonsense tone didn't seem to faze her in the least. She smiled over her shoulder as she left

the room.

"Oh, he knows you're here."

Decker had little choice but to plop his butt in a chair and wait. He looked at his watch. If she was on time, and she didn't strike him as the fashionably late type, Marie would be at the station in about twenty minutes.

Five minutes had passed and Decker had just about reached the end of his polite when the little gray-haired lady came back through the door carrying a silver tray a little rounder than her figure. With a warm smile, she placed the tray on the coffee table in front of him. A silver coffee service and a small plate of sugar cookies sat atop a white lace doily. As she busied herself pouring a cup of the hot liquid, Decker bit back his temper and tried to speak civilly.

"Ma'am, I'm here to see Mr. Alan, not have a tea party. Where is he?"

She flashed him another of those you're-being-a-bad-boy-but-I-love-you-anyway smiles.

"It's coffee, lieutenant Decker, and Mr. Alan is on an overseas business call that came in unexpectedly. He will be with you as soon as possible. If you need to call someone, you may use the phone on the table over there."

She pointed to an antique phone table in one corner of the room atop which sat a very modern telephone with all the bells and whistles.

There was a sudden click in Decker's head that had him seeing flames. Finding it increasingly difficult to keep his voice level, he addressed Mrs. Schwartz with a tone of steel.

"Did Mr. Alan suggest that I might need to call someone?"

She shrugged noncommittally.

"He realized that you might be inconvenienced by his business call. Now enjoy your coffee and cookies and Mr. Alan will be with you soon."

Alan was playing him for the fool and Decker didn't like it one bit. Obviously, he and Alan were in a tomcat circle over Marie and Alan thought he had chased the competition from the alley.

Decker could play his own game and let Alan dangle in the breeze. After all, logic dictated that if Alan were after Marie, he wasn't likely to leave town for a week. A plus B equaled - Alan had lied to Decker because he knew about his date with Marie and wanted him to blow it and stand her up.

'Good move, boy, but not fast enough to outfox this old tomcat,' Decker thought as he stood, went to the kitchen door and opened it to find Mrs. Schwartz standing at the sink, washing dishes.

"Excuse me, ma'am. I have an important appointment that I won't cancel. Would you please tell Mr. Alan that I will contact him another time? And thank him for the tea party. It was most interesting."

With that, Decker turned and left the house, breaking into a run as soon as he cleared the door.

Fortunately for Tyler, the detective didn't see the snarling, saber-toothed visage that glared down at him from the top of the stairs. A growl-tinged whisper echoed down the stairway.

"Round one to you, Detective. Enjoy your victory. It will be your last!"

Chapter 14

Decker felt like a skid-row bum next to the beautiful lady with her hand currently resting on his arm. Here he was in his gray suit, the one he'd been wearing to work nearly every day for two years now, and his scuffed up old cowboy boots standing beside a vision in a pale blue slip of a dress and matching heels.

As they waited for the hostess to show them to their table, he glanced down at Marie. She smiled up at him, her guileless eyes shining with obvious pleasure, and he felt somewhere between the luckiest man in the world and a cradle-robbing lecher. He stood a bit taller and laid his hand over hers on his arm.

"I hope you like this place, Marie. It was kind of spur-of-the-moment but I figured everybody likes Italian."

`Not quite everybody,' Marie thought with a secret smile, then chastised herself for thinking about one man while out on a date with another. `Crass, Marie, really crass.'

"I love Italian food, Michael."

Decker was surprised at how much he liked the sound of his name on this woman's lips. There was something about her that went beyond desirable, though, God knew, he had noticed she was extremely sexy. She had an innocence about her that he hadn't seen in a long time, the kind of simplicity of belief that made a man want to protect her from the horrors of the world which Decker knew all too well.

`And one of the worst of those horrors,' he thought with a frown, `is already hot on her scent.'

"What's bothering you, Michael?"

His blood soared toward the boiling point when she brushed her fingertips over his furrowed brows, his immediate sexual reaction catching him quite off-guard. She dropped her hand back to her side as they were led to their table.

"You shouldn't frown like that. It causes wrinkles and makes your date very nervous wondering if she has anything to do with its cause."

He hoped she wouldn't notice the improved fit of his slacks as they took their seats at the little table. He whispered a silent prayer of thanks for the red checkered tablecloth draped over the small - he supposed the correct word would be `intimate' - table. He assumed it was supposed to add ambience. He didn't know about that but it sure gave a man something to hide behind.

Knowing from experience that it could put a damper on the evening's activities, Decker tried to switch out of detective mode. Thinking back, he realized with a start how very long it had been since he had even tried to be just a man. He smiled what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

"Nothing's bothering me that I should be thinkin' about while in the presence of such a lovely sight as yourself."

Marie blushed and whispered, "Thank you." God, she was a pretty little thing!

They fumbled with their napkins, took sips of their water, studied the menus, all the things nervous people on their first date are wont to do. After a few minutes, Decker closed his menu and looked up expectantly.

"What would you like, darlin'?"

He nearly choked as the endearment slipped past his lips. What the hell was he thinking? He barely knew the woman. After all, this was the liberated 90's, when opening a door could be interpreted as an insult tantamount to grabbing a handful of butt! Depending on her point of view of such things, Marie might take him off at the knees for being so presumptuous! He mentally braced for a dressing down.

Her soft smile said she didn't mind at all, even appreciated the gesture. Decker wondered if he'd died and gone to Heaven.

As she told Michael what she wanted for dinner, Marie thought how nice it was to meet a man who wasn't afraid to be polite, even old-fashioned chivalrous. She had always liked it in the old movies when the man would order for the woman. It was a sweet gesture of protection.

'And at least he bothers to ask what I want, instead of just assuming like someone else I know,' she thought with a wry twist to her lips.

Decker gave their order to the waitress, including taking the liberty of ordering a nice red wine to go with their spaghetti. He was searching his mind for something to talk about that had nothing to do with police work when Marie threw him a lifeline.

"I hope you won't mind if we talk about your work, Michael. I find the idea of police work fascinating and it's a lot more interesting to talk about than buildings. Do you take an oath of secrecy or can you talk about things?"

He smiled, an expression Marie recognized all too well as a male pat on the head to the little lady. But he wasn't obnoxious about it and she found she didn't really mind.

"There are elements in any on-going case that I wouldn't be able to talk about, but most of my work hits the newspapers the day after I drop it on my captain's desk."

"Isn't that annoying? I mean, don't you need secrecy to catch the bad guys?"

He shook his head, his smile sarcastic.

"The people have the right to know, don'cha know?"

He shrugged. The wine came and he dutifully tasted it before giving the nod to the waiter to pour a glass for Marie. She sipped it as he continued.

"Most the time, it doesn't really matter. The punks, who take out convenience store clerks for a couple bucks, or each other for turf, don't read the papers anyway. It's only when you get some nutcase who wants to see his handy work in the press that it becomes a problem. Some of these guys, half the reason they do this crap is to get their egos stroked by the publicity. It gives them a real hard-on...oh, sorry."

Decker was surprised to feel the heat of a blush spreading across his face and neck. He hadn't blushed since he was a West Texas farm boy out on his first date. Marie giggled softly and gave a dismissive wave of her hand.

"It's okay, Michael, I've heard worse. Most of my colleagues are men and they don't usually pull their punches just because there's a woman in the room. Unless off-color language or humor is aimed at me, I just take it in stride."

He leaned forward with a mischievous smile.

"And what if it is aimed at you? The bodies start piling up?"

She returned his smile, leaning forward so that he could hear her conspiratorial whisper.

"Actually, I've found that a burial at sea is best. And it's ecologically sound, feeding the fishes and all."

They both chuckled, the first-date ice effectively broken by mutual humor.

"Is there any way to keep things out of the press so you won't encourage these creeps?"

Michael sighed, shaking his head.

"Not really. If there's a good one going, like a serial killer, the press practically camps out on our front doorstep. If we try to roust them, they scream first amendment. About the only thing I can do is keep things under my hat till I can move on someone. That's not technically correct procedure, but sometimes it's the only thing that works. And sometimes there are elements that we make a deliberate effort to hold back so we can weed out fake confessors and copycat killers."

"What kind of elements?"

"Oh, specifics about the M.O. like exact murder weapon, or maybe a quirk like words scribbled on the wall. Something only the real killer would know."

Conversation ceased as the waitress placed their plates in front of them, asked if there was anything else, then, receiving Decker's "No, thank you, ma'am", disappeared back into the anonymity of a crowded restaurant.

As she laid her napkin in her lap and prepared her food, Marie decided she would take the plunge into the subject she really wanted to discuss. All he could do was tell her he couldn't talk about it and she would respect his judgment, even if she didn't like it.

"Michael, can you talk about Beth?"

He had feared this subject might come up. He knew he really shouldn't talk about it, especially to someone so closely involved. On the other hand, if he handled it right, this would give him the opportunity to warn her off Alan without sounding like a jealous ass.

"I didn't figure you'd want to talk about it yet."

The corners of Marie's mouth raised in a sad little smile that caused a flutter in Decker's heart.

"It's kind of funny. I still feel like she's here. I remember when my grandpa died. I was just a kid but I knew he was gone, that he wouldn't be back. And when my parents were killed, I think I cried for a week. But Beth... Oh, I don't know, maybe I had gotten so used to her being in my life that it's like a habit I can't break. Maybe, and I know how weird this sounds, but maybe I'm so angry about how she died that I can't really mourn her until I know what happened to her, who did it. Does that make any sense?"

Decker nodded as he swallowed a bite of garlic bread.

"There's a thing called 'survivor's syndrome'. One aspect of it is people refusing to let themselves mourn, you know, get out all the pain, until they see justice done to their loved one's murderer. It's like punishing yourself for something that wasn't your fault."

He reached across the table and laid his hand over hers as he looked deeply into her eyes. His tone was soft but firm.

"You know it wasn't your fault, don't you, Marie?"

Though she felt her throat constrict painfully and a veil of moisture cover her eyes, Marie answered with true conviction.

"I know it wasn't my fault that Beth was....," she took a deep breath and said the word, "...murdered. But it will be my fault if I don't follow up and keep," she grinned, "kicking the police in the behind till they catch the weirdo that did it."

She easily slid her hand from Michael's grasp on the pretense of taking a sip of wine.

Marie wasn't sure how she felt about the lieutenant. He'd been there for her at the most awful

moment of her life and she didn't want to misread her feelings of gratefulness for something more personal. He was a nice guy and she liked him, found him easy to be with, but she's never been a tease and she didn't want to send him the wrong message. With Tyler in her life, she was afraid she just didn't have room for another involvement.

But if it didn't work out with Tyler, would she want to pursue a relationship with Michael? She just wasn't sure.

`Lining them up, now, Mare?' Marie wondered if she would ever stop hearing what Beth would have said in her mind. She hoped not.

While Marie collected her thoughts, Decker continued eating and inspecting the immediate area for danger. Old habits die hard. Besides, ever since they left the precinct house, he'd had the strangest feeling that they were being watched. Scanning the restaurant, he couldn't see anyone taking an inordinate amount of interest in them. Still...

Decker narrowed his eyes. He couldn't see very well beyond the window of the restaurant, the glare of the lights blocking his vision, but he wondered if...nah, he was just getting paranoid. This case was really getting to him.

Marie's soft voice brought his senses back to the table.

"Have there been any new developments?"

After a very short argument with himself about police procedure and his pension, he decided to be completely straight with her.

"None of what I'm gonna tell you should leave this room. Actually, none of it should leave my mouth, but I figure I better protect my butt and let you know I'm working on the case."

He smiled and Marie giggled softly, her eyes sparkling. Decker was surprised to find himself wondering if he were too old a wolf to share his den. He quickly brought his mind back to detective work where he felt most comfortable.

"I put a rush on the autopsy and they listened because I used the magic word `serial'."

In response to the questioning raise of her eyebrow, Decker explained.

"This is the second murder with the same M.O. to occur in this city in the past month. With this unique an M.O., that could spell serial killer. It could be a cult thing, like Manson, or some crazy gang initiation. One thing's for sure - if the press gets hold of this thing before we have a reasonable explanation, they'll have every vampire nut in three states racing into town to meet Count Dracula. Recognizing a need for immediate results, my captain backed my rush order and it actually got noticed."

He took a swallow of wine, knowing he was stalling.

"I got the preliminary report this afternoon. Are you sure you want to hear this?"

Decker didn't want to cause her more pain by discussing her friend like another dissected statistic. Marie smiled and pushed her nearly empty plate aside, making it clear that he had her undivided attention.

"This is like a movie to me, Michael. It doesn't seem like we're talking about anyone I even know, let alone my best friend. Someday it will hit me and I'll probably spend several days with a box of Kleenex and my old photo albums, but, right now, I want to do anything I can to help you find him."

`And do awful, painful things to him before I let him die,' she completed the sentence to herself.

Decker nodded and pushed his plate aside.

"This isn't polite dinner conversation so it's a good thing we're done. The victim was killed while she was being forcibly penetrated."

A little loss of color was the only indication of any discomfort that Decker could see in Marie. He wasn't the kind of man to keep asking a girl if she were okay. If she couldn't handle it, he figured Marie was a strong enough lady to tell him so.

"Cause of death was loss of blood, just like a five-year-old female killed in an alley on Sunset several weeks ago. The only wounds on either victim, other than a few bruises probably sustained in the struggle with their assailant, were two punctures on the throat over the jugular vein. Semen was found at the most recent scene but they haven't as yet been able to type it. Here's the part the press would have a field-day with - human saliva was found on the wounds. They haven't been able to type that either. They sent a sample from the little girl to Langley to see if the big boys can come up with anything we missed. So far, nothing."

Decker took a deep breath. `Here goes.'

"Marie, how well do you know this Tyler Alan?"

Both of Marie's eyebrows shot up in surprise at the rather sudden change of subject.

"Tyler? I met him a little over a month ago. Why?"

"How did you meet him?"

Realizing the lieutenant had gone into interrogation mode, Marie decided that answering his questions would be the easiest, and probably quickest, way to get him to return the favor.

"I met him when we went to dinner to discuss a house he's having built in the hills. He asked for me personally."

Decker nodded and stored the information for later retrieval. Having a good memory had proven to be one of his best assets throughout his career.

"And that was the first time you'd ever met?"

A memory of Romania flashed guiltily through Marie's mind, and across her sea-blue eyes, even as she nodded. Michael narrowed his eyes, his lips compressing in annoyance at her obvious deception. Marie hung her head, then looked up at him from beneath long, black eyelashes.

"If I tell you the truth, you'll think I'm crazy."

Decker leaned forward, trying to create an atmosphere of shared secrets with his proximity.

"This case has already taken some pretty wild turns. Try me, Marie."

She shrugged.

"I still don't see what Tyler has to do with any of this but... Last August, I went on vacation to Romania. Beth knew I was a long-time vampire enthusiast," Decker mentally choked on his 'vampire nut' comment, "and she arranged the trip on a shoestring budget we figured I could manage. I now know it is quite possible to hang one's self with a shoestring.

Anyway, I went to Castle Dracula on one of those guided tour things. It was really boring, 'we believe the great Prince once kicked this very rock', that sort of thing. I decided I'd do a little exploring on my own. Really dumb. There was this hole in the ground, which, when I got closer, I saw was the top of a staircase that seemed to go right into the ground. I realize how crazy it sounds, but I wanted to see something different, something I could remember for the rest of my life, and so I started down the stairs. Before I knew it, it got so dark I couldn't see my hand in front of my face, let alone the stairs. I guess I'd just gotten caught up in the fantasy and I wasn't paying attention. So there I was trapped on these stairs in the dark in a supposedly haunted castle, and somebody talks to me from below."

Marie shivered at the memory of that terrifying moment.

"I panicked, to say the least. In my haste to leave, I slipped. I would have fallen who knows how far and probably broken several bones on those stone steps if this man hadn't caught me in his arms. I couldn't see a thing so I don't know how he managed to catch me. Maybe he'd been there long enough to get used to the dark, or maybe he had some kind of night vision goggles, like they use in the movies." She shrugged, confusion furrowing her brows. "He held me against his body, asked me if I was all right, then..." she glanced into Decker's eyes as a blush slowly crept over her cheeks, "he kissed me."

Decker's eyebrow raised but he didn't interrupt her.

"The tour guide had noticed me missing and chose that minute to come down the stairs. My hero said he had to go and gave me a gentle push toward the approaching rescuers. Before he disappeared, he said he'd see me again."

Decker quickly put two and two together.

"You think this `hero'," sarcasm warred with contempt in that one word "was Mr. Alan. Has he mentioned it?"

The confusion on her pretty face intensified as she shook her head and shrugged.

"No, he hasn't, and I have yet to get up the courage to ask. He admitted that he's done business in Romania, but... I told you you'd think I was crazy. It probably wasn't even him. And I still don't see what any of this could have to do with Beth."

"In my experience, Marie, you never know what might turn out to be important in a murder investigation."

Decker took a moment to store the information Marie had just given him in the drawer in his mind marked `examine more closely later', then continued his questions.

"What did Beth think of Mr. Alan?"

Marie sighed.

"She didn't like him. She thought there was something wrong with him. See, Beth was a really good judge of people. She sometimes got feelings about people that she couldn't explain, but they were almost always right on the money. She had a bad feeling about Tyler, thought he would hurt me somehow, I guess. So I decided to listen to Beth's advice and not see him anymore."

Marie looked at her hands as she shredded a napkin on the tabletop.

"I don't know if I could have done that, though. Tyler and I seem to have some kind of connection that just pulls us together."

With a blush, she realized to whom she was spilling her romantic guts. She straightened and looked the lieutenant in the eye.

"Tyler couldn't have had anything to do with Beth's murder. Not only was he in my car on the way home when it happened, but he's not the type...I mean...he just couldn't do something like that."

Flustered by the strength of her own emotions, she stopped and took several breaths before going on.

"Since you probably already think I'm totally insane, I don't suppose I can make it any worse. Have you given any thought to the possibility that Beth was killed by a real vampire?"

Marie had expected the veil of skepticism that closed over detective Decker's face, but as the thought took shape in her mind, she began to feel...right, as though some niggling thought in the back of her mind was finally making itself understood. She raised her hands in front of her face as if to ward off his objections.

"Wait, here me out. There have been legends of creatures that sustain themselves on the blood of

humans for as long as there has been written history, and, I think, even before that. Who's to say they don't just make mistakes once in a while and give us a glimpse of them? Maybe they lose their temper, or get really hungry, and don't think things through as well as they should. Think about it, Michael. There are so many disposable people out there, nobody would even notice if they disappeared. Their bodies could be rotting in the dump, or they could be fish food. Nobody would report it because nobody would miss them."

Decker took both of her hands firmly in his, temporarily putting a stop to the mutilation of her paper napkin.

"Marie, I've seen a lot of strange things in my life. I've handled cases where very sick people have found unusual, and unpleasant, ways to end other people's lives. But none of them were ever living on their victims' blood. It's just a fact that swallowing too much blood will make a person vomit. Believe me, honey, there's no such thing as a vampire."

Marie rolled her eyes. Had she really expected him to readily embrace the idea? Her terrier blood in full swing, she continued in her attempt to enlighten the stubborn, pragmatic policeman.

"Humor me for a second. Was there anything unusual about the murder of the little girl?"

Though he hated to give any credence to such a crazy idea, Decker was a good enough detective to keep an open mind to every possibility, no matter how implausible. He'd play along until she saw how ludicrous this whole idea was. He shrugged.

"Okay. The perp was interrupted by the girl's father, who took exception to him killing his little girl."

"What did he do?"

Decker pulled a face. He really didn't want to tell her all the gory details, but he had a feeling she wouldn't give up until he'd spilled the whole thing. He sighed heavily.

"Piecing it together from the father's limited statement and the evidence at the scene, it went down like this: the father shot and wounded the perp, who then removed the father's arms and exited the alley."

Her eyes flew wide in surprise.

"Removed his arms?"

Decker nodded.

"Yeah, ripped 'em right out of the sockets like he was a Barbie doll. We figure the perp must be some kind of body builder, maybe on steroids, though there was no evidence of that. Whatever, he's one real strong, real crazy, José."

Marie mulled over this new information for a minute. Once she got past the gory parts - no small task with her imagination - she saw that her theory could clearly be born out, or blown away, right now. Her enthusiasm for the truth came out in her voice, which rose slightly with excitement.

"You said he was shot. Did you find blood? His blood, I mean."

Decker could see where she was headed and he wished he could set up a roadblock to get her back on to a straight road. He knew that she would find all she needed to decide that the perp was an honest-to-God vampire because he had yet to find anything that proved differently. He had to admit this particular fruitcake theory had occurred to him more often than he cared to admit. If he believed in such things, which he definitely did not, he reminded himself firmly - he'd long ago have been looking for a slaving nutcase with long fangs dripping blood.

Still, he could think of lots worse ways to spend an evening than discussing his work with a pretty lady, so he'd play along. What could it hurt?

"Like the semen and saliva, the blood is giving the so-called experts fits. They tell me it has elements of type-O negative, but it doesn't match up exactly. They 'think', which means it's not official and they'll deny it if I quote them," 'Here we go,' he thought, "the perp might have some kind of disease that messes with his blood type. I think they are reachin' 'cause they can't give me any solid answers."

Marie shook her head, her face animated.

"Can't you see, Michael? It's vampire blood, that's why they can't identify it. They've never seen anything like it."

Marie was practically floating, her long held dream so close to being confirmed reality she thought she might burst with excitement.

"I always knew there had to be something real behind the legends. After all, how would such similar legends turn up all over the world, even in primitive cultures, without there being some basis in fact? It's only logical..."

"No!"

Decker didn't realize he had nearly shouted the denial until he saw the look of shock on her pretty face as she leaned back against the booth, her eyes wide, and her mouth slightly parted. He dropped his eyes to his lap in shame, then looked back into her guileless eyes and smiled rather weakly. In a more reasonable tone, he tried to explain his vehemence.

"Marie, it *isn't* logical. This is 1995, not 1895. Vampire legends were explained by science long ago as schizophrenics or hemophiliacs or some other kind of nut."

Marie's jaw was set, her lips thin, her expression the perfect picture of stubborn determination. If

lieutenant Decker had known her better he would have realized that her mind was made up, he was fighting a losing battle.

"The same science that says bumble bees can't fly no matter how many of the little hummers buzz up scientists noses? The same science that states unequivocally the impossibility of people spontaneously bursting into flames no matter how many crispy loungers are found in empty, locked houses? The very same science that can't give you a blood type even though they have three different fluid samples from the same person and the most sophisticated scientific machines available to man with which to analyze them? Is that the source you're using as the basis for your denial of the existence of something that has been written about by man for as long as man has been trying to inform future generations with scribbles on his chosen medium, lieutenant?"

Decker visibly winced at the sudden use of his professional title. Women always found ways to let you know they were angry, and it usually involved what they called you. He sighed and nodded.

"Until I find a better source, I'm afraid I've gotta stick with that one."

An idea suddenly flashed into Decker's mind. Yeah, it might at least solve his problem of keeping Marie away from Tyler Alan. He leaned forward and spoke quietly and earnestly.

"But if I were one to give any credence to bedtime stories, the first place I'd look for an honest-to-God vampire is the place it all started - Transylvania, Dracula's hometown."

Decker tilted his head and rubbed his chin, looking thoughtful as he attempted to plant the seeds of doubt he hoped would grow into a full-blown tree of suspicion in Marie's mind.

"You know, if I were the believing type, I'd wonder about the events of the last few months of your life. You meet Mr. Alan at castle Dracula and he takes a liking to you. He arranges to meet you, makes his move and finds you agreeable. But when your good friend, Beth, meets him, she gets the willies and advises you to ditch him, which you do. He loses his temper and kills her before he cools down."

`Damn, I wish this didn't make so much sense!'

Decker's thoughts brought him up short. Maybe he hadn't examined *all* the angles of this case. Though he wasn't about to believe in vampires, he knew how crazy having lots of money made some people. Maybe Alan had a vampire fetish. He could have used his bucks to figure out a way to drain people fast, and now he was getting his jollies when the sun went down. Or maybe he used the vampire angle to throw the police off the scent while removing anyone he marked as his enemy. Still, that wouldn't explain Becky and Rodney Cage. They didn't move in Alan's circles, couldn't have crossed him. Unless... Maybe Alan was some kind of pederast. He might have been doing his thing with Becky

when her father interrupted them. Decker shook his head. Why wouldn't he have used his special weapon on Mr. Cage and left him a drained hulk like the little girl, instead of tearing the poor guy to pieces?

Every theory he came up with had merit, but in the end, they just didn't pan out.

"Michael? Lieutenant? Earth to Michael."

Coming back to the present, Decker realized that Marie was trying, rather unsuccessfully, to recapture his attention. He smiled lamely.

"Sorry, I was thinkin' 'bout the case."

"That's okay, I guess I kind of asked for it. But you're wrong about Tyler, Michael. He's a gentleman, he could never do those awful things."

Decker laughed softly.

"I see. Vampires may be real blood-sucking monsters, but they're not gentlemen."

He held up one palm as she started to protest.

"I'm sorry, darlin', I didn't mean to ruffle your feathers. This case just has me hung out to dry. How 'bout we talk about something that isn't so close to home while we enjoy this lovely dessert?"

Though Marie was hardly ready to let the subject drop, she could see by the gray shadows beneath his eyes that the lieutenant really needed to get away from his work for a while. She smiled and nodded.

"Okay. What kind of movies do you like? I just bet they're not cop movies."

He laughed, the distracted look slowly leaving his eyes.

"Sure, we all like to see how easy it is to solve a case when you have five writers and a twenty-million-dollar-per-case budget."

Marie laughed and, through dessert and the ride to her apartment, they made small talk about movies, TV, music. She liked Michael. He was funny, well spoken, and sexy in a gruff, no-nonsense way. They liked some of the same movies, though he didn't care for horror movies and she didn't think much of martial arts flicks. He didn't get much chance to listen to music, but he admitted to having one of the new-age country stations preset on his car radio. She didn't like the howling, somebody-ran-over-my-dog old country, but she liked the love songs. Decker laughed at her description, commenting that he just couldn't get into that let's see how many strange sounds a smashed guitar can make before it dies modern rock. All-in-all, they got along quite well.

It came as no surprise to Marie when Decker, an old-fashioned man all the way, insisted on walking her to her door. He took her keys, opened the door and turned on the light, then leaned in for a

quick inspection.

She smiled up at him, the look in her eyes clearly stating that she appreciated his concern.

"All clear?"

He nodded and she realized that he was serious. She spoke with the tinkle of laughter in her voice.

"I feel like the president with his secret service men."

She sobered a little, afraid he might think she was making fun of him, but his slow smile assured her that she hadn't offended him. He placed a bent finger under her chin and, as he leaned closer, spoke softly.

"I'm protecting something far more precious than the president."

His lips gently brushed hers, the kiss ending before Marie even had a chance to respond, which was all right with her because her feelings were in somewhat of a jumble at the moment.

She took a step back and gave him a soft smile.

"Thank you for dinner, Michael. I had a wonderful time."

"Would you like to do it again?"

Oh, how she hated this part. Men always asked the tough questions before you got a chance to think about things. She really did like Michael, and, considering the way Tyler had spoken to her this evening, their future relationship was a giant question mark, so she wouldn't be double-timing anyone if she agreed to see Michael again.

"I'd like that."

She stepped into her apartment, turned and smiled at him as she slowly closed the door.

"Call me."

As Decker headed back to his car, happily whistling a non-tune, he thought he heard something moving in the bushes that grew behind the carport of Marie's apartment building.

'Probably a cat lookin' for his dinner.'

He smiled, feeling like everything was right with the world, and continued on toward his car.

Decker's hackles rose to full alert so suddenly that he had his gun in his hand before he even realized it. Someone was watching him, he knew it as surely as he knew his own name, and he doubted it was a particularly sentient cat. Crouching slightly, his gun now held firmly in both hands, he scanned the area around the carport. Nothing stirred.

Alley cats don't hold still 'cause you pull a gun on 'em.

His sixth sense, that gut feeling that had kept him alive for so many years, told him he was in

lethal danger even though he couldn't see a thing out of the ordinary. Slowly, his eyes constantly scanning the area, he eased his way to his car. He pulled open the door, jumped inside, closed and locked the door in one quick, fluid motion that would have done a man half his age proud.

After keying the ignition, he flipped a switch to flood the area with light. Still nothing. With a heavy sigh, Decker decided his conversation with Marie had spooked him more than he had realized. Good lord, he'd be seeing giant bats swooping down to tear out his throat if he weren't careful.

He needed some sleep.

It wasn't until he left for work the next morning that he found the four deep, parallel gouges that ran the length of the passenger side of his car, gouges that sank clear through the metal of the trunk.

Chapter 15

After lieutenant Decker left, Marie couldn't sleep. She kept running their conversation through her mind and getting more and more uncomfortable. Tyler, a vampire? That was ridiculous! Wasn't it?

As she stood brushing her hair before her bathroom mirror, she searched her memory of Tyler's house and found it sadly lacking in mirrors. Concentrating, she remembered a mirror over the medicine chest in the downstairs bathroom. One small mirror. So the man wasn't vain, that should be a plus.

Then there was that sofa thing. Most guys couldn't throw a sofa across the room because they were having a bad night. He had laughed it off as martial arts, but that kind of training didn't make you any stronger, did it? She had sat on that couch and it felt plenty sturdy. She wouldn't have thought one man could just pick it up and throw it like a football. But if that man had the strength of a vampire? Marie shook her head and, sitting on her bed, reached for the phone.

"I'm going to put an end to this craziness right now."

She dialed Tyler's number and waited through several rings, clicks, and more rings. After counting to twelve, she decided he wasn't going to answer. She hung up the phone in disgust. What kind of modern businessman didn't carry his cellular phone with him wherever he went?

One who was stalking prey on a dark city street and couldn't afford to have his phone go off and give away his presence?

"Stop that!"

Marie shook her head to clear away the unpleasant thoughts Michael had started rolling around in there. Tyler was *not* a vampire and that was that!

She stepped into her closet and was in the process of hanging up the evening's clothes when she noticed that her red blouse was on its hanger backward. She pulled it off the closet pole to get a better look, sighing a little "ahh" of astonishment when she saw the myriad wrinkles that covered its surface.

Tilting her head to one side in confusion, she wondered aloud, "what the heck?"

She might not be a clotheshorse, but she didn't run around dressing like a bag lady either! She would never hang up a blouse looking like that. Curious, she pulled several other pieces of clothing from the closet. The light colored pieces were fine, but the darker ones - two pairs of pants, a black turtleneck, and her ever-popular little black skirt - were all crumpled as if they had been rolled into a ball.

Marie laid the wrinkled clothes on her bed and returned the others, thinking that further examination might solve this mystery. As she stared at the dark clothes, goose-flesh rose on her arms.

She turned slowly and looked down the hall. The closet. Hadn't she thought her red blouse was on the floor when she first opened it? And hadn't it mysteriously come open all by itself when five minutes earlier it would have taken an act of God to pry it open? She rubbed her hands over her arms as she slowly shook her head once again.

"What is going on here? Am I losing my mind?"

Frightened by the unusual turn of events, she desperately searched her brain for a logical explanation.

This had all started when Tyler came to town. Or had it? Had her fairly well-organized life actually started to deteriorate in the bowels of an ancient castle with a chance encounter? Had her rescuer on that dark staircase really been Mr. Tyler Alan? And, if so, why hadn't he admitted it by now? How had he found her half the planet away in California? Had he actually searched for her, or was this whole thing just the greatest coincidence in history?

The questions were breeding like bunnies on holiday. Oh, how she wished Beth was here to help her make some sense of this whole mess.

Beth. The horrible bottom line to this whole passion play was that if Tyler were a real vampire, he had killed Beth. Would he, could he, do such a thing, even in a fit of temper?

In her mind's eye Marie once again saw the sofa flying across the room like a baseball, propelled by pure fury.

Attempting to pull a deep breath into lungs that felt like lead, she reached for the phone. She really needed to talk to Tyler. She nearly jumped out of her skin when, just as she touched it, the phone rang. She pulled it slowly to her ear as though it might sprout teeth and bite her.

"Hello?"

"Marie?"

She didn't know if she were disappointed or relieved to hear Michael's voice.

"Hello, Michael."

"I just wanted to make sure that you got in all right."

A gentle smile touched her lips.

"Lieutenant, you walked me to the door and thoroughly secured the area before you allowed me into my apartment." Laughter lightened her words. "I wouldn't be surprised if you had run a security check on my neighbors."

Decker chuckled.

"Old detective habits die hard, I guess."

"I'm fine, but it's nice of you to call."

"Well, I'll let you get some sleep. Good night."

"Good night, Michael."

Smiling as she hung up the phone, Marie decided the detective was right; she had done enough thinking for one night. She needed sleep. Besides, maybe she would think better in the light of day. Even to a fan, vampires never seemed as real once the sun rose.

Marie turned down the bed and was about to climb in when a firm knock sounded at her front door. Once again, she nearly screamed in surprise. Her hand at her throat, breathing heavily, she wondered if her heart would survive this night.

Before she even reached the door, a familiar voice called to her softly, raising gooseflesh and questions in equal parts.

"Marie, it's Tyler. Open the door."

She hesitated at the door, knowing what would happen if she did as he asked. Who was she kidding? Tyler never *asked* anything, he demanded in varying degrees of autocratic pique. She didn't want him to make love to her right now. Though it would make her feel wonderful tonight, it would just as surely leave her even more confused in the morning. She really needed to make sense of her feelings before she added more fuel to the fire.

Leaning against the cool wood of her front door, she spoke through it, "Tyler, it's late. I was in bed."

"Marie," he sounded as though he were leaning against the other side of the door, "open the door." His voice lowered to a seductive whisper. "I need you, Marie. I want you as I have never wanted another. Do not refuse me."

Sighing, Marie leaned her back against the door, trying to clear her thoughts. Suddenly, like the light bulb over the head of a cartoon character, an idea came to her. Maybe she could discern the truth about Tyler while she enjoyed his company. Sort-of like killing two birds with one stone. She turned and pulled open the door before she could change her mind.

She had startled him. Before he could completely school his features she saw something in his face that scared the daylights out of her. Something evil shone in the depths of his near-black eyes, something feral touched the corners of his finely drawn lips. He wore all black - boots, slacks, turtleneck, duster, not a drop of color touched him. In the shadows of her doorstep - she had forgotten to turn on the porch light - his hair even looked black. In that stark, unguarded moment, Marie saw the possibility of a truth that would break her heart.

Her eyes flew wide and she took a step backward.

"Tyler?"

He stepped into the light of her apartment and smiled seductively as he flung his coat onto the couch. She barely had time to recover her wits before he pulled her into his arms and kissed her deeply, temporarily sending all thought flying on the wings of anticipated pleasure.

Though she had brushed her teeth before going to bed, Tyler caught the faint scent of garlic on Marie's breath as his lips touched hers. Since he had observed her dinner with the policeman, he had been prepared. His iron control clamped down on his desire to retch until he could reach past the garlic and find the taste and smell of Marie, pure and fresh. He slid his tongue slowly into her mouth, testing himself, glorying in the pressure, the tension, and the lust this beautiful angel inspired in him. It felt as though he had been away from her for decades instead of mere hours.

At that moment his desire for the future crystallized in his mind - he wanted this woman to be his forever. And he would have that which he desired, whatever obstacles he must overcome to make it so.

Marie knew she had better get hold of the situation before it got beyond her plans. She returned Tyler's kiss but, when he would have lifted her into his arms, she placed her hands on his shoulders and gave a gentle push. His raised eyebrow questioned her actions.

"I thought I might take a bath to relax. I don't know about you, but I've had kind-of a disturbing evening."

With a slow, seductive blink, she tipped her head toward the hallway, and said in her sexiest voice, "Would you care to join me?"

Pulling from his grasp, she turned and walked away. Slowly, she untied her robe and let it slide off her shoulders, over her hips, to the ground. Continuing down the hall, Tyler her willing tail, she slipped the spaghetti straps of her short silk chemise off her shoulders and stepped out of it, her pale skin shining in the light of her bedroom doorway. She turned and flashed him a seductive little smile before stepping into the room.

Tyler picked up the chemise and held it to his face, inhaling deeply of her scent. His loins filled as he followed her into her bedroom, where she disappeared once again, this time through the open door of the bathroom. He heard the water begin as he impatiently pulled the clothes from his body. Though he could barely restrain himself from plunging into her silken sheath, he would continue to exercise control - a thing he had found sadly lacking in himself in the last few weeks - and let her have her way.

And he could think of worse ways to spend an evening than making love immersed in a tub of warm water.

When he had finished undressing, he entered the bathroom to find her standing beside the nearly filled tub, her alabaster nakedness reminding him of an ancient Greek statue of Aphrodite, the goddess of love. She bent and turned off the taps, giving him an enticing view of her posterior, then straightened to face him again. She looked expectant, which made him wonder if he had forgotten something or missed some signal. He started to look around for a clue, but she quickly stepped forward and slipped her arms around his waist. The skin-on-skin contact brought his mind swiftly back to the scene at hand. His lips descended once again to meet hers as he leaned her back over his arm. She wasn't as pliant as she had been last night but he put that off to her having been in a state of shock. Smiling inwardly, he accepted that he might have to work a little harder to bring her to a frenzied peak of ecstasy. Which, of course, would be no problem. After all, he loved a challenge.

Reaching out to close the door so the steam would not escape, he nearly choked as a full-length mirror was revealed on the back of the door. For one long second that seemed to stretch unto eternity, he watched in wonder as Marie hung suspended in space with no visible support, kissing a phantom lover who remained unseen in the silver-backed glass.

Damn! As his senses returned, Tyler swore to himself. This was a complication he should have foreseen. Marie's magic had once again worked its wiles on his mind and nearly led him down the path of destruction. He would have to remedy this situation before it became a disaster.

He abruptly broke the contact of their lips and, against a squeak of protest, lifted Marie into his arms and quickly carried her from the room. As he laid her down on her bed, he spoke in a whisper against her ear.

"I need you now, Marie. I can barely breath for wanting to be inside you. I will relax you, my love. Have no fear. I shall caress every inch of your beautiful body with my hands and lips until you are as carefree as a newborn babe. When you cry out for my possession, I will mold you to my body like a kidskin glove and carry you with me to Heaven."

`Lord, this man could talk a woman to orgasm!' Marie thought even as she tried to come up with a way to get him back into the bathroom. He stretched out next to her on the bed and ran his fingertip over her lips. Against her will, her lips puckered and parted, and her back arched in anticipation of his next caress. `Stop that!' she chastised her mutinous body, `this will never work if you just go ga-ga and melt into his arms.' She grabbed his hand before he could do any more magic on her body and pulled it to her lips, where she slowly kissed, licked and nipped each of his fingertips. He shivered, his eyes blazing brighter than the morning sun as passion flared through his blood. She smiled and spoke softly, running her fingers over his bare shoulder.

"I really wanted to get you in the bath with all that hot water flowing around us, heating us up. It's a shame to waste the water."

Lowering her voice to a promise-filled whisper, she coaxed him.

"Come with me, Tyler."

She started to rise but his arm across her shoulders gently pushed her back down. He brushed his close-cropped beard over her neck and shoulders, his breath occasionally tickling her ear as he spoke.

"Another time, sweet. Tonight, I want to hold you in my arms and make passionate love to you all night long. I want to hear you scream my name in ecstasy again and again. I want to feel your body writhe and shudder beneath me. Just lie back and let me love you, Marie."

Shivering with her own passion, Marie felt herself losing the battle. As usual, Tyler would have his way.

Unbidden, an image of Beth flashed into Marie's mind. Had Tyler had his way with Beth? Had he...oh, this had to stop!

Hands on his shoulders, Marie pushed hard. Before he could do more than frown in reaction, she was off the bed and glaring down at him, hands on her hips. Her serious expression and tone brooked no opposition.

"We have to talk, Tyler. Before you whisper any more of those sweet nothings which I find about as easy to resist as chocolate ice cream, I want some answers."

Taken aback by the sudden change in Marie, Tyler pulled himself to a sitting position and leaned his back against the headboard. His expression unreadable, he spoke in a no-nonsense tone to match hers.

"Very well. What are the questions?"

Marie threw her hands into the air in frustration and paced a few steps away from the bed as she spoke.

"Where do I start?"

She turned to face him, trying to skewer him with her potent glare. She didn't realize what a seductive picture she presented, standing there naked and blazing. Still, she seemed very serious and Tyler decided it might be best to hear her out. He made a point of looking at her face and forced his mind away from her unclothed state.

"Okay. Were you the man who caught me on the stairs of Castle Dracula last August?"

As she waited expectantly for an answer, Tyler felt the jaws of fate preparing to make a meal of him.

"That would be quite a coincidence, wouldn't it?"

Marie frowned at him, her eyebrows drawing together in frustrated anger.

"Don't do that, Tyler, don't dance with me when I'm not dressed for it. It's a simple question, basically yes or no. Was it you?"

With a heavy sigh, Tyler dropped his eyes and pulled the sheet over his groin, a move meant to look inspired by modesty that was actually a stalling tactic. When he again raised his eyes to meet hers, the black intensity of his gaze told Marie he had decided to be honest with her. It also told her that she might live to regret that honesty.

"Yes, it was I who stopped your downward plunge to oblivion, I who tasted your sweet lips in the darkness of Castle Dracula's stairwell."

He waited a moment to see how she would process that bit of information. When she didn't comment, he decided that meant he was supposed to continue.

"Later that evening, I spoke with your tour guide and gained your name. Using my international network of contacts, I backtracked your tour and eventually acquired your address and profession.

I had been planning to build a house in America for quite some time and, when I found that it was where you resided, LA became the city of choice.

You know the rest. I didn't tell you about our connection in Transylvania because I thought you might take offense at being hunted down like prey."

Marie quietly digested his answer. It seemed reasonable enough, especially the part about her taking offense. She knew some women who would have read him the riot act for tracking them down like that. Fortunately, she was not one of them.

"For your information, I find it quite flattering that a man would be so impressed with me in such a short time that he would go to so much trouble to find me again."

His sultry smile warned her that he was easing back into seduction mode. If she wanted more answers, she'd better keep firing questions fast and furious.

"Why didn't you just lead me back up the stairs yourself?"

Tyler sighed with the realization that this interrogation wasn't finished.

"Because I was there picking up some artifacts that the Romanian - or whatever they're calling themselves this week - government considers their property."

"You deal in stolen art?"

Her raised pitch indicated her surprise. His response had taken her off guard. Though she'd had her suspicions about his dealings with the law, she hadn't thought him a thief.

"I suppose some would see it that way. I believe that anything," his chocolate gaze grew more intense, "or anyone, belongs to the man with the skill to take it and the power to hold it. I am both skilled and very powerful."

Marie decided to deal with the moral dilemma of falling for a thief later. She wanted to keep asking questions while Tyler seemed in such an agreeable mood. Besides, the answer to her next question might make thievery look like child's play. And her asking it might end their relationship real fast, either because he would decide she belonged in a loony bin and run for the hills, or because she would have hit the nail on the head and he would...protect himself.

She looked into his eyes, took a deep breath and plunged.

"Are you a vampire?"

In all his long life, Tyler had never been taken so completely off-guard. All of the skill he had developed over the years to hide his feelings deserted him for the mere breadth of a second, but that was long enough for Marie to see the look that crossed his face. Not the incredulous expression of a man being asked a ridiculous question, or even the indignant countenance of a man being falsely accused. No, his was the look of a man who had just been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Her eyes wide, she took a step away from the bed. Tyler knew he had two choices: Come up with a reasonable explanation, one filled with as little falsehood as possible, or kill her now. She was not ready to accept him for what he was, even though she played the trendy game of belief in, and love of, the creatures of the night. She needed more time to recover from her friend's death. And he needed more time to completely capture her heart. Then he would tell her the truth. He would not, could not, kill her. Not now, not ever!

He raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

"I am a vampire enthusiast like yourself. However, I have chosen to pursue my 'hobby' a bit more passionately. I have actually tasted blood."

His eyes pinned her in place and she felt the breath leave her lungs in a rush.

"Human blood from a willing donor. For your protection, that is all I will say of the incident."

He waved his hand in a casually dismissive gesture.

"Needless to say, I would rather not have any of the people with which I do business, or the authorities, know of this. People being as superstitious, and hypocritical, as ever, it could conceivably ruin me, both financially and personally. Does that answer your question?"

Marie felt as though she had been pulled from the path of a speeding train just in time to feel its hot breath singe her skin. For a space of time that she really couldn't measure, she had actually believed

that Tyler - her lover, the man she hoped was going to prove to be her knight in shining armor - was a real, honest-to-God vampire. His explanation didn't exactly fit in with her conception of him - she never would have suspected him as a closet vampire fan - but she was willing to admit that she hadn't known him long enough to have a very well-developed image of him. After all, he did live in a very old-world house. And he sometimes spoke kind-of old-fashioned. It would make sense that he was into something a little weird. But, vampires?

She should be glad, she told herself. After all, they shared an interest, although she had never wanted to *be* a vampire, just to meet one. And, considering the events of the last few days, she was no longer even interested in an introduction.

Though his features didn't show a thing, Tyler nearly held his breath waiting for her reaction. What would he do if she didn't buy his story? Though he doubted the police would pay her any heed if she went to them with the claim that Mr. Tyler Alan, respected businessman, was a vampire, or even a vampire wannabe, he didn't want to deal with more of their annoying questions. Nosey authorities were one complication for which he had never found a suitable solution, other than leaving the city, or country, until the heat died down, sometimes several decades. He did not intend to be chased from California by the Keystone cops. He would leave when he chose to leave.

And there was something precious here that he would not leave behind.

One side of his lip curled into a snarl at the memory of watching Marie with lieutenant Decker as they talked and laughed together earlier this evening. That was one policeman Tyler was certain would make a show of believing anything Marie said to him as long as it led him to her bedroom.

Marie's cute little nose wrinkled as she spoke.

"You drank blood? Ewww, that's disgusting!"

She sat on the bed beside him, her nicely rounded behind brushing against his hip. Her relaxed demeanor made it clear that she had accepted his explanation. Tyler drew a deep breath of gratitude to the powers that be.

"How do you keep from throwing up? When I had my tonsils out, I threw up blood for two hours."

Tyler shrugged.

"It's an acquired taste. I thought we shared an interest in the creatures of the night."

She nodded.

"The first time Frank Langella walked through the door with his cape flying in the breeze like a flag, I fell in love with vampires. They're so sexy, so completely in control. I was just a kid but I was

sure they were real. I mean, every culture in the world, past and present, has some sort of vampire legend. They show up in..."

She dipped her head and the cheek that Tyler could see lit up with a very becoming blush. Giggling softly, she shook her head.

"Boy, there I go. Why do you believe in vampires?"

Tyler's gaze became intense.

"Because I know they exist. I've met one."

Animation lit her face as she turned to face him more fully, her breasts rising and falling with her excited breathing.

"Really? Where, when, who...?"

Tyler laughed and took her hands in his, effectively stopping her bouncing on the bed. The jiggling of her breasts had been driving him to the brink of insanity!

"I met her in Transylvania. She was a beautiful woman, very intelligent. She called it a gift, though she added that eternal life had its drawbacks."

Her tone hushed as though in a church, Marie prodded him for more information.

"How did you know she was a vampire? I mean, she might have been just saying that to, you know, get your attention."

He lowered his voice, adding a sexy note that Marie couldn't help noticing.

"I allowed her to taste my blood."

Marie's eyes flew wide as she quickly searched his neck for any telltale scars. Her crinkle-nose frown told him she had found him lacking. With one long finger, he traced the artery in her neck.

"The bite of a vampire leaves no mark on the living victim, only on those who die by it."

"You mean all those scenes in the movies where the damsels in distress look at their throats in the mirror and see the damning mark of Dracula are wrong? I always liked those scenes."

He smiled an indulgent smile and shrugged.

"Sorry. Vampires cast a shadow, too."

"But they don't show up in mirrors because mirrors are backed by silver and silver is anathema to vampires, right?"

The bath! Tyler suddenly realized that the little minx had been trying to get him in front of a mirror to prove his blood. Didn't she realize that calling a vampire out was a good way to reach an early grave?

She sounded so hopeful, wanting her supposition to be correct. Though he knew by lying he

might protect himself from her further attempts to trap him, his desire to please her triumphed. He nodded.

"Very good."

Her smile beamed her appreciation of his compliment.

"Do they need native earth in their coffins? Can they shift their shapes, turn into wolves or mist? Are they afraid of crosses, or white roses? Can...?"

With a broad smile and a chuckle, Tyler raised his hands in supplication.

"Whoa, slow down. I can answer only one question at a time."

He raised an eyebrow, his smile warming her blood.

"Aren't you feeling a bit chilled out there?"

Without waiting for an answer, he slid across the bed, making room for her, and raised the covers next to him, drawing a sharp breath as the cool air of the apartment touched his exposed loins.

With the flush of excitement brought on by learning the truth of her long-time fantasy creature still staining her cheeks, Marie nearly jumped into the bed. She pulled the covers over both their bodies as she settled her cheek on his shoulder, bringing nearly the full length of her body into contact with his side. Draping her arm across his chest, she turned her face toward his expectantly, like a child waiting for a bedtime story. With a sigh, Tyler forced his mind to the answers she sought.

"Vampires do not have to sleep in coffins, they just have to keep the light of the sun from touching them. In old times, a coffin was the easiest, most dependable method.

Native earth?"

He raised his eyebrows and shook his head.

"I have no idea from where that ridiculous notion came. Vampires are no more bound to the earth than are humans. They can travel as they please, crossing running water or hallowed soil, with no fear of exhausting their supply of native earth. As long as they avoid exposure to the sun, that is a hard and fast rule. No matter the age or intelligence of the vampire, nor even if he has native earth on his person, one author's suggestion I found particularly amusing, he cannot face the sun and survive.

Metamorphosis? That is an interesting question. To my knowledge, vampires cannot change shape. However, I don't know that this lady had ever given it a try. Perhaps it's just a matter of lack of desire to do so. Perhaps most vampires have a desire to remain as nearly human as they possibly can. Since they are not herd creatures, as are unchanged humans, I would suppose they could become very lonely."

He shrugged and Marie took note of the sad look in his eyes. She touched his bearded chin with

the tip of one finger.

"Did you know her well?"

His eyes still sad, he shook his head.

"No. We knew each other for as long as it took for us to gain our desires of each other. Me, a knowledge of the vampire world; her, sustenance."

"Did it hurt, getting bitten?"

Tyler smiled and slowly shook his head, his eyes growing dark with memory.

"Her bite brought pleasure the likes of which I have not known since. At least," his dark eyes found her face and bored deeply into her soul, "until I met you."

Marie shifted uneasily under his intense scrutiny. She dropped her eyes and traced her finger across his chest, leaving a trail of fire behind of which she was totally unaware until he shivered. Placing her palm flat on his chest, she raised her eyes once again, relieved that a little of the intensity had left his face.

"What about crosses?"

Tyler blinked slowly as he returned to the present. He dropped his head back against the headboard and stared at the ceiling.

"Vampires do not particularly care for any religious relic. Though their flesh will not burst into immediate flame upon contact, they can sustain quite a nasty burn if they hold the thing for more than a few seconds. Worse, if the object is made of silver."

He returned his attention to her face with a gentle smile.

"As you said, silver is anathema to the creatures of the night."

"Why didn't she kill you?"

"Vampires don't always kill their victims, there is no necessity that they do so, it's just safer than leaving behind a witness."

A question that had been unknowingly plaguing Marie since seeing Beth's body in the dumpster sprang forth almost of its own volition.

"Do their victims come back to life after they're buried?"

The pain in her voice told Tyler that this question was of a far more personal nature to Marie. He once again cursed his loss of control with Beth as he tightened his arm around Marie's shoulders in a gesture of comfort.

"No, Marie, Beth will not return to life as a vampire. You must drink the blood of the vampire, as well as die by his bite, to inherit the `gift'."

A sad little smile touched her lips before she went on.

"You said they can walk on hallowed ground?"

He shook his head.

"I said they can cross it, on wheels, in the air, but not on foot. The holy taint of hallowed ground will burn right through the soles of a vampire's shoes. I suppose, if he were stupid enough to remain, it would burn through his flesh and bone, as well. It is the same with holy water. It reacts like acid if it comes into contact with a vampire's skin."

Marie shook her head.

"Boy, did Anne Rice have it wrong."

"I believe Mrs. Rice found vampires to be a useful vehicle for the catharsis of her tortured soul. By removing most of their special powers and making them simply long-lived humans with special dietary requirements, she attempted to make death the real villain, the only villain, in life. It certainly worked well for her financially. But I doubt many vampires would find her work very flattering."

"How do you kill a vampire?"

Though thoroughly enamored of Marie, Tyler had yet to slip into insanity. He would *not* give her the means to destroy him. He chuckled and pulled her closer.

"Sweet, the lady from which I learned the secrets of the night was very much alive. I don't think it would have served her to tell me how to bring about her destruction. If, indeed, she even knew."

"Good point. Tyler...?"

Tyler could here a blush in that softly spoken question.

"Yes?"

"Most of the legends say vampires can't have sex. Can they?"

"That is a part of the legend that Christians have played up to the hilt. It keeps them from wanting immortality, I suppose."

Marie giggled softly.

"Especially the men."

Tyler returned her laughter.

"Indeed. Yes, they can have sex in the normal way. Biting is also very sexual to them, often climactic. Therefore, vampires have more sex, not less."

He leaned forward to whisper in her ear.

"Not something the church wants to get around."

She giggled again and snuggled her nose into the soft, straight blonde fur that covered his chest.

Her even breathing became slower and Tyler realized that she was growing sleepy. Though his body ached to ravish her, his heart wanted only to hold her while she slept. Wrapping both arms around her, he slid down in the bed, taking her with him. She snuggled again and sighed. She sounded like a sleepy little girl.

"There are so many questions, so much I want to know."

He brushed one hand over her hair.

"Shhh, love, you are so very young, you have a lifetime to learn all the secrets of the world. Sleep now, my sweet. I will love and protect you..."

As her slow, even breathing told him she could hear him only in her dreams, he whispered against her hair.

"...through that lifetime. And beyond."

Chapter 16

"...pretty house in the hills...ain't finished."

"...a house he's having built in the hills."

Decker was filling out a report on the latest gang-banger who had taken a bullet for the cause when the two seemingly unrelated voices, Marie's and Rodney Cage's, combined and exploded in his head. He laid his pen on the desk and stared unseeing at the unfinished report. Could be coincidence. Nah, he'd learned his first year as a detective that those didn't happen nearly as often as criminals would like you to think. Could be he had a strong desire to nail Tyler Alan because the bastard was claiming Marie's attention. Yeah, so? That didn't mean the theory had less validity.

Theory? What the hell was he thinking? He could hardly go to the captain with the *theory* that a rich, influential businessman was sleeping in a coffin all day and draining the blood from the good citizens of Los Angeles at night! No matter what his gut was telling him, he had to approach this from a logical prospective.

Okay, logic. Alan was some kind of vampire nut who had the means and the desire to carry out his sick fantasies and get away with it. He might have damning paraphernalia in his home. If Decker could get a search warrant. With what, a jealous hunch?

Deathbed statements carried a lot of weight and Cage's last words were about an unfinished house in the hills. Alan was having a house built in the Hollywood hills.

Shaking his head, Decker realized that pig wasn't going to fly either. He had wondered himself how Cage had known anything about Alan's house. Had Cage taken part in a burglary, or some other criminal activity, in the area and spotted Alan overseeing the construction? That would be quite a stretch. Besides, that wasn't Cage's MO.

How could the dying man have known about an unfinished house he had never seen? The gooseflesh on Decker's arms joined his rising hackles to warn him that there was no reasonable explanation for this one.

Damn, he hated this case!

With a quick glance at the clock on the wall - 12:45pm - he dialed Alan's number. The rings and clicks told him that there was something funny going on with Alan's calls. Was he bouncing them off a satellite? Transferring them somewhere? Making a mental note to check on it later, Decker wondered why Alan found it necessary to transfer calls if he were in LA? So he couldn't be traced?

"Tyler."

The skin on the back of Decker's neck tightened and his lip started to curl in a very unprofessional response. He forced his expression back to normal, cleared his throat and spoke civilly to the man he wanted to arrest more than he had ever wanted anything in his life - except, maybe, Marie.

"Mr. Alan, this is lieutenant Decker."

"Ah, lieutenant. I apologize for missing you last evening. I was unavoidably detained."

His voice was smooth as black silk, a stark contrast to Decker's own years-of-yelling gravel tone. Decker could sense ambivalence coming from Alan, and wondered if it were inspired solely by their shared interest in Marie, or if some more primal conflict were involved.

"I take it your business trip has been canceled?"

Decker could have sworn he heard a yawn. Was the lazy bastard still in bed?

"Quite. I'm rather busy, lieutenant. May I request that you get to the point?"

Decker stiffened in his chair, his hackles now at full extension. The haughty SOB! All civility left his voice, to be replaced by barely concealed hostility.

"You got it. You are wanted for questioning in the murder investigation of Beth Davis. Since you didn't see fit to keep our appointment last night, I feel justified in taking a harder attitude. You have until 4pm this afternoon to plant your butt in the chair next to my desk."

Tyler's voice dropped to a near whisper, menace dripping from each consonant.

"What will be the consequences if I choose to ignore your command performance, Lieutenant?"

Something primal skittered up Decker's spine. Was this how ancient man felt when faced with a predator capable of tearing his throat out? His inflection, however, showed none of his fear, bordering instead on contempt.

"Then I'll get a warrant which will allow me to forcibly escort you to the station for questioning. But I'm sure that neither one of us would like to see that happen."

Tyler gave a short, mirthless laugh.

"On the contrary, lieutenant, I have the feeling you would love to see me brought low by the forces at your command. However, I don't think you would want it made known to your superiors that you didn't wait for me last evening because you had a date with my woman, a decided conflict of interest on your part. I believe they might find that rather unprofessional conduct."

Decker ground his teeth. The captain would understand, but that wouldn't keep him from writing it up if Alan made enough of a stink.

He just knew Alan was wearing a smug smile that would have made Decker want to punch him

if he were in the same room. Hell, he was aching to knock the bastard's teeth down his throat and he couldn't even see him!

Alan continued in that smooth-as-silk businessman's tone that he did so well.

"Now that we've pounded our chests and exchanged threats, lieutenant, let us return to the civilized creatures we like to think evolution had made us and arrange a meeting. I'm free this evening, say 8 p.m.?"

"Seems like you never come out in the daylight, Alan. Why is that?"

Alan actually chuckled, setting Decker's teeth even more on edge.

"According to Marie, you think it's because I'm a vampire."

He sounded like a teacher chastising an obstinate student.

"Really, lieutenant, don't you think that theory is a little wild?"

Decker had taken all he was going to take from this guy.

"Wild or not, Alan, if there's anything to it you can bet I'll be happy to set a precedent in law enforcement by sharpening a chair leg in your honor."

Decker took a deep breath to regain control, and then took one last stab at his recently acquired nemesis.

"By the way, Alan, if Marie is your woman, why did she go out to dinner with me last night? She's got the sweetest lips I've ever had the pleasure of tasting. I don't think you got your brand on her yet. My office at 8, Alan."

The click of the phone line told Tyler that he had been summarily dismissed. His lips pulled back from his sharply-extended canines as a hiss issued from deep in his throat. He dropped the phone onto his bed and spoke to the black air above him.

"Very well, lieutenant Decker, we shall indeed meet this evening."

His glittering black eyes began to glow red as he ran his tongue over the sharp tips of his unique weapons.

"It shall be the most educational meeting of your short life."

His next words were barely discernible through his deep, angry growl.

"And the last!"

Marie awoke bright and early to find a piece of her stationary, the good stuff that Beth brought her from France, folded into an origami rose and lying where Tyler's head had rested the night before. She smiled and gently carried the fragile treasure to her dresser.

"Is there no end to this man's talents?"

Catching sight of their graduation picture, she once again heard Beth's voice in her head, 'if something seems too good to be true, it'll cost a lot more than the price tag.' Marie shook her head.

"Not this time."

Remembering how Tyler had held her as she drifted off to sleep, Marie's gentle smile warmed her face like the morning sun. She couldn't remember ever being this happy, especially not where a man was concerned. He was so perfect - handsome, intelligent, tall, polite, rich - practically the pattern for Mr. Right. Other than his temper, and everybody had one of those, she had yet to find a single flaw in her Prince Charming.

As she showered, she found herself reliving the ecstasy of the night before. Tyler's warm hands, hot breath, and hard body were all over her, caressing, teasing, heating her to the boiling point, then protecting her as she exploded into a million fiery pieces.

When she finally got out of the shower, she was surprised to see how late she was running. She blushed, quietly chastising herself.

"Marie, such thoughts on Sunday. You're going to Hell for sure!"

Giggling, she grabbed the first appropriate clothes she could find in her closet and quickly dressed. After gulping down a diet shake - she liked the chocolate flavor and it was fast - she glanced at the clock over the fridge and squealed at the time. She had about five minutes to make the ten-minute drive to church. She ran to the bedroom to grab her purse. At the last minute, she slipped the paper rose into her purse so she would have something to remind her of Tyler. Then she headed off to church with the same smile still lighting up her face.

It was a lovely, sun-bright day and Marie gloried in the warmth of the heavenly ball of fire. She had always loved days like this when the whole world shone like a back-lit landscape painting. She almost hated to enter the church, but she knew the sunlight would look just as beautiful shining through the stained glass windows. She daintily dipped her finger into the font of holy water near the door and crossed herself as her mother had taught her when she was barely tall enough to reach the font. Then she made her way to the front of the church.

She liked to sit down front where she had a better view of the fascinating statues. Their serene expressions usually made her think of the Heavenly mansion that awaited her in the afterlife. But today they reminded her of Tyler's face as he had...

Marie jumped when a gentle hand touched her shoulder, fearing someone had somehow read her decidedly un-church worthy thoughts. Turning to find a young priest staring at her with a look of

concern, she blushed profusely. Her voice shook as she stood and faced him.

"Yes, Father?"

The priest spoke quietly as he pointed downward.

"Your purse is smoking."

With a startled gasp, Marie looked down at her small, drawstring-style purse lying on the wooden pew. Sure enough, it was belching black smoke from the small opening at the top.

With true chivalry, the priest - Father Blackstone, she remembered - gingerly picked up the purse with one hand while placing the other on Marie's arm. He led her out the side door of the church to the parking lot, leaving a trail of acrid smoke in his wake.

Once clear of the church, he extended the arm that held the purse toward her, a question mark in his gray eyes. With the thumb and forefinger of her right hand, Marie carefully grasped one loop of the cord that held the purse closed and took the offending receptacle from him. The smoke was quickly dying down and, after a minute, it stopped completely.

Slowly, fearing at any minute the thing might burst into flames, Marie carefully placed her fingers on either side of the purse's lip and pulled until it came open. Her throat clenched as she examined the contents. She had been carrying only two items in her purse - her wallet and Tyler's origami rose. Sitting on top of her untouched wallet was a tiny pile of ashes. Nothing near it, neither the leather wallet nor the cloth purse that had surrounded it, had been touched. The rose seemed to have burned in a space all its own.

"What was it?"

Father Blackstone's deep, gentle voice startled Marie. He had looked over her shoulder to determine the source of the smoke. She had forgotten he was with her. Now she raised questioning eyes to his, the shadow of fear darkening her green gaze.

"A flower. A paper rose my boyfriend made. I brought it so I could have a part of him with me. What happened?"

The young priest examined the neat pile of ashes with their untouched surroundings and was surprised to feel the soft prickle of fear slide over the back of his neck. He quickly crossed himself and shook his head.

"I don't know. Why didn't your gentleman friend come with you this morning?"

Marie blushed.

"I don't even know if he's Catholic. Besides, he's always gone in the morning."

"Good, Marie, paint yourself The Whore of Babylon!"

Her blush deepened as she tried to extricate herself from her own statement.

"I mean, he..."

Father Blackstone held up his hand, a soft smile lighting his handsome face.

"I understand. Perhaps... Marie, isn't it?"

Marie nodded, flattered that he remembered her name. They had only been introduced once.

"Marie, perhaps you could get him to come to the office to speak with me. I would like to know what he used to make that flower. If it was a joke, it was not very considerate of your safety."

Marie shook her head.

"It was my own stationary and I don't think Tyler is much of a joker. I just don't get it."

Looking toward the door, he placed a gentle hand on her shoulder once again.

"Perhaps you could leave your purse in your car during Mass."

Even though he was taking the chance of being late for the service, Father Blackstone felt he should pursue this. He had no idea why; he just had a feeling that this young woman was in some kind of peril, perhaps a kind that only The Church could battle.

"Please, Marie, come speak with me later, if you have the time. If not today, as soon as possible. All right?"

The slightly desperate note in the priest's voice did nothing for Marie's state of mind. She nodded, and then took her purse to her car. Returning to the building, she remembered Tyler's words about holy water being like acid to a vampire. Would acid do that to paper, make it burst into flames?

With a stern shake of her head, Marie put those traitorous thoughts to rest. Tyler had explained everything. Hadn't he? Everything he'd said last night had made a form of sense.

Except it didn't explain who had killed Beth and those other poor people Michael had told her about. And it didn't explain why an origami rose had just burst into flames in her purse.

Quickening her step, Marie hurried through the door, feeling as though she really needed the guidance the church might provide.

After the service, which was comforting even if it didn't give her answers to her current questions, Marie dawdled in the parking lot, waiting for Father Blackstone to finish with his duties. Eventually, he noticed her there and came over to stand by her side.

"Would you like to come to my office or would you prefer to sit in the park?"

Marie looked longingly at the little bench in the park across the street. It could barely be called a park, really. It was just a patch of grass, a few trees, a birdbath and a wrought-iron-and-wood-slat bench. Still, she had spent several after-Mass hours with Beth discussing the solutions to the problems of the

world in that little green sanctuary.

"I'd like that."

She smiled wistfully and the Father found himself wondering what tragedy had clouded such pretty eyes.

They crossed the street and settled themselves on the bench. Marie was in the process of debating how to talk to a priest about such strange and un-priestly things as vampires when he spoke.

"I hope you'll forgive me if I don't say `what's troubling you, my child?' I'm afraid I lean toward `what's up?'"

Slightly startled, Marie returned his winning smile, deciding she liked this man very much. Maybe he would be able to help her.

"I like that. I've always felt just a little strange talking to a priest. I'm always afraid I might say something, I don't know, improper."

He nodded.

"Too worldly? Yeah, I know. Please, tell me why it took half the Mass to get your smile back on your face?"

"Where do I start?"

She sighed, and Father Blackstone thought how young she was to be carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders. He hoped he could remove at least a few pounds.

"My best friend since, oh, practically the dawn of time, was murdered Friday night. Her name was Beth, Beth Davis."

The startled light of remembrance flashed in his eyes, quickly followed by sorrow.

"I'm very sorry, Marie."

Clenching her jaw to keep her resolve not to break down in front of Father Blackstone, Marie nodded.

"Beth and I had figured out a way she could `accidentally' meet my new boyfriend at a restaurant. He's kind of private and I didn't think he would agree to being shown off. Anyway, she didn't like him. She said something wasn't quite right about him. I decided to bow to her usually superior judgment and gave him the brush-off."

She looked at her hands twisting in her lap and gave a soft snort of disgust.

"I don't think I could have stuck to it, though. I was," her voice dropped to a near whisper, "I am, falling in love with him."

She gave a little laugh, her tone lightening.

"Beth knew it before I did. She was like that. Sometimes we could read each other better than we could ourselves, you know?"

He smiled and nodded once again, wordlessly encouraging her to continue.

"Tyler, that's my boyfriend, he wasn't exactly amused. He left in quite a huff. I needed a couple minutes to, well, to cry so I went to the restroom. Beth must have waited as long as she thought was healthy and then come for me."

She took a deep breath, her determination preparing to take its toughest beating to date.

"The homicide detective, lieutenant Decker, found her body in the alley out the back door by the bathroom. Somebody raped her, killed her and dropped her in the dumpster."

Even though she had been certain all her tear ducts were deserts, Marie found the tears welling up and spilling over to trail slowly down her cheeks. The Father produced a handkerchief from his pants pocket and handed it to her. She continued speaking as she dabbed at the moisture.

"Detective Decker just happened to be having dinner at that restaurant. He was very nice, giving up his dinner to help me look for Beth, and then taking charge when everything got so...ugly. The whole thing seems kind-of dreamlike now, like it happened to someone else."

"Were the last rites performed?"

Marie looked at the ground, ashamed to admit she hadn't even thought about that. With a soft smile, she remembered Beth talking about the last rites. 'If the Big Guy doesn't know me by the time I croak, I don't think an introduction will help much.'

"I'm sure her parents saw to that. I should have called them. The police beat me to it before I could get my head on straight."

"You're carrying a lot of guilt that has no basis in fact, Marie. Beth's death was the Lord's will. It wasn't your fault. And I'm sure you did all you could to help her parents."

Marie shook her head.

"Actually, I haven't even spoken to them. We've never gotten along and I doubt that will have changed. They always thought I led Beth into trouble."

A soft chuckle flavored her words.

"Most the wild things we did were her idea but they wanted to blame someone other than their own sweet, innocent child. I got used to it after a while. I was even flattered once or twice that they would think I could come up with such insanity."

She raised her eyes to meet his.

"It's not guilt, Father. If I feel guilty about Beth, I haven't been hit by it yet. It's the way she

died."

His eyes were so soft, so understanding. He looked like he knew all the answers to all the questions in the universe.

"She was killed by a vampire."

Dark eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"A vampire?"

"I know it sounds crazy, but all her blood was drained through two punctures in her throat. Lab tests showed there was human saliva on the punctures. No matter how much logic is thrown at me to the contrary, I know in here," she placed her fist over her heart, "that she was killed by a vampire."

She looked back at her lap, her voice dropping as though speaking to herself.

"I've always felt in my heart that they were real. Beth was one of the few people in the world who didn't think I was crazy. And her opinion changed from week to week."

She raised her eyes once again, hope and anger vying for space in their depths.

"If I find it, can you help me kill it? Does the church know how to deal with such things?"

He shook his head and placed his hand over hers in her lap.

"Marie, though the church believes in the evil in men's hearts, and knows there is no limit to the monstrous things that evil can bring about, we don't participate in witch hunts. I think you're probably trying to rationalize one of those monstrous acts, to justify the horrible things done to your friend by saying the fiend needed her blood to live."

He stopped as she shook her head violently.

"No, I'm not rationalizing anything. They're real. Tyler met one in Europe. He told me about it."

"Is Tyler the man who made that flower?"

Marie's eyes narrowed in suspicion over the sudden change of subject.

"Yes. Why?"

"Perhaps he's not the best person for you to be with during this difficult time. I do not wish to cast aspersions on Mr. Tyler, I'm sure he's a fine young man, I just want what is best for you and I know that people are very vulnerable in their time of grief. You should speak with a grief counselor, I know of several who are excellent. They can help you get through this painful time and move on to a better one."

He touched her shoulder in a protective gesture.

"I fear a man might take advantage of your emotional state."

Marie blushed and looked away.

"I see that is already the case."

Blue eyes flared as they returned to his face.

"No, Tyler did not take advantage of anything. He's been wonderful. I don't know what I would have done without him. And I don't need any counseling. I'm not crazy."

"Marie, I didn't mean to suggest..."

Looking away, she spoke more to herself than to the priest.

"Why did I bother? The priest never helps in the movies. At least, not until the vampire sets the church on fire or something."

She turned to face Father Blackstone as she rose from the bench.

"Father, I'm sorry if I was a little cross with you. Believe me, I understand that you want to stick with conventional wisdom on this. But I need help of the unconventional type. Nobody will take me seriously. And the worst thing is, the more I think about it - and I did a great deal of thinking during the service while people were casting glances my way like they expected me to grow horns at any minute - the more I think Tyler's lying, the couch, the mirrors, and now, the flower. The evidence is piling up against him like snow in a blizzard. I think he tried to throw me off by handing me a piece of the truth."

Her hands clenched into fists at her sides.

"He killed my best friend and I know I should be heading straight for the lumber yard with sharpening tools. But I..."

Her eyes shone with unshed tears, her voice dropping to a whisper as she unclenched her hands and held them plaintively toward the priest. Father Blackstone felt his heart clench in sympathy for the young woman.

"I love him, Father. In the movies, that means I'm doomed."

She took a deep breath and straightened, her smile wry.

"Oh, well, be careful what you wish for. Thank you, Father."

He stood, a worried frown creasing his brow.

"I don't think I helped much. Marie, perhaps you should speak with Father O'Brien. He's been around a lot longer than I have, I'm sure he's forgotten more than I'll ever know."

Marie giggled and repeated something she and Beth had snickered over in church many times.

"He's been around longer than God."

He smiled.

"Close. He might be able to help."

"Thank you, Father Blackstone. Being able to talk to someone about it has helped immensely. I know what I have to do."

Marie offered her hand and he shook it, his expression of concern increasing.

With a look of determination setting her jaw, Marie turned and stepped into the sun to cross the street. As she felt its hot rays on her skin, she imagined what it would be like to feel the warm light of day. Slipping into her car, she set it on her chosen path, wondering if she might be seeing the glorious sunshine for the last time.

Chapter 17

Marie felt a twinge of guilt as she rang the Schwartz' doorbell. She wasn't expected and her middle-class morals told her `dropping in' on a single man was reprehensible. Not to mention possibly eye-opening. After all, he might be entertaining another woman. `Only if she likes close quarters and dark spaces,' she thought with a stubborn tilt to her chin. No, she was not going to be put off of this fact-finding mission. Nor was she going to chicken out. Throwing the last of her manners to the wind, she impatiently rang the bell once again.

Though she smiled graciously upon opening the door, there was the slight taint of suspicion in Mrs. Schwartz' eyes that also flavored her words.

"Marie, what a nice surprise. I'm afraid Mr. Alan is busy at the moment."

Mortification at her actions tinting her face a deep crimson, Marie pushed past the little woman and strode into the sitting room. For just a second she thought she saw the threat of violence flash across the kindly elf's eyes. Would she actually get mean to protect her employer?

Marie waved a nonchalant hand in Mrs. Schwartz' direction as she breezed into the sitting room and plopped down on the couch.

"That's all right, I'll wait."

Marie could feel the anger emanating from the housekeeper as she stood at one end of the couch, glaring down at her. Her tone was ice cold as she explained his absence.

"Mr. Alan is on a long-distance telephone call which may last several hours. He asked not to be disturbed and I intend to obey his wishes. Perhaps you could return after 8 this evening. I'm sure that would give him ample time to conclude his business. I will inform him of your visit and expected return."

`And the sun wouldn't be a problem,' Marie thought as she made a show of settling in to the sofa.

"He might finish early and I want to be right here waiting as soon as he is available. I don't mind waiting, even if it does take hours."

She put on her best I've-got-it-so-bad look, added a good dose of air to her voice, and disgusted herself even more.

"I'm happy just to be in the same building with him."

She nearly gagged, wondering where those words had come from. By the end of this day she'd have no dignity left.

Mrs. Schwartz smiled, no civility showing in her eyes, and nodded. She turned on her heel and made a grand exit into the kitchen.

Marie made the quick, and accurate, assumption that there were servants' stairs leading from the kitchen to the upper level of the house. The little elf lady was probably scurrying up said stairs to leave a note on her master's coffin informing him that while he slept a lovesick twit had invaded his house!

Marie shook her head. Was she crazy? Did she really think Tyler was upstairs in a coffin catching twenty winks? No, she was unable to truly believe any of this without visual proof. And that, she reminded herself, was why she was making such a fool of herself. She was going to prove, or disprove, her suspicions once and for all.

Taking rudeness to limits for which her mother would have probably made her say twenty Hail Marys, she raised her feet and stretched out on the couch. If she could feign sleep, maybe Mrs. Schwartz would let down her guard and Marie could slip up the stairs unnoticed. She would get as comfortable as possible and fake it.

Marie marveled at how comfortable the couch felt, how she seemed to sink into it like a giant feather pillow. The room was just-right warm, she could hear someone, she assumed Mrs. Schwartz, bustling about the kitchen, making quiet, motherly sounds. Feigning sleep became a moot point as she drifted into the soft, dark world of dreams.

Marie awoke with a start, nearly taking a tumble off the couch before she got her bearings and remembered where she was. A quick glance at her wristwatch - 6 o'clock! - sent a tiny sizzle of fear up her spine. She'd slept nearly two hours. It would be dark soon.

Wiping the last residue of sleep from her eyes and the corners of her mouth, Marie shook her head.

'Some detective I am,' she chastised herself silently, 'More like a Keystone Cop.'

A quick look around told her she was still alone in the sitting room. The sounds coming from the kitchen had stopped. Had Mrs. Schwartz gone out, or was she lulling Marie into a false sense of security? There was only one way to find out.

Moving with as much stealth as she could muster, Marie slowly made her way to the stairs. She was surprised, pleasantly so, that the floorboards beneath her feet didn't creak a symphony to announce her passage. She made it up the stairs with so little noise it almost made up for falling asleep on a stake-out.

Slowly creeping down the upstairs hallway, she opened the first door she encountered, slipped through it and quietly closed it behind her. Giving the room a quick perusal, she was disappointed to

find a perfectly normal bedroom. By the look of the clothes hanging in the closet, this must be the Schwartz' room. She didn't think she'd find much of interest in here, so, after listening at the door for any sounds that might threaten imminent discovery, she eased out into the hall and closed the door.

Calmer now that she had actually examined a room without getting caught, she took a second to get her bearings. Smiling, she realized if she had done so before, she could have saved herself some time. At the end of the hall, there was a door that was slightly larger than the others.

It must be the master bedroom.

Maintaining as much silence as possible, Marie made her way to the larger door. With her hand on the doorknob, she felt her heart jump into her throat. What might be on the other side of that door suddenly terrified her. What if she were right? How would a vampire feel about being discovered au natural, so to speak? Would he attack first and ask questions later?

Determined not to chicken out after getting so close, she took a deep breath and turned the knob.

A frustrated sob escaped her throat as the door held, locked against unwelcome visitors. Of course, the old biddy had locked her out. That witch! Disheartenment welled in Marie's heart as tears welled in her eyes. She was so close!

She knew old Elf Butt would tell Tyler what a fool she had made of herself no matter what came of it so she might as well play this thing to the hilt. Leaning against the door, she tapped her knuckles against the hard wood and whispered, "Tyler?"

No answer, not that she had expected one.

So what did she do now, run home with her tail tucked between her legs and wait for Tyler to come spin another lovely fairy tale for her?

Maybe she could get lieutenant Decker to teach her how to pick a lock so she could come back here... It wouldn't matter what new plan she concocted to discover the truth. Mrs. Schwartz, sister of the Hansel and Gretel villain, probably wouldn't even let her in the front door next time. Could she...?

Marie's thoughts were suddenly interrupted as a band of steel clamped painfully around her upper arm and her head was jerked back by a hand in her hair. The pain brought a renewed round of tears to her eyes and she yelped as she was turned and tossed down the hall to land on her hands and knees. Fighting fear and shock, she rolled over onto her back to see an older version of Aryan perfection coming toward her, murder clearly evident in his eyes.

The part of her brain that was still capable of rational thought told her this must be Mr. Schwartz. From her position, he looked slightly smaller than a mountain, with legs like mobile pillars and arms like tree trunks. She thought about running, but knew he was too close for her to get away. Logic was

her only weapon.

"I'm Marie Parker, Mr. Alan's friend."

Her voice climbed the scale as he advanced.

"I just wanted to see Tyler. I have mace in my purse and I know how to use it!"

Near-mad fury shone in his faded blue eyes, and he clenched and unclenched his fists as he strode purposely down the hall. Marie's muscles froze in fear. She couldn't seem to move, so, as much as she hated resorting to it, she did the only thing left to her. She screamed.

"Tyler!"

"Helmut!"

His deep voice resounded through the hallway, seeming to bounce off the very walls around them. The blonde giant who now stood over her like a lion contemplating his meal frowned and spoke to the closed door in a respectful, though surprised, tone.

"Herr Florescu?"

The disembodied voice behind the door gave a sharp order in what Marie assumed was German. The giant nodded, turned back to Marie and, with a slight bow of his head, offered his hand to help her up. He stood patiently waiting while she decided if he were just helping her up to get a better angle for a bite, or truly letting her off the hook. Assuming Tyler had told him to mind his manners, she finally relented and let him assist her, though she gave him a good frown. He dipped his head once again in a wordless apology and motioned for her to follow him back down the hall.

Never one to give up easily, she looked toward Tyler's door and raised a questioning eyebrow. With the look of a patient father chastising a recalcitrant child, Helmut shook his head and motioned once again for her to follow him. With an unladylike snort, Marie turned and trudged down the hall dejectedly.

The blonde titan led her down the stairs and back to the sofa, where he politely indicated that she should sit. Complying with ill-grace, Marie petulantly addressed him.

"You must be Mr. Schwartz."

He nodded, pointing at himself.

"Ja, Mr. Schwartz."

"Let me guess, your English leaves something to be desired."

He frowned in that confused way of people who have no idea what you're saying to them, then pointed at her in a classic 'stay' gesture that set her already teetering teeth on edge. His kitchen-aimed yell did nothing to calm her.

"Liebchen?"

Mrs. Schwartz came into the room and, for just a minute as she looked at her husband, Marie saw a much younger woman. Then the veil of politeness closed over her face and she turned her ever-smiling countenance toward Marie.

"I see you've met my husband. Would you excuse us a moment?"

Marie shrugged and nodded sullenly. Mrs. Schwartz pulled Helmut by his shirtsleeve into the kitchen, where Marie heard a soft conversation. She was actually considering using the distraction to slink out the front door, when the gray lady reappeared, her face creased with obvious worry. She wrung her hands as she spoke.

"Miss Parker, I hope Helmut didn't hurt you. He thought you an intruder, you see, someone who wanted to do Mr. Alan harm. He speaks very little English. He didn't understand why you were there."

She gave Marie a look that clearly stated Helmut was not alone in that lack of understanding. Marie sighed in frustration and stood. She waved her hand.

"Don't worry about it, he didn't do any damage that a few weeks in traction won't fix."

At Mrs. Schwartz' alarmed expression, Marie nearly laughed out loud.

"I'm fine, that was just a little American humor. Very little. I think I'll leave before I make an even bigger fool of myself, if that's possible. Tell Mr. Alan that I...uh..., ' Marie could feel the color suffusing her face, "oh, just tell him that I died of embarrassment and I'll see that he gets an invitation to the funeral!"

With that, she flew past the little elf and out the front door into the afternoon sun. She jumped into her car and pulled away from the house so quickly her tires squealed a protest.

Marie drove only a few blocks before the frustration, anger and fear caught up with her. She pulled to the side of the road and turned off the engine. Now that the crisis was over, she could let out the emotions building up inside her. She got out of the car and walked to the front of it, pausing to kick a tire. It didn't help much. She leaned on the hood of her car and inhaled the fresh air, or whatever passed for it in Los Angeles. Exhaling a strangled breath, not quite a sob, she hung her head. How would she ever face Tyler again? She had made such a fool of herself!

Marie mentally kicked herself for a couple of minutes, which was as long as she would allow herself to admit defeat, and then she turned her thoughts to how she could ascertain the truth about Tyler. Asking him was out of the question; he had already proven his skill at weaseling out of the truth. The whole truth, that is. She had no doubt that most, if not all, of what he had told her last night was true. It was the parts he had left out that she would have to discover for herself. But how?

The sky was a pretty shade of pink as the sun began its slide into the ocean. Admiring the sunset, a thought came to her. What if she staked out Tyler's house and followed him to see where he went at night? Could she? Shrugging, thinking she couldn't fail any worse than she had earlier today, she climbed back into her car, turned it around and retraced her path to the Schwartz cottage.

She parked about a block away, far enough she didn't think Tyler would spot her car. Then she walked to his neighbor's yard, where she found what she thought would be a perfect stakeout spot behind a large Juniper bush. She figured it would cover her while she watched his front door. She settled herself on the ground and waited, desperately hoping Tyler's neighbor wouldn't call the police if he saw her there.

It wasn't long before Tyler emerged from the house, dressed once again in total black. Marie's heart lodged in her throat as he perused his surroundings, fear that he might see her there warring with her reaction to seeing him once again nearly stopping her breath. He was so very handsome, dark power emanating from every pore. She found herself tempted to stand and wave, just so he would come to her and wrap her in his arms. She fought the urge by digging her nails into her hands.

He must have found everything to his liking because he walked to the curb to enter the taxi that had just arrived. She quietly cursed as the cab pulled away. She couldn't exactly follow a car on foot.

Or could she? Marie remembered how Beth and she used to avoid truant officers when they played hooky from school. A quick scan of the neighborhood told her it was basically circular. If she cut through several back yards, went over a few fences, and generally acted like a twelve-year-old trying to avoid getting caught sloughing off school, she might be able to get to her car and catch up with Tyler's cab before they reached the freeway.

Taking a deep breath for fortification - and thanking Beth for suggesting those aerobic classes, even if they were only an excuse for a manhunt - she sprinted toward the first of several chain-link fences she would have to climb to make this insane plan work. Just before she hit the wire, it occurred to her that, in this neighborhood, the fences might be electrified. Too close to stop now even if she were going to get fried, she swallowed hard as she jumped and grabbed the fence as high as she could reach. She was glad to find no current zinging through her body, but equally unhappy to hear an alarm sound and see the house light up like a giant Christmas tree. Great!

She quickly ran across the large, well-manicured lawn and climbed the adjacent fence, hoping that would end the cacophony. No such luck. The same racket started in the yard she now found herself, only this time she heard the distinctive, and heart-stopping, bark of a large dog, a large, man-eating dog, no doubt. She was certain wings sprouted from the heels of her feet as she crossed that yard in record

time. At this rate, she was going to wind up in jail for trespassing. That would be the perfect end to the perfect day.

She crossed three more yards, setting off some kind of alarm in each, before she caught sight of her car at the front of the last house. With the last of her strength and breath, she ran to it, jumped in and sped off in the direction Tyler's cab had gone.

Breathing evenly in an attempt to disperse some of the adrenaline soaring through her system, she slowed the car just as she crossed the path of a patrol car. Giggling, she thought, 'He's probably on the trail of the mad alarm tripper.'

Marie sobered as she turned a corner and saw a taxi from the same company as the one Tyler had taken. Since she hadn't gotten any numbers or noticed any unique marks on Tyler's cab, she would have to get closer to be sure this was the right car.

As they passed under a streetlight, she caught just a glimpse of a curly blonde ponytail on the backseat passenger. She'd know that hair anywhere. It was Tyler!

Dropping back, she tried to remember everything she had ever seen on TV about tailing a criminal. You had to stay far enough back so they didn't notice they were being followed, but close enough that you wouldn't lose them if they took a sudden turn. You had to watch the lights so as not to get caught on the wrong side of a red one. You should change lanes once in a while, so they wouldn't always see the same car in the same lane behind them. That might make them 'rabbit' - police jargon for run like heck. Boy, this police work was a lot harder than Don Johnson had ever made it seem!

It soon became apparent that they were heading toward a much less affluent area. When the taxi pulled over by a large office building, Marie made a turn so fast her brakes almost screeched with the strain. She breathed a sigh of relief when they didn't, somehow certain Tyler would have taken notice of the unusual sound.

Pulling into a parking place at the curb, she watched through the rearview mirror as he paid the driver and walked into the building. Frowning, she wondered if he had some business here. At 8:30 at night? Doubtful. Maybe he was meeting someone.

"Sitting here second guessing him isn't getting me anywhere."

She got out of the car and began slowly walking toward the building. There should be a building directory in the foyer. Maybe that would give her a clue as to Tyler's business here tonight.

She was almost to the crosswalk when the door opened and Tyler emerged from the office building. Nearly swallowing her tongue, she quickly ducked into the doorway of the pawnshop that occupied the corner. Stomping her foot in anger at herself for getting too close to him, she wondered if

he had spotted her. She really was not cut out for police work.

Peeking around the edge of the doorway, she breathed a sigh of relief as she saw him moving away. His loose catlike walk, a predator on the hunt, told her he didn't know he was being followed. Maybe she was doing okay in the tailing department after all.

Staying on the opposite side of the street, she followed him slowly and carefully, ever ready to jump into a doorway if need be to avoid discovery.

Their surroundings deteriorated as they proceeded, hitting rock-bottom as they reached the inimitable Sunset Strip.

This was downtown Los Angeles, where the dispensable people congregated to acquire money and destroy their lives. Marie watched, fascinated, as Tyler melted into the scenery, becoming one with the miscreants that peopled the Strip. Before her eyes, he became a dark, menacing figure to whom even the most threatening occupants of this very dangerous place gave a wide berth. She saw a large, muscle-bound type with tattoos running down both arms and over part of his exposed back take a step away from Tyler when he looked him in the face. She could have sworn the man started to cross himself before he remembered where he was and what he had become.

Gooseflesh raised along Marie's arms, and something, Fear?, slid up her spine to lodge in her throat. Was this the same man that had held her so gently, taking her to such unimaginable heights with his exquisite lovemaking? Could she ever lie with him again if he were the predator she thought him?

She rubbed her arms, wondering if this had been such a good idea after all. Did she really want to prove her theory? She hadn't realized what she would be losing if she were right. On the other hand, ignorance of something made it no less a fact.

Tyler stopped and slowly scanned the street. To avoid discovery, Marie quickly slid into a dark doorway that smelled so strongly of vomit, urine & sweat she had to grind her teeth together to keep from retching. If she hadn't been concentrating so hard on her stakeout, she would have had the good sense to be afraid. She really didn't belong in a place like this. She didn't have the survival skills necessary to endure, let alone prevail, in this harsh environment. Did Tyler?

Once again peeking around the edge of the doorway, she saw just the hem of his duster as it disappeared into the mouth of one of many dark alleyways that dotted The Strip.

Afraid she might lose him after coming so far, Marie burst from her shelter and started to cross the street. The sudden, shrill honk of a car horn brought her up short at the curb, her hand over her mouth to stifle a scream. The irate driver cursed loudly as he sped on to his destination.

Impatiently tapping her foot, she waited till traffic would allow her to cross, then did so at a run.

She stopped at the mouth of the alley, disappointed that she couldn't see Tyler, but determined, nonetheless, to follow in his footsteps.

"Forget him."

The hard female voice startled Marie. She jumped and turned to see a girl of maybe fifteen, though she wore overdone makeup in a vain attempt to look older, leaning against the wall just outside the alley. She wore a cropped angora sweater that bared the underside of her small breasts, and short shorts that showed her cheeks, her outfit leaving little to the imagination.

Marie couldn't imagine why this girl would be speaking to her. The surprise showed in her tone.

"I beg your pardon?"

The girl smiled, an expression that hadn't reached her eyes for a long time, if ever.

"New around here, aren't `cha?"

Not sure of a correct response, Marie raised her eyebrows and shrugged in confusion.

"Don't mess with that one, he's bad news. If he was payin' a million bucks for a kiss, I wouldn't pucker up, ya know?"

"Why?"

"Cause," the girl's eyes clouded with fear and she lowered her voice, "he's a killer."

Looking as though she might regret her confidence, she straightened, her expression returning to that of a hardened street whore.

"Now get the hell off my street!"

She turned and walked away from the alley, rubbing her shoulders as if she had just felt a chill in the air.

Marie stared after her, fighting the tears that were trying to spill from her eyes. No! She wouldn't believe it until she saw it with her own eyes, or, at the very least, heard it from Tyler's lips!

Straightening her shoulders, she took a deep fortifying breath, turned and walked slowly down the dark alley in search of the truth. A truth that would break her heart and change her life forever.

Chapter 18

Tyler couldn't shake the feeling that something was not as it should be. His hackles tingled, usually an indication of some impending difficulty. Yet he could find nothing to explain the sensation.

Perhaps it related to someone other than himself? He had not been able to reach Marie before he left this evening, but that didn't concern him overmuch since he assumed she was embarrassed by her brazen behavior of this afternoon. She had probably gone into temporary hiding, not wanting to face him until she had recovered sufficiently to apologize.

What she had done this afternoon perplexed him. Had she been so desperate to see him that she had so debased herself in front of his servants? No, as much as his ego would like to embrace that explanation, he doubted its validity. Was the little fool still trying to prove him a vampire, then? That made more sense. And, if that were the case, the subterfuge he had undertaken last night hadn't worked. He was going to have to come up with a way to make her believe his claim of vampire fanaticism. The alternatives were either premature or not to be considered.

As he strode purposefully down Sunset Strip, he ignored the feeling of being watched. He was used to that; indeed, he might have reason to worry if he hadn't felt frightened stares following him wherever he went among this retched human refuge. He might be losing his touch if they didn't feel a desperate need to keep him in their sight.

He gloried in their fear; feeding the dark part of him that soared on nights he stalked the streets.

Tonight, he would feed quickly, then visit Marie and make sure she was undamaged by Helmut's rough treatment. Though his first impulse had been to strangle his manservant for his abuse of Tyler's woman, Tyler had quickly realized that Helmut was just performing the duties for which Tyler employed him. Marie had been in the wrong and Tyler intended to chastise her for her indiscretion just as soon as he assured himself that she had suffered no damage from the incident. If a single bruise colored her soft flesh, he would indeed have a very strong word with Helmut, a word the manservant would not soon forget!

Checking the street for anything of interest to him and finding it lacking, he slipped into the nearest alley to hunt in earnest.

He preferred to hunt the Strip in the early evening so most of the junkies would not have made their 'scores' yet, filling their blood with poison. He had found that a high concentration of heroine, amphetamine, or whatever was the substance to abuse this week, in the blood transferred its effects to him for a short time. He didn't care for the loss of control, the 'high', for which these pitiful humans sold

their souls. One more bit of proof that he was the superior being.

As he stalked slowly and quietly down the nearly black alley, he heard a rustling near a dumpster. Seeking the deeper shadows against the wall, Tyler froze as a middle-aged man stepped around the edge of the receptacle, adjusting his pants. Tyler's lips pulled back from his teeth in an expression that bore only a passing resemblance to a human smile. He had seen this scenario many times in his hunting. The man had just received oral service from one of the local whores. She would stay behind the dumpster long enough to stow her fee, and then return to the street to lure another customer.

'Your career is at an end,' Tyler thought as he emerged from the shadows to slip into her space. She barely had time to look into his glowing eyes before he was upon her, his teeth easily penetrating her throat as she put up a pitifully ineffective struggle for her life. He held her in a lover's embrace as her body spasmed in the first orgasm she hadn't faked since coming to this city.

The woman's blood warmed him as it filled his body, bringing him little satisfaction otherwise. He was a bit annoyed to find that his desire for Marie kept him from enjoying feeding as much as he would have liked.

Thoughts of his beautiful lady filled his mind as he leisurely drained his victim. He thought of how it might feel to hold Marie like this as she gave herself to him willingly. How he would slice his fingernail across his own throat, puncturing his jugular, and bring her lips to rest against his flesh, savoring every second of her rebirth. He would hold her and love her for all eternity.

"Tyler?"

For a minute, he thought his musings had taken voice. Then the hurt, fear-filled tone registered in Tyler's mind and he knew that Fate - evil, merciless bitch! – Had ripped his choices from him, forcing his hand.

He dropped his prey, his hunger satisfied, and raised his head to find Marie standing with one hand against the dumpster for support, her wide eyes beginning to glaze over in shock.

Hearing a scuffle behind the dumpster, Marie had slowly gone to investigate, knowing deep in her heart what she would find when she stepped around the receptacle. Still, she hadn't been ready for the vision that greeted her. Tyler was bent over the limp body of a woman, his mouth on her throat. A tiny trickle of blood ran from the corner of his mouth down her neck.

Marie had enjoyed this scene a dozen times in her favorite movies, always instructing the woman to turn and flee before the vampire could catch her and force her to become one of the undead. Now she knew why they never ran when she yelled at the screen. They couldn't. Their feet wouldn't move; none of their muscles would obey their commands. Everything just went into slow motion and they were at

the mercy of the monster before them.

She knew because she had just become the heroine in this all-too-real monster movie.

Tyler took a step toward her, and then seemed to think better of it, stopping in his tracks. Straightening, he ran the thumb and fingers of his right hand over his mustache and the corners of his mouth, removing the last of the telltale blood. He dropped his gaze to the ground, took a deep breath and raised his eyes once again to meet Marie's. She was relieved to see the feral look had disappeared, to be replaced by a gentler expression that spoke of his feelings for her and his desire to soften the blow she had just been dealt.

"Marie."

He spoke softly, as though he thought she might run away like a frightened child. Which was exactly how she felt. Oh, how she wanted her mom to turn off the TV and tell her it was time for bed! When he took another step in her direction she dropped her hand from its supporting position on the dumpster, her muscles tensed to run. Tyler seemed to sense that. He raised his hands in a gesture of supplication, his tone becoming more earnest.

"Whatever else you choose to believe, you must know the most important truth of me. I love you, Marie. I would never harm you."

Tears began to choke her as she screamed her outrage.

"You killed Beth, you raped and murdered my best friend! Is that how you love? Is that your way of not harming me?"

Tyler closed his eyes; wanting to shut out the vision of the suffering he had caused her shining in her beautiful blue eyes. Her pain was like a lance in his side, ripping at his insides till he could barely contain a moan. He wanted so to hold her, comfort her, but he knew she would turn from him if he made any attempt to close the physical space between them.

He had to make her understand.

"I made a mistake, one for which I would gladly do penance if I could reverse it. I lost my temper," he nearly spit the word, his anger at himself so strong, "which is no excuse, but I truly regret any pain I have caused you. I ask your forgiveness."

His lip curled in a half-snarl as he heard a sound in the alley beyond their dark space.

"Marie, this is no place for a lady such as yourself."

He cautiously moved to her side, ready to stop at the slightest sign of retreat on her part, and placed his hand on her arm, ignoring the flinch of her muscles as he touched her.

"Come back to my home and I will answer all your questions."

She pulled her arm from his grasp, the vehemence in her actions catching him off-guard and earning her a quickly-covered snarl.

"Like you answered my questions last night? No thank you. You're a liar, Mr. Alan, or whatever your real name is! A liar, a murderer, and a blood-sucking monster!"

She was nearly hysterical, unmindful of the tears streaming down her face.

"You don't love me. You're incapable of love, or any other human emotion. You're not human, you're a monster!"

Her words, echoes of his own long-ago thoughts, cut him to the quick. He grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her body against his own, his actions so sudden she went limp with shock. His hot breath fanned her face as he spoke.

"You have no idea of what you speak. I am so damned human! If I were the monster you say, I would drain the blood from your veins and leave you here to rot, just like that whore. And I would feel no regret, only the instinctive need to protect myself from discovery."

He gazed deeply into her eyes, his own as black as night, willing her - with his heart only - not to fear him, to truly hear him and understand. His words came in a fierce whisper.

"But I cannot do that, I cannot because I have come to love you more than life itself. When I awaken, your face is the first thing I want to see, your voice the sound I crave. Would a monster feel thus?"

He brought his lips closer to hers, almost touching her soft flesh as he continued.

"Would a monster wish to hold you for all eternity? To show you all the wonders of the world? To give to you anything within my power? Whatever I am, Marie, I love you with all my heart and soul."

He tentatively touched his lips to hers, everything inside him waiting for, and fearing, the revulsion and rejection that would cut through hundreds of years of life and finally break his heart.

With a sob, Marie leaned into the kiss. She knew she was crazy, but then, so was this whole situation. She figured in a crazy world she should listen to the one thing she had always been able to trust - her heart. It was telling her loud and clear that Tyler wasn't lying this time, he truly loved her. So much she thought it might break her heart. Could she love him that much? Could their love overcome some definite social handicaps? She didn't know and didn't particularly care at the moment. All that mattered right now was how good his lips felt as they explored her own. She pushed her pain, fear, outrage - all thought to the back of her mind and gave herself over to the wonderful feeling his touch created inside her.

Not since he had awakened to his new life had Tyler felt such elation. He now understood why he had been given that second chance at life - To find his true love, to find Marie. It had taken so long, but it was all worth it for this explosive minute of mutual discovery. He kissed her lips, her eyelids, her pert little nose, and her chin. Pulling away just long enough to slip one arm under her knees, he lifted her into his arms and continued worshiping her with his lips, his teeth, his tongue. She closed her eyes and gave herself completely, holding nothing back. He knew he had her trust when his lips went to her throat and she didn't tense a single muscle. She was his. At last, she was his!

Opening her eyes to look at Tyler's handsome features, Marie realized the building that had been behind them was no longer there. And they were moving. She gasped and tensed. Tyler raised his head from administering to her earlobe and smiled down at her.

"I never said vampires couldn't fly, love, just that we don't turn into bats to do so. You have nothing to fear. I'm taking you home."

She tilted her head to the side and watched with awe the landscape of LA passing beneath them as they soared above it. She knew she should be scared - she never had been a very good flier - but Tyler's strong arms wrapped her in all the warm security she needed. She turned her face back to his, her eyes wide with the wonder of a child. His smile turned to one of pride.

"There are many things I can do that unchanged humans cannot."

As she opened her mouth to loose the waterfall of questions, he gently shook his head.

"I will tell you, show you, everything, my love. But now, I want to make love to you as only I can."

His eyes glowed with extreme intensity.

"Do you trust me?"

With a soft smile, she nodded, sending his heart soaring higher into the heavens than his powers could ever take him.

There was a light tap as his boots touched the wood surface of his balcony. Marie barely noticed, so lost was she in sensation. Kissing her deeply, possessively, he carried her into his bedroom and laid her on his huge, burgundy-curtained bed. As he straightened and began removing his duster, he spoke in the sexiest voice Marie had ever heard.

"Now I shall make love to you as a vampire."

Watching him undress in nearly breathless anticipation, Marie whispered, "Will you bite me?"

Bare-chested now, he leaned over her to trace one fingertip down her throat to the crest of her breast. She shivered, bringing a very masculine smug smile to his lips.

"'Previews of coming attractions' is a modern concept and I am an old-fashioned man. Trust me."

His palms slid down her body to the hem of her short sundress. When he touched the bare skin of her legs, she closed her eyes and drew a deep breath through her clenched teeth, loving the feel of flesh on flesh. His fingers caressed her thighs as he slipped his hands beneath her dress to claim her underwear. He made short work of removing her lace panties, along with her sandals, then stood and lifted her into his arms once again. Placing her feet on the ground, he cautiously released her, then waited to see if she would remain standing or crumble at his feet. She stood - barely - swaying slightly like a young tree in an evening breeze.

Marie's pretty sky-blue eyes slowly flickered open and she gazed quizzically down at him as he dropped to one knee before her. He grasped the hem of her dress in one hand and lifted, running his unoccupied palm over the skin he was exposing.

By his time-frame, brassieres were a fairly new invention for which, in his opinion, firm-busted women like Marie had no use. Trying to unhook one while making love to a woman was torture. He was pleased to find that she had shunned the bit of reinforced cloth tonight. He caressed her breast, reveling in the quickly tautening flesh, as he pulled the dress over her head and tossed it to the floor.

Sensation had become Marie's world. Deep soft carpet caressing her bare toes, the cool air of the room as it touched each exposed piece of flesh in turn, Tyler's hot breath on her skin, and his hands. Oh, his wonderful hands, bringing her to life in pieces, kneading, stroking, massaging. It sent jolts of electricity through every part of her. When his palm began rhythmically kneading her breast, the strength seemed to drain from her legs and she slowly fell forward against his muscular chest. Without missing a beat in his tender torture, he wrapped his strong arms around her to steady her. He caressed her buttocks, pulling her firmly into contact with his entire hard body. She was painfully aware of the rigidity of a certain part of that body where, even through the cloth of his pants, it pressed against the sensitive flesh of her lower abdomen.

Her mother would be appalled - come to think of it, so would she when could think straight again - but right now Marie chose to follow her instincts. As she returned his kiss, slowly working one hand through his hair to release it from its tie, she slipped the other hand between them and found the zipper of his pants. Smiling inwardly at his sharp intake of breath against her lips, she lowered the zipper and began exploring the hard flesh inside. Tyler shivered violently as he gently pushed her away from him, letting her fall to the bed. She arched one brow, a sultry smile touching her lips.

"Don't you like that?"

He looked quite menacing as he stalked toward her, but she had promised him trust and she was determined to deliver. She slid farther onto the bed until she found her head resting on a silk-covered pillow. He spoke in a growl as he finished the job of removing his clothes.

"A bit too much, as I think you are well aware, you little vixen!"

He crawled onto the bed, a large predator about to devour his prey. His hands on her knees applying soft pressure, he spread her legs and knelt between them. The socially correct part of her mind screamed that she should try to cover her nakedness, but the decadent part, inflamed with lust, gloried in his bold appraisal of her most intimate flesh, easily winning the battle. Sliding his palms over her thighs, he applied subtle pressure until she relaxed her legs and let her knees drop, opening herself completely to his desire. He leaned forward and cupped her breasts with that same air of appraisal, sending a violent shiver through her body that brought another proud masculine smile to his lips. His intense gaze found her eyes and she read approval in the excitement there. She reached out and engulfed his erection in her palm, gently squeezing until he groaned and pulled away from her once again. She pouted.

"You know, this seems mighty one-sided. Don't I get to have any fun?"

Still caressing her breasts, Tyler spoke in a smoky whisper.

"Aren't you enjoying yourself, sweet?"

He gently rolled and squeezed her nipples between his fingers, eliciting an answering groan from her as she arched her back in a vain attempt to ease the pressure growing within her.

"Ah, I see you are. At another time, I will allow you to pleasure me; to make me ache with need, if you wish. But tonight, my love, my life, tonight, I claim you!"

He spread his body over hers as he dropped his lips to her breast. He kissed and licked first one nipple, then the other, enjoying her tiny moans and swallowed screams of pleasure. She was so responsive, and his body was aching with such need, he wondered how much longer he would be able to maintain control. The hard flesh his lady endeavored to caress was pulsing with the fire of desire, needing her moisture to put out the flames and bring him release.

Marie enjoyed the coolness of the air on her wet nipple, marveling at the number of sensations she suddenly seemed capable of experiencing all at once. Every nerve in her body was alive and kicking, taking in each tiny stimulation and magnifying it until she thought she might expire from pleasure. His hot breath touched her throat and she tipped her head back to give him better access. As his lips brushed the sensitive skin of her neck, her lower body seemed to arch of its own accord, begging him to get even closer.

With a growl, Tyler rose once again to his knees. The light coming through the open bed curtain

lit him as though he were in a spotlight. He gave a whispered growl of command.

"Marie, look at me!"

Marie raised her eyes to his face and saw all her years of belief staring back at her. His brows pulled together into a nearly solid line of menace. The irises of his eyes were black as coal, ringed by a line of red that glowed with an inner light, the source of which she didn't care to examine. She deliberately avoided looking at his mouth, not certain if she were ready for that yet, skipping, instead, to his chest and arms which bulged with muscle she had guessed at, but never seen. The proof of his arousal jutted proudly from between lean hips at the base of a well-muscled abdomen. He was a glorious dark angel.

Taking a deep breath, she raised her eyes to his lips, dreading, yet fascinated by, what she might find there. They were parted, the upper lip deliberately pulled back to reveal the terrible fangs of a predator. They were easily a quarter inch longer than the teeth that flanked them, their points as sharp as needles. Slowly, she raised her hand to his face. The look of a wary animal flashed across his eyes, but he didn't shy away, doing nothing to avoid her touch. Folding her hand so that only her index finger extended beyond her fist, she touched one fang.

Tyler held himself still as a statue as Marie saw him at his most frightening and least human. Would she see only a monster? She looked so shocked, her eyes wide, her breath locked in her throat. Would he lose her now, see her beautiful face fill with revulsion and fear? As she reached out to touch him, he closed his eyes for the briefest of seconds and uttered a silent prayer - the first since his rebirth - that she would not turn from him.

When she exhaled the breath she had held for several seconds, he opened his eyes to gaze upon the most beautiful vision he had ever beheld - Marie's smile.

"You're not as scary as some, but you're sexier than all the movie vampires put together."

Surprised to find he still had command of his voice, he quipped, "Even Langella?"

She sighed dramatically, gave a little nod.

"Forgive me, Frank. Even him."

With a sigh that was nearly a sob, he sat back on his heels and pulled her into his lap, crushing her in his arms. She wrapped her arms around his chest and he felt moisture touch his shoulder. With his lips against her ear, he whispered, "Why are you crying?"

She answered sheepishly, "I'm not really crying, just leaking a little. I was afraid if I proved you were a vampire I would lose you. I'm happy that didn't happen. Sometimes, happy brings tears."

She shrugged.

"It's a woman thing."

She shifted a little and Tyler became instantly aware of her legs wrapped around his waist and the close proximity of his burgeoning manhood to her tight sheath. He slid one hand down her back to cup her softly rounded buttocks. She tightened her legs in response and he nearly lost hold of the control he was working so very hard to maintain. Moving his hand farther, he caressed the petals of her femininity, drawing a surprised gasp from her. She leaned back and looked at him, amazed - and pleased - to find herself not the least bit afraid of him, even at this close range.

Slowly, he brought his lips to hers as his fingers began a rhythmic dance on her lower body that chased all thought from her mind. He slid his hand back and forth, spreading her natural moisture over the sensitive nub at her center. When he concentrated his attention on that tiny nub, she writhed and arched against him as he swallowed her cries of pleasure. His tongue caressed the inside of her mouth as he slid a hand between them, shifting the other to her back to steady her, and teased her with the tip of his weapon, making her cry out for his possession. When she thought she would die if he didn't take her, he slowly gave her what she so craved, sliding deep into her body while still ministering to her pleasure center.

Marie threw back her head and screamed, not caring who might hear or what they might think of her. If she didn't let out some of the pleasure Tyler was causing to build up in her body, she was certain she would explode!

"Yes, love, pull me deeply into your glorious body. Open to me, Marie. Hold nothing back. Ah, that's it, beautiful woman. Give yourself completely and be mine for eternity!"

She couldn't take any more. Something had to give. The rhythm of his hand increased with the speed of his thrusts. Something deep inside of her started to shiver like a forest pool in an earthquake, and she knew the end was near. As the first contraction ignited her nerve endings, his mouth closed on her throat and, in the second before the prick of pain, she knew her dream of a vampire lover had finally come true. Then rational thought deserted her. She was spiraling upward to a place she had never been, a place of bright lights and sensation beyond comprehension. This wasn't an orgasm. This was complete sensory overload. She held tightly to Tyler and embraced each sensation with open arms, unafraid, until her body reached its limit and she collapsed against him, completely spent.

As Marie's sheath contracted tightly around his shaft, Tyler knew now was the time to claim her as he had never claimed another. Briefly, as his lips touched her skin, he wondered if he could survive the climax that was sure to accompany his possession of his beloved. Smiling inwardly, he decided he'd take his chances. He could think of no better death than being held in her arms, joined in love.

He quickly penetrated her skin with his fangs in an attempt to lessen any pain he might cause her. Her hot blood flowed into his veins, her scent in his nostrils, her woman's body massaging him intimately, her arms and legs holding him close. In a moment of stark enlightenment, Tyler wondered - Was he possessing her or being claimed himself? Then thought became impossible as every muscle in his body tightened and pleasure such as he had never in his long life experienced exploded through him. Joined with Marie, he gave her his seed as she gave him her blood.

Tyler marveled as suddenly, for the space of a lover's breath, the blackness behind his closed eyelids was illuminated by bright, golden light. Sunshine.

Feeling his lady collapse in his arms brought him back to the reality of the moment. Using the last of his strength, he lowered her to the bed, and then fell to the warm sheet beside her. His last thought before falling into a deep, restful sleep was one of gratitude to a God he thought had forsaken him as he lay on the forest floor of his homeland in a time long gone; gratitude for Marie, whose love had brought the light of the sun back into his life. Marie, his love, who he swore with his last conscious thought to protect and defend till the end of his time on this Earth.

Chapter 19

Marie awoke to find Tyler staring at her. He was lying on his side next to her in the warm, dark cocoon of his bed, his elbow bent, head resting on his hand. His disheveled hair resembled a blonde mane about his face. His chocolate eyes seemed to be asking her a question even before his lips voiced it in a tone of dark silk.

"Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

"Yes."

He smiled softly as he reached out and caressed her hair.

"Perhaps you should give it a little more thought, love."

Marie shook her head, returning his smile.

"Don't need to. I love you. What's to consider?"

His eyes darkened and took on that intensity she found very disconcerting.

"To be my wife, you must become as I."

Marie's forehead wrinkled as she studied the muscles of his chest. She hadn't really given that much thought. She loved him, didn't want to face even a day without him, let alone the rest of her life. But was she ready to completely rearrange her life, practically become another species, to be with him? Could she be a predator like him, killing people to survive? She shuddered. She just wasn't quite ready to make that decision yet.

When she raised her eyes to meet his, she saw resignation there. He smiled, but his eyes reflected the sorrow in his heart.

"I understand, love. You are not ready for the life I offer you. Unlike me, you are not a natural predator."

He touched the tip of her nose in a gesture that made her heart ache.

"You don't wish to hurt anyone. Don't look so sad, sweet, it was not an ultimatum."

Her eyes, which had dulled with a sadness that he wanted gone, lit at his words. He pulled her into his arms and hugged her tightly.

"I love you, Marie. I will never leave you, even if that means watching you grow old and decrepit."

She lightly slapped his back.

"Hey!"

He chuckled.

"Perhaps, after you've had time to think about it, you'll change your mind. I will wait." He whispered as if to himself, "It feels as though I have already waited through an eternity."

Leaning her head back, she captured his eyes to suggest the most logical, in her opinion, solution.

"You know, we could get married without me sharing your coffin."

He frowned, but a smile touched his lips.

"Well, you know what I mean."

She dropped her gaze to his chest, self-consciously running her finger over his warm skin.

"Tyler, I do want to be with you forever, it's just...oh, I don't know...I guess I'm kind-of a coward."

He shushed her, tangling his fingers in her hair and gently pushing till her cheek rested against his chest.

"You are not a coward. I don't know if I would have chosen this life if I'd had a choice other than death, which I did not consider much of an option."

"How did you die?"

Speaking softly, as if telling a child a bedtime story, Tyler related the basic events that led to his becoming a vampire, finding irony in the fact that his ego demanded he let the exact time period remain vague. He didn't want his lady to know exactly how old he was!

Marie didn't question his omission. She nodded against his chest occasionally, her breathing becoming slow and steady. As he went on about his life after his rebirth, she began to snore softly, her warm breath stirring the fine, blonde hair that covered his chest.

Tyler gently laid Marie back on the bed. She was so vulnerable, the light of her life so easily snuffed out. What would he do if the dark hand of Fate were to take Marie from him before he could convince her to drink his blood and join him in eternity? His gut clenched at the mere thought of being without his heart mate, the love of his life, now that he had finally found her. And Fate had been so fickle with him lately. During the day when he was not there to protect her, Marie could do something so mundane as cross the street while her mind was on something else and end her life beneath the wheels of a speeding car.

He would awaken once again alone in his world of darkness.

No! He would not, could not let that happen! The sun had just reentered his life in the form of his beautiful lady. He could not bare to have it snuffed out, plunging him into a darkness from which he

could never hope to escape!

He gasped in pain as he sank his sharp teeth into his own wrist and pulled, tearing a jagged cut in his flesh. Praying she would one day understand his desperation and forgive him, he placed the laceration over Marie's mouth, watching in fascination as his blood dripped onto her slightly parted lips. After several drops had fallen, the accelerated healing powers of the vampire closed his wound. As the drops slowly trickled across Marie's lips, her tongue darted out to lick away the annoying moisture. Swallowing, she sealed her fate.

Once again, Tyler gathered his lady into his arms and held her tightly to him. He possessed her completely now, as she possessed him. When her current life was at an end, through accident or choice, and his blood claimed her, he would be there to guide her into the night.

The first thing Marie noticed when next she awoke was that the bed curtains had been closed, effectively sealing out all light from the big, ornate bed. She was lying on her back, her head cradled in the crook of Tyler's arm. To her surprise it wasn't pitch black, just moonless-night dark. She found her eyes had adjusted to the lack of light so that she could see fairly well. With a little sigh, she raised her eyes to Tyler's handsome face, fearing she might have dreamed the whole amazing, and terrifying, night. But there he was, her vampire lover, asleep beside her in the cocoon of his sunlight-safe bed. Marie marveled at the change in him when he slept. His face lost most of its hardness, though she was sad to see that his countenance of steel-encased granite was so ingrained that a little of it remained even as he slept. His long, dark-blond eyelashes lay softly upon his cheeks, shadowing the pale skin beneath. The nostrils of his straight, aristocratic nose flared occasionally as he breathed deeply. His fine coral lips were slightly parted, each breath stirring the tiny hairs of the mustache and closely-trimmed beard that surrounded his mouth.

Slowly, so she wouldn't wake him, she raised her hand and ran two fingertips over those wonderful lips, remembering how thoroughly they had explored her body, the fire they had breathed into her veins. She shivered as she realized the full length of her body, from thigh to shoulder, pressed against him, the heat of his skin warming her. How could she have ever believed he would lie motionless in a coffin, needing no breath to sustain him? He was so very alive!

Though touching his lips hadn't seemed to bring him any closer to consciousness, she still moved slowly as she slid from the bed. She was careful not to open the curtains, slipping beneath the hem and into the room like a snake. She giggled at the analogy as she disentangled herself from the heavy material of the bed curtain and straightened to begin the search for her clothes.

"Good morning."

Marie nearly jumped out of her skin at the softly spoken greeting. She turned to find Mrs. Schwartz standing in the doorway, a black silk robe dangling over her arm. As Marie stared, unable to find her tongue, Tyler's maid held out the robe to her, a secret smile curling her lips.

"Mr. Alan thought you might like to begin your morning with a shower. I freshened your clothes and placed them in the bathroom."

Moving in a sort of haze of combined embarrassment and surprise that the little elf seemed to know everything, Marie took the robe and slipped into it, while Mrs. Schwartz stepped past her and adjusted the bed curtain. Marie noticed that the balcony doors had been closed and the heavy burgundy curtains tightly drawn across them. The light from a crystal lamp sitting atop a bedside table kept the room from becoming uncomfortably dark. Marie raised one eyebrow in question.

"The master avoids the sun, Miss Davis, other light does not disturb him. If you'd like, while you shower and dress, I'll prepare breakfast for you."

Marie couldn't believe she was actually going to talk to Mrs. Claus about her lover but she didn't have anyone else to ask. Choking slightly on a crimson blush, she forced the words from between stiff lips.

"Won't I...disturb him...if I shower here?"

Mrs. Schwartz smiled indulgently and patted Marie on the hand as she replied with a twinkle in her eye that surprised the heck out of Marie.

"Not at all. He sleeps like the dead, dear, as do most men."

Ignoring Marie's slack-jawed reaction to her joke, Mrs. Schwartz gave her shoulder a soft push toward the bathroom.

"Now you had better hurry, Mr. Alan instructed me to wake you at 7:30 but I...", she blushed and looked away, piquing Marie's curiosity over what could possibly embarrass *her*, "I'm afraid I slept in a bit. It's 8 o'clock now, but I'm sure you'll have plenty of time to eat a good breakfast before rushing off. I'll be downstairs. If you need anything just poke your head out the door and yell."

With that, the elf disappeared out the door, closing it behind her.

Marie stood staring at the closed door. 'He sleeps like the dead'? Where had that come from?

From the slightly mussed look of her hair, and the rosy glow of her cheeks, Marie would have sworn Mrs. Schwartz had slept in because she and Mr. Schwartz had made good use of the house last night while Tyler had been out. When the cat's away, the mice will play! The image of those two locked in a passionate embrace put the finishing touches on a bout of laughter that brought tears to Marie's eyes.

She was still laughing as she stepped into the bathroom to shower.

Except for the polished steel shield above the sink, and a complete lack of conventional mirrors, Tyler's bathroom was perfectly normal. It was elegantly appointed, with polished gold and black marble throughout, and the room had no windows. She'd have to remember those details when putting the finishing touches on his new house.

Frowning, Marie wondered exactly where she and Tyler stood on said house. She narrowed her eyes at her reflection in the shield. If he had used the house to get her into his bed and planned to drop it now that he had achieved his goal, she'd have his...well, maybe not, she still had a use for those. She'd sue him! And win by default because he couldn't make daytime court dates? That wouldn't give her any satisfaction. Well, she'd at the very least give him a piece of her mind he would not soon forget! Shaking her head as she closed the carved glass shower door, she decided she'd ask him about the house this evening. Until then, she'd give him the benefit of the doubt.

Showered and dressed, Marie took one last look at the dark bed that sat in the middle of the room like some huge dragon guarding its treasure. A soft smile touching her lips, she realized the bed did, indeed, guard the greatest treasure of her life. Turning off the lamp, she went downstairs for breakfast.

She found Mrs. Schwartz in the kitchen, bustling about as usual. The smell of freshly baked blueberry muffins permeated the kitchen, making Marie's nostrils flare and her stomach growl with embarrassing anticipation. She hadn't realized she was so hungry! She quickly took her place in the little breakfast nook as directed by the pointing of the wooden spoon held in Mrs. Schwartz' plump hand. A picture of Mrs. Potts from the Disney animated feature Beauty and the Beast came to her mind and Marie wondered if she would ever run out of analogies for Mrs. Schwartz. She smiled as a bowl of oatmeal large enough to please Papa Bear was placed on the table before her.

"I haven't had oatmeal since I lived at home."

That had been a deliberately noncommittal statement. Truth was, her mother couldn't make oatmeal that wouldn't pass for mortar to save her life. Spot, Marie's dog when she was a little girl, had eaten a lot of mortar-meal when Mom wasn't looking. Marie sighed and poured cream over the steaming cereal. No dog - she'd have to eat it herself. Conversation might help.

"How long have you worked for Tyler?"

Mrs. Schwartz smiled as she placed a plate of steaming muffins next to Marie's bowl. She reached across the table and spooned something onto the oatmeal.

"I think you might like it better with a little brown sugar and cinnamon. Try it."

Marie dutifully took a bite, plastering a smile on her face so she wouldn't insult the proud little

elf. Surprise lit her face as she chewed. No mortar here, just nicely textured oatmeal, the perfect mixture of sugar-sweet and cinnamon-tangy, which tasted as good as the ads always made it look.

"My family has served Herr...Mr. Alan...for generations. I first came to his service in 1948, a month after I married Helmut."

Marie spoke between bites, using the manners her mother had tried desperately to drill into her.

"That was good timing."

The animated singing teapot smiled, making Marie feel as if she were being patted on the head.

"Our families arranged it that way, dear."

Marie's eyebrows flew up, the spoon stopping halfway to her mouth.

"You mean, it was an arranged marriage?"

Her incredulity met with another indulgent smile.

"They were still quite common in Germany at that time." Pride, and love, lit her face as she continued. "Helmut is from a family that has served the master in Romania for many generations; longer, even, than my family has served him in Germany. Our elders felt that it would be advisable for our families to join to help secure Mr. Alan's position in California, a place he felt would become pivotal in America. Helmut and I were married in Germany, then sailed to America where the master secured our citizenship. We have served him faithfully since reaching the shores of this great country. You should try a muffin, dear, they're quite good, if I do say so myself."

The sudden change of subject caught Marie off-guard. She realized that words like 'arranged marriage' and 'master' came as naturally to Mrs. Schwartz as breathing. Their families had served Tyler for many generations? How old was he?

Still trying to comprehend all Mrs. Schwartz had just revealed, Marie absent-mindedly buttered a muffin. She made a sound of appreciation as she bit into the warm sweetbread. It was delicious.

Marie's ire began to tingle. Of course, it was good. The poor woman had been held prisoner for all of her adult life with nothing to do but clean house and perfect recipes!

Her growing anger heated her words.

"Didn't you ever want children? A career? I don't know--a life, maybe?"

Once again, that indulgent smile that was beginning to make Marie's teeth ache touched the elf's lips.

"Unfortunately, Helmut and I could never have children. I serve Mr. Alan. I see to his needs, try to keep his life running smoothly. I am his secretary, receptionist, cook, maid and supply sergeant. Doesn't that seem to you like quite a career? As for a life...", she tipped her head and her eyes softened

as she looked at Marie, "my life is loving my husband. That is all the life I could ever want or need. I believe you are on the verge of understanding that, my dear. I do so hope you choose to step over that edge soon. Mr. Alan is very fond of you."

Mrs. Schwartz raised her eyes to the ceiling, listening for a second, then sat across from Marie at the little breakfast table. Taking Marie's hand in hers, she swept her eyes nervously around the room and lowered her voice as if partaking in some conspiracy.

"He loves you, I think. He has never loved another. Oh, he has held some close for a while, trying to chase away the loneliness, but he has never loved."

She stood and patted her hair, then began running water in the sink to wash the dishes as if she had never spoken.

Hoping Mrs. Schwartz was right about Tyler's feelings, and wondering what the future might hold, Marie took one last bite of oatmeal, then stared in surprise at the empty bowl. She had actually eaten it all! Now she knew how Goldilocks felt.

"I have to go."

Mrs. Schwartz turned off the water. Taking an aluminum foil package from the counter, she turned and handed it to Marie.

"Some muffins for later. Now don't fuss, they'll just go to waste. Or worse, Helmut will find them and they'll go to his waist."

She laughed, a light, tinkling sound that Marie found contagious. She accepted the package and Mrs. Schwartz showed her to the door. She thanked her for breakfast, not even surprised to find a cab waiting for her at the curb. After all, the little teapot seemed to know everything. Did she actually think Mrs. Schwartz would have forgotten that she needed a ride to the office? Hardly.

Marie assumed Mrs. Schwartz had stayed in the house until she saw her circle the front of the taxi and, with a short word, hand something to the driver, who nodded. She smiled at Marie over his shoulder.

"Goodbye, now."

Marie gave the driver the approximate address where she had left her car the night before. Thankfully, it was fairly easy to find. Exiting the cab, she started to reach for her purse, then realized that she had locked it in her car.

"That's okay, lady, your boyfriend's maid took care of it."

The cabby leered at her as he spoke, an I-know-what-you-did-last-night expression that she desperately wanted to slap off his face. Instead, she stuck her nose in the air and walked away, making it

perfectly clear that his opinion didn't concern her in the least. If he had been able to see her face, he would have known differently. She was scarlet! Oh, how she hated being thought of as the kind of woman who left in the morning in the same clothes in which she'd arrived the night before. Granted, she had just done that, but she was *not* that kind of woman. This had been an isolated incident.

Putting the disgusting cab driver out of her mind, she was glad to find her car in one piece, hubcaps included. She reached into the front wheel well and retrieved the magnet box that contained her keys. As she stood and turned, she walked smack into a hard chest that smelled of Old Spice cologne. Startled, she raised her eyes to meet a steely-gray stare.

"Michael!"

Her open hand went to her chest as she exhaled a shaky breath.

"You scared the daylights out of me! What are you doing here?"

It bothered her that he hadn't said anything yet, and he looked so serious she wondered if something were wrong. He looked around, as though he were checking to see if someone were watching, then he took her arm, none too gently, and pulled her toward her car. His voice was stern, with just a touch of anger around the edges.

"Open the door, we need to talk."

Prying the key out of the little metal box, she unlocked the driver's door. Stepping around her, Decker reached inside and unlocked the passenger door; saw her seated on the driver's side, then closed her door. She watched with some trepidation as he circled the car, his stride determined, and climbed in the passenger side.

His door closed, he reversed her question, the heat of anger in his voice growing, "What are *you* doing here, Marie?"

Confusion showed in her furrowed brow and crinkled nose.

"I'm on my way to work. And it's rude to answer a question with a question, you know. Especially if it's the same question, and I asked you first."

A little of her confused fear was slipping away to be replaced by annoyance. She rubbed her arm, giving him a pouting frown.

"I think that was police brutality."

Still not mollified, Decker nonetheless felt ashamed of his actions. He stared through the windshield, trying to compose his thoughts. When he turned back to her and spoke again, his tone was a little less accusatory.

"I'm sorry if I hurt you, Marie. Seeing you here threw me for a loop."

Marie tipped her head, eyebrows raised in question.

"There was another murder last night, about three blocks from here, on The Strip."

Damn! She didn't look surprised. She looked guilty. Gut clenching painfully, Decker placed his hands on Marie's shoulders and turned her to fully face him, making her gasp in surprise.

"All right, Marie, you don't work or live around here. I'll bet if I got out and felt the hood, I'd find that this car has been sitting here all night. Now tell me what the hell's going on! And it better be the truth or I swear I'll haul your butt downtown and grill you till I get an answer I like!"

Her wide-eyed look of fear softened his grip on her shoulders. But his tone said that he would brook no nonsense.

"You've been at, or near, the sight of two similar murders. I can't ignore that. Tell me what you know, girl. You don't need to be afraid, I'll figure out some way to keep your name out of it. You've got my word on that."

Marie had never been a very good liar. She'd also never been in a position where lying - or telling the truth, for that matter - might have such dire consequences to someone she loved. Swallowing hard, she gathered her courage and looked Michael right in the eye.

"I appreciate your concern, Michael, and I'm very sorry that you think I would have something to do with the murder of my best friend. If I'm under arrest, please read me my rights and allow me to call a lawyer. I'm certain my employers have an excellent attorney on retainer. I have nothing to tell you about Beth's murder that I haven't already told you. And I don't know anything about last night's murder that would help you."

He narrowed his gray eyes, the accusation there making it difficult for her to keep looking at him.

"Are you covering for Alan?"

He'd had enough years as a detective to see in her eyes, just before she slid them away to gaze at the floor of the car, that he had hit the nail on the head with that question. With a feeling of loss crushing his heart, he pulled her closer, raising her chin so he could look deeply into her eyes.

"Marie, he's not worth it," he pleaded, "He's a nutcase. Alan murdered a five-year-old girl while her father watched, then mutilated him so he'd die a slow, agonizing death."

Marie tried to pull away as tears came to her eyes, but he was relentless, bruising her shoulders so she could not pull away from the truth.

"Is that what you're protecting? Is that what you're willing to go to jail for?"

"I told you, I don't know..."

He shook her so suddenly she bit her tongue, gasping in pain, as she tasted her own blood.

"Damn it, girl! He raped and murdered your friend with you a few feet away. He punctured her throat and drained the life out of her while he forced her legs apart and..."

Sobbing, she put her hands on his chest and pushed rather feebly.

"Please, Michael, stop it. Please!"

Unable to bear her tears, he pulled her into his arms and hugged her tightly. He spoke into her hair, emotions - anger, pain, and loss - sharpening his softly spoken words.

"I don't want to find you like that, honey, pale and cold. You've got to help me stop this bastard."

Placing his finger under her chin, he raised her face. She still avoided his eyes.

"Do you know who killed those people?"

It was Marie's turn to look out the windshield. She spoke in a very small voice.

"I can't help you, Michael."

Decker took a deep breath, released it on a sigh of frustration and determination.

"Then I'll help you, darlin'."

He got out of the car and walked around to her side. It occurred to Marie too late to lock him out, start the engine and run. He opened her door and, using professional police procedure, took the keys from the ignition and pulled her from the car. He closed her door, locked it and pocketed the keys.

"Michael, what are you doing? I have to get to work."

He shook his head.

"Not today, darlin'. I'm taking you in for questioning in the murder of Beth Parker and a related murder of an as-yet-unnamed hooker. In police work, coincidence is a dirty word."

A crooked, sad smile raised the corners of his mouth.

"You don't need to worry about your rights, girl, I'm not arresting you and I don't plan to ask you any more questions, since you've been so cooperative. I don't like wasting my time. I can hold you for 72 hours with the evidence I've got. I think that will be long enough to push your boyfriend into doing something without thinking it through."

His expression was so cold Marie shivered.

"And one stupid mistake is all I'll need."

Chapter 20

Marie could not believe what was happening to her. She felt as though she had stepped into a bad soap opera. Michael - Lieutenant Decker, as she preferred to think of him now - had actually taken her to the police station and locked her in one of those little wire cages in an interrogation room. Thankfully, he had seen to it that she remained alone in there, but she wasn't certain if he were being considerate of her feelings, or letting her rot in solitary confinement. Whatever, it would be a long time before she would once again be civil to the man.

She had no idea how long she had been sitting on the little bench that hung on one wall of the 'cell' when Decker walked through the door of the interrogation room. She was so angry with him that she gave him her glare of death; then, with a "humph" of disgust, she raised her chin and looked away.

"I brought you some coffee and a doughnut, Marie. I thought you might be hungry."

Marie realized with a start that she had forgotten the muffins Mrs. Schwartz had given her, leaving them on the seat of the taxi. Her brow furrowed with chagrin as she imagined the leering cabby enjoying her muffins. Though it was in no way his fault, she glared at Decker again. The icy disdain in her voice should have frozen him in his steps.

"Thank you, but I've eaten."

Shrugging, a wry smile tugging at the corners of his lips, Decker took a bite of the chocolate doughnut he held in his hand. Though she truly wasn't hungry, Marie grimaced inwardly. She loved chocolate doughnuts.

Decker offered the cup of steaming black liquid to her.

"Coffee?"

Haughty didn't seem to be getting her anywhere - men could be so dense! - and she was thirsty. With an air of nonchalance, she stood, walked to the door of the little cage and reached through the small opening in the wire. Being careful not to touch the detective, she took the cup. With a polite smile, she nodded her thanks, then took a sip.

Decker couldn't help chuckling at her grimace.

"Why do you think we eat the doughnuts? Helps get the taste of the coffee out of your mouth."

"Why don't you just learn to make good coffee?"

"And spoil our reputation?"

Hoping to make use of the temporary softening of their adversarial positions, Michael stepped

close to the wire.

"Marie, what happened last night? What were you doing in that part of town?"

He seemed so concerned that, for just a second, Marie considered telling him everything. Then she stubbornly set her jaw and shook her head.

"I have nothing further to say to you, Lieutenant Decker."

Decker tucked his chin against his chest in anger.

"Fine!"

He turned and slammed out of the room. Marie returned to her seat on the bench, pulling her knees against her chest and wrapping her arms around them. She felt so lost and alone.

A movement on the wall of the cell above her head caught her attention. Staring in horror-filled paralysis, she watched as a spider the size of a silver dollar slowly crawled down the wall toward her. Her breath, caught in her throat for that second of realization, now found its freedom in a scream that bounced off the walls of the little room like a yodel in the Grand Canyon. She flew up off of the bench and backed away from the wall, keeping her eyes on her eight-legged roommate, until her back hit the wire with a painful thud.

Her eyes growing wild, Marie scanned the walls, the floor, the ceiling, and finding several webs, some of which looked recently occupied. When her hair brushed her bare arm, she jumped, screaming, and slapped her arm with such force she left a welt.

She was trapped, trapped in a small, dark, occupied space!

In that moment of total panic, she reached for the one thing she knew could save her, called out for the one person she knew would rescue her.

With tears streaming down her face, Marie threw back her head and screamed, "Tyler!!"

Tyler's eyes flew open as he sat up in his dark-curtained bed, a sense of panic the likes of which he had never before felt gripping him, twisting his gut into a painful knot. His eyes, growing darker with each second of tormented wakefulness, scanned his immediate vicinity for the source of his distress. Nothing. He closed his eyes and shook his head to clear away the distraction of reality, beads of sweat flying from the ends of his unbound hair. In his mind, he pushed outward, away from his body, searching for anything that might explain his current discomfort.

In the darkness behind his eyelids there flashed a picture of Marie, her cheeks tear-stained and dirty, her eyes wild with fear. Tyler's jaw clenched as he realized it was his lady's distress that had awakened him.

His sixth sense told him it was still hours before sunset. Fear, an emotion to which he was completely unaccustomed, made his voice harsh as he called for his servants. He sensed their quick appearance in his room, beyond the dark bed curtains. Helmut spoke.

"Herr Florescu?"

In a German dialect so old it now adorned only history books, Tyler instructed them to see that the room was completely sunless. Once they assured him of that, he threw back the curtain and rose from bed, unmindful of his nakedness. Mrs. Schwartz averted her eyes, a becoming blush tinting her venerable cheeks. Tyler paid her little heed as Helmut assisted him in dressing. He had no time for her modesty. He must get to Marie!

Buttoning his black silk shirt, his intense black gaze caught Mrs. Schwartz in its snare.

"Call Marie's office, find out if anyone there knows her whereabouts. If not, contact Lieutenant Decker with the same inquiry. Find her! Quickly!"

The little woman jumped, nearly executing a turn in mid-air, and scurried from the room. Tyler instructed Helmut to use the cellular phone to call for a limousine. With a crisp nod, the Aryan manservant took the phone from the bedside table and followed his wife out of the room.

Once dressed, Tyler paced his bedchamber like a caged tiger. What would cause Marie such distress? Was she hurt, in danger? With little concentration, he could sense her continuing fear. What threatened her? Vowing to destroy whatever, or whoever, dared hurt his lady, Tyler began stretching and flexing his muscles in preparation for the coming confrontation. Impatience evident in every line and angle of his patrician features, he glared toward the curtained window, cursing the sun that kept him prisoner.

As each hour-long minute passed, Tyler became more furious. What was keeping his servants? Growling his frustration, he plucked a crystal vase filled with dark red roses from its place on his reading table and tossed it across the room to smash against the wall. The pleasure he received from the loud crash of shattering glass was short-lived. He was searching the room for something else on which to take out his anger when a light tap sounded on the door.

"Yes!"

Mrs. Schwartz peeked around the door, then slowly entered the room, her posture that of a rabbit poised to duck into its warren at the first sign of the wolf. The worried look on her face did nothing for his state of mind. He stepped closer to her, and then stopped as he saw fear enter her eyes. Clenched fists held tightly at his sides, he produced a civilized tone from some deep part of himself.

"What have you discovered?"

His servant smiled nervously as she replaced the cellular phone on the master's bedside table, glad to see the nobleman return to her master's eyes. She kept her tone neutral, hoping to sooth her master's vexation.

"Lieutenant Decker informed me that Marie is being held at the police station for questioning. He claims he can detain her for three days, if he so chooses, without pressing charges. He would not allow me to speak with her."

She wrung her hands, concern for her master, and her master's lady, evident in her worried tone.

"The limo will be here in thirty minutes. Helmut will have it ready for you."

Once again, Tyler's ebony gaze went to the window. His internal timepiece told him he could not safely leave the protected room for another hour.

With a curt nod, he dismissed Mrs. Schwartz, sullenly tracing her movements with his eyes as she retreated from the room and closed the door. Palming the phone, he sat in the large wingback chair that occupied one corner of the room. He had spent many comfortable hours in this chair, reading, studying the world around him; now, it felt like a bed of nails.

"I wish to speak with Lieutenant Decker."

Obnoxious Muzak played an unrecognizable instrumental version of a modern tune as he was put on hold. Tyler ground his teeth, barely resisting the urge to growl. Several minutes passed before the line once again clicked to life.

"Decker."

Tyler quickly pulled away the phone as a hiss escaped his lips. The policeman's tone clearly stated his conviction that he had the upper hand. The smug bastard!

Composing himself, Tyler spoke quietly.

"Lieutenant. I understand Marie is with you. I would like to speak with her."

"Sorry, Alan, she isn't exactly on vacation here. No visitors, no phone calls for 72 hours."

Tyler felt the arm of the wingback chair, gripped in his fist, releasing from the body, but he paid no attention. His voice dropped to a menacing whisper.

"You will release her now, Lieutenant, or I shall consider you personally responsible. Do you understand me?"

"Is that a threat, Alan?"

"No, Decker, I do not threaten."

Tyler knew he must end this conversation before he said something he would surely regret. He was losing control and he could ill afford to do so while dealing with the enemy.

"Release her!"

With a superior attitude that, in Tyler's mind, sealed his mortal fate, Lieutenant Decker replied succinctly.

"No."

The connection was broken as the cellular phone disintegrated in Tyler's hand, the pieces further decimated as they struck the wall of his bedchamber, their destruction accompanied by a roar of pure animal rage.

Chapter 21

"Marie!"

Marie jumped away from her position at the front of the little wire cage. She had been standing there with her back pressed against the hard wire for what seemed like days. After her friend the spider had taken his morning constitutional stroll about the wall, he had settled into a crack about a foot above the bench, thus insuring that she would not be found anywhere near that bench if her life depended on it. She had been pessimistically waiting for muscle cramps to begin when she heard her name called from somewhere. But where?

"Marie, answer me!"

She slowly stepped toward Spidey's wall at the top of which was a small, maybe two-by-three foot window. The quiet command sounded like it came from outside that window. But that was impossible. They were on the fifth floor.

Command? Impossible? Tyler!

"Tyler?"

"Quiet, love! Come closer to the window."

Staring in apprehension at the single spiky leg protruding from the crack in the wall, she raised her eyes once again to the window, her voice filled with desperation and fear.

"Tyler, I can't."

Commanding his body to a higher position outside the window so he could look down into the room, Tyler took in the wire cage and felt his hackles rise, fury heating his blood. Decker had dared put his lady in such a dirty, despicable place? He would surely die a most terrible death for this offense!

His eyes connected with Marie's and he saw the fear shining within their depths, the same fear that had awakened him from a deep sleep. Seeking to calm her, he spoke quietly, yet firmly.

"Why? Are you bound in some way?"

Though she knew it should startle her to see him just hanging there in space like some marionette from Hell, all Marie could think was how good it felt to have him so near. Embarrassed, but still not willing to brave Tarantula Rex, she shook her head and pointed at the wall.

"A big, hairy spider had found his dream home on the wall. I'd really rather not disturb him, you know?"

Her voice softened and lost most of its icy tone of fear, warming his heart.

"What are you doing here, Tyler?"

"I came for you, my love. After your fear woke me, I nearly went mad trying to find you. Your lieutenant Decker was kind enough to gloat that he was holding you here. I came as quickly as I could."

The apology in his voice touched Marie. She knew he hadn't rescued her sooner because the sun had been in his way. She gently shook her head, her beautiful auburn hair falling in shimmering waves about her shoulders.

"You're here now, that's all that matters. And he's not *my* Lieutenant. Right about now, I wish I'd never met him. Can you do anything to get me released?"

Suddenly, she remembered what Michael had said about Tyler making a mistake. The edge of fear returned to her voice as she warned Tyler.

"Tyler, Decker said he was using me to make you make a mistake. Please be careful."

Smiling wickedly, Tyler gave an imperious nod, and then wrapped his hands around the bars that covered the small window and pulled. There was the unmistakable grind of metal stressed beyond the breaking point, then the whole window exploded outward. In the next instant, he was wrapping her in his arms, holding her so tightly she thought she might suffocate, but she wasn't complaining. She didn't care if she died right now as long as she could stay in his arms.

His breath stirred her hair as he brushed his lips over her forehead, and then whispered into her ear. Gooseflesh covered her from head to toe and she shivered in his arms.

"Hurry, love, they are coming to investigate."

With her held tightly against his chest, he turned toward the window and they both rose into the air.

A loud crash heralded the arrival of Lieutenant Decker as he flung open the door to the room and it hit the wall.

"Hold it right there, Alan! Freeze, you bastard, or I'll fire!"

In the small room, the explosion of cap against powder was deafening. Tyler felt the bullet hit him square in the middle of the back, searing heat sending pain flaring into his brain, nearly breaking his concentration. But, with single minded-determination, he forced himself and Marie through the small window before Decker could fire a second round.

As he soared over the city, several thoughts flowed into his mind at once - He had just made Marie a fugitive, a fact she was sure to regret; he was losing blood at an alarming rate, his strength quickly ebbing, and would need to feed soon; and his chest hurt. The bullet must have lodged against something tender, perhaps his heart. Or...

Terror shot through him more surely than the bullet had torn through muscle as he realized that Marie had gone limp in his arms. His concentration slipping in panic, he lost several yards of altitude before he could retrieve sufficient command of his senses to right their course. He must get Marie home before he lost too much strength!

The last few miles to his home seemed like hundreds. Sweat ran in rivulets down his face, stinging as they found the hole Tyler now knew Decker's bullet had ripped through his chest. He was weakening with each breath, and it was only anger and pure determination that took them those last miles.

Panting with exertion, Tyler laid Marie's limp body on his heavily-curtained bed. A hiss escaped his snarling lips as he found the red bloom that had spread across her chest, just below her left breast.

As he began to pull away from her to call for his servants, her eyes fluttered open and she moaned softly as the pain, dulled by shock, reached her brain. Her hand moved from her side as if to reach for him, then dropped back to the bed, her meager strength unable to complete the task.

Tyler knelt beside the bed and engulfed her hand in his, facing what he had known in his heart since discovering that Decker's bullet had not been content with his flesh, passing through his chest and into Marie.

Her death was near.

Emotional agony clamped on his throat, choking his words.

"Love, I have failed you again."

Her beautiful sky-blue eyes met his, undying love shining bright within. Her radiant smile tore at his heart, the pain wrenching a choked curse from his lips. Her bare whisper was the voice of an angel to him.

"You never failed me, Tyler. You made my dreams come true. I got to be rescued by my hero - twice. I fell in love with a wonderful man and he loved me back. I even got to meet a real vampire."

She squeezed his hand with an amazing amount of strength.

"You're the best thing that ever happened to me."

She swallowed, nearly choking on the pain. As darkness teased the edges of her vision, fear tried to overcome her, but she bravely chased it off one last time.

"I love you, Tyler."

"I cannot let you go. I cannot return to the empty existence that was mine before you brightened my life."

Tears began to course down his cheeks, his voice hoarse with emotion he had thought never to

experience.

"Please, love, stay with me."

In that minute that seemed like an eternity, Tyler asked himself the question that had plagued him since he had forced his blood into Marie's veins without her knowledge - Could he let her go if she chose true death over the life he offered?

With the blinding clarity born of his unselfish love for her he came to the realization that he would, indeed, honor her wishes, even if that meant condemning himself to a living hell on Earth without her.

Marie knew she was in shock because she was feeling so little pain. When the bullet had entered her chest, just before she had passed out, she had felt like one of the victims of the Hellraiser movies. Like her skin had been completely removed and turned inside-out. Now there was a kind of peace settling over her and she knew she was about to die. It would be so easy to just relax and go to sleep.

But, no matter how much her chest hurt from the damage Decker's bullet had caused, her heart ached more at the thought of leaving Tyler.

Tyler brought her hand to his lips and placed a gentle kiss in the palm. Seeing the tears in his eyes was all she needed to decide. She wouldn't leave him as long as she had any chance to stay. She would fight for every breath she could get, kicking and screaming till Death pried her from Tyler's arms!

"Don't...let...me...go."

Tyler had to place his ear above Marie's lips to hear her whispered words. His eyebrows raised in surprise, his chocolate eyes brightening with hope. He spoke clearly, giving her a last out before he made his next, irrevocable, move.

"Are you sure, my love?"

Weak as a newborn kitten now, all she could manage, as a reply was a single soft nod.

Marie's nod came just as Tyler heard her heart begin the irregular rhythm of impending death. Though he would have preferred to be gentle, to make love to her for hours, claiming her slowly, he had no time. With a violence born of fear, but tempered by love, he grabbed her shoulders and pulled her toward him, sinking his teeth into her throat as he slid his arms around her and held her pressed tightly to his chest. Her heart was barely pumping, but his unique teeth drew her blood into his veins, binding them forever.

Her body spasmed once in his arms, pleasure, and life, escaping on her soft sigh. Then she was still, her blood turning to the bitter gall of death. He withdrew his teeth, letting his lips linger on her throat in a lover's caress he knew she could not feel. With a ragged sigh, he laid her back on the bed and

closed her eyes, which had been staring at the world of Death.

Seeing her like that, so peaceful, he wondered in a moment of stark panic if he had been successful. Would she rise with the sunset or was she lost to him forever? And if he had been successful, could she do what was necessary to survive? Would killing others to live eventually destroy the inner beauty that he so loved in her, leaving her a dry hulk of mere existence? Should he hope for success, or failure? Sitting beside her peaceful body, he dropped back his head, ignoring the single tear that slid across his temple to disappear in the blonde hair of his short sideburn, and whispered, "Dear God, let her come back to me!"

Rising, he opened the door to the hall and yelled for Helmut. When his manservant appeared, Tyler instructed him to begin their emergency plan immediately, including accommodations for Marie. Surprise showed on Helmut's broad face, but he questioned nothing, just nodded and did as he was told.

Tyler began packing the most important items of his belongings. He knew that lieutenant Decker would arrive soon, and he had no intention of being here when that creature once again defiled his home. How he longed to feel that puny human's useless struggles as he...

Tyler's lips pulled back from his teeth in a vicious snarl. The lieutenant's appointment with a painful destiny would come soon enough, he would see to that personally. But for now he must concentrate on Marie's safety.

His snarl smoothing slowly to a smile, he thought of their future, realizing that with Marie's rebirth to the life of the vampire, he, too, would be reborn. Today, he would hold his beautiful lady in his arms while she slept. Then, with the sunset, he would awaken to an eternity of love with the one woman that completed his soul.

THE AWAKENING

Chapter 22

Darkness yawned before her, a seemingly endless, gentle darkness. No, wait; there was a light, a small light at the bottom of the blackness into which Marie seemed to be helplessly falling. The light was slowly getting brighter. She felt no pain, no fear, just confusion. How had she come to be here? Where was `here'?

Relaxing in the warm current of air that bathed her body, carrying her toward the light, she reached out, curious how that radiant beacon might feel if it touched her skin. Everything was perfect, except...something, someone was missing.

Something deep in her brain was trying to scream its message to her conscious mind. Frowning - at least, she thought she was frowning. Her body felt so strange she wasn't at all certain her brain's messages were reaching their intended destinations - Marie concentrated on that annoying little mind voice. What was it saying?

Tyler...

The whisper of a name. The tingle of a half-forgotten memory.

Tyler...

Soft brown eyes, glowing with the unshed tears of love and loss. Blonde hair like a crown of gold. Strength flowing into her body from the arms wrapped so tightly around her. The light was achingly bright now, its warmth and comfort so inviting. Marie sensed that all she had to do was reach out and the wonderful light would engulf her and carry her to a beautiful new existence.

An existence without Tyler.

Turning, she reached into the darkness at her back.

"Tyler!"

"I'm here, love."

She opened her eyes to gaze upon a blanket darkness dotted with tiny pinpoints of light. Had the light exploded at her audacity? Or were those...Stars! Blinking, trying to clear her mind and find reality, she turned her head and saw Tyler lying beside her, one arm pillowing her head, the other resting across her chest just below her breasts. His smile was glorious, but concern shone in his chocolate gaze.

"How do you feel?"

Marie closed her eyes, taking a mental inventory. Her chest didn't hurt anymore. That was a definite plus. She licked the roof of her mouth and pulled a face. It tasted like she had eaten something disgusting! Her muscles were a little stiff, as though she had run a long ways without a rest. And she was hungry. Ravenous!

She smiled and opened her eyes, running them lovingly over his handsome face and magnificent bare chest.

"I'm hungry."

Kermit the Frog had taken over her voice! She cleared her throat, and then tried again, happy to have quickly won the battle with the frog.

"I could eat a horse! And my mouth tastes like I already ate the hind end. Other than that, I feel fine."

She frowned.

"Only, I don't know where we are, and I don't remember how we got here."

She giggled weakly.

"So, other than the fact that I've lost my memory, and possibly my mind, I'm just fine. How are you?"

Tyler chuckled, the warm sound going a long way toward soothing her concerns, and pulled her more tightly into his arms, gently pushing her head against his chest.

"I have the feeling I will be answering your questions for eternity, since I doubt you will ever run out of curiosity."

She tried to pull her head away from his chest to glare up at him but he would have none of it, holding her fast. She settled for a gentle slap against his hard stomach as she voiced her indignation.

"Are you saying that's a bad thing? Curiosity is the sign of a quick, intelligent mind. My mother said so."

His chuckle tickled her fingertips as it rumbled through his chest.

"Probably as she was answering your thousandth question of the day."

He sobered a little, though she could still feel happiness emanating from his every pore.

"How much do you remember?"

Closing her eyes, Marie brought forth the last clear memory she had before waking up in Tyler's loving arms. Pain! She gasped and grabbed her chest, amazed that there was no wound. Tyler rubbed her back and made comforting sounds.

"Think, Marie, get past the pain."

Tyler's room, dark and warm. His handsome face was so full of grief and pain. Tears. Something...scary...her mind shied away from those images, and she didn't feel like fighting with it. Then, hot breath on her neck heralding ecstasy, her body exploding with intense pleasure. She couldn't remember falling asleep. Had she passed out? Once again, her mind shied from the truth. Disgusted, she shook her head.

"I can't remember. Did I pass out?"

Tyler took a deep breath, pushing aside his dread of her reaction to his next words. With his hands on her shoulders, he pulled her back so he could look into her eyes. The resignation she saw in his chocolate stare scared the daylights out of her.

"Lieutenant Decker shot me in the back as we parted company with him at the police station. The bullet went through me and entered your body here."

He brushed his fingers over a spot on her chest. She could see a pinkish circle in the flesh he had so lovingly caressed, roughly the size of a quarter. She raised her eyes to his, a silent plea shining in their depths, hoping this was all some sick joke, yet knowing, deep in her heart, that it was not.

His own pain at having failed her tightened his chest and choked his words till they were not much more than a whisper.

"I could not save you. The only life I could offer you was my own. You chose to stay with me."

The light of memory dawned in her quickly dilating pupils, the fear he had expected hot on its heels. When she tried to pull away, he tightened his arms, forcing her back against his chest. He wanted to give her what security he could offer, knowing her world was falling apart and realigning itself.

"No! No, no, no."

Her soft keening set his teeth on edge, the desire to *do* something making his muscles bunch and shake. He knew he could do nothing to alleviate the grief and pain she was feeling at the moment. He could only be there to comfort her, and answer her questions when they came. Holding her tightly, he rocked her in his arms like a baby, whispering soft words of comfort into her ear.

He knew how it felt to mourn one's own passing, if only from one life to another. It was something that had to be done before you could move on.

Well he remembered the night, long ago, when he had been walking in the woods of his lands and had come upon an old friend lying beneath the sheltering boughs a huge oak, sleeping soundly. They had been born the same year, played together as children, fought side by side as grown warriors. They had chased the same women, even caught a few. And now, there he was before Tyler, an old man.

Sick at heart, Tyler had wanted to kill his old friend for being so weak, so feeble, and so *old*.

Controlling his anger, he had turned and left, walking slowly through the forest until he realized he had no idea where he was headed. Sitting, he leaned against a tree and stared at the moon till its shadow remained in his vision even when he closed his eyes. Suddenly, he had realized what his new, seemingly perfect, existence meant, the loneliness, the dehumanization. That night he had wondered, as Marie had said, if he were still a man or, had, indeed, become an animal.

With noble bearing, he had finally stood, his back as straight as the tree behind him. He was neither man nor animal, but a perfect combining of the two. He was a superior being, as God had decreed at his birth, and again at his rebirth. He would walk the Earth, demanding, and taking, his due, ruling wherever he went. That night he had decided he must move on, and keep moving whenever his lack of deterioration began to make people uncomfortable.

Marie shifted in his arms, bringing him back to the present. She leaned back and looked at him with surprisingly calm eyes.

"Just so I don't jump to any incorrect conclusions," she took a deep breath, and then continued in a firm voice, "I'm a vampire, right?"

Slowly, gauging her response, he nodded. She swallowed hard. Sighing, she nodded crisply.

"Okay. Well, now that I've had the prerequisite mental breakdown that I guess is perfectly normal when one is told one has just died, I think we better get some things straight."

Tyler smiled. He had known Marie was strong and he was proud to find she was proving him correct. He braced himself for the deluge of questions to which he assumed her statement alluded.

She sat up in the bed, pulling the comforter with her to cover her nakedness, and leaned her back against the headboard. Tyler joined her in that position, turning toward her. With one hand she counted her points.

"One, I am not going to kill people. I don't care if it's going to be like being on a fat-free diet for the rest of forever, I just won't do it. Two, I am not going to live on your money. I have my own career and I don't intend to give it up just because I've become solarly disadvantaged."

Unable to contain himself, Tyler burst into laughter over that.

"Solarly disadvantaged?"

She grimaced at him, though the corners of her lips turned upwards, then continued as though she had not been interrupted.

"Three, I intend to finish that blasted house of yours. I am not going to throw away almost two months of my life, not to mention the dream of actually seeing my design take solid form."

His face shifted to a more stern expression.

"Marie, lieutenant Decker..."

"I know, lieutenant Decker is going to say that I'm an escaped convict. I'd like to see him explain how I could have ripped the bars off that window."

A dawning light entering her eyes, one dark eyebrow lifted and she turned to face him fully.

"Could I do that, now?"

A bit disgruntled that she might think herself as strong as he, Tyler gave her an indignant frown before answering.

"I was a warrior before I gained the powers of the vampire. I assure you, I am a great deal stronger than you, even with your new improved blood."

Marie found his pouty tone of injured pride endearing. She fluttered her fingertips lightly over his chest, smiling as his nipples tightened, and lowered her voice seductively.

"Of course you'll always be stronger than me, Tyler. I wouldn't have it any other way. All I meant was, am I stronger now?"

Narrowing his eyes, he gave a single, rather grudging, nod. She could tell by the firm set of his jaw and the thinning of his lips that he was still not placated. She looked up at him coyly from beneath her lashes.

"No matter how strong I am, I'll always need someone to get rid of the spiders for me."

Tyler held his serious expression about one second longer, then his face broke into a glorious smile that warmed her heart like a sunburst. He pulled her onto his lap, where he proceeded to kiss her breath away for several minutes. When he finally let her come up for air, she glared at him and said sternly.

"I wasn't through!"

"Forgive me. I was overcome by your beauty and irresistible sex appeal."

She frowned at his sarcasm, but a blush tinged her cheeks. She could tell by her position on his lap that he was only half joking.

"I intend to meet with Decker..."

She raised her hand to stop his interruption.

"...in a public place. I'll tell him if he doesn't sweep my involvement in all of this under the proverbial rug, I'll start a sexual harassment stink that will have his badge in my front pocket by the end of the year. After all, he did date me and he hasn't even tried to hide his jealousy of you. I'll just tell any and all who might want to listen that he threatened to arrest you, my boyfriend, on some trumped up charge if I didn't agree to have sex with him. And if he tries to use your being a vampire as an excuse,

he'll end up in a padded room with a teddy bear for company, one without plastic eyes that he might choke on. No matter how much he may want to nail your butt, I don't think he'll be willing to lose everything to do it. Oh, and by the way, you have got to get hold of yourself, Tyler."

He looked pointedly down at his crotch, and then raised both eyebrows in question. She blushed more deeply and smacked his arm.

"I'm serious, you incorrigible leech!"

"Thank you."

She slapped his arm again, playfully narrowing her eyes.

"You have to learn to control your temper. Look what trouble it's gotten us into."

His eyebrows shot up once again.

"Us?"

"Well, yeah, we're in this together now, you know. And if you go losing your temper and killing people left and right, we'll have to leave town before I can finish your house. I would *not* be a happy camper if that happened."

Looking somewhat chagrined, Tyler nodded, his tone only slightly more serious.

"You're right, I should be more circumspect in respect to my dining companions. I shall endeavor to do so in the future."

"You know, you could just not kill people. Then you wouldn't have to worry about bodies being found."

"True. Then all I would have to worry about is composite drawings of my handsome face circulating all over the country. Women these days tend to take it amiss when a man grabs them and bites their neck, even if it does give them the best orgasm of their lives."

Jealousy flared in her azure eyes as she slapped him again, this time on the chest. He laughed and pulled her against him.

"You are the only woman in my heart, Marie, and it will always be thus."

His hands began a slow exploration of her lower back, his intent obvious in his darkening eyes and quickening breath. Once again she pushed away from him, bringing the disgruntled frown she had expected.

"I still have a few questions."

Tyler sighed.

"Love, if I wait to make love to you until you have no more questions, I shall be a very old man."

Her mischievous smile warned him he was not going to like her next words.

"Aren't you that already?"

She giggled as he lightly slapped her butt.

"Imp!"

He rolled his eyes and ground his teeth as he watched more questions light behind her eyes, then roll off her tongue.

"What's your real name? I mean, I'm sure you have to use aliases all the time. How do you keep track of them? It would be so embarrassing to forget who you are today. Like the guy in that movie 'The Stepfather', you know, when he asked himself, 'Who am I?' Do you...um!"

She made a sound of extreme discontent as he placed his hand over her mouth, her eyes wide with annoyance.

"You have to let me answer once in a while, sweet, or I might forget some of the questions. After all, I have no scorecard with which to keep track."

He chuckled when he released her face and saw the thin line of her lips. How he loved her temper!

"The name with which I was baptized is Tylerian Alain Florescu. I never use an alias - a false name - I merely use variations of my true name. In the recent past, I have been adding Roman numerals and becoming my own son, grandson, and so on. Tedious, but I only need remember what number I am today, and that rarely comes up in polite conversation. And, no offense, my love, but you have questionable taste in movies."

"That was a good movie!"

"Do you ever watch anything that doesn't have screaming as the main element of its soundtrack?"

She straightened, reminding Tyler of a kitten in full fluff.

"Of course I do! I saw Hamlet - Mel Gibson is such a hunk, and Much Ado About Nothing - I liked Keanu better with long hair."

His deepening chuckle earned him another glare.

"What?"

"Your desire for culture seems to have a direct connection to your libido. Now, before you waste all that glorious anger on such an insignificant thing as entertainment, or lack thereof, why don't you ask me another question."

She crossed her arms over her chest, a move that raised and gathered her breasts and drove him

to the brink of a loss of control he was certain she would find offensive.

"Fine! How did you learn to fly?"

His skin darkened - she wasn't certain whether with a blush of embarrassment or a flush of anger - and he spoke in a lecturing tone she had found he sometimes used when he was covering emotion.

"When I had been reborn only a few months, I found myself in a rather sticky situation. It seems a commoner took offense at finding me in his bed with his wife."

"Imagine that."

He smiled, not an ounce of apology in his eyes.

"In order to avoid damaging the man - after all, he did have a legitimate enough argument with the situation - I exited quickly through the window and ran into the woods. This was an area unknown to me and I should have been more careful, but the angry husband, pitchfork in hand, was in rather hot pursuit and I felt it prudent to keep out of his reach. Unfortunately, this was the first time I had run anywhere since my rebirth as a vampire."

The fascination of a young man discovering his immortality shone in his eyes and his voice softened.

"I couldn't believe how fast I could run. I felt like the wind, able to go wherever I pleased, as fast as I pleased. It was glorious."

His expression returned abruptly to the present as he rolled his eyes in disgust.

"Until I ran off a cliff I hadn't known was there. Suddenly, I was falling. Seeing the very sharp rocks coming at me at an incredible speed, my mind screamed `up'! And I began to rise."

He shrugged.

"It took me a while to perfect it so that I could actually fly - direct myself from one place to another - but it was that simple. I just had to want it."

"You're very spoiled."

His grin was roguish.

"I know."

"Where are we?"

He blinked once; wondering if he would ever acclimate to her sudden subject changes, then answered her question.

"A house in Laurel Canyon that is owned by one of my businesses. It would take days, and a very sophisticated computer system, to trace it to me. I do not plan for us to stay here that long.

And, before you have another dander attack, I purchased it already built. I was very impressed by

the skylight."

Raising her eyes, she once again admired the blanket of stars that spread across the ceiling above them. Looking around with a more critical eye, she found the blinds that moved on an electric track to cover the skylight. She also noticed the lack of curtains on this bed.

"Those blinds keep out enough light for you?"

He shook his head.

"Hardly. But this is Hollywood, the land of the unusual. Notice that this bed rests in what I believe is called a `conversation pit'?"

Now that he mentioned it, she could just make out the edge of the floor above them. She nodded, curiosity furrowing her brow.

"The man who had this house built wanted to be able to see the stars at night while he lay in bed with the bimbo of the hour. He also wanted to entice said bimbos to his house by having wild parties, with a large dance floor. So..."

He took a remote control from the side of the bed and pushed a button. A panel slowly made its way from one side of the edge of the conversation pit to the opposite side, closing the bed in total darkness. As soon as it touched, he pushed a button and it reversed. As it eased back into its casing, he continued his explanation.

"To the room above it looks as though the floor is unbroken. The panel is reinforced steel, bulletproof. When closed, three feet of it rests in the receptacle on either side, making it very sturdy. No light enters, even if the room above is flooded with sunlight. I felt most fortunate that the man was willing to part with it."

"Why did he sell such a neat place?"

"He was concerned about the remote location, in terms of safety. I assured him that I have extremely good security."

"Why do I get this image of you lying in wait for a burglar, practically drooling in anticipation?"

His feigned expression of hurt was comical.

"You wound me. I do not drool. Often. And then only when sorely pressed."

Marie jumped in surprise when her stomach growled, then raised her eyes to his and blushed.

"I told you I was hungry. It's awful. I'm craving a chocolate doughnut, thanks to that creep, Decker. Aren't I supposed to crave blood?"

Her question was met with an indulgent smile.

"Sweetheart, you are quite capable of eating solid food. The hunger for blood came quickly to

me; but, as I have said, I was a warrior, a predator in my own right. A craving for blood, the blood of my enemies, had been mine for many years. It was a very small change to desire it flowing down my throat instead of onto my land.

You should find a small selection of food in the kitchen. If nothing there suits you, I will either wake Mrs. Schwartz to cook or Helmut will drive to town and purchase whatever you might desire. I think you should stay inside until you have grown more accustomed to the unique abilities of your new blood. The sensory overload of the city would be quite unpleasant if you were not prepared for it."

Marie started to rise from her place on his lap but a hand sliding up her thigh to cup the most sensitive place at the apex of her legs brought her up short. She gasped and fell back, her eyes wide with surprise, going to Tyler's face. She was immediately caught in the web of desire that lit his near-black gaze, a willing fly succumbing to the seduction of a beautiful spider. His voice was a breath of fire on her suddenly over-sensitized nerves.

"Your hunger can wait. First, I want to join with you, body and soul. I have never before given the gift of my blood, never found a woman with whom I would wish to spend eternity. You are the mate of my soul, my completion."

He released her and spread his arms; his eyes demanding what she yearned to give.

"Come to me, my heart. Sheath me, possess me. I give you all that I am and will ever be."

She went into his arms then, wrapping her own around him as tightly as her newfound strength would allow and holding on for dear life.

Chapter 23

"Find him, damn it! He didn't just disappear off the face of the Earth!"

Detective Benedict, the poor schmuck who hadn't had enough seniority to get out of the assignment, had been tagged by Decker to assist in his search for the abducted 'prisoner'. He'd been on the job for twenty-four hours straight and his wish that he'd called in sick today was becoming a certainty that he would be doing so tomorrow, and he would be telling the truth.

From the minute Decker had walked out of the that interrogation room after firing at the abductor of Miss Parker - his explanation of what had gone on in that room was still under investigation - the lieutenant had been riding everyone within yelling distance to get him some piece of information that he could use to find Tyler Alan.

What the young detective didn't know was that Decker was choking on his own guilt. He shouldn't have fired with Marie that close and he knew it. Had known it, if he were honest with himself, even as he pulled the trigger. But when Alan had just levitated like some kind of special effects movie scene, Decker had lost all thought except to stop him before he could get away with Marie.

That fact that he might have hit Marie was chewing a hole in his gut. Why hadn't she screamed, called out for help? Had she already been hurt, had Alan made her bleed before Decker had ever arrived? Could he have bitten her...? Decker shook his head. He didn't know, and that, along with about a thousand other questions, was slowly driving him crazy.

He felt out of his league and he didn't have the foggiest idea where to find a pinch-hitter that would stand a chance.

Benedict stared at a computer screen with eyes that had begun to blur several hours ago. He spoke cautiously to the lieutenant, not wanting to wake the sleeping lion that seemed to lay in wait behind Decker's eyes.

"Lieutenant, it looks like one of Alan's companies owns property in just about every state, and several other countries. The number you had for him is being answered by some secretary. She says all she's been told is he's out of the country and unable to be reached. Do you want to leave a message?"

Decker gave a frustrated snort as he turned from his own computer screen to glare at the young detective. There was more gravel than voice coming from his throat as he berated Benedict.

"He's a fugitive, detective - and I'm usin' that rank real loosely - what the hell kind of *message* would you suggest?"

Benedict looked at the floor and shrugged dejectedly. Decker took a deep breath and let it out slowly, shaking his head as he rubbed his forehead with his fingertips. Maybe he was riding the kid a little hard. Benedict would make a good cop once he got a little of the green wizened out of him.

"Benedict, you're doin' fine. This whole thing has everybody a little frazzled. It's not every day that a suspect just flies out of a holding cell. Not even in LA."

His world-weary grin got an answering smile from the earnest young man.

"Dig deeper, track down the subsidiaries, and see what they own. Find the slime under Mr. Alan's slick exterior. Stick close to LA. I've got a feeling he's still nearby."

His voice dropped and he spoke mainly to himself as he turned back to his own console.

"I don't think he'll leave town till he pays me one last visit."

With a look of grim determination, lieutenant Decker went back to making phone calls and punching computer keys.

Marie was surprised that even though it was still dark, Tyler had fallen asleep after they made love.

"Some things never change," she mumbled to herself as she climbed from the bed and made her way to the kitchen. Just as she thought, there was not a single chocolate doughnut - or anything else chocolate, for that matter - to be found in the whole place. That just wouldn't do. She *really* wanted chocolate!

Looking out the windows that seemed to be everywhere, she wondered how far they were from a store. It couldn't be that far. After all, this was America, land of the convenience store. If she walked a couple of blocks, she was sure to find something to soothe the chocoholic in her soul.

Returning to the main room of the lower level, the room that contained the huge, disappearing conversation pit, she smiled at Tyler's sleeping form. He was so very handsome. Small drops of sweat still clung to his pale skin, making it shine in the pale moonlight. She shivered as she remembered him throwing back his head, exertion-dampened hair flying, his deep voice rending the air with the culmination of his passion. For a brief moment, she considered crawling back into bed and waking him in a very suggestive fashion. Then her stomach grumbled its annoyance at having been ignored for so long and she decided she needed sustenance before she could handle another bout of decadence with her lover.

Clothes. Now there was an interesting dilemma. Had Tyler brought along anything for her to wear? Blushing, she remembered how very much he seemed to prefer her naked. But that just wouldn't

do for a midnight chocolate raid of the neighborhood Sev.

Snooping, she wandered through a set of double doors into a large room with an attached bath. She was pretty sure the original designer had intended this as the master bedroom. Her eyes widened at the size of the walk-in closet. She had seen smaller apartments! Flipping on the closet light switch - good grief, what size light bulb did they have in there? 500? - she found what she had been looking for - Tyler's clothes.

Sliding several hangers over the metal bar, she chose her ensemble with a humorously critical eye. Pulling a black silk shirt over her head, she giggled when she found that it reached almost to her knees. His slacks were even more of a joke, hanging on her like an old person's skin. She cinched the belt to its tightest setting, rolled up the pant legs five times, then got the shock of her life when she turned to inspect herself in the full-length mirror that covered one end of the closet.

Instead of the reflection of a little girl dressed up in her daddy's clothes, there was...nothing, no reflection at all.

For one crystal moment, reality threatened to crash down around Marie's ears, sending her screaming into the night, her sanity in shreds around her feet. She stepped forward, her feet feeling as if they were slogging through oily mud, and slowly reached out to touch the mirror. The silvered surface felt cold and uncomfortable in a way she didn't understand, as if it could burn her with its frigidity. Pulling away, she stared in awe at the smudge her finger left behind. Still, the mirror showed no sign of her presence, reflecting only the inside of the closet.

Closing her eyes to shut out the bizarre mirror, Marie decided she would take the Scarlett O'Hara path and think about this tomorrow. Right now she was hungry, and she never had done her best thinking on an empty stomach. She knew she was copping out, but she really wanted Tyler with her to help her deal with her feelings as she confronted her new life. Until he was available, she would deal with her more immediate needs, like chocolate.

Since she couldn't imagine trying to walk anywhere in Tyler's shoes, she was thankful to find her own white sandals in one corner of the closet. A quick inspection showed her the spots where blood had been hastily wiped from the thin straps. Shuddering, she shrugged with her usual pragmatism and slipped them on, buckling the ankle straps. She was definitely going to have to do something about her wardrobe.

Tyler was shifting restlessly when she entered the main room. She frowned and rose up on tiptoes, walking as quietly as possible. If Tyler woke up, he was sure to insist that he knew best, but she didn't want Helmut to go get her something to eat, she wanted to get it herself. She had decided this was

going to be an adventure and she didn't want Tyler to talk her out of it.

She grimaced as she tried to sneak out the front door, the squeak of the hinges sounding like a drum roll to her ears. Peeking around the door, she was relieved to find no blonde head rising above the conversation pit. Tyler had probably learned to screen out sounds that didn't matter, but how did he decide what was important and what could be ignored? She'd have to remember to ask him about that.

Carefully closing the door, she smiled proudly. She had made good her escape.

Turning away from the door, she froze in her tracks and gasped. The outside world was so alive she could hardly take it all in. There must be a million little night creatures moving around out there, each making its own unique sounds. Crickets chirped, worms wriggled, beetles scurried, owls hooted and fluffed their wings, and a hundred other things she couldn't even identify carried on the noises of their lives.

Tyler had warned her about this 'sensory overload' and, as usual, he had been right. It was almost overpowering. She leaned back against the door and put her hands over her ears, the dampening effect helping her to collect her senses. He had said it would be worse in the city. No doubt! She could barely imagine how much noise all those people must create. She'd go crazy!

Taking several deep breaths, she remembered visiting Nancy, a friend of hers who ran a day care center. The cacophony of seven children in the same small room had caused every muscle in Marie's body to stiffen within minutes of her arrival. When she had mentioned it, Nancy had just smiled and told her that you quickly learned to screen out the unimportant screams and wails, responding only to the sounds that meant pain or fear. Marie had asked how she could tell which were which. Nancy had pointed to her ear and said, "Listen." Marie had decided at that moment that Nancy was either the wisest, or the craziest, woman who's acquaintance she had ever had the pleasure of making.

But now, with the screams and wails of another world threatening her sanity, Marie drew on the wise advice of her friend. She closed her eyes and listened, slowly canceling out one noise at a time, until, after several long minutes - or were they hours? - she had it under control. She knew what belonged and, in her mind, it all blended together to become the soft background soundtrack to life. She realized then that people did that every day, tuning out the unimportant sounds around them, they just didn't know they were doing it.

Becoming a vampire was like being a baby again. She had to learn how to deal with sights and sounds and smells as though she were experiencing them for the first time; which, essentially, she was. Everything was brighter, louder, and more intense.

Head held high, quite proud of herself, she began her jaunt in search of chocolate. Reaching the

end of the driveway she examined the canyon road before her. Deciding the store would be downhill, she turned left and set out at a fast walk. She remembered what Tyler had said about running. She'd keep that sensation for later, no need to get greedy on her first night out.

Time passed as she began to enjoy just being alive. She smiled at a squirrel as it poked its head out of its hole in a roadside tree, amazed that she could see it, let alone hear its heart begin to beat faster as it spotted her. She felt a strange sensation, as though someone were watching her. Curious, she stopped and scanned the woods at the side of the road. Narrowing her eyes, she spied a tiny fawn, no more than a few weeks old, lying motionless in the tall grass several yards from the road. It had been left alone by its mother while she went to tend to some deer business. Fascinated, Marie realized that she had found the tiny wonder by sensing the heat of its little body. Smiling, she shook her head in amazement at these newfound senses, and proceeded with her stroll.

She heard it long before she saw it. An old pick-up truck that had seen better days came around a bend in the road behind her, its headlights making the scenery before her flare like a flashbulb going off. She stepped to the side of the road to let it pass, and then curiously glanced sideways when it pulled up alongside her.

The man in the driver's seat was about fifty, though he was not holding up well. Too much alcohol and nicotine had conspired with an ugly disposition to prematurely age him. He smiled at her, showing cigarette-yellowed teeth and the eyes of a scavenger, and she felt her stomach tighten with the first pangs of fear.

The window on the passenger side was down - whether out of choice or disrepair, she didn't know - and he spoke to her with a vocal leer.

"Hey, sweet cheeks, wanna party?"

Great, he was drunk. And he smelled like he hadn't bathed in about a decade. Tightening her lips over the urge to cough, Marie realized these new senses could be a bit of a nuisance at times.

Her mother had told her that if she just ignored bullies they would usually leave her alone and go looking for more timid prey. Keeping her eyes on the road ahead, she continued walking as though he hadn't spoken to her.

No such luck.

"Hey, you deaf? I'm talkin' to you."

Figures. He had to be the type that got belligerent if you ignored him. Thanks, Mom.

Okay, she'd try a different tact. Using her most polite business voice, Marie looked him right in the eye as she rebuked him.

"I am not interested in a ride, a date, or anything else that you might have in mind. Please drive on."

She pointedly picked up her pace, once again staring straight ahead, hoping he would get the message. As the engine revved and the truck sped up, she breathed a sigh of relief that he was leaving.

That lasted about two seconds, which was how long it took him to swerve in front of her, blocking her immediate path, slam on the brakes, and cut the ignition.

He climbed, none too steadily, from the truck and began walking toward her. His smile had turned even uglier, predatory. Marie stopped, her mind running through, and discarding, several escape plans at once. She could turn and run, but he might catch her and the chase would have revved his engine even more. She could scream, but would anyone hear her out here in the sticks? She could try kicking him in the groin, but what if she missed?

"Uppity, huh? I know how to fix that, baby. When I'm done with ya, you won't be thinkin' you're better'n me, that's fer sure."

He reached for her as she took a frightened step backward, his hand closing painfully on her shoulder. She started to say something, still trying to diffuse the situation with words, then gasped as he grabbed the back of her head and pulled her toward him.

"Take him!"

The voice she knew so well seemed to come from all around them. With a grunted, "huh?" her would-be attacker tipped his head back, looking into the treetops above their heads. The action exposed the vulnerable skin of his throat to her, and she noticed how his pulse increased with his surprise. Suddenly, she remembered what she had so recently become, knew what Tyler wanted from her. She didn't have to be afraid; she could kill this simpleton with one quick nip. But she didn't want to kill him, that wouldn't teach him a thing. Maybe being on the receiving end of bullying for once would change his view of life.

Shifting her weight to one foot, she brought the other down hard on his instep. She grimaced as she heard the crack, and then nearly had to cover her ears as he screamed and backed away from her.

"Take him, Marie!"

She quickly scanned her immediate vicinity in a vain attempt to locate Tyler, but even using all her senses, she couldn't be certain exactly where he was hiding. Boy, he was good.

Returning her attention to the redneck bully before her, she slammed her open palms against the man's chest, pushing him toward his truck. Once again, she heard the unexpected sound of bones breaking. With a comical expression of betrayal, she looked at her own hands, and then shrugged. In a

slightly apologetic tone, she said, "Guess I don't know my own strength."

She pointed toward the pile of rusty metal that passed for transportation.

"You'd better get your sorry butt out of here before I really lose my temper!"

With the look of fear that he had always loved seeing on his victims contorting his own face, her victim turned and ran toward the sanctuary that his truck had become. None of the other women he had brutalized in his life, and there had been quite a few, had ever dared to fight back, let alone actually hurt him. Had the whole damn world gone crazy!

Suddenly, a dark shape dropped from the trees directly in his path. He might not have stopped of his own accord, but the steel-like fingers that clamped around his throat took that choice from him. He was lifted into the air, and his pain-and-fear-fogged mind wondered if he had just crossed Darth Vader.

"Tyler, no!"

His eyes red with fury, teeth bared, Tyler met Marie's frightened and angry glare. His voice was an inhuman growl.

"Why? Why do you defend this piece of offal? He is your prey."

She began walking toward him, not at all sure what she would do once she got within arm's reach, but feeling a need to *do* something.

"He's a human being, Tyler - barely, granted - but still human. He doesn't deserve to die just because he decided I'd make a good party girl. He's scared. Maybe he'll think twice next time he decides to force the issue."

The man's choking sounds were becoming less noticeable, an indication that he was losing life fast. Forcing more command into her voice than she felt, she hoped she wasn't pushing her luck.

"Let him go, Tyler."

Contemptuously, Tyler dropped him to the ground at her feet. She breathed a sigh of relief, thinking this confrontation over.

"Take him!"

It was a command that warriors of hundreds of years ago would have jumped to obey, fear of Lord Florescu's wrath overriding any other consideration. She met his eyes, their blazing depths freezing her where she stood. For the first time she noticed that his hair was unbound, flaring around his face like a flaming halo. He narrowed his eyes and commanded her once again.

"He is our prey. Take him!"

Anger flooded her veins, overpowering any residual fear. How dare he order her like some kind of servant! She smacked her hands onto her hips and tossed her head like an angry stallion.

"No!"

His eyes never leaving her face, he stepped over the nearly unconscious man and, grabbing her shoulders, gave her a single, sharp shake. His lips were scant inches from her face, his breath hot on her cheeks, as his voice dropped to a whisper from the bowels of Hell.

"You dare defy me?"

Though her heart was lodged quite thoroughly in her throat, she managed to answer with an amazing amount of determination.

"I won't kill anyone! I told you that and I meant it!"

"You are a vampire. Like it or not, you must feed. He is the perfect victim. A drunken fool who ran his truck off the road, where it burst into flames."

He gave her another shake to emphasize his words.

"It is time you learned that your stubborn nature cannot dictate to Fate. You must feed!"

Glaring up into his blazing red eyes, she felt the sharp tips of her canine teeth emerging, but ignored the new sensation in the face of her current anger.

"I will not kill defenseless human beings. *I* am not a monster!"

Tyler straightened, the barb of her words slicing directly through his heart. He released her shoulders and retraced his steps over the prone man, his eyes still blazing. But the anger now shielded some other emotion that made Marie's heart ache. She started to say something - she was sorry? - but Tyler's sudden actions stopped her. Giving no warning, he bent and slid his arms under the redneck's shoulders and knees. With the smooth, seemingly effortless movements of a jungle cat, he raised the man into the air, and then lowered him sharply onto his bent knee. At the sickening snap her stomach gave an answering lurch.

Tyler lowered the groaning man to the ground with unexpected gentleness and care, and then spoke to her in a soft imperious voice.

"Feed, or leave him to die slowly in exquisite agony. With either choice, in some eyes, you become a monster."

Stunned to temporary paralysis by his actions, she watched dumbly as Tyler rose slowly into the night. In the blink of an eye, he was gone.

She slowly dropped her gaze to the man at her feet. He was not much more than a crumpled heap, resembling a pile of laundry in desperate need of cleaning. The sounds of pain and fear coming from his throat added to her nausea, as did his pitiful attempts to crawl toward his truck. When he finally realized that the bottom half of his body was not cooperating with the top, he raised shock-dulled eyes to

her face. His voice was filled with quiet wonder.

"He broke me."

Tears beginning to blur her vision, Marie nodded.

"Ya gotta help me. I need a doctor or somethin'."

Hope flared quickly in Marie. Sure, she could run back to Tyler's house, or maybe to that store that had to be just around the next bend in the road, and call 911. Help would come and...Who was she trying to kid? Nobody could help this poor fool. His back was broken. Still, that didn't have to be a lethal injury. Medical journals were filled with cases of miraculous recoveries from back injuries, some people even going on to live normal lives. If he were carefully moved, taken to a hospital, he would live. He might never walk again, or, she thought with a small smile, ever be able to assault another woman.

What a strange path justice sometimes follows.

She knelt by his side, leaning as close as she could stand to his stench so he would be sure to hear her.

"I'm going for help. You should lie as still as possible. I'll be right back."

She practically jumped to her feet. Turning, she made the decision to return to Tyler's place, since she was fairly certain he would have his cellular phone with him. She couldn't be sure how far she might have to run to find a store. Of course, she couldn't be sure Tyler would let her use his phone. She would fight him for it if she had to!

Running was an amazing experience even in this night fraught with eye-opening experiences. As soon as she gave her feet the order to run, she seemed to be flying across the pavement. The wind created by the sheer speed at which she ran blew her long auburn hair over her shoulders, as though she were traveling in a convertible. She felt invulnerable, unbeatable. No one could ever catch her. She was the wind, free to fly anywhere her mind directed.

Sheepishly, she realized she had run past Tyler's driveway. Quite some distance past, like a couple of miles. Turning, she retraced her steps more slowly, still nearly bursting through the door of Tyler's canyon hideaway. She ran into the main room, scanning the vicinity for traces of Tyler and finding herself rather relieved when she didn't find any. She really didn't want to have to fight with him since she was certain he was much better at it.

Spotting a phone on the wall in the kitchen seemed like the answer to her prayers. She quickly pulled the receiver to her ear and stabbed the three life-saving numbers. Nothing. She looked at the phone in her hand and realized there had been no dial tone. The phone was dead, as dead as her redneck assailant would be if she didn't get help soon. In frustration, she tossed the phone at the wall, jumping

back when it exploded into pieces as it struck the wall. Unknown strength again.

Obviously, she was going to have to risk a confrontation with Tyler if she wanted to be of any help to that poor man lying in the road.

"Tyler!"

She was about to begin the search for him that she had hoped to avoid when the sky outside the windows lit with an eerie glow. A second later, a loud boom shook the glass. Startled, Marie flew to the door and on out into the night. In her heart, she knew what the distant glow rising above the treetops meant, but she desperately wanted to deny it.

"Tyler!"

"You needn't yell."

She whipped around to find him right behind her, leaning casually against the doorframe, arms crossed over his broad chest. The upward, slightly sideways tilt of his chin told her as no words could that he was holding himself away from her in his most aristocratic manner.

She was seeing red and it wasn't all the burning sky.

"What is that?"

She pointed toward the faint glow to the west.

"I repeat, you needn't yell."

His narrowed eyes and sepulchral tone gave clear warning that she had better stop yelling, this instant. She lowered her voice one or two decibels, speaking in a fierce enough tone that he would know she was still angry.

"What is burning, Tyler?"

He arched one brow, his tone droll, as though he were terribly bored with the conversation.

"Surely, you know. You didn't think I would let that buffoon live when he could identify us. No doubt, Lt Decker would have arrived with the sun."

He shook his head, his golden hair shimmering in the moonlight. His pat-the-little-girl-on-the-head attitude was making her want to slap his face. She continued her interrogation in an angry, accusatory tone.

"What did you do?"

He tilted his head to the other side, his brow climbing higher.

Marie's lips drew back from her teeth in anger, sending both of Tyler's eyebrows into peaks of sarcastic surprise. The corners of his perfectly formed lips turned upwards in a taunting smile.

"Temper, temper. If anyone, other than myself, of course, were to see such a toothy snarl, they

might think you a," his eyes narrowed, voice dropping dangerously as he drew out the word, "monster."

She winced and dropped her eyes to the ground in shame. She really hadn't meant to hurt Tyler with that 'monster' comment. It had just come out that way. Oh, how she wished she had perfected the practice of engaging her brain before setting her mouth in gear!

Raising her eyes to meet his, she was unsurprised to find that his dark gaze was still empty, businesslike. Her voice softened, reflecting her regret.

"Tyler, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"I admire your ability to speak your mind."

She shook her head in confused frustration.

"But I didn't mean it. I don't think you're a monster. I just...oh, I don't know!"

She ground her teeth, trying to find the right words to explain her feelings, even though she didn't completely understand them herself.

"You can be so darned autocratic sometimes. You make me so furious I just want to strike out at you any way I can. I told you I wasn't going to kill anyone, but you still tried to force me to do it your way. Why, Tyler, why can't I just nibble on people?"

He had her wrapped in his arms and pressed tightly against his body before her brain registered that he had moved. His breath was hot on the skin of her cheeks as he ran his eyes lovingly over her face before trapping her eyes with his molten gaze.

"Do you think I want any man to experience the kind of pleasure you can give and live to remember it?"

His arms tightened around her, driving all but the shallowest breath from her body. His eyes blazed with passion and possession.

"You are mine! The thought of another man touching you, even to become your prey, makes my blood boil! I watched you with that disgusting creature on the road, protecting you, waiting for your anger to drive you to take him. When you knelt beside him, I thought I would explode with fury!"

His lips closed on hers, bruising yet claiming, possessing, loving. She responded in kind, the events of the night temporarily forgotten in the passion of his embrace. She could feel the hard proof of his desire pressed against her lower body. How wonderful it felt to be so very wanted by such a powerful, exciting man. He slowly licked her lips, his hot breath fanning the moisture, the sensation of cool on heat making her shiver with nothing even resembling cold. He kissed her until all strength left her limbs and she went limp in his arms.

Lifting her into his arms, he carried her into the house, his lips never leaving her skin. He kissed

her eyes, nose and chin. She shivered again as his lips slowly traced the line of her jaw. He ran the tip of his tongue over the heat of her throat eliciting a moan from deep within her. She wondered if a woman could have an orgasm just lying in a man's arms. She could barely catch her breath to plead for mercy.

"Tyler, please! I'm...I...I need you!"

He stepped into the pit and laid her gently on the bed. She had no intention of waiting for him to undress her after he finished tossing his clothes all over the room. She was ready for him when he lay down beside her, his naked skin gleaming against the black sheets. Her hands slid over his chest, down his rock-hard stomach to the other rock that was quickly becoming the center of her universe. She had never before wanted a man inside of her, actually ached for it, until now.

She was not prepared for him to lie back on the bed, his body relaxed, his lips curling softly upward. Frustration made her words sharp.

"What are you doing?"

His deep male chuckle was one more caress on nerves that didn't feel like they could take much more without release.

"I find your impatience quite flattering."

She blushed very becomingly, turning his smile radiant.

"Fear not, my love, I will enter your magnificent body soon enough. But first, I will tell you how you are to feed. I am the predator, love; you - my mate."

His eyes finding, and holding, her gaze, he pushed the hair from his neck, exposing his strong, pale throat. In a deep growl, he commanded her.

"Drink from me, my heart. I am all that you will ever need."

Swallowing hard, she realized that she was hungry, but in a different way. It was a hunger like none she had ever felt. More than just a nagging ache in the pit of her stomach, this hunger was like a burning need flowing through her veins. She no longer wanted chocolate. She wanted something...

Her eyes strayed to the pulse beating in Tyler's throat and she felt pulled toward him like magnet to steel. She wanted what he was offering.

"Will I hurt you?"

His soft smile was so full of love it brought tears to her eyes.

"No, love, you will not hurt me."

"What if I take too much? What if...?"

The touch of his fingertip to her lips silenced her endless questions.

"Trust me."

He closed his eyes and tilted his chin up to more fully expose his throat to her hungry, frightened eyes. His voice dropped to a desire-filled whisper.

"Kiss me, my heart."

With her usual dramatic aplomb Marie decided that if she were going to do this thing - and even her stubborn pride was finally willing to admit that she needed to eat - she was going to do it all the way. Without warning him - men could be so touchy when it came to anything they perceived as physical dominance - she raised herself over Tyler's prone form, straddling his hips with her knees. His eyes flew open in surprise, but as her hand closed around his passion-swollen shaft, they darkened with the realization of her intent. He lay still as she lowered her body, impaling herself on his hard flesh, but his fingers clawed deep furrows into the mattress.

"You..try..my..control!"

He was sweating profusely in his struggle not to grab her shoulders and pull her beneath him, driving himself to release within her body. She leaned forward, the pleasure shining in her eyes.

"Then don't control yourself. For once, Tyler, just let go."

He was shaking now, his breathing harsh and shallow. Once again, he closed his eyes and raised his chin, offering his life to his lady.

As his love's lips closed on his throat telling him that she had accepted his solution and would therefore be safe as long as he provided for her, he relaxed, giving himself over to the sensations devastating his body. When her sharp teeth pierced his flesh, his back arched of its own accord, driving his shaft deeper into Marie's welcoming flesh. A scream of pleasure so perfectly combined with pain that no one could tell where one began and the other ended escaped his lips. Bright lights flashed on the movie screen of his closed eyelids. She slowly rocked her hips as her muscles began their age-old massage on his achingly hard flesh. He wrapped his arms around her, one hand holding her head to his throat, and moaned as wave after wave of rapture shook him, a pleasure so intense he thought he would surely die of it.

When she would have moved away from him out of inexperienced fear of draining him, his hand on the back of her head held her firm. Another roller coaster crest of pleasure took her, contracting every muscle in her body, then it slowly allowed her to glide down the other side. She relaxed over his body, vaguely aware of his hand tangled in her hair pulling her away from his throat. Wondering if it were hard for him to breath, she decided he'd move her if he weren't just as comfortable as she.

She had never felt so completely satisfied. There were not enough words in the English language to explain it. She was full, as though she had just finished a seven-course dinner of all her favorite foods.

She felt like she had just had the best orgasm of her life - twice! She was enveloped in the arms of the magnificent man who had become her other half, completing her like the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle. Everything, everything in the universe, was perfect.

Sleep enveloped Marie like a warm fur blanket.

Chapter 24

The slumber of a vampire was nothing like Marie had thought it would be. It was like...well...sleep. She dreamed about doing the laundry and other inconsequential stuff. Then she had a doozy of a nightmare about the redneck from the truck reaching out to her from an open grave, saying she belonged in there with him. The biggest surprise came when she awoke with a start from that little ditty and found Tyler looking at her with concern furrowing his blonde brow. The cover was closed over their bed, making it difficult for her see more than a few inches in front of her face.

"Is it night-time?"

He pulled her into his arms as a yawn escaped his control.

"Excuse me. No, little one, the sun still shines. Did you have a bad dream?"

He smoothed her hair away from her forehead, brushing his lips ever-so-gently over the exposed flesh.

"How come we're awake if it isn't dark outside?"

His chest rumbled with his chuckle.

"Vampires can function in the daytime. Most choose to remain abed because it's safe there. I usually sleep five or six hours a day, then find ways to amuse myself until sundown. Some of the daytime talk shows are quite fascinating. Did you know there are real vampires stalking the earth? Several of them were on Oprah, or Geraldo - one of that ilk. I was tempted to call and ask how they had arrived at the studio in the middle of the day. I resisted."

Marie smiled against his chest and, wrapping her arms around his waist, gave him a little squeeze. She felt his sigh of contentment.

"Unfortunately, this house is not equipped for daytime play. It is a safe house, here for emergencies. Helmut is in the process of securing our passage out of the country as we speak. How does Rio sound?"

Marie sat up so suddenly he blinked in surprise. She didn't bother to keep the sheet wrapped around her, forgetting all modesty in her current temper.

"Did you hear anything I said last night?"

He raised both eyebrows in question, openly enjoying the view of her breasts rising and falling in anger.

"I told you I want to finish your house. I want to continue my career. Does any of this sound familiar?"

He nodded, his indulgent expression making her palm itch to slap him. His tone of teacher-to-child didn't help.

"I understand your reluctance to leave your home. The first time is never easy, but you will get used to it with practice. It is best not to stay in any one place for more than twenty or thirty years. Even in LA people will begin to notice your lack of aging. No plastic surgeon is that good."

When she didn't respond to his joke, Tyler sighed and sat up to face her.

"You need not worry about finances. I have perfected the fine art of making money. I am very wealthy and my finances are spread about the globe in such a way that even the collapse of a whole nation would cause little concern. I might even profit from it. I own property all over the world - houses, chateaus, even a small castle. You will enjoy visiting my homes, some of them are very interesting from an architectural point of view."

He smiled, a distant look entering his eyes as he thought of their future.

"We will travel the globe, seeing all the sights. I will show you the view from the top of the Eiffel Tower; all of Paris will be laid out below us like a sparkling Christmas tree. The Swiss Alps..."

"No!"

He tipped his head, nostrils flaring in a way that told her he was not pleased with being interrupted. She didn't give a hoot if he were mad enough to spit bullets!

"That's right, I said `no'. I appreciate your plans for my life, Tyler, I really do, but did it ever occur to you that I might have a few of my own?"

She shook her head in surprised annoyance.

"You really didn't listen to me, did you? Fine, try really opening your ears this time. As soon as the sun sets, I am going to my office. First, I'll write a memo to Mr. Abraham, explaining that I have to go on the night shift. As long as he can reach me by phone during the day, I don't think he'll mind. Besides, I have every intention of so completely knocking his socks off with my work on your house that he'll be glad to have me on his team no matter what hours I work. Then, I'm going to put in eight hours of work on said house. Oh, and I'm going to call Decker and set up the meeting that I mentioned when you weren't listening."

"Marie, I listened to you. But you're new to this world, you don't understand all of the complications, the difficulties that may arise."

"Well I guess I'll deal with them when they come up."

She raised her hand in front of her to stop his interruption.

"No, Tyler, you can't keep me safely locked away in your castle - chateau, canyon hideaway, gilded cage, whatever you choose to call it - for the rest of my life. I'm just not the damsel-in-distress type. How do we know when the sun has set?"

The change-of-subject question caught him off guard, giving him a sneaking suspicion that was exactly what his lady had intended. She obviously didn't want to discuss this matter further, and he wasn't about to let her know how much her rejection of his protection was distressing him, so it would seem this conversation was, indeed, at an end. He eased onto his back and slipped his hands behind his head, every move screaming his displeasure.

"It is safe."

Marie reached across his chest, inhaling his scent with a sigh, and retrieved the remote control for the ceiling/floor panel. She pushed a button and nothing happened. With a frown at his obstinate expression, she started pushing buttons to find which one would release her from this prison. A stereo blared into life, the sweet voice of Madonna nearly breaking her eardrums. She quickly pushed that button again, silencing the music. Another button brought the morning news - television, she guessed, though the screen must be concealed, needing the push of another button to reveal it. She punched the button to shut it off, not even realizing that she was snarling at the control.

"Careful, you'll break it."

She glared at him, the thought of smacking him with the darn thing sounding really good at the moment.

"Would you care to tell me which button opens this modern-day coffin?"

"I thought Miss - oh, excuse me, Ms - Independence didn't need assistance from anyone."

"Oh, Tyler, you're being impossible! I realize that as a man you have to go against your nature to be agreeable, but do you think you could put forth the effort just this once?"

He shook his head.

"I would much prefer to let you flounder in the hopes that you will see reason and realize how your world has changed."

"Excuse me, I would not be stuck in here if I hadn't become a vampire so I fail to see how this relates. You're just being childish."

She pushed another button. When nothing happened, she wondered what she had just turned on or off or whatever.

"You might try the button labeled 'panel'."

This he said in such a dry tone you could have served it with an olive. With scarlet staining her cheeks and a definite desire to strangle him nearly choking her, Marie squinted and examined the control to find everything clearly marked. She hadn't even considered that. Embarrassment fueling her anger, she opened the panel, then, with a mumbled; "Creep!" threw the control at him, hitting him square in the chest. He laughed, humor never quite reaching his chocolate eyes.

"Your powers of observation are sadly lacking. Very well, love, try your wings alone. I will ride into town with you as I have some unfinished business there, as well."

She stomped into the bathroom, yet another surprise in her I-thought-I-knew-all-about-vampires awakening. She had thought bathrooms would be a thing of the past, but she found she needed them just as much now as ever. She bit her tongue as she started to ask Tyler another question. She wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of refusing to enlighten her again. She'd just plow through her new life and let the questions answer themselves.

At least until she and Tyler made up, which she hoped would be soon. She hated fighting with him, feeling as though a part of her was missing when he was angry with her. But she wasn't about to back down just to keep the peace.

He could be so exasperating at times. Couldn't he see she needed him for so many things that she wanted her independence in the few places she could have it? No, that concept was beyond his fragile male ego. She sighed. Too bad that gorgeous bod, handsome face, and fascinating mind had to come in a package deal with all those irritating male thought patterns.

When she left the bathroom, she found a deep blue velour bathrobe hanging on the doorknob. She didn't even have to get it near her face to smell Tyler all over it. Smiling, she wrapped herself in its velvety softness, reveling in the newfound intensity of her senses.

"You can wear that on the drive into town. Which will make said drive much more interesting for me."

He was standing in the door to the master bedroom, well-tailored light gray slacks outlining his manly figure to perfection. His shirt, one subtle shade lighter than his pants, was the finest silk known to man, so fine; she could see his skin through it. The dark gray tie he was in the process of tying accented the rest of the suit perfectly. It also matched his handmade Italian leather shoes. She assumed, correctly, that the suit coat would match the pants, with a handkerchief of the same dark gray as the tie, no doubt, folded just so in the breast pocket. Heavenly days, did the man know how to dress, or what?

She tried her best to remain unaffected by his appearance, she really did, but his presence drew her like a moth to a flame. She wanted to run her hands through his perfectly groomed hair, loosen his

tie and rumple his shirt.

Before she realized she was moving, she had her arms around his neck, looking up at him with longing darkening her eyes to cobalt. He flashed a triumphant smile as he wrapped his arms tightly around her back and brought his lips down on hers. His kiss was passionate, possessive. She moaned softly as his tongue slid slowly between her lips, coaxing them to part and allow him access. One hand cupped her bottom and pulled her firmly against his hard body. He thrust his hips against her lightly, teasing her and himself. It was so tempting to fall under his sexual spell and let him have his way.

Moaning again, this time with regret, Marie released her hold on his neck and brought her hands between them. With a push against his hard chest, she signaled a desire to end their foreplay. Frowning, he dropped his arms to his sides.

"You're still determined to pursue this foolish idea of career and blackmail."

He made it a statement. She didn't care for his choice of words but she didn't want to continue their fight. With a heavy breath of frustration, she nodded. This earned her a raised brow.

"No argument?"

"I don't want to fight with you, Tyler. I figure the only way to prove to you that I can pull it off is to do it. I think you're a Missouri kind of guy; you have to see it to believe it. So, when I make good my threats, I expect an apology from you forever doubting me. And, Tyler..."

He had begun to turn back into the bedroom. He looked over his shoulder at her, his expression unreadable. She raised her palm to his cheek; her heart skipping a beat when he closed his eyes and leaned into her touch. She waited to regain his gaze before continuing.

"I love you, Tyler. Though we don't always agree, nothing is going to change that. No matter how long my life is going to be, I wouldn't want to live it without you. I need you. Okay?"

He pulled her hand from his face and kissed her palm, his eyes sizzling with deep emotion, his whisper intense.

"Very well, my love, fly as high as you dare. I will be there to catch you if you fall."

He released her hand and blinked slowly. When he opened his eyes once again, they were clear, his expression all business.

"The car is waiting. Shall we?"

Marie sat at the table, nervously sipping her water, as she waited for lieutenant Decker to keep their appointment. He was only five minutes late, but she had thought him to be the type that was usually on time. Her imagination went into overdrive, visions of police surrounding the place to capture a dangerous criminal - her! - Dancing in her head.

Decker had been reluctant to meet with her even after she had assured him that Tyler wouldn't put in an appearance. She had chosen The Rooftop Café because it was quiet, two people could have a conversation without yelling, but it was still a public place. And, she assumed if she had to she could jump off the roof to get away. After all, she was a vampire now. She could fly. Couldn't she?

Shaking the self-defeating doubts from her mind, Marie breathed a sigh of relief as she spotted the lieutenant making his way to her table. He looked his normal rumpled self, though the dark circles under his eyes were new. He nodded to her and took the seat across from her, his serious attitude making the air between them begin to vibrate with tension. The waitress who had shown him to the table asked if he would like a drink.

"Water's fine, thanks."

Frowning at the lack of a big tip she saw in her future, the waitress nodded and left, to return an uncomfortable minute later with a glass of ice water.

Alone, neither seemed to know how to begin the conversation. After another minute of Marie looking everywhere but at Decker while the detective studied her like a specimen under a microscope, he spoke.

"You look good. We thought you might have been hurt in the escape."

Marie considered just how much she wanted to tell him. The whole truth, in this instance, didn't seem prudent. She'd give him the abridged version.

"I was, but I'm fine now. Michael, I would like you to do something for me."

He knew from that quick, pat answer that she was hiding something. She wasn't very good at the secret game and he figured he could break her fairly quickly. He'd play along till he could get her to slip up, and then zero in for the proverbial kill.

"If I can."

Making note of his cautious response, Marie knew that the time had come for her to get tough. Unfortunately, she'd led a somewhat sheltered life, what with three brothers to fight all her battles for her, and she had never had to be very tough. Taking a deep breath, she squared her shoulders and thought 'tough'.

"I want you to erase my involvement in all this."

Michael's eyebrows flew up in surprise as he parroted her statement in an amazed, 'did-I-hear-you-right?' tone.

"'Erase your involvement'?"

Marie nodded.

"Face it, Michael, whatever explanation you come up with will be better received than the truth. You can..."

He interrupted her, his growing anger evident in everything from his tense expression to his gravelly growl.

"Wait just a minute. Why in hell would I whitewash any of this? Alan's part in your escape gave me the ammo I needed to put his face on every police roster in the state."

"How could you do that? You don't have a picture of him."

Michael didn't like that edge of panic in her voice, since it related to protecting Alan.

"I got a real good look at him. We worked up a sketch and got it out to all the precincts. He's to be considered armed and dangerous."

Marie made no attempt to disguise her fear for Tyler, forgetting all about her plan to get back to her normal life in the face of possible danger to the man she loved. She pleaded with Decker.

"Michael, that's not fair and you know it. Tyler doesn't carry a gun."

"He doesn't have to, does he? He ripped those bars right out of a concrete wall, for God's sake! I think that's pretty damned dangerous!"

Decker noticed people staring and realized he had raised his voice to a near yell. With an effort, he regained control, returning to a more civil tone, hoping to talk some reason into this misguided woman before it was too late.

"Marie, what's this guy got on you?"

He reached across the table and captured her hand.

"Tell me the truth, Marie, and I'll protect you, I swear I will."

'Tyler was right, this is hopeless,' she thought to herself. 'All Michael cares about is catching the bad guy.'

"Michael, I can't tell you the truth. It's not really my truth to tell. And you wouldn't believe me, anyway."

She laid her hand over their joined hands on the table and lowered her voice. Though she didn't feel particularly good about it, she'd do just about anything, including using the oldest trick in the book, to secure his cooperation.

"You cared about me once, Michael. Now you're the only chance I have for any semblance of a normal life. Please, Michael, please help me."

Decker had been played by the best and he had to hand it to her, she was pretty good. But Marie's attempt at plucking his heartstrings had only served to inform him that whatever had been - or

might have been - between them was over, a thing of the past. Alan had her now - hook, line and sinker. He pulled his hand from her grasp and sat back, his light blue eyes turning steely.

Marie saw the softness leave his eyes and knew she had lost. Frustration, and the realization that she would never see her plans for Tyler's house take solid form, flooded her eyes with tears.

"Come on, Marie, you're not gonna stoop so low as to try tears now, are you?"

She glared at him, detesting his detective tone, hating him at that moment. She swallowed hard, vowing she would say all she wanted before the tears could choke her. If he wouldn't help her, she would at least make sure that he realized the part he had played in the dissolution of her normal life. She was angry now; angry, frustrated, grieving for the friendship they might have shared.

"You want the truth, Michael? The truth is you killed me."

His brows raised, eyes dilating in surprise.

"That's right. When you shot Tyler, the bullet went through him, out his chest and into mine. When he realized he couldn't save me, he offered me his life and I took it. Not because I was afraid to die - by then the fear was gone - I stayed because I love him."

She almost disliked herself for the satisfaction she felt at his look of disbelief. Almost. But she had lost so much. Letting out some of the pain in anger felt good. And he deserved it.

"Don't look so shocked, Michael. After all, I can't be sitting here scaring the heck out of you because you don't believe in me. That's right, Michael, I'm a vampire."

Her heart skipped a beat as she said it out loud, making it so irrevocably real. Awe softened her words.

"I am a vampire."

She looked into his eyes and saw skepticism and concern in their depths. She could hear his heartbeat racing; smell the sweat of awakening fear on his skin. Her heart softened, remembering all he had done for her when she had needed someone. He'd been there when he didn't know her from Eve. Was this the way to repay his kindness?

"I'm sorry, Michael. This is all so unfair to you. I just wanted to finish Tyler's house, but I should have realized that everything had gotten a little dramatic to be able to just wipe it away."

She reached for his hand and was surprisingly pleased that he didn't pull away from her.

"This isn't your fault, Michael. I think it was inevitable from the time Tyler first held me in his arms in that dingy old castle in Transylvania. Granted, I have a lot of adjusting to do, but I'm happy. I never dreamed that love could be so wonderful."

She blushed and looked away, releasing his hand.

"I better go."

She smiled sadly, doing a terrible imitation of a New York accent.

"I'm a wanted criminal, I better blow this town."

"Marie..."

"Don't, Michael," tears spilled from her eyes but she paid them no notice, "I was never good at goodbye. Thank you for being there when Beth...thank you for everything."

Standing, she turned to leave. She sensed Decker rise even before she felt his hand on her shoulder. Crying in earnest now, she touched his hand but didn't turn to face him.

"I'm a good cop, Marie. Maybe, in the end, that's all I'm gonna have. But I'll, by damn, have that."

She jumped at the sharp stab of pain in her hip. Turning to face him, she saw Michael slip something - a syringe? - into his jacket pocket. Her eyes flew wide with surprise that quickly mutated to fear. He slid his arm around her as the edges of her vision blurred and she felt the first effects of the drug.

"There was enough tranquilizer in that shot to bring down an elephant, since I figured I might need a little extra for Alan. Don't be afraid, darlin', you're just gonna take a little nap. I won't let anything happen to you. I'll even keep you in the dark, if that's what it takes."

He looked deeply into her eyes. She was so sleepy; all she wanted to do was listen to his pretty voice.

"You're not a killer, darlin', and I'm not about to stand by while Alan makes you one. That's the way, sweetheart; just keep walkin' where I lead. We're gonna take a nice elevator ride."

She wanted to talk to him, to make him understand her deal with Tyler, that she wouldn't kill anyone even if he tried to force her. But forming words took too much effort. Just walking was becoming a problem. Flying might be easier.

"What the hell?"

As Marie started to lift off the ground, Decker held tightly to her shoulders and pulled. She settled back on her feet. He gave her a little shake that made her whole world go topsy-turvy.

"If you try that again, Marie, I'll cuff you to me. Understand?"

Maybe if she nodded, he'd stop being mad at her. Everybody seemed to be getting mad at everybody lately and she didn't like that. She nodded, the single up-and-down movement of her head causing her to wonder how long she could stay on her feet when the world had obviously slipped its axis. Exhaustion weighing heavily on her now, she leaned her head against Decker's chest. It was

comforting to listen to his heart thumping out its nice, even rhythm. Maybe if she just took a little nap, she'd feel better when she woke up.

As the elevator opened, Marie collapsed into Decker's arms, her grip on her drug-beset consciousness at an end. Slipping his arms under her shoulders and knees, he lifted her into his arms and carried her like a child to the car, securing her limp body in the passenger seat. As he walked around to the driver's side and got into the car, he made an effort to collect all the jumbled thoughts rolling around in his tired head. He needed a plan, one that would let the good guys win this time.

He knew this was personal now, between him and Alan. This case had now become a battle to the death. And though he was seriously outgunned, he thought as he looked at the sleeping angel in the seat beside him, he had one hell of an ace in the hole.

Chapter 25

‘Something is terribly wrong.’

The warning flashed red in Tyler's mind as he stood in the alley across from Decker's precinct building, waiting for the good lieutenant to make an appearance. Searching his immediate vicinity, he found nothing immediately identifiable as the source of his unease. Still, there was something...

"Damn!"

He swore as he shook his head, trying desperately to clear it. But he was so wrapped up in his plans for vengeance, he couldn't think as clearly as he would like. He would have to temporarily put aside his feelings of anger and hatred for the policeman to get a handle on the unpleasant sensations tickling his subconscious.

Tyler closed his eyes and took a deep breath, sending all thought from his mind on his exhaled sigh. For several moments, only the black void of relaxation touched his consciousness. Once cleared of all excess baggage, he allowed his mind to slowly fill with the images that came to him.

Marie. Had something happened to his lady? No, that wasn't possible. She was either at work, stubbornly laboring over the plans for his new house, or at the location she had chosen for her rendezvous with Decker, waiting in vain for the detective to answer her summons.

Tyler had no intention of allowing that meeting to take place. He had dropped Marie at her office, then immediately positioned himself in front of the precinct building where he could see Decker's parked car. Using his cellular phone, he had telephoned the lieutenant, disconnecting as soon as he heard the unmistakable gravelly growl on the other end of the line. Decker was trapped. When he left to keep his appointment with Marie, Tyler would follow him from above. When the car came to a stop on a secluded street corner, Tyler would swoop in and exact his revenge.

Using the bond formed when he joined his blood to hers, he searched for any feelings of fear or unease in Marie. Nothing. Sending his superior senses to their farthest reaches, he found no immediate danger to himself. No one stalked him from behind; no riflescope targeted his back. Slipping more deeply into the shadows of the alleyway, he pulled his cellular phone from the pocket of his black duster and flipped it open. He snarled, remembering how many of these he had been through since meeting Marie. A soft smile quickly raised the corners of his patrician mouth. His lovely lady had proven a bit expensive, but well worth it. Obeying the feelings to which he had listened since he was just a boy, he dialed Decker's office. An unknown male voice answered.

"Benedict."

"I wish to speak with lieutenant Decker."

"He's not available right now. Wanna leave a message?"

A tiny alarm bell began annoying the far reaches of Tyler's mind.

"The matter I wish to discuss with Decker is quite urgent. Do you know when he will return?"

"Sorry, he's left for the evening. What's the problem?"

That tiny alarm now became a klaxon.

"Do you know where he can be reached?"

"He said if anyone called for him to say he'd gone to some building site in the hills. He didn't..."

Tyler disconnected, resisting the extremely compelling urge to crush the phone in his hand; instead, he closed it and slid it back into his pocket. Decker must have predicted him, leaving by some means other than his own vehicle. Did that mean that he had met with Marie? Quickly retrieving the phone, Tyler dialed her office, not at all pleased to find himself connected to the answering service. He rudely hung up without a word, shoving the phone back into his pocket.

The pride-slamming thought that had been nagging at the edge of Tyler's mind for quite some time now took full form. He had underestimated the lieutenant, assuming Decker was just a bumbling Keystone Cop because he had encountered so many of those since his first brush with American law, so very long ago. It was time he accepted the fact that Decker was a modern day warrior, fighting the only enemy that threatened his home - crime. And he was good, striking in unexpected ways and places, catching his enemy unaware. Tyler felt a certain respect for the policeman. In another time, a time of warriors' respect and honor, Tyler would have been proud to call Decker 'friend'.

That time was long gone, with no tears shed for its passing.

Tyler rose high above the streets of Los Angeles and soared toward the Hollywood Hills. This battle had gone on long enough, with Marie balancing precariously between the two warriors. A look of determination darkening his chocolate eyes to near-black, Tyler vowed that tonight would see an end to his war with lieutenant Michael Decker.

Decker had never dug a grave before, and he sincerely hoped he would never have to do it again. Every few shovels full, he raised his eyes to check on Marie where she lay on the soft ground several feet from the edge of the hole. Her breathing remained even and deep, indicating she was still in a drugged state. He had two more sedative-filled syringes in his jacket pocket, but he hoped he didn't have to use one of them on her. He feared the effects of too much of the heavy tranquilizer on her small body.

How the hell had he ever come to this? He came from a long line of policemen, law-enforcement being considered the 'family business'. He could bet his Dad had never dug a grave in the dead of night in the line of duty. And his Granddad, that grizzled old cuss, he would've ordered one of the patrolman under his command to do it if it absolutely had to be done.

Decker had never lacked for female companionship, if you could call it that. A never-ending stream of police groupies poured through the police bars he frequented when he didn't have anything better to do, which wasn't often. They were cheap and easy, but had the depth of a kiddie pool. The few decent women he'd gotten involved with over the years had grown skittish as soon as they found out what he did for a living. Eventually it was all too much for them, the unpredictable long hours, and the fear of the late-night phone call.

Decker had never wanted to be anything but a good cop. Even as a kid, he'd never played the robber in 'cops and robbers'. He was always the cop, always the good guy.

With another glance at the lovely supine body lying so helpless just a few feet away, he felt disgust well up inside him. Some good guy! Marie was the most innocent being over the age of ten that he had encountered since becoming a cop. She was the kind of woman he had always hoped to find someday, one who needed protecting, who would give her love freely. He could have made a home, maybe even a family, with her. He was sure of it.

If Tyler hadn't gotten to her first.

Realizing his thoughts sounded like those of an obsessed nutcase, Decker smiled sadly and shook his head. Maybe, if things had gone differently, something more would have happened between him and Marie, maybe not. But she was innocent, of that he was certain. And he was not about to let a thing like Tyler Alan change that.

Something he had been amazingly good at from a very young age was being able to tell a bad guy, a criminal, when he came into contact with one. Oh, Alan was smooth, smooth as melted chocolate, but Decker could still see through the slick exterior to the slime that oozed beneath. And, even if it turned out to be the last thing he ever did, he was determined not to let that evil reach Marie.

Evil? Decker's brows furrowed as he rolled his shoulders in discomfort at his choice of adjectives. In all his years on the force, he'd never seen anything he would have called 'evil'. Sick, twisted, down-right mean, but never 'evil'. Maybe it took a lot more years than most people ever get to reach that distinction.

Did he really believe Alan had been around more years than he should, that he was some kind of supernatural creature? Michael laughed softly. He wouldn't be digging a grave for the average bank

robber. Yeah, this guy was something most police never had to deal with, at least, not that they ever knew about. Decker was determined to be a good enough cop to take down any criminal, no matter what.

Deciding the three feet or so that he had dug was good enough, the lieutenant put the shovel aside and carefully lifted and lowered Marie's limp body into the hole in the ground. She didn't give any indication of regaining consciousness. The lab guys had said the elephant would be out for anywhere from twelve hours to eternity, which had suited him just fine when he was thinking about giving the stuff to Alan. Now, it worried him. Easing into the grave beside her, he felt her wrist for a pulse. It was strong and steady, just a little slow. Good.

Exiting the grave, Decker retrieved the two-gallon jugs from the trunk of the police cruiser he had borrowed for this job. After making sure that the corks that served as stoppers for the bottles were secure, he laid one bottle at each end of the hole in the ground where Marie lay. He tied one end of the long cord he had brought with him to the pin he had inserted in each cork. Pulling the cord taut, he settled himself on the ground at the side of the grave, knowing he wouldn't have long to wait.

Tyler surveyed the scene from above, hovering like a great bird of prey. What did the clever lieutenant have in mind? What was the purpose of this elaborate setup? Tyler had no doubt it was a trap. He just needed time to figure out how to avoid being caught in it. The problem was, he had a little over two hours in which to do so before he and Marie would become victims of the sun.

Tyler snarled as Decker leaned forward and brushed a lock of hair from Marie's face. As his fingers started to trail lower, Tyler prepared to drop onto his prey.

"That's close enough, Alan."

Tyler froze midair, amazed to find the policeman looking right at him.

"I'd have been dead long ago if I couldn't feel somebody stalkin' me. I figured you'd come at me from your most advantageous angle, so I kept my gut thinkin' skyward. Why don't you just plant yourself over there?"

He indicated with a slight move of his head the space across from him on the other side of the grave.

Tyler's teeth were at full extension, his blood boiling with the need to exact his revenge on this arrogant little pest and free his lady. His eyes blazed an eerie red and his voice was the echo from an evil grave as he spoke.

"Why would I follow your orders?"

Decker's face hardened, telling Tyler that he had given a great deal of thought to his next words and he meant every one as gospel.

"Because if you don't, I'll pull on this cord and open those bottles. That will dump a good gallon of holy water into that hole before you can get to Marie."

Decker waited a breath, watching Alan's countenance as he hovered a few feet above him.

"I gotta hand it to you, Alan, your face doesn't give away a thing, but I still don't think you want to chance it."

Tyler's teeth ground together so hard they should have been dull as he lowered himself to the ground where Decker had indicated. This close, he could feel that the lieutenant spoke the truth - the bottles held the hated liquid. He looked at Marie, sensing her slow return to consciousness, then turned his baleful glare on Decker.

"A clever arrangement, lieutenant, but what do you hope to accomplish?"

Never taking his eyes from Tyler's lips - he didn't know how much to put on that 'vampire hypnosis' but he wasn't taking any chances - Decker slowly pulled one of the syringes from his pocket and tossed it on the ground at Tyler's feet, eliciting a raised brow from the tall man.

"Inject yourself with that and Marie goes free."

Tyler's voice was sarcasm personified.

"Trust you with her life while making you judge, jury, and, no doubt, executioner over me? I think not."

Trying desperately to lure the detective's eyes to his own, Tyler lowered his voice to a whispered growl as he leaned closer to Decker.

"You have no idea how quickly I can move, lieutenant, how quickly I could clear the space between us and break your pitiful neck."

Decker smiled, testing Tyler's control to the limit.

"You know as well as I do that as taut as I've got this cord, and as wound up as I am, those corks would go before you could get to me even if you can move like the road runner. We can play 'mine's bigger than yours' as long as you want, Alan, but that Eastern sky's looking a little lighter every minute. If you don't cooperate in time for me to get Marie to a dark place, it'll be a moot point, won't it? You made her vulnerable to the sun, you gonna let her burn?"

Tyler hissed, no longer able to control his expression of anger while keeping his physical temper under restraint. He bent and picked up the syringe, his eyes never leaving Decker's face, hoping for that crucial moment of eye contact that would seal the lieutenant's fate. But Decker refused to look him in

the eye. Since Tyler was certain Decker was the type to stare people down, he assumed the policeman had decided the eyes of a vampire held some danger. Intelligent man, to a point.

Uncapping the syringe, Tyler forced a drop of liquid to the point of the needle and sniffed, flaring his nostrils at the pungent scent. Though he couldn't specifically identify the drug, he was fairly certain it was a tranquilizer of some sort. He looked at Marie, lying so quietly in what could so easily become her grave. This must be how Decker had captured her; her lack of consciousness fooling Tyler into thinking nothing was wrong because she wasn't frightened. He raised fire-glazed eyes to the man who had become the worst enemy of his long life.

"How did you know this wouldn't harm her?"

Decker shrugged nonchalantly, though his eyes and softened tone held the tell-tale signs of guilt.

"I didn't. I got the stuff to take you down. I never intended to use it on Marie, but when she told me what you had done to her, I didn't have many other options."

Tyler closed his eyes in an expression of near-pain and shook his elegant head. The little fool! She told him the truth? Sighing, he chastised himself. Why was he so surprised? She always told the truth, her lack of subterfuge one of the many things that had drawn him to her like a moth to a flame. Opening his eyes, he returned his attention to the lieutenant.

"What is it?"

Decker's lips thinned to near nonexistence.

"You don't need to know that, Alan, all you need to know is that you're running out of time, which means Marie's running out of time. Stick that in your neck, where I can see skin, and push the plunger."

With a quick wary glance toward the Eastern sky, Tyler felt the first stirrings of real panic. His time was, indeed, running out. Changing his tone to his most seductive, he appealed to the one thing he and Decker shared.

"Decker, she needs me to survive. If you care for her..."

Decker held up one hand, careful to keep the cord taut with the other.

"You can cut that crap right now, Alan. Marie already tried it, and she's a damn sight more convincing than you. Yeah, I care about her. That's why I'm not gonna let you turn her into a killer. I'll kill her myself, if I have to, to keep that from happening."

Decker shook his head, still keeping his eyes firmly glued to Alan's lips. There was a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach that got worse as each minute of darkness was consumed by the impending sunrise. His tone as close to pleading as he would allow, he tried one last time to talk Alan

into doing it his way.

"I don't want to kill Marie, you know that, Alan. So don't push this so far that it will be impossible to save her. Follow my orders and I give you my word she'll be okay."

As much as he hated to admit it, Tyler knew Decker was a man of honor. His word was his bond. That, and the lightening sky, gave Tyler little choice. He would never let Marie be hurt. Rolling his shoulders to ease the tension there, he brought his aristocratic blood to bear. Standing to his full height, his chin proudly raised, he brought the syringe toward his neck.

"No!"

A bare breath of a whisper slipped from the hole in the damp ground, jarring both men's concentration as they sought its source. Marie's eyes were open, though she seemed to be fighting to keep them that way. Her face was contorted with the emotional pain she was experiencing. Each word cost her dearly in reserves of strength.

"Just..leave..me. He..won't...Darn it!"

She shook her head, trying to clear the cobwebs from her mind, and the fuzzy feeling from her tongue, that were making it difficult for her to make sense and speak. This drug-induced fog was beginning to make her angry. The dizziness that took hold of her with that headshake just added to the anger. She wanted to sit up and yell at these two men, fighting over her like two wolves over a choice piece of meat, but she couldn't seem to find the energy to lift a finger. She could feel the cold steel of handcuffs on her wrists. And her feet were cold. She wiggled her toes and felt cold air caress them. Even though her voice still lacked much volume, her indignation was quite apparent.

"You took my shoes? You creep!"

Decker smiled in spite of the seriousness of the situation. The girl had a way about her.

"No, darlin', I didn't take your shoes. They must have fallen off when I..."

That was as far as he got. He had shifted his attention to the girl just long enough for Tyler to make his move. Before Decker knew what hit him, Tyler had his throat in a vise-like grip, taking great pains not to move the lieutenant one inch. He growled an order against Decker's ear.

"Release the cord."

There was no oxygen entering Decker's body. He had two choices: Pull the cord and let Alan try to save Marie, or let go of the cord and try to reach his gun, though he doubted he would be successful. Neither choice appealed to him. As conscious thought became more difficult, Decker's hold on the cord began to slacken.

"Tyler, no! Don't kill him. He's just doing what he thinks is right. Stop it!"

Concentrating all her strength into the move, Marie reached up and pulled on the pant leg at Tyler's ankle. She just wanted to get his attention, to make him listen to her. Unfortunately, he had been standing on the very edge of the grave and her unexpected pull threw him temporarily off-balance. His foot slipped over the side and into the hole, painfully scraping her hip. He didn't release his hold on Decker, pulling him closer to the edge, his quick senses telling him that action would keep the cord from being pulled accidentally. What his senses didn't tell him was that his body hit one side of the cord as he fell, loosening one of the bottle's corks.

He flew back out of the grave, his intent now to break the lieutenant into several pieces; then, as soon as he had assured himself she was unhurt, chastise Marie for interfering in the affairs of men.

Decker released the cord as soon as he realized Alan was going to fall against it. No matter what happened, he just couldn't bring himself to bathe Marie in something that might prove to be acid to her.

Decker saw Alan shoot out of the grave as he gained his feet and prepared to fight. The vampire hit him square in the chest like a ton of bricks, sending them both rolling head over heels in the damp earth. Alan was hissing and snarling, making Decker think of a rabid dog. When Alan went for his throat again, Decker put everything he had into a punch to his opponent's jaw. Though his head snapped back, Alan just smiled, an uncomfortably toothy smile and pinned Decker's shoulders to the ground.

"Now you shall learn the truth of vampires first hand."

Marie had struggled to a sitting position, letting her anger give her strength. Men! They could never talk things over like civilized human beings, always had to prove who was the toughest first. While she laid in a damp, muddy, icky grave that was probably crawling with worms and...what was that? Something brushed her head and she swatted it away, visions of spiders hanging on their webs filling her head. But this was dirt, spiders didn't live in dirt. So, if that wasn't a spider web, then what...

Still so weak from the drug that she couldn't move much faster than a fat snail, Marie stared in horror as the cork connected to the cord she had just pulled brushing away an imaginary spider began its slow descent into her grave, leaving the contents of the bottle to spew into the hole that had just become her grave.

Chapter 26

"No!"

Tyler shouted as he felt the flare of fear in his lady, turning just in time to see the cork leave the bottle. He fell to the ground beside the bottle and slammed his palm over its opening, screaming at the dazed girl, "Up, Marie, up!"

The searing pain was like nothing he had ever felt, temporarily stealing all thought from his mind. All thought but one - save Marie. He watched in horrified fascination as tiny drops of holy water began oozing through the back of his hand. Though he wanted to push the bottle away, taking Marie out of danger, he found he couldn't move, his muscles frozen in place. The pain was spreading up his arm, as though the dreaded liquid followed the path of his blood. The instinct born of that dark blood now told him that if he stayed in contact with the blessed water long enough for it to reach his heart, he would know true death.

Dragging his eyes from the passion play of his hand, he turned his head to see if Marie had reached safety. Her eyes were tightly closed, a look of concentration straining her features. Still, she didn't rise.

With the greatest effort of his life, Tyler spoke softly, with an undeniable air of command.

"Marie, you're thinking too much, love. Picture it in your mind and it will be."

The shock as the spreading agony simultaneously found his shoulder and broke through his hand nearly took his consciousness. Fighting for every breath, he willed Marie to rise, to reach safety. After a flicker of doubt furrowed her brow, her beautiful face relaxed and she began to rise like a radiant cloud. If this was to be Tyler's last vision on this Earth, he wouldn't have chosen another.

Pain of a more annoying sort flared briefly in his thigh, then he was pulled over onto his back, the contact with the bottle of holy water blessedly broken. He stared up into the angry face of lieutenant Decker, the barrel of a rather large handgun competing for his attention, as it was jammed against his high cheekbone.

"Move a muscle and I'll blow your head off! It might not kill ya, but it'd ruin your pretty face."

Between the drug with which Decker had just injected him and the nearly unbearable pain he had so recently endured, Tyler's reserves of strength were gone. He needed to feed, but he was as weak as a newborn babe, unable even to raise his head. All he could do was smile and grit out a few words before

his system shut down to heal.

"If you are truly the excellent policeman you claim, lieutenant Decker, you'll see me to a place of darkness. If not, you are as much a murderer as I."

Tyler's chocolate eyes, enlarged with shock, slowly closed, his handsome face relaxing as he surrendered himself to the healing darkness.

In her panicked fear, Marie not only envisioned herself rising above the makeshift grave lieutenant Decker had dug, she saw her body floating over Los Angeles, taking her home, to her apartment. She wanted to be in her own bed, tucked in and cozy. When her feet hit the ground with a thud, she opened her eyes to find she was standing in front of her apartment building.

"Tyler?"

Looking around, she instantly knew that he was not with her. Her stomach hurt - come to think of it, most of her body hurt, like she'd fallen asleep laying out. Her eyes flew wide as she looked toward the East. Sure enough, the sky was beginning to lighten. She had to get somewhere sunless. Fast!

The handcuffs proved a minor inconvenience. Marie gave one hard pull, not really believing she could free herself, and the chain between the two cuffs snapped like a dry twig. She'd worry about the fashion statement of matching stainless steel bracelets later. Right now, her impending lethal sunburn concerned her more.

She retrieved the key to her apartment from under her mat, smiling momentarily as she remembered Beth chastising her for such a clichéd hiding place. Opening the door, she stepped through it and closed and locked it again in record time, then began frantically closing all the blinds. She didn't think that would keep out enough sun to save her, but it might help a little. Surveying her apartment, she realized there was no way to keep out all the sunlight. She was going to fry! Feeling the panic grip her, she stopped and closed her eyes, gathering her thoughts.

Tyler. Where was he? Would he be all right? She shook her head, knowing that worrying about him would surely drive her crazy, since there was nothing she could do till sunset.

`What would Tyler do?' she thought as she searched the room for somewhere to hide from the sun.

"Wait a minute!"

She spoke excitedly to herself as a memory flooded her mind.

"Tyler showed me."

She ran to her closet and pulled out every dark piece of clothing she owned, gathering them into

her arms and carrying them to the hall closet that had caused her such consternation by refusing to open at her command. Had that truly been just days ago? She quickly shoved out all of the stuff that had congregated on the floor over the time she had lived there.

"Oh, well, I'd been meaning to get around to cleaning this closet, anyway."

Stepping inside, she closed the closet door and started shoving clothes into all the cracks the sun might seep through. Curling up on the floor, she pulled her heavy winter coat over her, covering her body as best she could. She was so tired; all she could do was say a little prayer that Tyler was okay before she fell into the deep sleep of the very weary.

For the first time in his career in law enforcement, lieutenant Michael Decker called in sick. He hated ruining his perfect record and he hated lying even more. But he needed the time to prepare for the awakening of his prisoner.

If only he had some idea how to contain a vampire.

After Alan passed out, Decker had considered just leaving him there to fry, he really had, but the bastard was right, that would have made Decker a murderer just like him. So the lieutenant had hauled Alan's limp body into the trunk of his car - no small task with a man carrying as much muscle as Alan had on his hard body, and dead weight at that - then reversed the process when he reached his apartment. Decker had hoped none of his neighbors were up and about at that ungodly time of the morning to see him carrying an unconscious man into his place. He could just imagine the sick explanations that might enter their minds. On second thought, he'd rather not.

Finding a place the sun couldn't reach in light-conscious Los Angeles was difficult. Decker hoped his utility closet would fit the bill, since, by the time he got Alan to his apartment, the rising sun had given him little choice. As he laid Alan on the floor of the closet, he had felt how hot the man's back had become. And he would have sworn he could smell sulfur. The sun must have actually touched Alan's back on the way into Decker's apartment. The detective shook his head, a wry smile touching his lips.

"Sorry, Alan, this is the best I can do."

He looked at the man lying unconscious on the floor and was amazed at how regal he seemed even in his current state. As Decker closed the door, he shook his head.

"I sure as hell hope I don't open this later to a pile of ashes."

The over-tired policeman flexed his shoulders, wincing as pain zinged along a thousand muscle pathways. Maybe he should work out, get rid of a few of those chocolate doughnuts. Or not eat them in

the first place?

"Nah."

He smiled to himself as he poured a cup of day-old coffee and stuck it in the microwave oven to heat up. Discovering a carton of left-over take-out Chinese in the fridge, he started absent-mindedly spooning it into his mouth, not really tasting it. Which was a good thing, since it was only slightly this side of penicillin. Finishing it, he dropped the empty carton into the overflowing garbage can.

"I gotta take that out soon."

He retrieved his coffee and took several cautious sips of the extremely hot liquid as he made his way to the couch. His thoughts were so jumbled, the events of the night turning his mind into the world's fastest roller coaster. He hoped the caffeine would help, though he would have preferred a stiff shot of scotch to take the edge off. Sitting the cup on the coffee table in front of the couch, he made the decision to call in sick. Thankfully, the phone had found its way to the living room at some time, so he was able to act on his decision immediately. He didn't feel good about lying to the captain, but he had no choice. Alan had to be stopped, and if it didn't happen tonight, Decker figured he'd be dead and Alan would be in Brazil or Switzerland or wherever he chose to hunt this month.

He hung up the phone and leaned against the back of the couch, running his hand over his face. Lord, he was tired! But he didn't have time to sleep, had to use every minute of sunlight to think this thing through. If Alan woke up before he had a plan, he was dog meat. He needed to get some more holy water, maybe talk to Father Trent, the priest that had given him the water last night. Should he hang a crucifix on the door, or some garlic over the frame? Maybe he should convert, become a Catholic. Or maybe...

Decker's head fell back against the couch as his body claimed the sleep it so desperately needed.

Tyler awoke with a start. Jumping to his feet, he assumed a position of defense, knees bent, lightly flexed hands low in front of his body. He surveyed the immediate vicinity for danger, surprised to find - laundry? With a sigh, he relaxed as the memories of last night's fiasco returned. Judging from the pile of unimaginative clothes on top of the dryer, this must be a utility room, Decker's answer to sun-proofing. It was not as dark as Tyler would like, but it would do. He discerned the darkest corner and eased his body to the ground against the wall, using one arm to shield his sensitive eyes from the light.

Shifting his shoulders, Tyler felt the sting of burned flesh. He snarled with the realization that that fool detective must have secured him just in time. Grinding his teeth, he let the scene of his planned

destruction of the lieutenant play across the insides of his eyelids to keep himself from tearing this small room to pieces in his anger!

Tyler shook his head, chastising himself. This nonsense of catering to his childish fury at having been bested by Decker was not productive. With deep breaths, he shed the anger, placing himself into a meditative state for several minutes. He must concentrate on the matter at hand - his escape. He had no doubt Decker would have some elaborate plan for keeping him in this prison of darkness until he could figure out a way to transport him to police headquarters, where Decker could then follow proper police procedure. Tyler had no fear of the police, but he didn't much care for the idea of being drugged again. It hadn't been enough fun the first time.

His acute senses told him it was still several hours before the sun would set. To finish healing, to be at his best when his chance for escape - and vengeance! - came, he needed more sleep.

Dozing, Tyler opened and narrowed his eyes as he heard movement outside the door.

"Alan?"

Tyler made the quick decision to let Decker believe him in deep, vulnerable sleep all day, like movie vampires.

"I know you can hear me, Alan. I can feel your hate burning a hole right through this door."

The wooden door creaked as Decker settled his weight against it with a sigh.

"That's fine. You and me were probably destined to go at it from the minute I was born. But Marie, she doesn't belong in this. What happens to her without you, Alan? Can she make it on her own? You're not invincible, you'd be dead right now if I were a different sort of man."

Tyler closed his eyes and sought Marie, knowing from the moment of his awakening that she was unhurt. He felt her serenity, knew she was sleeping peacefully. Though he couldn't pinpoint her location - a fact that brought him no comfort - he knew she was safe.

As much as Tyler hated to admit it, Decker had a valid point. Marie didn't deserve to be the prize in their power tug-of-war. And Tyler had been severely compromised last night. If Decker had left him to find true death in the sunlight, would Marie have been able to survive without him? His lady was strong, but she had such a stubborn streak. Would she listen to her newborn instincts and kill to live? Or would she stick to her resolve not to take lives, dying for her pride?

"Did you have some resolution of this problem in mind, lieutenant?"

Decker jumped in surprise as the cool voice came through the door. Though he was pretty sure Alan was awake in there, he hadn't been at all sure the aristocratic SOB would deem fit to talk to him. Stepping away from the door, he leaned against the opposite wall.

"Hell, no, I don't have the foggiest idea what to do. Can you bring her back, make her right again?"

A sardonic grin split Tyler's lips, his voice taking on a humoring tone.

"No, lieutenant, ours is not a your-money-back-if-not-completely-satisfied option to life. A vampire is something you become because your only other choice is death. At least, that was the case for both Marie and myself. She will require blood to survive until true death claims her.

You will be glad to hear that she refuses to kill, even at the cost of her own life. She and I have agreed that I will see to her needs. So, you see, lieutenant, by keeping me from her, you are attempting what I'm certain no man has ever done before you - killing a woman not once, but twice."

The small room reverberated with the sound as Decker slammed his hand against the door.

"Damn it, Alan, I didn't want to hurt Marie! That was the last thing on Earth I wanted."

Tyler smiled, enjoying Decker's emotional pain and loss of control. Perhaps he could use it against the policeman.

"So what will you do about it now, lieutenant? Will you compound the wrong you have already done her by leaving her to starve to death; or will you release her only source of sustenance, and, therefore, only chance of survival?"

The door opened, letting in more light from the hall. Tyler shrank back into the corner, a hiss escaping his lips, as Decker entered the room and closed the door.

"You're good, Alan, I gotta give you that. You could probably talk the horns right off the Devil."

Decker leaned against the dryer, paying no attention as the pile of clothes began slowly falling to the linoleum at his feet. His face contorted in a look of disgust.

"Look at you. You talk like this life of yours is the be-all, end-all, like anybody'd be crazy not to want it. If you ask me, you'd be pretty crazy to ask for it."

His pride forcing his hand, Tyler stood. His eyes rebelled at the light, throbbing with the need for darkness and sleep. He knew he had a limited time to continue this battle of wits before he would have to give in to his body's needs, but he'd be damned if he were going to let lieutenant Decker see his weakness.

"Have you ever faced certain death, Decker? Obviously not, or you wouldn't be standing here annoying me."

He walked toward Decker, stopping when his feet nearly touched those of his enemy. He had to admit a grudging admiration for the man who made no move to lengthen the space between them, though his heart was hammering in his chest. Tyler's voice was soft, menacing, yet tinged with the regret

of memory.

"When you exhale your last and, try as you might, you cannot command your lungs to bring another life-giving breath into your body, you would do anything to live. Anything!

I was like you, Decker. I wielded the weapons of the day to protect my lands and people from anyone who wished them harm. I enforced the law, brought justice to the weak. I was a warrior, the image of courageous piety."

Tyler dropped his gaze to the ground, his tone softening.

"Yet, when the time came, I was not courageous enough to face death and lose."

He raised his eyes once again, and they burned with defiance.

"If you think yourself better than me, I hope to be at your side when death comes to claim you. When darkness begins to narrow your vision, I will offer you my blood to live. And, believe me, lieutenant, you will take it!"

For the first time, Decker really looked at the man standing before him. Not as a criminal, but as a human being. He was shocked at what he saw when he removed the born-policeman veil from his eyes. Alan stood tall and proud, a man undefeated by life. Or death. A man who had fought more battles than Decker could ever imagine, and won them all. Though he was completely at Decker's mercy, you would have thought he was in total control, not a worry in the world. Looking into the eyes of the man he had chosen as his worst enemy, the lieutenant saw what Alan had been - a warrior - and felt respect swell his heart.

"I hope that time never comes, Alan. Standing here, I'd swear I'd never do it; but, God help me, if I was dyin', I'd probably take you up on that offer."

A lopsided grin touched his face.

"I suppose I'd tell myself that the world still needed me to protect it from the evil of the streets."

He resisted the urge to look Alan in the eye, though he badly wanted to see his reaction to his next question.

"Did you ever regret your choice?"

Tyler once again dropped his eyes, his voice barely a whisper.

"In all these years, only once."

He continued to stare at the floor, feeling anew the pain that had nearly crushed his heart when Marie had called him a monster. Decker, realizing Alan was not going to reveal what had caused his regret, cleared his throat, bringing Tyler's attention to the situation at hand.

"Damn it, Alan, what the hell am I supposed to do now? Throw out twenty years of police work -

not to mention a lifetime of belief in the law - and let a confessed murderer walk out the door? Or cause the death of an innocent girl? I sure liked life better when it was black and white."

"So did I, lieutenant."

Their eyes met in an understanding as old as war and humanity's need for warriors to fight it.

Tyler seized the opportunity, taking the choice from Decker. His will swept into the lieutenant's mind like a cold winter wind, freezing all independent thought in its path. He spoke with the calm authority of a born commander.

"You are very tired. Lie down on the floor and sleep. You will not awaken until you hear my voice again."

Like a complacent child, Decker obeyed, stretching his body over the clothes on the floor. He closed his eyes, promptly falling into a deep, dreamless sleep.

As Tyler returned to the darkest corner of the small room, he staggered with exhaustion, yet his lips drew up in a weary smile. He was, once again, in control, as he should be. When he awoke, he would end his battle with the lieutenant once and for all. Then he would find Marie and together they would seek the safety of another country.

With the image of her soft body wrapped in his arms warming his mind, Tyler let much needed sleep claim him.

Chapter 27

"May I please speak with Lt Decker?"

Though a bit drastic, going to the precinct house where Decker worked had been the only logical course of action that came to Marie's mind upon waking alone. She called his cellular phone, only to be told by a female voice she didn't know that Mr. Alan was unavailable at the moment, would she like to leave a message? Marie politely declined, hung up the phone and started to worry. Her little voice told her Decker had the answer, but if she just phoned the station and Michael weren't there, she would have encountered a dead end. No, this needed a more personal touch.

From the look on the young detective's face, she had been correct about the dead end.

"Lieutenant Decker is off today, ma'am. I'm detective Benedict. May I help you?"

Marie bit her lower lip, concern for Michael, and Tyler, tying her stomach into one of those fancy knots that only sailors can manage. Hunger had already tied it in a normal square knot before she had even left her apartment. She wondered what she would do if she didn't find Tyler soon. How quickly could a vampire starve to death?

Strengthening her determination to find Tyler, she cast aside those self-defeating thoughts. Smiling at the good-looking young detective, she looked into his eyes and felt the strangest sensation of floating. It seemed as though she were looking at herself from a distance, from...Marie blinked, breaking the eye contact, her eyes widening in surprise. Blushing, she realized she had just been inside the detective's mind, seeing herself from his point of view. Only she was wearing considerably more in reality than she was in his mind. Men!

"I really need to get in touch with him. Do you have his number at home?"

Detective Benedict shifted uncomfortably in his seat, painfully aware of the effect this lovely vision was having on his libido. He'd love to say 'yes' just to keep her around a while longer, but he knew the lieutenant would have his head on a platter if he violated Department policy. He smiled wanly and shrugged his shoulders.

"Sorry, it's against policy."

Frustrated, frightened by her growing hunger, and worried near sick about Tyler, Marie resorted to an action she felt quite immoral, but she was desperate! She looked deeply into the detective's eyes and, thinking 'I want to know what you're thinking' willed herself into his mind. She had that sensation of floating for several seconds, then she was hearing his thoughts right alongside her own in the weirdest

sort of schizophrenia she could imagine. Slowly growing accustomed to being two people at once, she made her desires dominant. She thought 'you want to do whatever I tell you', and watched in fascination as the detective smiled a silly, I'm-so-happy smile.

"What is lieutenant Decker's phone number?"

"555-1478."

He divulged the number with that same smile lying lazily across his lips. Her face lit with a self-satisfied smile, she decided she might as well make the most of this connection, just in case.

"And his home address?"

His brows pulled slowly together into a confused frown. She sensed from her connection to his mind that he didn't know the address, and he would have to look away from her eyes to find it, which he had no desire to do. Remembering a hypnotist she had seen on TV when she was a kid, she wondered if she could give detective Benedict a sort-of post-hypnotic suggestion. Using her most soothing voice, she gave it a shot.

"You will find Michael's," she sensed his confusion with that name, smoothly correcting herself, "lieutenant Decker's address and give it to me. As soon as you have done that, you will forget all about my asking for his number or address. You will feel very good, like you just woke up from a very peaceful nap."

Marie frowned, wondering what she was doing wrong. Though she'd given him an order, the detective just sat there staring at her, happy as a little lark. Why wasn't he jumping to do her bidding? Maybe she needed to be firmer, demanding.

"Do it!"

She winced at her bitchy tone, but decided it had done the job when he blinked, breaking eye contact with her, turned and started flipping through a Rolodex sitting on the desk before him. Finding what he wanted, he pulled the card from its nest among what seemed like thousands of like cards and handed it to her. She quickly shoved it into the pocket of her dress. Detective Benedict blinked rapidly for a couple of seconds, as though trying to clear some foreign object from his eye, then smiled at her again, all business.

"May I help you?"

Marie sighed.

"No, thank you, I guess I'll just have to wait to speak with lieutenant Decker until he's available."

"He might come in just to check on things, Decker is real dedicated, you know? If you'd like to wait, I could offer you a cup of coffee, or maybe a coke?"

He had cute dimples that seemed to go on forever. And he was so earnest, though, having been inside his mind, she knew his ultimate goal was to get her naked and willing. Still, he was so warm. The coffee room was probably isolated and...

Marie jumped as if bitten. What in Heaven's name was she thinking? She shook her head.

"Thank you, Detective, but I have something urgent to do at the moment."

He looked so rejected, and she did owe him for her ultimate invasion of his privacy, even though he would never know he had been invaded.

"Maybe some other time?"

Like a puppy getting praised, he gave her a tail-wagging smile.

"Sure, anytime."

"Thank you."

She quickly made her retreat from the police station, walking across the street to a pay phone. She dialed lieutenant Decker's number, but with each unanswered ring, the knot in her stomach pulled tighter. She was about to hang up when the ringing stopped, the other end silent.

"Hello? Is anybody there?"

"Marie?"

"Tyler? Oh, Tyler, are you all right? What happened? Why are you answering Michael's phone? Is he okay? Did you hurt him, Tyler?"

In one breath, she had gone from relief to accusation without a break.

"Marie, please, I'm not in the mood to play twenty questions at the moment. And your concern for your boyfriend is growing quite tedious."

"My boyfriend? Tyler Alan, you know he's not my boyfriend! And excuse me for wanting to know you're okay. I was a little worried, you know. Why...okay, one question. Why did you answer the phone?"

"Because it woke me with it's incessant ringing?"

"Tyler!"

A deep chuckle rumbled through the phone line, warming Marie to her toes.

"The lieutenant brought me to his home for safe keeping. I suppose I overslept because of my need to mend."

"Mend? Why...?"

"Marie, love, I'm quite all right. Where are you? I shall come to you and..."

Needing answers, Marie interrupted him, though she knew it would nip his ire.

"Tyler, where is Michael?"

His silence told her she had been correct in spades about the ire. She could feel his anger seeping into her pores, feeling almost as though it were originating from inside her head. Sudden realization hit her like a freight train, the accompanying anger narrowing her vision and shortening her breath. She did not wish to pursue this subject over the phone. Her tone was curt.

"Tyler, I'm coming to you. Stay right where you are, and don't *do* anything."

"I beg your pardon."

His voice barely above a whisper, he nearly hissed his displeasure. Knowing she had spoken in a very authoritarian manner, Marie thought she had better make amends. On the other hand, she was building up quite a head of angry steam herself.

"I'm sorry I didn't word that in a way that would keep your aristocratic hackles from rising, Tyler, but I happen to be a little peeved at you right now. I would rather you didn't compound the situation by eating a friend of mine, *another* friend. Okay?"

"I shall prepare myself for your arrival. I assume I can expect you in the near future?"

Boy, he really was perturbed with her. But, if what she suspected turned out to be true, it was a safe bet that her anger would blow the roof off Decker's apartment!

"The very near future. Bye."

The connection was broken before she spoke her last word.

Looking around, Marie stepped into the same alleyway Tyler had used to secrete himself the night before. She got her bearings as best she could, then thought 'Up.' She rose slowly into the air, remembering at the last minute to flex her feet so her shoes wouldn't fall off. Though she had used this mode of transportation to reach the police station, she still wasn't comfortable with it. She just didn't feel like anyone was driving. It wasn't like she got a steering wheel, or a joystick, or anything else to make her feel physically in control. All she had to do was think about going to a place, and she went there. But she had to keep her mind on what she was doing, holding her concentration, or she might take a rather sudden dip. She did *not* care for those dips. She decided to think of herself as flying a plane with no auto-pilot, always keeping at least one hand on the wheel.

In less than ten minutes, she was touching down outside lieutenant Decker's apartment building. It was a good thing she knew how to find addresses in LA, since she had never visited his place. She looked around guiltily, afraid someone might have seen her landing, but no one was about. She knocked on Michael's door, taking a deep breath in preparation for her first sight of Tyler.

A thousand breaths couldn't have prepared her. He opened the door with a towel wrapped around

his lean hips, his shoulder-length golden blonde hair loose, falling in waves about his broad, muscular shoulders. His eyes were backlit by an inner fire, whether from anger, lust or something else, she didn't know. He stepped back from the door with an imperious wave of his hand, inviting her to enter.

'At my own risk,' she thought as she stepped into Michael's apartment. She jumped as the door snapped shut, not quite a slam, but a point-maker, nonetheless.

"Excuse me while I finish dressing."

He started to walk away from her, and she marveled at the ripple of muscle through his shoulders and back. She remembered how that taut skin felt beneath her fingers, and a zing of pure lust brought her nether regions to instant life. She hadn't realized how much she had missed waking up in his embrace, how much she wanted to feel his arms around her, his body pressed against hers.

"Don't do that on my account."

She reached out and tugged on his towel, disappointment furrowing her brow when he turned toward her, the towel caught in his hand and held to maintain his modesty, or just to deny her a view of his naked body. A thundercloud roiled in his narrowed eyes, his brows nearly one solid line across his forehead.

"Be careful, little girl, you may find you have teased a tiger instead of the domestic kitten you seem to think you're provoking."

Upon seeing him nearly naked, she had lost most of her desire to fight with him, another, more intimate, and activity coming instantly to mind. She tried placating him with a soft voice.

"Tyler, I said I was sorry. All I did was tell you to wait for me."

He had her shoulders in his hands, squeezing hard, before she could say another word. His breath heated her lips as he lifted her off the ground to meet his eyes.

"You do not *tell* me anything! Not now, not ever! Do you understand me?"

Responding to the terrifying fury of his eyes, she could only nod, her own eyes wide as saucers. He tossed her onto the couch, though, as she flew through the air, she had no idea where she was going to land. His towel had fallen to the ground but they were both too wrapped up in conflicting emotions to notice. He turned and left the room, she assumed to get dressed.

As the tears welled in her eyes, Marie rubbed her arms, knowing he could have caused her a great deal more pain. He had wanted to make his point, and he had succeeded in spades. She wanted to be angry, and she was, furious at his autocratic treatment of her! Unfortunately, she was also scared to death and broken-hearted as a result of said treatment. She wanted to cry, to run to him and find comfort in his arms, to give him a piece of her mind he would not soon forget. Instead, she remained where he

had thrown her, trying desperately to file each emotion in its proper place, then decide which to pursue first.

Tyler stepped into the bathroom, his relief at seeing Marie alive and unharmed warring with his anger at her audacity at commanding him. His hands shook as he leaned against the bathroom sink, drawing deep breaths to cleanse the fury from his soul. Lieutenant Decker could have ended his life and he would have been absolutely helpless to stop him. He desperately needed to feed to restore himself to full strength. Staring at his hands, he wondered if these concerns might have caused him to overreact a bit with Marie. He could feel the pull of her presence in the next room, the need to crush her body against his almost overpowering. The last thing he ever wanted to do was hurt Marie, let alone over something that was not entirely her fault.

Needing her more than life itself, he left the bathroom at a near-run, meeting her mid-hall as she ran from the living room to find him, her need for him equally great. He lifted her and wrapped her in his arms, spinning to compensate for the speed of her run and avoid them both crashing into the wall. She was still getting the hang of that tremendous speed available to her at the snap of a thought. His mouth found her lips, bruising them in his passion. She didn't care, meeting him kiss for kiss until they were both nearly breathless. Holding her tightly in his arms, he returned to the living room and sat on the couch, pulling her into his lap. He kissed the trail her tears had made on her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, my heart. I should not have been so harsh with you."

She shook her head, sniffing.

"No, I should have known better than to give orders to a guy like you."

She touched his chin and he felt an electrical blaze flare along his skin, spreading from her touch deep into his soul. Her eyes, though still moist, smiled up at him.

"You're far too tyrannical to ever take orders from anyone."

His eyebrow rose high, as she had known it would, and she giggled with the pure pleasure of being held in his arms and teasing him.

"Tyrannical? Indeed."

He pulled her close and nuzzled her neck, prolonging her giggle.

"I'm afraid my sunny personality did not fare well under the tender loving care of lieutenant Decker. My back still feels the sting of the sun that he allowed to caress my unconscious flesh, and my need to feed is great. Though no excuse for my behavior, I hope you will accept it as an explanation and not think me inexplicably tyrannical."

She smiled and kissed his earlobe, an action he found surprisingly erotic. Though his loins

sprang to life, he knew that he could not do justice to the passion that burned in himself and his lady until he regained his strength. With a shiver of physical denial, he set her on the couch beside him.

"Enough of that, you little vixen, I must dress and go on the prowl for some helpless victim on which to slake my thirst."

As he stood, she wrapped her soft palm around his shaft, stopping him dead in his tracks. He dropped his head back with a deep groan, another more powerful shiver gripping him.

"Just a minute, Bubb, I have a question that I would really like answered before you leave."

Taking a deep breath, he recovered himself enough to speak.

"That is not a handle."

His jaundiced glare brought another smile to her lips. Releasing him, she stood and walked around the coffee table, wanting to put a little space between them before she asked her question, knowing his answer might make her furious. She didn't want to have to resist the temptation to hit him proximity might bring. He made note of her movements, his expression becoming more serious as he turned to track her progress about the room. She took a deep breath, caught his eye and plunged.

"Why am I a vampire? I never drank your blood."

Tyler's neck stiffened, the rise of his chin the only indication of his discomfort. When he replied in a tone of consoling explanation, Marie knew she was headed for a real snit.

"I had a feeling that there was danger in your future, that your death would come swiftly. In the eventuality of your death, I wanted to be able to claim you quickly. And I wanted to strengthen the bond that had been formed by my tasting of you."

This last was said with the warmth of memory, causing a hot little ripple to shimmy down her spine.

"I gave you my blood while you were sleeping."

Marie's eyes flew wide, her breath catching in her throat. Speech was impossible for a moment, giving him a short - very short - reprieve from her anger. He had known this time would come, had, in fact, dreaded it's arrival. He winced inwardly as she found her voice.

"You ambushed me in my sleep?"

Her eyes glittered dangerously with a combination of anger and hurt.

"So all that about giving me a choice was bull. You meant to..."

"No."

His attempt at soft interruption went unnoticed.

"...force me to be like you all along. Even if I..."

"No!"

This time his interruption was impossible to ignore since the volume of his bellow practically shook the rafters, the vehement denial charging the air. Marie gave him her full attention; auburn eyebrows furrowed over eyes shooting green sparks. Tyler clenched his fists at his sides. Since when had he found it necessary to explain - let alone defend - himself? This woman was tearing his aristocratic upbringing to shreds! He lowered his voice, nearly grinding his teeth with the desire to yell.

"The choice was yours and I would have honored it, even if it had not been as I desired. I would not force you to my life, though I felt life would have lost all meaning if you had chosen differently. I prepared you without your knowledge because..."

With a flash of understanding, Tyler dropped his eyes to the floor, shame almost choking him. His voice dropped to a whisper.

"...because I was afraid. Fate can be a cruel mistress, sweeping her fickle hand across our lives on a whim, destroying all in her path."

He raised his chocolate gaze; catching and holding her eyes, even when the stark emotion she read in him made her want to look away.

"I have never loved as I love you. If I had lost you, I would have been completely alone, with no hope. I didn't know if I could live with only half of my heart, having found the means of completion in your embrace."

With one quick, fluid motion he stepped over the coffee table and took her upper arms in his hands, pulling her against his body so she had to drop her head back to see his face.

"I swear to you I would never have forced this life upon you."

In his eyes shone all the truth she would ever need. He loved her. Even if she didn't exactly approve of his methods, he had acted out of that love and nothing else. With that motive, she could forgive him just about anything.

With her normal aplomb, Marie changed subjects without the slightest warning, a habit certain to drive Tyler to the brink of insanity.

"Are you Catholic? I mean, wasn't just about everybody in your day?"

Her incessant questions would surely push him over. Tyler blinked, easing his grip on her shoulders. A sweet smile touched her lips and he couldn't resist placing a rather chaste kiss over it. She wrinkled her nose and he laughed, stepping away from her.

"Milady does not care for my kisses?"

"That was a kiss? My dog gave better kisses."

"Wetter ones, no doubt."

In a more serious tone, he warned her of his mood.

"If I plunder your lips as I would like, I will want to plunder your body."

She raised an eyebrow and tilted her head in obvious invitation. He chuckled.

"As I have said, I must feed before I can do justice to my passion for you."

"Why do you call it `feeding' instead of `eating'?"

Tyler rolled his eyes in semi-mock frustration. He spoke as he turned and headed back down the hall.

"If you wish answers to your questions, you will have to attend my dressing."

She followed him into what she assumed was Michael's bedroom, where Tyler's clothes of the night before, a bit worse for wear, had been carefully laid across the bed. Enjoying the view of his body as he dressed, she nonetheless listened to his answers.

"I refer to it as `feeding' in an attempt to give it the dignity I feel the taking of a human life deserves. We do not technically `eat' people, not like you would a burger and fries, we `feed upon' them."

She wrinkled her nose again and mumbled under her breath, "*you* `feed upon' them."

He smiled, choosing to ignore that remark and attempt a bit of revenge.

"Yes, I was."

Marie's attention had been rather rapt on his hand as he zipped his pants. She blinked and frowned in confusion.

"You were what?"

"I'm glad to find that I am not the only one who has difficulty following your train of thought."

She raised her eyes, then, seeing the laughter in his, dropped them as the warmth of a blush crept over her face and neck. His deep chuckle warmed her blood.

"I was a Catholic, a staunch Catholic, at that. You would be amazed at some of the excuses I invented over the years to explain my lack of attendance at mass."

"Why?"

"Because, sweet, the common people attempted to be very pious and they wanted their rulers to be even more so. The curiosity of the rabble brought about some rather unpleasant results for those less creative than I, such as being burned at the stake as a heretic."

"Oh."

He finished knotting his tie and bent to retrieve his jacket, giving her a nice view as his slacks

pulled tight across his well-muscled behind. She sighed, and then continued.

"It doesn't seem fair. I mean, we're both Catholics, how come we don't get along with holy water? It should recognize us or something."

With a slight sadness for her lost innocence shining in his eyes, he crooked his finger under her chin and gazed into her bright eyes.

"It does, my love."

A sad little sigh escaped her as she nodded, mumbling, "it still doesn't seem fair." With a fierce rush of love, he wrapped her in his arms, wishing he could make the whole world fair for her. She hugged him tightly, and he felt his heart would burst.

The red-hot poker of hunger chose that moment to find its mark in his gut and he exhaled a breath of agony.

"Tyler?"

He set her from him with a pained smile.

"It's nothing, love, just my body reminding me that I'm not quite as invincible as I would like to think."

"Yeah, I'm kind-of hungry, too."

With a wicked grin, he flipped his eyebrows.

"Would you care to come with me? I know a wonderful place to dine."

She grimaced and pushed him away from her.

"No, thank you. I'll just hang out here and watch prime-time TV. Maybe they'll have a special on the occult and I can pick up some pointers. Hurry back. And..."

She impetuously hugged him as tightly as she could, an embrace that would have broken the ribs of a normal man.

"...be careful."

As he looked down at her, his eyebrows drew together in a frown, his tone brooking no opposition.

"Decker is in the utility room. Leave him. I will take care of him when I return. Do you understand?"

Marie nodded, knowing Tyler was in no mood to argue. He had started to shake with his need for sustenance.

He left by the front door, kissing her deeply before disappearing into the night. Staring after him, she softly clarified.

"Yes, Tyler, I understand. But I don't agree."

Chapter 28

"What do you suppose he meant by 'take care of him'?"

Marie nearly jumped out of her skin when she heard the familiar voice behind her. She turned to find Michael standing in the hall doorway.

"Michael!"

It did nothing for her peace of mind to find him holding a rather large handgun, though he wasn't currently pointing it at her. He was just holding it against his side, pointed at the ground, reminding her of a child's security blanket.

Lieutenant Decker followed her eyes with his own, then smiled.

"Don't worry, darlin', I wouldn't use it on you. It just makes me feel on a little more even ground with Alan."

He uttered a wry chuckle.

"Though I don't know why, guns haven't proven much help so far."

He returned his full attention to her, the look in his steely blue eyes stating the seriousness of the situation.

"Why don't you close the door so we can talk?"

Though he couched the request in the most pleasant of terms and tone, Marie still sensed the command hidden beneath the surface of his words. Complying, she stepped into the apartment and closed the door behind her, and then perched on the edge of the couch, her hands folded in her lap, decidedly uncomfortable with the current situation. Decker eased his lean frame into the lounge chair adjacent to the couch. His face softened in a sad, bone-weary smile.

"You look like a little girl about to get a lecture from her daddy."

The corners of her mouth lifted in a nervous half-smile.

"I guess I feel a little like that."

He sighed, placed the gun on the coffee table and sank back into the chair.

"I'm not your daddy, sweetheart, and I wouldn't know where to begin with a lecture if I was. This whole thing's gotten so far out of control, it'd take some kind of miracle to put it right."

He looked off into some distant place and spoke as if to himself.

"And I'm not so sure I believe in those anymore."

He brought his eyes back to pin her where she sat, returning to the businesslike tone she had

come to expect from Michael.

"Okay, Marie, here's the problem. I'm a cop and I know that you and Alan are killers. It's my job to take down killers. I don't want anything to happen to you, I think you might be capable of rehabilitation if you weren't under Alan's influence, but he says killing him is killing you. If you can think of a way out of this for all of us, I'd be real happy to hear it."

"I'm not a killer, Michael."

He shook his head.

"I don't buy that way o' thinkin', darlin'. You may not do the actual killin', but Alan does it for you. In my book, that's the same as doing it yourself."

"No, I...he doesn't have to kill, he can just take a little blood. Vampires never *have* to kill."

"That's not the way he does things, and you know it. He's a hunter, Marie. To him killing isn't just for food, it's something he does to stay superior, to keep telling himself he's the boss."

He was quiet for a moment, gathering his thoughts. His eyes widened, as if in surprise, then narrowed as he nodded and looked into her eyes.

"You may have just given me the answer. Or maybe that vampire nap I took rattled my brain. If you've never killed anyone, and you don't have to kill to survive, you're not my enemy."

He stood and, moving past her, sat next to her on the couch. They faced each other, Michael's arm on the back of the couch touching Marie's shoulder.

"You gotta prove to me you can do it, Marie. Prove you can live without killing."

He tilted his head away from her, exposing his throat to her hungry eyes. She hadn't realized she had been hearing his rapid heartbeat since he had taken the seat next to her. It was a comforting sound, like the hiss of steak hitting the grill, telling you the end to your hunger pangs is just a few short minutes away. Shaking her head, she started to stand, but he grabbed her shoulders and held her firm. Panic seized her. What if she couldn't stop?

"Michael, no, I can't. This is crazy. It won't prove anything. Tyler will still..."

"Alan is another problem altogether. Separating the two of you is what I thought I couldn't do, but if you can stop without killing, I can. Come on, Marie," he gently shook her, her auburn mane spilling over his hands, "show me you're not like him!"

He tangled one hand in her hair and pulled her face toward his throat. She could hear the blood coursing through his veins, its warm promise echoing in her ears until she could no longer resist the need pulsing in her own veins. She felt the sharp tips of her fangs slide along her bottom lip as they lengthened. Her breath came in short, excited gasps as she slid her arms around his neck and placed her

lips over the artery at the side of his throat.

"I must be outta my mind," Decker whispered to the air as he felt the sharp pain of penetration. Then words, thought, humanity, all flew from his mind as he experienced the bite of the vampire. His back seemed to arch of its own volition and he pulled Marie closer, wanting more of the most exquisite pleasure he had ever experienced. Conscious thought became impossible as soon as her teeth found their mark and his blood became hers. He had never before cried out during sex, had always been the stoic lover; but now, as his head fell back against the couch, a scream of pure animal pleasure poured forth from his mouth, shaking the walls of the small apartment.

Sinking her teeth into warm, taut flesh was the shortest foreplay in which Marie had ever participated. As Michael's hot blood flowed into her veins, her muscles clenched and released in such an intense orgasm she thought she might lose consciousness. It was more than sexual, more than fulfilling her need for food. It was acceptance. Once and for all, she was a vampire.

Marie shivered as, somewhere in her consciousness, she heard Michael's scream of fulfillment. She felt so good, so warm; she wanted this feeling to go on forever. But she knew she had to make it stop, had to force herself away from him before it was too late. He wasn't helping any by holding her so tightly against his body. She withdrew her teeth from his throat, placed her palms on his chest and gently pushed until his hand fell away from her head to land limply on the couch at his side. Renewed panic gripped her as Michael's eyes fluttered shut and he slid sideways along the couch, unconscious.

"Michael?"

She lightly patted his cheek. No response.

"Michael! Oh, no!"

She pressed her ear against his chest, a move that really wasn't necessary since she could hear his heart beating without getting that close. Still, it made her feel better to hear it up close and personal, its steady rhythm reassuring her that he was just sleeping - maybe unconscious would be a more accurate term - but he would wake up.

As she had done the morning of her eighteenth birthday, Marie rose and went into the bathroom to find a mirror. Becoming a woman, as her mother had told her she would do when she reached the magical one-eight, had been a terrible disappointment in the looking different department. Now, as then, she wanted to see if the change would show on her face. However, once again she had forgotten her handicap where silver-backed things were concerned. To her consternation she found that she wasn't going to get any better answer this time, since she couldn't see a blessed thing in the mirror that hung over the bathroom sink.

"Well, doesn't that just figure! Darn, how am I going to put on my makeup?"

She remembered the polished steel shield in Tyler's bathroom.

"I guess we'd better buy stock in stainless steel."

Hearing movement, she returned to the living room to find Michael sitting up, a look of dazed amazement on his face. He looked up at her when she entered the room, his eyes taking an extra moment to focus.

"Girl, you pack a better wallop than Mike Tyson."

Marie smiled and blushed.

"Are you okay?"

Now it was his turn to blush as he glanced down at the front of his slacks.

"I'm fine. Excuse me a minute, I been in these same clothes long enough they could stand by themselves."

When he returned, freshly shaved, brushed and laundered, Michael wore a stern expression. Marie feared he had come to some unpleasant decision about Tyler.

"Marie, Alan has to be stopped. Imagine how many people he's killed in his lifetime."

She gave him a lame smile.

"I suppose he is the world record holder for mass murder. But he isn't mean about it, Michael, he just kills to eat."

"That's not true, Marie."

Visions of a blood-soaked alleyway flashed in his mind and he swallowed hard, more determined than ever to stop Alan.

"I've seen with my own eyes how mean he can be, darlin'. Stop foolin' yourself. He's not the good guy, I am. You've just proven he doesn't have to kill to survive. He does it 'cause he likes it."

He shook his head wearily.

"Never mind. He's got you believin' whatever he wants you to believe. It's not gonna do me any good to..."

Marie narrowed her eyes and, standing to face him across the coffee table, smacked her hands onto her hips.

"Wait just a minute. I do *not* believe whatever anyone tells me, not even Tyler. You're right, he doesn't have to kill, and he could run around town taking a nip here and a nip there. But then you'd be getting reports from women saying they'd been accosted and bitten by some maniac. A couple of composite drawings later, Tyler would be a wanted criminal all over the country, maybe the world. It

would be a little difficult for him to survive for long like that, wouldn't it? So, in the big picture, he has to kill to survive."

A look of dawning crossed her pretty face, softening her tone.

"And, if anything happened to him, so would I."

She returned her full attention to Michael, her eyes beginning to shoot green sparks of anger.

"You have to get rid of that sketch you made of Tyler."

During her introspective moment, Decker had retrieved his gun. Now he raised it menacingly.

"No. I figure I'm all that stands between Alan and the thousands of people he might kill before someone, or something, stops him. I'm gonna take him down, once and for all."

He narrowed his eyes, the barrel of the gun pointing at her as steadily as if it were carved in stone.

"If you get in the way, Marie, you're gonna go down with him."

Her hurt look took Decker by surprise. He had forgotten how young and innocent she had been when this all started. But, before he could reconsider, she straightened, her face losing all emotion.

"Are you going to shoot me, or can I leave?"

Her tone was as steely cold as her eyes. Decker resisted the urge to shiver.

"You can go. The next time I see you, Marie, I'm gonna consider you the enemy."

She nodded, finally seeing him as a policeman, a defender of the law, first and foremost. He was just doing what he thought was right. Could she let Tyler destroy him for that?

She dejectedly studied the floor, letting her shoulders slump, and made her way to the front door. Turning, she spoke in a tiny, defeated voice.

"Michael?"

His eyes shone with determination as he met her gaze, keeping the gun centered on her chest.

"Yeah?"

He had one half second to realize his mistake. In that blink of time, he tried to pull the trigger, but his mind was overcome before the signal could get from his brain to his finger. Marie held out her hand.

"Give me the gun."

She spoke softly, but with an undeniable air of authority. Like an obedient child, he laid the pistol in her hand.

In the back of Marie's mind a strange comprehension dawned. She didn't need a mirror to see how she had changed when she had awakened to her new life, she could hear it in her voice, feel it in

every pore of her body. A new maturity was blossoming within her, necessitated by circumstance, and fed by Tyler's love.

"Listen carefully, Michael. When I leave this room, you will develop a very high fever. It will make you want to sleep, which you will do for twenty-four hours. When you awaken, you will remember nothing of Tyler Alan or Marie Parker. If anyone mentions either of those names, you will put down any confusion you might feel to the aftereffects of the fever. Do you understand?"

He nodded slowly. Knowing in her heart that she would never see him again, Marie felt tears well in her eyes. She stepped forward and touched his face. He leaned into her hand like a contented kitten.

"You're a good man, Michael Decker. Try thinking of yourself as a man first and a detective second. There's a woman out there with your name on her. Keep looking till she finds your heart."

The closing of her throat on a sob made her pause for a moment, but her eye contact never wavered. Christopher Lee had taught her well.

"Goodbye, Michael."

She turned and quickly left the apartment.

Lieutenant Michael Decker stripped off his clothes, tossing them wherever they landed, and climbed into bed.

"I feel like an overcooked Thanksgiving turkey. I wonder if that little number in records - Rosey? - Knows how to cook chicken soup. Maybe I'll give her a call."

He looked around for the phone, but when he didn't see it in the immediate vicinity, he fell back on his pillow.

"Later, I gotta get some sleep. Then I'll get back to...whatever."

He was asleep as soon as he closed his eyes.

When Tyler returned to Lt Decker's apartment, he found Marie sitting next to the front door like an abandoned waif. He eyed her suspiciously as she stood and stepped in front of him, using her body to bar his way into the apartment. She gave him a bright smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. Eyes narrowed, he warily addressed her in a formal tone.

"Marie, what are you about?"

She looped her arm through his, trying in vain to turn him from the door. When he wouldn't cooperate with her obvious desire, her smile drooped and lines of worry appeared on her forehead.

"Tyler, we have a lot to talk about. Why don't we go back to the cabin and have a nice, long

chat? I..."

Tyler turned his full attention upon her, his intensity making her squirm uncomfortably.

"Did you kill him?"

"What? Who?"

"Decker."

Her eyes widened and she shook her head, confusion and dawning knowledge warring in her eyes.

"How did you know?"

His eyes remained narrowed, anger simmering just beneath the aristocratic facade he was fighting to maintain.

"Your skin is abloom with the blush of the blood rose. Did you kill him?"

"No! I didn't even want to bite him but he practically forced me. He wanted me to prove we could bite without killing. Tyler, wait..."

She grabbed his arm as he took a step toward the door. A snarl curled the perfectly formed lip beneath his well-trimmed blonde mustache as he regarded her with barely concealed fury.

"You have given him his last cheap thrill. I hope you both enjoyed it. Now I shall conclude my business with the good Lieutenant."

He glared at her hand where it rested on his arm, then raised his glowing red eyes to hers, hissing a command.

"Release me!"

Her nostrils flared as she took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders.

"No!"

A growl sounded deep in his throat, bringing the hair on her nape to attention. She felt the muscle underneath her hand bunch in preparation to toss her aside. Before he could manage that, she jumped away from him and placed her back against the door. She was amazed to feel her teeth growing with her anger.

"You'll have to go through me to get to Michael. Couldn't you just listen to me for once? Decker won't..."

His hands closed so tightly around her upper arms she thought she might hear the snap of breaking bones at any minute. He lifted her, turned and tossed her onto the ground like a discarded rag doll. She hit hard on her butt, jarring her clear to the fillings in her teeth.

She knew it was not the cleverest response, knew she should search for the hurt inevitably

lurking in her heart and try to play on his manly sympathy. But she had taken all of the abuse at the hands of this man she was going to tolerate! Without even realizing what she was doing, she flew through the air and hit him square in the back, as he was about to turn the doorknob. The weight of her body and force of her assault slammed him against the door. She wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist, hanging on for dear life. She really didn't want him to get his hands on her at this moment. She could feel the fury vibrating through his skin like a live thing.

His reaction caught her totally off-guard. He stood stone still and spoke with the soft voice of menace personified.

"Does he mean so much to you?"

Exhaling a near-sob, Marie dropped to her feet and quickly stepped around his stiff body to stare deeply into his red glare. She reached toward his face, but he pulled away, his nostrils flaring like an angry stallion's.

"Tyler, that's just the point. He doesn't mean anything to me anymore. I told him he wouldn't remember us."

His eyebrow raised one grudging millimeter, his tone showing dispassionate interest.

"Explain."

"I used vampire vision," one corner of his lip followed the eyebrow, "to convince him he didn't know anything about either of us. I told him he would have a high fever for 24 hours. When he wakes up, he won't know you from Adam. I said if he felt confused, he could put it down to the fever. I think it will work because he really doesn't want to remember. I studied hypnosis once - Beth wanted to help her boyfriend of the hour quit smoking and I volunteered to find out about it - anyway, the book said you can't force someone to do something under hypnosis that they wouldn't do without it. Michael wanted to forget, he wanted a way out. So I gave him one. If you'll leave him alone."

"Am I to just forget about the bullet he put in your heart, the holy water grave of his construction, the touch of the sun on my back?"

"He didn't mean to shoot me. He..."

She took one look at his granite expression and threw her hands into the air.

"Okay, yes, you're supposed to forget all of that. And, in anticipation of your next question, because I asked you to."

Tyler closed his eyes, wanting the darkness to assemble his thoughts. She didn't love Decker, didn't care about him at all. If he went ahead with his plans to kill the good Lieutenant, he might lose Marie to her anger. Nothing was worth that risk, not even vengeance.

Tyler exhaled deeply and, turning his softened gaze upon her, nodded.

"Very well. For your information, ours is not hypnosis, it is control. We have no need of their desire to do our will. Do you still plan to finish designing my house?"

Surprised by the sudden change of subject, she quickly shifted her thoughts. Her nose crinkled as she shrugged.

"They have a composite drawing of you from the jail rescue. I think we better leave the country."

She smiled, hope for the future taking hold now that the past seemed semi-settled.

"I'll stop by my office and pick up the disks before we leave. I can continue to work on it while we do a little touring, maybe ten or fifteen years. That should give us time to argue out all the details. Actually," she wrapped her arms around his neck, pleased to find he didn't pull away this time, "it will give me plenty of time to bring you around to my way of thinking. Then, when it's safe to come back to America, all we'll have to do is get it built. Okay?"

He was amazed at how little effort it took for her to achieve her goals with him. He should be sterner, make her bow to his command. But looking into her eyes, alight with love, he felt his age-old need to command peeling away from him like a dead skin, leaving behind the need to love, and be loved by, the beautiful little imp he held in his arms. His anger forgotten, he pulled her tightly against his body and ravished her lips with his own. She tasted of blood and lipstick, a combination he would never have thought so enticing. He slowly ran his tongue over her lips, delighting in her shiver. His loins began the slow burn of desire as he whispered into her ear.

"You win, vixen. Now, I will award you the prize."

They spent the next several hours in a grove of trees, waking the wildlife with their cries of pleasure. In the wee hours of the morning, they rose hand in hand and slowly made their way through the skies of southern California to the canyon that held their secret hideaway.

As they approached, it quickly became apparent something was wrong. Several fire trucks were attempting to quell a raging inferno threatening houses and trees alike. And at the center of that rampaging blaze were the ashen remains of their safe house.

Chapter 29

"Marie, to me!"

Marie had been staring dumbfounded at the flames that were licking the tops of the trees beneath them like a hungry child devouring an ice cream cone. She hadn't realized that she had been slowly sinking until Tyler's command shook her from her state of shock. She turned her fear-darkened eyes to his face and thought 'follow him'.

They made good time returning to the little chalet in Beverly Hills. He entered through an open basement window, then turned and helped her climb through the window and down into the basement.

This area was obviously used for storage. Cardboard boxes were stacked to the ceiling on three sides of the single room, silent sentinels bearing witness to their passing. Industrious spiders had been at work in any space large enough for them to consider habitable. Marie wrinkled her nose, a dust-induced sneeze threatening.

Tyler's deep voice startled her as it severed the silence of the dark basement.

"I apologize for the meager accommodations."

He seemed far away, his mind firmly embracing something to which he was in no hurry to make her privy. As usual with him, if she wanted to know something, she'd have to ask.

"Tyler, what's going on? Is it the fire? Do you think someone set it?"

"Most likely."

He walked between two stacks of boxes, clearing the way through spider webs - some dusty and clearly uninhabited, others...she didn't want to think about it! - with a nonchalant wave of his hand. Reaching the wall, he pressed his hand against what looked to be an electrical receptacle. The wall shifted slightly, just enough for them to slip into the room beyond. Marie stared open-mouthed at the secret panel as Tyler pulled her through. She wanted to examine it more closely, try to ascertain how it had been so seamlessly installed in the wall. Before it had opened, she would have sworn this was an outside wall with no breaks.

Turning to ask Tyler if he had installed this secret room, she was confronted by a large, dark coffin that took up most of the small room in which they stood. A tiny gasp of surprise escaped her. Tyler smiled at her, though his thoughts still seemed only half with her.

"When I first became a vampire, I believed the legends. I had little else to go by. It took me many years to venture out of this 'bed' and discover that I could safely sleep in any dark place bereft of

sun."

In a grand gesture, he waved his arm toward the coffin, pride warming his voice.

"This has traveled with me for quite some time. It is an excellent example of early nineteenth century craftsmanship."

He smiled at her dubious expression. Leaning, he whispered conspiratorially into her ear.

"In an emergency, the old stand-by makes a suitable haven."

"You want me to get in there?"

The edge of panic in her voice enraged Tyler's protective instinct. He pulled her into his arms.

"I will be with you, my love. There is nothing to fear."

Sliding one hand lower to cup her bottom, he pulled her more tightly against him so she could feel hardening length of him against her belly. His breath caressed the tiny hairs in her ear as he whispered.

"I will try to make it more agreeable to you."

She pushed against his chest until she could look up at him.

"Believe it or not, there are some things sex won't fix. Claustrophobia is one of them."

He chuckled, but his voice took on the edge of command.

"Trust me, darling, I will keep you safe. We have no other choice. The sun is rising."

With a gentle push, he closed the door to the secret room. Though she resisted, he used soft words, endearments, and a little of his superior strength, to pull her into the coffin beside him. He had to lie on his side to accommodate her, which he didn't mind. It was worth it to feel her soft body pressed so intimately against his. When he thought he had eased her fears sufficiently and had her comfortably settled, he tried to close the coffin's lid. With surprising strength, she grabbed his arm before he could reach the lid. Panic had returned to her voice.

"What are you doing?"

Amazed at the fact that she was actually hurting his arm, he frowned at her, a potent move in such close quarters.

"This coffin is sun-proof only when the lid is closed."

"This room looks pretty dark to me, I bet the sun never gets in here."

"Would you bet our lives?"

She swallowed hard, irrational fear warring with logic.

He looked at her hand where gripped his arm.

"Release me."

If he had voiced it as anything but a request, Marie might have balked. As it was, she shrugged and dropped her hand. But Tyler could see the fear still tightening her face. He would have to get her mind off their current situation to banish that fear.

"Do you wish to hear the story of the people I believe set the fire in the canyon?"

Bright eyed, she smiled up at him, so glad that he wasn't going to stay inside his own mind. The prospect of being closed inside a coffin was frightening enough; she didn't want to be there alone, not even mentally.

"I must close the lid, Marie. I don't know if this room keeps out all sunlight and I would hate to find out otherwise by bursting into flame from a stray beam in the middle of my beauty sleep. Close your eyes. I'm right beside you."

Marie did as he told her, trying not to listen to the creak of the ancient hinges. She had to think about something - anything! - to keep her mind from its chosen path, which was quickly becoming thoughts of darkness, asphyxiation, spiders! This must not be Tyler's original coffin; she didn't think they had hinges in his day. He said this one came from the nineteenth century and he must be older than two-hundred. His first coffin was probably dust by now. Maybe he'd upgraded for comfort. Oh, this wasn't working.

"Share your thoughts with me, love."

His breath tickled her ear as he spoke. She had to admit, the necessary closeness was nice. He slid his arm under her to pillow her head, resting his other hand on her hip. She crossed her arms in front of her chest and snuggled into his embrace.

"I was just wondering what happened to your original coffin."

"It is in Walachia, my homeland. It awaits me in a cavern beneath a small, unremarkable house near the ruins of Castle Dracula, should I ever have need of emergency lodgings in that country."

Visions of the cavern in her long-ago dream flashed through her mind and she wondered at the strange twists and turns of life.

"Wow, they really built things to last back then, didn't they?"

She could feel his frown, giggled in response.

"Indeed."

"So who's the firebug?"

As attuned to him as she had become, she could feel his mood turn dark, ominous.

"They call themselves `The Hand of God.'"

He snorted derisively.

"Their humility is boundless."

"Who are they?"

He sighed harshly.

"Zealots, religious fanatics who believe themselves the saviors of the world. Their sole purpose in life, from the cradle to the grave, is to rid the world of whatever, or whomever, they deem to be evil. They have branches in every civilized country on the planet, using all the modern conveniences to keep each other informed of any possible outbreak of 'Satan's work'. They've hounded me since their inception just after the fall of the Inquisition. I had hoped they hadn't yet reached the enlightened shores of America, but now I have a feeling that is not the case."

"The fire could have started accidentally. Maybe there was a storm, I read that lightning starts a lot of fires in the forest."

She could tell he wasn't buying that bridge for one minute.

"Do you think Mr. & Mrs. Schwartz are okay?"

"Yes. I sent them to town to complete several errands. They won't return until mid-morning, at the earliest."

"Was that another 'feeling' you had, Tyler?"

He nodded.

"Is psychic ability one of the perks of being a vampire?"

He chuckled at her hopeful tone.

"I don't think so, love. I had 'feelings' before I became of the blood."

Her mumbled, "Figures!" earned her a squeeze and another chuckle.

"Is it a feeling that makes you think The Hand of God is involved in the fire?"

"That, and the sensation of being watched which I've had for the last few days. I'm not certain how they found me this time. They can be very ingenious pests, doggedly following the slimmest trail until it bears fruit. I hoped the last time I had the dubious honor of dealing with their cult I had put the fear of God - more accurately, the fear of me - into their sorry little minds. Obviously, they are too stupid to heed me."

"What happened the last time you dealt with them?"

He tucked her head more securely under his chin.

"You don't want to know."

Marie stiffened, not at all pleased with his pat-on-the-head tone. She pushed against his chest but found that it was like trying to move a rock. With so little immediate space in which to use body

language, she would have to settle for an indignant tone.

"Yes, I do."

He sighed, his tone turning hard.

"Very well. Envision the most gory, brutal scene you have ever viewed in a motion picture."

Marie remembered a movie Beth had made her rent, one of those zombies-eating-everyone-in-sight things. She shivered with the memory of the things she had seen before she had closed her eyes, telling Beth to let her know when it was okay to look. She'd spent most of that one resting her eyes.

"Okay."

Her response was quite tentative.

"Now remember my fury as I rearranged the furniture in the Schwartz' living room when I thought you had left without my leave."

His wild eyes, disheveled hair and growl of anger played across her closed eyelids. She shivered and he caressed her hip reassuringly.

"I remember."

"Combine them, adding several hours with no one to disturb me."

Marie let her imagination go for about two seconds, which was at least one second too long.

"I don't want to know."

"Exactly. It's time to sleep, my love."

His voice was becoming more airy with each word as sleep tried to claim him. Letting the warmth of his breath against her hair lull her, she snuggled more deeply into his embrace and imagined they were on a cloud, drifting away together.

"You were right. He came back."

The old man squinted as he leaned on the silver-eagle that formed the head of his cane. His eyes had been failing for quite a few years now, along with most of the rest of his body. Sometimes, he wished he could rest, rest and forget. But he had made a promise to his father, a promise that he was close to fulfilling. Then, and only then, could he give in to the peaceful release of death.

The old man spoke as if lecturing a class, his voice a summer breeze passing through steel wool.

"Animals follow patterns, Rolf, and these creatures are the lowest of Satan's animals. Always remember that. Soon, my father, and all those who have died to fight this evil, shall have their vengeance."

Rolf looked askance at Professor Klatt. The ancient teacher of even more ancient times might be slightly off center, but he had an unerring knack for finding the creatures of the night. During Rolf's apprenticeship to the Most Revered of The Hand, he had learned a great deal about Satan's work. And, he remembered with a dark smile, he had had the honor of personally destroying one of Satan's most seductive - and, therefore, dangerous - creations.

The memory of the beautiful woman lying naked in her coffin, helpless in the daylight, came to him now. He savored the expected rush of blood to his loins as he remembered raising the axe high above the screaming creature, then plunging it through her waist, severing her spinal cord. Those assisting him had quickly pulled on her feet and shoulders, placing a blessed crucifix in the gore between to insure that the pieces of the wretched beast could not heal back together. His comrades had praised him for his excellent aim, for not hesitating. He had accepted their congratulations with proper humility, thanking the Lord aloud for giving him the strength to carry out His will.

When he had excused himself, the others had gone about removing any evidence of their presence, assuming he needed a minute to calm his stomach. After all, he was only twenty years old. Fools! He had stepped into the bushes at the back of the sepulcher to ease the ache in his loins. Though he had meant only to adjust himself in his pants, as soon as he had taken his member in his hand, his seed had spewed forth. He had to bite his lip to keep from screaming with the pleasure.

Since then, he had relived that night whenever he was with a woman, finding the sweet memory of the destruction of evil to be the only thing that could inject the necessary steel into his sword.

His calm and piety on that mission had earned him the much-desired apprenticeship with Professor Klatt. Tiring easily and often forgetful, The Most Revered was not expected to be able to serve the Lord much longer. Someone must learn everything the Professor knew so they could lead those of The American Hand against the Darkness. Rolf had been proud to accept the honor.

His attention returned to the present as Professor Klatt stepped slowly around the corner of the Beverly Hills chalet.

"Get the others. We must work quickly, while he is at his most vulnerable."

"What about the woman?"

Rolf tried not to sound too eager.

Professor Klatt dismissed the subject with a casual wave of his wrinkled hand.

"She must be destroyed as well. You may have that honor, if you desire."

Rolf nearly choked on his reply, the sudden, fierce response of his body taking him off-guard.

"Yes, Most Revered, I would be most honored."

Professor Klatt turned a knowing smile on his young apprentice. Rolf was still enjoying, with youthful exuberance, the triumph of good over evil, a response he himself had felt often in the early years. The years before his father had been murdered, before he had been forced to take an axe to his own mother to stop the evil that had invaded her body.

Professor Heinrich Klatt allowed himself the luxury of memory as the others in his party performed their duties. He was a young boy, idolizing his father, an officer in the Third Reich, and a member since birth of The Hand of God, the greatest force for good in the world. He listened intently at the closed door of their meetings, believing everything they said as though written in stone.

Then came the meeting when they spoke of Him - Major Tyler, of the strange things that happened under his command. They would have to be very careful, for if he were evil they would destroy him; of that there was no question. But they would have to do so discreetly so that none of them would ever be associated with his death as Herr Tyler was an officer of the revered SS. His death would be meticulously investigated. Yes, they would have to be very careful.

In the weeks to come, Heinrich would watch and listen as The Hand confirmed their suspicions that Major Tyler served the Dark One. They began watching him, stalking their prey, waiting for just the right moment to strike.

That moment had come in the form of Rudolph Hersch, a young corporal who served as Tyler's adjutant. After watching him for several days to discern his schedule, Heinrich's father and another Hand member had quietly removed the corporal from his quarters and taken him to a small room in the back of a tavern owned by another member. They had tied him to a chair and spoken to him at great length of the evil being done by his commanding officer. Even after everything had been explained to him and he had been given the honor of being asked to join them, Corporal Hersch had refused to cooperate. That was all the proof they had needed that he had somehow been tainted by the proximity of Tyler. Herr Klatt had strangled the corporal; then, with some well-placed abuse of his body, made it appear as though the young man had been killed in a homosexual lover's quarrel. After quietly placing the body in the Major Tyler's quarters, all that was necessary to complete the downfall of the Major was an anonymous phone call. By eight o'clock that evening, Herr Tyler had been taken in for questioning by the dreaded Gestapo.

Using his connections at Gestapo headquarters, Heinrich's father had seen to it that Major Tyler was severely beaten during his lengthy interrogation. The Hand had wanted him weakened so he would more easily admit his service of Satan. In the morning Herr Klatt had learned that after being beaten bloody and nearly senseless, all the while professing his innocence, Major Tyler had been released by

one of the Gestapo officers who had been assigned to question him. The officer had had no idea why he had given the order, had not been able to remember doing so, but his signature graced the release order.

Tyler had been nowhere to be found, having disappeared after his release. Giving him their customary benefit of the doubt, the Gestapo had made him a wanted man.

Young Heinrich had been quite impressed by the Major's miraculous escape from the most powerful force of the Third Reich. He had begun to study his father's books in earnest to solve the puzzle. Eventually, his research had led him to the conclusion that Major Tyler was a vampire - a creature, once human, who now slunk through the night, drinking the blood, and draining the souls, of the righteous. When he had informed his father of his findings, Herr Klatt had laughed nervously - a spark of fear lighting deep in his eyes - and told Heinrich that his study skills would serve him well in the future.

Two months after Major Tyler's disappearance, Heinrich's mother had begun to act strangely. She had begun to complain of having little appetite, had stayed abed all day, coming down only after the sun had set. After a week, Herr Klatt had begun to worry, calling a doctor to visit her. The doctor had said she had poor blood, that she needed rest and a good, rich diet.

The fool!

That night - so very long ago! - came to Heinrich like a nightmare that haunts the waking hours, never leaving the dreamer until it drives him insane. Once again his ears hurt with the loud retort that had awakened him from a sound sleep. He cringed inwardly as the man remembered the child doing when the deep, powerful voice came from his parents' room, calling his father a fool, a brainwashed idiot. Young Heinrich had tiptoed to the door, pressing his ear against the cool wood.

"For what you have cost me, I will destroy all that is precious to you."

A deep, dark laugh had caressed the wood.

"Last night, your wife drank a very special wine. A very good year, if I do say so myself. While you and your comrades plotted the demise of some poor fool who has caught your notice, I took her life and gave it back to her, much improved."

"No!"

His father's scream had so frightened him that an answering scream had escaped his own throat. The door had been yanked open, his arm grabbed, and he had found himself flying through the air to land at the foot of his parents' bed. Raising his eyes, he had stared into the visage that would haunt his dreams - and many waking hours - for the rest of his life. Herr Tyler, perfectly attired in the malevolently elegant black uniform of the SS, stood looming over him, the sharp fangs of the vampire

bared in a smile of triumph. Blood had been dripping from a wound in his lower torso, but he had ignored it.

"Ah, the littlest Klatt. Andrea, your son is lovely."

With a narrow-eyed warning, he had dismissed Heinrich and turned his attention to the couple on the bed.

"Please, Andrea, continue your meal. What, lost your appetite? Do as I command!"

"No. Please."

His mother's voice had been so soft, more air than words. Tyler's face had grown red with fury as he sprang onto the bed. Heinrich had peeked over the end of the bed, curiosity barely overriding fear. He had seen Tyler holding his mother by her fine neck as he sank his fangs into Herr Klatt's throat, his body draped sideways across both of them. To the child losing, not only his parents, but his belief that the righteous were invincible, the horrible tableau had seemed to go on forever.

His vengeance nearly complete, Tyler had jumped off the bed, Herr Klatt's blood staining his lips, and slowly lowered his gaze to Heinrich, causing the little boy to wet himself, as he hadn't done for years. The warm liquid had flowed down his leg as he sat frozen in wretched fear and shame. Tyler had taken a step toward him, but a soft sob from the woman on the bed had brought him up short.

"Please, not my baby."

Tyler had caught the boy's eyes for a space of time that could have been a second or an eternity. His voice had been an unforgettable growl.

"See that you don't follow your father's foolish ways, boy!"

With that warning, the monster had turned and walked out the French doors. Heinrich had stared in horrified wonder as Major Tyler's black-booted feet had lifted off the ground and disappeared into the air above the balcony.

Heinrich had turned his eyes to his mother then. Seeing the whisper of blood that colored her lips, he had known what he would have to do. Finding the ability to move returning at last to his clenched muscles, he had stood and slowly walked around the bed to his father's side. Tears ran down his cheeks - the last he would ever cry - Heinrich had viewed his father's pale countenance, feeling his first knowledge of death.

His father had used the last of his strength to grab Heinrich's hand. Staring into the eyes of his own immortality, with his last breath, Herr Klatt had sealed the boy's fate.

"Avenge me!"

Heinrich had replied with the exuberance and boundless faith of youth.

"I will, Father, I promise."

The glassy stare of his lifeless eyes had told Heinrich that his father had not heard his promise. But Heinrich's word had been given and he would strive keep it till his death.

"Professor, we are ready. Professor?"

The look in Professor Klatt's eyes frightened Rolf in its intensity. The Professor blinked and turned too-bright eyes to his apprentice, the slow curling of his lips emanating malice.

"Proceed."

As befit his age and station, the Professor watched as his assistants performed the necessary tasks. The coffin, wrapped in tire chains which had been bathed in holy water, was carefully pulled through the basement window of the Schwartz' chalet, gingerly carried to the front of the house and placed in the waiting van. Professor Klatt was the last to leave the premises. He smiled, the dark-trimmed house reminding him of his youth. His smile slowly turning to a frown, he stepped up into the front seat of the van, closed the door and pressed the red button on the small box he held in his hand. There was a muffled whoosh and flames shot out the basement windows. Allowing himself just one more minute, Klatt watched as the flames licked hungrily at the eaves.

"Vengeance is mine!"

The van pulled away slowly so as not to attract the attention of the neighbors, most of whom stood on their porches, gawking at the blaze. Klatt turned, his heart skipping a beat as his eyes came to rest on the dark coffin lying on the floor of the van, several of his young associates perched warily on its lid, keeping it from moving. As he thought of the plans he had for the malevolent creature inside that mahogany casket, he felt a shiver of anticipation run through him. Finally, finally victory - and absolution - would be his!

Chapter 30

The first hour of a vampire's sleep closely resembled the sleep of the undead seen in so many old movies. Though not quite comatose, Tyler could do little during this time, had no more sense of what was going on around him than would a human in deep slumber. He hated the vulnerability of it, especially now that Marie was under his protection, but there had been nothing he could do about it. Wrapping her in his arms and whispering to her that they would be all right had been the limit of his power.

Having her so close, so very dependent on him, had kept him unusually alert. So, as soon as his body had claimed its necessary rest, he felt the gentle swaying of the coffin in which they lay, heard the hum of tires too close to be on the street in front of the Schwartz' house. All his senses came to full alert and he knew they were in trouble.

With a gentle nudge to her shoulder, he woke Marie. She opened her eyes and blinked sleepily, smiled, then closed them again and snuggled against his chest.

"Marie?"

"Hum?"

He gently fisted her hair and pulled her head back so he could see her face. She was so beautiful, so defenseless in her innocence. His heart swelled with love as his mind flared with warnings of danger. He spoke more sternly.

"Marie, wake up."

Her eyes opened and closed several times before she brought him into focus. How he longed to kiss the sleep from her lips and pull her willing body beneath him. He settled for a chaste kiss.

"Don't be frightened, love."

Marie came instantly awake. People always told you not to be frightened when you should be scared out of your wits!

"Why?"

He brought his finger to her lips, a wry smile curving his lips.

"Shhh. I see you obey me in all things."

His expression grew serious.

"We are moving."

Her eyes flew wide and he saw panic begin in their depths.

"It's all right, love, this coffin is completely sealed, and the sunlight cannot enter here."

"What..?"

A short, nervous giggle escaped her as his finger slid across her teeth. He moved his hand, bringing it to rest on her shoulder in a caress. This time she obeyed him, whispering her inevitable questions.

"What if someone opens it?"

Though that thought had been on Tyler's mind since he had first awakened, he had hoped it wouldn't cross hers. He should have known better. In this case, the truth was all he could offer her.

"Then we will die."

"What? No `I'll handle the situation'?"

He raised his eyebrows, shrugged and slowly shook his head.

"There is nothing even I can do against the sun, Marie."

The direness of their circumstances hit her full force. Whatever was happening, they were completely at the mercy of whoever had them. A hopeful thought lit her face and tone.

"Maybe it's Helmut. He might have..."

She stopped as Tyler once again shook his head, his dislike of disappointing her evident in his sad expression.

"I could sense Helmut. Though there is someone...familiar...to me out there, it is neither Helmut nor Margot."

"Could they have sent someone?"

He arched an eyebrow, his expression telling her more clearly than words how ludicrous he found that question.

"I didn't think so. But if you know this person, maybe there's a reasonable explanation."

"Oh, I'm sure there is. Reasonable does not mean pleasant."

He tucked her head back against his chest so he wouldn't see the fear in her eyes when he next spoke.

"Marie, you must let me handle this. If we are dealing with my enemies, it may be possible for me to secure your freedom."

"Tyler...!"

She tried to raise her face but his hand at the back of her head held her firm. Never one to be silenced, she spoke against his chest.

"You think it's them out there? The Hand of God?"

He tightened his arms around her and nodded, his chin against her soft auburn hair, willing himself to be mistaken. Could he bargain for her life? Tell them she had never, would never kill? No, they were fanatics, pledged to rid the world of his kind. It wouldn't matter to them if Marie were Mother Teresa, only able to do her good deeds at night; they would consider her tainted, in need of their assistance to find God. He growled low in his throat, regretting it as he felt her stiffen against him.

"What will they do to us?"

Her voice was tiny, coming from the heart of her fear. He sought to comfort her with a businesslike tone, as though they were discussing the price of a certain stock and not their impending demise.

"Their standard method for dispensing with vampires is to cut them in half with a large, sharp object, usually an axe. They wedge something holy - a crucifix, a religious statue, something that has been blessed - between the pieces so there is no chance of reattachment. It is quite adequate."

His tone deepened.

"However, for me, they may become more creative."

Marie felt a tear trying desperately to leave her eye. She rubbed her cheek against his chest to keep it from escaping. She was *not* going to cry and act like a baby. She was going to help Tyler figure a way out of this. She had to, so she could ask him about that 'reattachment' business at a more appropriate moment.

"Okay, so what's the plan?"

Tyler smiled despite himself, loving her faith in him, hating himself for being unworthy of that faith in this instance.

"I'll let you know as soon as I think of one."

"That was not the answer I was hoping for."

An idea came to him, not one that he would care to pursue, but one he knew he would if it became evident that he had no other choice.

"There is a vampire legend that you would not have heard because it is only told among those of the blood."

"Is this anything like telling the little girl a bedtime story so she won't think about the bogey man pounding on the front door?"

He chuckled, once again trying to ease her fear.

"Something like that."

She slipped her arms around his neck and squeezed, unable to stop the tears.

"I love you, Tyler. It's not fair. I haven't even found out if we can turn into wolves or bats or anything. We didn't get to fight about the toilet seat. I..."

She dissolved into sobs that Tyler felt tearing large holes in the fabric of his soul. He held her tightly, letting her get her tears under control before he spoke with the greatest conviction Marie felt a voice had ever carried. It was a conviction that both frightened and reassured her.

"As long as there is breath in my body, true death will not claim you."

She quieted, listening carefully to his soft voice, certain that what he was telling her was somehow very important.

"In vampire lore, the rays of the sun are composed of God's pure love, that is why they destroy vampires, which are abominations before God. The legend says that a vampire who finds the true love of another, mortal or vampire, and honestly returns that love, can use it as a shield from those rays, because they will not destroy that which they recognize as love."

Marie sniffed.

"That's really beautiful."

"I suppose even the undead want to believe in a love that can protect them from their worst enemy. A knight in sun-proof armor."

He sighed.

"I know how difficult it will be for you, love, but we must try to get some more sleep so we will be at our full strength when the time comes."

She raised her head and looked at him as if he had just asked her to bungee jump from the Empire State Building.

"You're kidding, right? You really think I can just close my eyes and drop off, with who knows what happening a plank-of-wood's width away? I don't think so!"

He twisted and gently pushed until he had her partially beneath him, his chest covering hers. He looked into her eyes, black coal burning behind his gaze.

"I must be as strong as possible when I awaken. Forgive me, my love, for weakening you. I pray you survive to curse me. I love you, Marie."

With no further warning, his sharp fangs sank into her throat, eliciting her cry of surprise. Her back arched even as she raised her hands to try to ward him off. The rapture she found in his possession won her inner battle as she cried out again, this time in pleasure, her muscles contracting and releasing as her orgasm ebbed and flowed.

Tyler stayed in control, not allowing his body to go beyond the need for sustenance. With Marie

writhing against him in the full throes of her pleasure, it was one of the most difficult things he had ever done, but he had no intention of losing one ounce of consciousness as long as their situation was this desperate. As she relaxed, he withdrew from her, pulling her back onto her side to face him. He felt the moisture on his shirt, knew she was crying. He had to hold his breath to hear her whispered plea.

"Tyler, please don't die for me."

Then he felt her relax, as the exhaustion, which he had just forced upon her, took hold, and she slept. As he let strength-giving sleep take him, Tyler hoped he would be able to abide by her wishes.

It was early morning when the van carrying Professor Klatt, Rolf, and three members of 'The Hand of God' pulled off the canyon road and climbed to the top of a rise in the mountains of southern California. They had scouted this location several days before and the Professor had found it perfect for his plans. The trees stopped several yards from the edge of a cliff that fell at least two hundred feet to jagged rock, leaving a grassy clearing in which the Professor intended to exact his revenge.

The old man climbed from the van, weariness from the trip warring with the excitement of the coming kill to make his step alternately dragging and spry. But only the excitement bubbled in his voice as he gave instructions.

"Yes, put the coffin right there, a few feet from the edge. No, you fool, give that crucifix to me; if you set it on the coffin, the whole thing might burst into flames. You have so very much to learn about the power of evil. Set up the ultra-violets there, and there."

He pointed to spots at the head and foot of the coffin.

"Start the generator and get the torch of the Lord lighted."

They squinted as the lights sprang to life, bathing the countryside in their eerie lavender glow.

"Excellent! Now remove the chains and stand back!"

They hurried to do as they were told, all except Rolf, who stood transfixed next to the Professor. His mind, not to mention body, was full of the impending death. The woman who lay beside the creature of Satan would die by his hand. He could barely breathe. The sting as a weathered hand struck his arm broke his reverie.

"All in good time, boy, all in good time. Keep your wits about you or the death will be yours!"

Rolf blushed, furious with the old man for finding him out and drawing the attention of the others. He smiled tightly.

"Thank you, Professor Klatt. My mind had wandered."

Klatt smiled back. The look in his eyes shocked Rolf into the realization that his mentor felt the

same lustful heat as that which flowed through his veins; he just kept it under his iron-fisted control. He still had much to learn from the old man.

When all was as the Professor desired, the three assistants reverently backed away, allowing him plenty of room to perform his duties. Klatt looked at his watch, lips pulling back from his teeth in a bare semblance of a smile.

"It is time."

"Marie, you must protect yourself."

Tyler tried to push her small body away from him. Though still slightly weak from his earlier use of her, she resisted quite effectively, clinging to him like a stubborn child. With a finger beneath her chin, he raised her face. She could see the love and determination shining in the depths of his blue-black eyes.

"Tyler, you can't go out there. Even an amateur like myself can tell that it's almost sunrise. If you..."

Once again, he placed his finger on her lips to silence her.

"I have lived a very long time. Trust me to know a little more than you. The sun you feel, though unpleasant, is not deadly. The real sun is still a few minutes away. Those minutes, and their belief in the power of their technological sun, will be our enemies' downfall. Turn away and cover your face."

He helped Marie to turn toward the back of the coffin, her hands over her face. Leaning over her, he spoke in her ear.

"My love, no matter what happens, you must promise me that you will stay here until I come for you. Or until the sun sets."

She turned her head, barely able to see his face at this uncomfortable angle. Tears streaked her cheeks, and she didn't even want to think about her nose.

"Tyler, please..."

She stopped as he shook his head, his beautiful golden blonde hair; loose as it always was when he slept, brushing her cheek.

"Your belief in me brought us together. If the worst comes to pass, trust in that belief to bind us and bring us together again. True love is never lost," he tried to smile, but couldn't make his lips obey, "it is merely inconvenienced for a time."

He gently brushed the backs of his fingers over her cheek, his choked whisper tearing at her heart.

"I love you, Marie, and I believe in your love for me. I must go. Promise me!"

Unable to speak because the lump in her throat was nearly choking her, she just nodded. He smiled, kissed her cheek, and then gently pushed her tear-streaked face down into the protection of her hands.

Marie jumped as she heard the creak of the coffin's metal hinges. She knew by that, and the heat on her back, that Tyler was exiting their haven of darkness. As the lid snapped shut once again, she willed herself not to cry because she wouldn't be able to hear what was going on outside if she was sobbing.

All but Professor Klatt stepped back, giving a unified gasp of fear, as the mahogany lid rose and the tall, black-clad figure emerged. After carefully closing the lid, Tyler turned toward his enemies, contempt written on every plane of his aristocratic face and shooting from his deeply narrowed black eyes. They had expected him to attempt to protect himself from the ultra-violet light. Instead, he stood straight, his shoulders thrown back, his head held high, looking down his nose at them.

"Declare yourselves!"

Professor Klatt raised the crucifix, holding it at arm's length in front of his chest like a shield. Since the lights had failed to affect the creature, he breathed a sigh of relief when it gave a barely perceptible flinch and cast its eyes to his face. His voice boomed with more strength than he had felt in years.

"I am Heinrich Klatt, The Most Revered of The American Hand of God. Creature of Satan, prepare to receive God's judgment."

Tyler's upper lip curled contemptuously, his response dripping sarcasm.

"To be decreed by you? Aren't God's servants supposed to be humble, Professor Klatt? I don't believe such humility would allow you to decide the will of your master."

Klatt took a step toward him, a move meant to show the beast he was not afraid. One corner of its mouth curled in sarcastic mirth.

"I can easily smell that which you attempt to conquer."

Its expression became serious.

"I have a deal for you, Professor. I will not resist you. I will confess my crimes and accept your Lord's 'justice', if you will allow the lady to remain in darkness, unharmed. She is not as I. Though I have convinced her that she shares my blood, she has harmed no one and refuses to do so."

Klatt listened intently, always aware of the lying capabilities of the damned. Still, if it spoke the truth, he did not wish to destroy the girl. Perhaps, unlike his mother, she could still be saved.

"She flew."

"She was touching me, flew under my power, though she thinks differently. I have enjoyed toying with her, making her believe that she shares my powers."

Its eyes narrowed and Klatt's intestines tightened, the memory of that long ago night threatening to overcome him.

"It would have made the eventual kill so much more satisfying."

"Why would you bargain for her life?"

It smiled, showing the tips of razor-sharp fangs.

"I know how much you would like to hear my confession, to feel as though you are truly doing your Lord's work, rather than merely playing the bully to feel stronger than you will ever be, and I feel certain that you will give your word to achieve that end. But the giving, and keeping, of that word will haunt you till the end of your days. And I will have my revenge from beyond this life."

It chuckled softly, evil filling the air all around it. Klatt imagined he could smell the rotting stench of death.

"What, exactly, would you have as my promise?"

"Professor?"

Rolf cried out in frustration and anger as he felt his prize slipping from his fingers.

"Silence! There will be others. I believe he is telling the truth about the woman. It is my decision."

Rolf turned and stalked off to brood in the van.

"Your word that the woman will be left alone, by you and your cohorts. After you have finished with me, you will leave this place without disturbing her."

Mulling that over in his mind, Klatt decided that it would be worth it just to have this beast kneel before him and confess his abominable sins. To have such a great and powerful creature at his command, to have it lay down its life at his order - yes, he, and his father before him, would surely be avenged.

He solemnly nodded.

"You have my word."

Tyler felt the hot caress of the morning sun on his back. He had only moments to succeed, or fail completely. He raised his arms and held them out to his sides in a parody of crucifixion he knew would anger Klatt.

"I am ready to confess."

"Take him!"

Klatt's three assistants rushed to do the Professor's bidding, youthful adrenaline driving them forward before caution could throw on the brakes. Two of them grabbed Tyler's wrists, while the third stepped behind him and grabbed the collar of his duster. Tyler snarled as his hair was pulled, an annoyance that poked at his restraint more than actual pain would have done. It took all his control to walk with a semblance of submissiveness to stand before the Professor, who lowered the crucifix as they approached. When Tyler and Klatt stood nearly toe-to-toe, the old man smiled in triumph.

"At last, the Lord's will is done."

No hint of submission covered the sarcasm in Tyler's words.

"One of the first things a servant should be taught, Professor, is never to confuse his will with that of the master. By the way," he arched one eyebrow and lowered his voice to a suggestive whisper, "how is your mother?"

Professor Klatt's eyes flew wide in surprise. He had been so certain that the creature had forgotten him. Now, it looked as though it were sharing some sexual secret with him - a bawdy joke, perhaps. With a scream of pure rage, he pressed the crucifix against the beast's bare skin where the open collar of its shirt exposed its chest. He was rewarded with a satisfying scream, followed immediately by a fist plowing into his jaw, sending him crashing to the ground.

Tyler ignored the excruciating pain in his chest as he grabbed the back of the neck of the captor on either side of him and pulled them together, their foreheads collapsing with a sickening crunch as they met. In one fluid motion, he spun around to face the man who had been holding his collar and kicked him in the jaw, the force of the kick snapping his neck and nearly ripping his head from his body.

Professor Klatt had regained his feet and now found himself staring into the face of his own nightmare. Once again, Herr Tyler glared down at him, though this time Tyler was only a foot superior. His red-tinged black eyes shone with the fury of Satan, his long, sharp fangs proclaiming his master to the world.

Heinrich was unsurprised to hear the ignition of the van engine followed closely by the screech of tires as it pulled out of the clearing. He had known Rolf was a coward, only good for destroying evil once it had been beaten. He pitied the boy, knowing he would have to atone to God for his desertion this day.

His mind returning to the immediate danger before him, Klatt once again raised the crucifix before him. The beast sprang forth and grabbed his arm at the elbow. With a growl ascended from the pits of Hell, it pulled and twisted, easily snapping the old bone and tearing the thin flesh that covered it.

Shame filled Heinrich as his scream of pain echoed across the mountainside. The beast tossed its prize aside, not satisfied with only a piece of its nemesis.

Tyler was nearly insane with pain and, if he were honest with himself, fear. His back felt as though it were being constantly bathed in acid, his strength ebbing with each wave of pain. He had to remove this last threat to Marie and himself before he could seek the safety of the coffin, but the sun had cleared the horizon. Every instinct told him it was too late, at least for him.

He grabbed the old man by his collar, preparing to dispense him with a quick breaking of his neck. He regretted that he couldn't take more time but that was one luxury he did not have. With surprising clarity for a man so near death, Klatt spoke, his triumphant glare never wavering from Tyler's eyes.

"My plan has worked. Though some had to be sacrificed, it was for the good of all. My assistant will return while you slumber, helpless, in your casket and set it ablaze. The cleansing fires of God shall claim you this day."

His control at an end, Tyler sank his teeth into Klatt's throat and tore a gaping hole in the sagging flesh. Blood sprayed over his face, giving him a brief, ironic respite from the heat of the sun. The Professor died without a sound.

Turning back to the coffin that held his most precious possession, Tyler tried to form a plan through the haze of mind-numbing pain attempting to command his brain. He had to get Marie to safety without exposing her to the deadly rays of the morning sun. He walked to the edge of the cliff and looked over, pleased with what he saw. A sheer drop of several hundred feet ended in a small box canyon. Even if they ascertained what he had done in time, he doubted the Professor's minions would be able to get to the bottom of the cliff before nightfall. It was his best option.

Reaching for the handle on the end of the coffin, Tyler swallowed hard as he saw what was left of his hands. The skin was a red, bubbling mass, slowly dripping onto the ground like horror-movie gore. Taking a deep breath was becoming extremely difficult, so he settled for short, shallow gasps of air. Pulling on the handle, he lifted the coffin over his head and forced his beleaguered body into the air one last time. He floated to the ground at the bottom of the cliff, his landing a bit rougher than he would have liked due to the fact that concentrating was becoming more and more difficult.

He stepped away from the coffin and watched with incredible aplomb as tiny flames began to leap from his pant legs. With stark clarity, he knew he was facing true death. But he had succeeded in protecting Marie, and no price was too high for that. He would have liked to lean on the coffin, getting as close to his love as possible, but he feared the fires of his demise would set the wood to flame. He

pulled the bottom of his black duster over his face in a last ditch effort to gain a few more precious minutes of life. It was little help against the rays of the fully-risen sun.

"Marie."

His voice was a horrible croak, barely recognizable as human, let alone his.

"I will always love you, my heart."

He dropped the duster and gazed at the sun, a pleasure he had not had for over five hundred years. His dusty chuckle accepted the inevitable with aristocratic good grace.

"God, it's a beautiful day."

Chapter 31

Marie could hear very little of what transpired outside her mahogany haven of darkness, though she pressed her ear flat against the uncomfortably warm wood. She heard a scream, and clammy fingers of fear clenched around her heart as she realized the exclamation of pain had come from Tyler. She was about to raise the lid and come to his rescue when she heard a second scream that was not Tyler's.

"Go get 'em, Tyler."

Bumps, yells, more screaming - was that the van starting up? The stress of not knowing what was happening, or if Tyler were unhurt, made Marie once again consider defying Tyler and opening the coffin. But as she was reaching for the lid, silence descended. She wasn't sure she liked that any better, but she decided to give Tyler a couple of minutes to speak to her before getting herself into trouble.

She jumped as the coffin began moving again. She felt a little like she was in an elevator. What was going on? She hoped Tyler was the cause of this movement, though her developing senses warned it was way past the bedtime of all good vampires. She tried not to think about his safety, knowing if she did she'd go stark raving mad with worry.

With a bone-jarring thud, the coffin came to rest on what sounded like a harder surface than it had previously occupied. Her curiosity, combined with an increasing panic at Tyler's lack of an appearance, was driving her to distraction! Where was he? What was taking him so long to join her? Finally, unable to stand the suspense any longer, she cautiously lifted the lid a tiny crack in the hope that she would be able to ascertain what was keeping him.

Bad idea! Sunlight streamed in through the crack; burning her hand so quickly she dropped the lid back down with a bang. Terror wrapped its clammy fingers around her heart and squeezed.

"Tyler? Tyler?"

She smacked her hands against the top of the lid in panicked frustration, tears streaming from her eyes to soak her hair and the black silk at her back.

"Tyler, damn you, don't you do this!"

With the clarity of a mind in trauma, she clearly heard him speak to her through the hot mahogany, though he sounded nothing like himself.

"I will always love you, my heart."

Pain flared in her chest and spread through her body like wildfire. She screamed his name, knowing in the place deep in her heart reserved for her one great love, that he could no longer hear her.

"No! Tyler, I told you not to die for me. Tyler? Please, God, no!"

Feeling the anchor of her world slip its moorings, she took a deep breath, refusing to give in to the desolation threatening her very sanity. She wasn't going to cry until no more tears would come. No, darn it, she was going to do something useful, something to help Tyler! But, what? There had to be something, some way she could hold on to her love.

Through her haze of loneliness and desperation flashed the memory of the legend of a vampire's love. Had Tyler told her that vampire fairy tale because he had known what he might have to do to protect her? Had he left the coffin hoping her love would protect him? Could it?

Prayer seemed the only answer. She began her conversation with the Lord in her normal, calm way, but was soon yelling as reality hit.

"God, I love him. He can't be all bad if he can love, and I know he loves me. It's not fair, God! I've done my best to be a good person. I wouldn't skip school, even though it made Beth mad and she sometimes went without me and had a really good time. I didn't have sex till I fell in love, and sometimes it seemed like that was *never* going to happen. Now it has, I've found someone, he's perfect, he's...Please, God, don't take him away from me! I can't bear to live without him!"

Marie lost her inner battle at that moment, sobs tearing through her, her mind going blank. She had to turn on her side to keep from choking as her nose began to run in earnest. Finding his scent still remained on the silk at her head, she inhaled deeply, causing a new torrent of tears to burst forth. She sobbed, begged God, and then cried some more until exhaustion brought merciful respite from the pain.

Marie suffered through the most restless slumber of her life. Though she was exhausted, both emotionally and physically, she couldn't seem to reach a point of sleep that afforded her any true relief from her thoughts. By the time she felt it was safe for her to exit her mahogany prison, she had lain awake staring into the darkness for several hours, waiting for nightfall, wondering what she would do when it came, fighting panic whenever her thoughts would drift to her future. Without Tyler, she felt as vulnerable as a newborn. Good analogy. She was a newborn vampire - well, maybe a toddler - but certainly not educated enough to be on her own. Where would she sleep? How would she eat? After asking herself the same questions for about the fiftieth time, Marie was delighted to step onto solid ground.

Surveying the coffin's surroundings, trying to get her bearings, she found the pile of dark ashes lying near it. Her breath caught in her throat, but she refused to let it escape in another sob. What good would crying do now? Tyler was gone, sacrificing himself so she might survive. As she knelt beside the

remains of the man who had possessed her heart - and always would - she wondered how long she could stand eternal life without eternal love.

Scooping the ash into her hands, Marie imagined she could feel some residual essence of Tyler. The rebellious sob forced its way from her throat, tears not far behind. Had he been in pain, or had he just burst into flames so hot he was instantly incinerated? As desperately as she wanted to believe he had been spared the agony of such a horrible death, she knew in her heart that he would have fought for every breath, every last minute of life. After all, Tyler had been stubborn in life, why would he have changed for such a mundane thing as death?

A flash caught her eye, the light of the moon reflecting off something shiny in the ash. She lifted the object from the debris, carefully blowing ash from it. Her heart, which she thought had surely lost the ability to feel by now, proved her wrong by clenching painfully in her chest. In her hand was the black crystal rose Tyler had made for her, the gift she had refused to accept because of her foolish pride. Had he carried it all this time, waiting for the right moment to offer it to her once again? Or, perhaps, to seal a marriage proposal when he felt the time was right?

"I accept, Tyler," she whispered to the pile of ashes. "I love the rose, it's beautiful. Oh, Tyler!"

She tenderly crushed the rose to her chest and began rocking back and forth, her lament, like the cry of the banshee, filling the night air with sadness.

After several minutes of giving in to her feminine need to express her emotions, she raised her head, a look of determination filling her sapphire eyes with a life they had lacked since the moment she had known Tyler was gone. With a sharp nod, she jumped to her feet and set about her task. After propping open the lid of the coffin, she began carefully scooping piles of ash into her palms and then laying them on the black silk that lined it. She knew she might be wasting her time but she shared the sentiment of a poster she had seen of Garfield the cat that said 'it's amazing what one can accomplish when one doesn't know what one can't do.' There was no one to tell her she couldn't bring Tyler back, so maybe she could. Her stubborn nature ought to be good for something!

After she had placed all of the ashes - and a considerable bit of dirt she hoped wouldn't throw a wrench in the works - in the coffin, she laid the crystal rose in the center, piling the ashes around it to keep it safe. She closed the lid, making sure it was sealed, and then patted it.

"I'll be back as soon as I can, Tyler. I have to find Helmut."

She frowned as her stomach growled.

"And, maybe, break into a blood bank."

She smiled, happy now that she had a goal to strive toward. She wouldn't give up, not as long as she was breathing.

As she lifted off and headed toward the lights of the city, she made herself - and Tyler - a promise: She would bring him back if it took the last miracle God was willing to give to man!

Chapter 32

"I don't want to hear that!"

Marie hung her head, ashamed of her sharp response to Helmut. After all, it wasn't his fault that his news wasn't what she wanted to hear. It didn't do any good to shoot the messenger. She smiled up at the blonde manservant from her position at Tyler's antique desk, seeing that he looked as miserable as she felt.

"I'm sorry, Helmut, it's just that I had hoped..."

With a wave of her hand, she left the sentence unfinished, knowing he'd probably understand. And, if he didn't, his wife would explain.

"I...uh...okay."

He bowed sharply at the waist - a habit Marie had explained a hundred times was not necessary - and left the room, quietly closing the door.

Marie smiled in spite of her disappointment. In the six months since Tyler...since she had last seen Tyler, she had been spending a portion of each night improving Helmut's grasp of English. Her smile faltered slightly as she thought of how Tyler would react to his man saying 'okay'. It was not a word that he had chosen to teach him, but she had quickly decided that must have been an oversight. How could you possibly learn English without such choice words as 'okay'? Helmut had proven a patient, attentive student, and his education helping her to make it through the long, lonely nights.

The days, now that was different. She had made the trip to Romania - though she preferred to think of it as 'Walachia' because it made her feel closer to Tyler - lying in the mahogany coffin with the ashes that had once been her beloved. Mrs. Schwartz had packed six cinnamon streusel muffins, still hot from the oven, a thermos of milk, and five units of stolen blood into a small cooler that took up one end of the wooden casket. She had suggested that Marie try to sleep as much as possible.

"That's how the master said he passed the time on these long flights."

Her age-crinkled eyes had clouded with pain and the beginnings of excess moisture as she patted Marie on the cheek and turned away. Both women had been crying a lot lately.

Sleep had come in short, nightmare-plagued pieces, enough to give her body the rest it demanded, but not enough to let her find the oblivion necessary to forget. The worst was the waking. Each time, as she entered that ethereal place between slumber and full consciousness, she swore she could feel Tyler near her. He was beside her, above her, all around her. But when she reached out, she

found only silk and ashes.

Marie had cried an ocean of tears on that long, trans-Atlantic flight.

It had been the same every day since their arrival in Europe. She slept what she needed, then fought consciousness for the rest of the daylight hours, nearly flying from the coffin as soon as the sun set.

Mrs. Schwartz had suggested she use the master bedroom, which Tyler had had sun-proofed long ago, to sleep. Marie had just smiled sadly, saying, "I guess it sounds stupid but I don't want to leave him." The little elf lady had hugged her, eyes once again suspiciously bright.

"No, my dear, nothing born of love is stupid. Perhaps your presence keeps him here."

As Mrs. Schwartz had sniffled and busied herself in the kitchen, a disquieting idea had germinated in Marie's mind. She had quickly shoved it into that box we all have for thoughts we don't want to examine too closely, and gotten on with her day. But it remained, just beyond her stubborn will.

Marie and the Schwartz' had taken up residence in Tyler's house just outside of Bucharest. The political atmosphere was not at its best - Margot opined that things had not been right since the aristocracy had been removed from power - so they kept an eye on any breaking problem, always ready to leave at a moment's notice. 'Relax' seemed to have left their collective vocabulary.

Helmut was extremely adept at breaking the law, getting Marie papers of false identification, or just about anything else she needed. He had taken her old driver's license and used the picture for all the papers. Marie found that quite ironic. The last picture she'd ever see of herself, and she looked like she was being booked for abusing the term 'bad hair day'. She remembered she had been in a hurry that day, rushing to get a job to a client by the time he thought he wanted it, and it had been a very windy day. By the time she had pulled her mind out of a ranch-style house in Carmel and into getting her picture taken, it was already done and she ended up looking like she'd tried to straighten a bad perm and got stuck halfway. Talk about being immortalized!

Marie had hoped that the answer to Tyler's rebirth could be found in the country that was the birthplace of the modern vampire legend. Every day, Helmut went searching for any piece of lore, no matter how small, which might prove useful. Most days, as today, he had been completely unsuccessful, informing Marie with an eloquent, "Sorry" and shrug of his broad shoulders that he had come upon no new information. Each time he did find something, anything that made even a vague reference to the 'undead', 'Nosferatu', or any of the many names for vampires, he would bring it home, even if he had to steal it. Marie, with Mrs. Schwartz interpreting, if necessary, poured over each item with a fine-toothed comb, trying to read between the lines, to decipher some hidden code that she felt was keeping the

answer just out of her reach. So far, nothing had proven successful.

She gazed at the ancient tome lying on the desk before her, a legal pad full of hand-written scribbles beside it. She had been over and over the English translation of Tyler's journals that Mrs. Schwartz had made for her. There was nothing there to help in her quest to reclaim her love. Still, she liked to examine the original text, tracing the bold letters, and imagine Tyler recording his thoughts, discoveries, even fears. Maybe if she read the translation one more time she would find something she had missed.

Slowly, as the pages blurred, the thought that refused to remain unseen surfaced completely, refusing to let her hide any longer.

Was Tyler being held prisoner here by her love for him, unable to find peace because he had loved her so much that he wouldn't leave her as long as she still called out to him? Should she let him go, show him she could get on with her life? She would never love another, of that her heart was certain, but she could make friends. Go to parties, eat, drink, and be merry. Expelling a heart-wrenching sob, she rested her forehead on her crossed arms, careful to protect the precious journal from the potential destruction of her tears. Who was she kidding? Since she had fallen into his arms in this very country, Tyler had become a part of her life, growing like a tiny acorn until he had become the giant oak at the center of her existence and everything else had melted away to window dressing. Without him, she was an empty husk, waiting to be blown away by a stiff breeze.

"Tyler, I'm running out of possibilities. I feel like I'm slipping into some dark void that I'll never escape. Help me, Tyler. Please!"

She turned toward the dark coffin on its ebony stand that filled the center of the small sitting room. As she had done countless times in the past months, she imagined she heard noise coming from inside its dark recesses. Led by never ending hope, she quickly pulled open the heavy mahogany lid, knowing deep in her heart what she would find.

Nothing. The ashes she had carefully moved to one side of the coffin so that she might lie beside them remained, as always, undisturbed by a merciful God, her beautiful crystal rose, that black reminder of happier times, nestled in their depths. No matter how many times she swore she was through crying, it seemed her traitorous body could always find a few more tears. Tonight was no different. As she leaned into the coffin to retrieve the rose, Marie's heartbroken tears anointed the ashes once again.

In her quest to bring Tyler back, that had been her first thought, her first shattered hope - her tears, the tears of the woman who loved him, would bring Tyler back to her. But that, like all the other desperate things she had tried since - pouring blood on the ashes, exposing them to the light of the

moon, praying for hours - had failed, each attempt leaving her more drained, more surely alone.

She lifted the rose, her hand closing around it as it had done so many times since finding it in the ashes on the California mountainside. But this time, one tiny perfectly-formed petal broke away from the rest of the crystal flower, its jagged edge cutting her finger as it fell to the silk lining. Marie jumped at the pain, catching herself just in time to prevent the whole flower slipping from her hand and following its petal. She watched in temporary shock as blood dripped from her cut finger onto the ash-covered black silk.

Shaking her head, she lifted the petal, fitting it back into place.

"I wonder if I can superglue it?"

She looked around the room as suddenly there was something...different about it that she couldn't quite identify. Excitement lit her cheeks like a pine tree at Christmas.

"Wait a minute! Is this the answer? Do you need *my* blood?"

Carefully returning the rose, and its errant petal, to the black silk, she began squeezing her wounded finger over the open coffin, her elation increasing as each tiny drop of her blood darkened the ashes. With the healing capabilities of the vampire against her, she managed only three drops before the cut closed, disappearing as though it had never existed.

Marie stepped back, certain she felt a change in the air around her. It was him, it had to be. Tyler was finally coming back to her! She imagined his scent - strong, clean male - wafting through the room. Any minute now, he would sit up and reach for her, the embrace of his arms the only Heaven she sought.

Waiting one minute, then another, then another, Marie finally could stand it no longer. She rushed forward, her smile of welcome dying on her lips like a rose without water, as she saw ashes, only ashes. Everything was as it had been before she gave her blood.

"No!"

She slammed her palm against the cool wood, hoping the pain in her hand would somehow keep her from experiencing the intensity of the pain in her heart. It was a useless gesture, as she had known it would be. Her chest felt as though it were going to explode, the pain spreading to her stomach, down her arms, unfurling through her entire body like a great malignant flag of defeat. With a sob, she turned away from the coffin and slumped into the desk chair, clutching her chest like an old man having a heart attack, wishing she had that luxury.

After an untold time of staring into the space above the desk, Marie shook herself from the lethargy of disappointment. As she had done after every new attempt to free Tyler from the clutches of

true death, she knew she should write down what she had done and the results. The results, she thought with gut-twisting sorrow, were always the same: failure.

Shaking her head, she raised her fingers to her temple and rubbed tiny circles in the tense flesh. She had felt something. She knew she had. Was Tyler trying to return, but unable? Was he feeling as much agony as she every time it didn't work? Was she holding him, forcing him to endure that agony again and again because he loved her too much to leave her while she still needed him?

Taking a deep breath, she smoothed her palm over his journal, the cool parchment warming to her touch. Tears streamed down her face but what she had to do was far too important to let a breaking heart interfere.

"Tyler..."

She had to clear her throat and take another deep breath before she could go on. She closed her eyes and imagined his face - chocolate eyes, glowing with love; straight nose, flared by passion; expressive lips, parted in anticipation of her kiss. Was she strong enough to let go?

Yes. For him, she could do anything.

"Tyler, I love you. I know some people might think that you cursed me by taking away the sun, but they don't understand. You gave me a sun ten times brighter just by smiling at me. Your touch was warmer than any sunbeam ever dreamed of being. You gave me a chance to be complete, to love and be loved by the most wonderful man who ever lived. I'll treasure that for the rest of my life."

She had to stop for a minute; her voice deserting her as she remembered how long that life might be and realized, once and for all, that she would spend it alone, never again feeling his touch. Her words came out in a pain-filled whisper.

"It was just a legend. Groundless, built on hopes and dreams, like most legends."

She inhaled shakily, then cleared her throat and straightened her back and shoulders, trying to show the strength she knew he would want to see.

"It's time for you to go now, my love. I can make it on my own. I will bury your ashes and let you go. Goodbye, Tyler."

For one more heartbeat, she held her head erect, her tears barely in check. She felt his presence more strongly than she had since he had sacrificed himself to save her. She knew he was saying his final goodbye and she didn't want his last vision of her to be with tears streaming down her face and her nose running a marathon. A warm breeze swept through the room, though no window had been opened to allow its passage, and she imagined Tyler slipping away into the night. Her last vestige of strength left with that breeze. She slid from the chair to curl in a ball on the floor, her choked whisper for her ears

only.

"I will always love you."

"And I, you, my heart."

Of all the tricks her mind had played on her in the last few months, this was the cruelest. His voice sounded so real, so near. She curled even more tightly, pressing her hands to her ears to keep out the sounds of life.

"Is this the welcome I get for saving your life?"

She almost laughed, wondering where she had found the strength for a sense of humor. Fearing she had finally lost her tenuous grip on sanity, she answered, even though she was certain she was responding to a figment of her imagination.

"I specifically remember asking you not to do that."

Oh, how she loved that deep chuckle!

What was that? Had the floor creaked? 'Well, sure, Marie, this house is older than God, it probably has a creak or two.' Something brushed her arm where it lay protectively over her face, keeping out the loneliness. Slowly, fear of waking from this wonderful dream keeping her eyes tightly closed, she reached out and closed her hand on heavy fabric. It seemed real enough. She opened one eye a slit, just enough to see what she held in her hand. Heavy black canvas.

"Marie, open your eyes. Look at me, love. I don't wish to frighten you by lifting you into my arms before you accept that I am here."

She slowly rolled onto her back, keeping her eyes closed until she felt floor under both shoulders. Fear clenched her throat as surely as Darth Vader's hand. She opened her eyes.

Tyler stood there in all his glory, just as he had looked when he had gone to battle to save her life. He was smiling down at her, his chocolate eyes alight. His aristocratic bearing sat on his shoulders like a cloak of pride. He was radiant.

Marie didn't move, didn't even breath, for fear the vision before her would disappear into the mist of lost dreams.

"I can wait no longer!"

With an elated growl, he loomed over her and suddenly she was airborne. Before she could blink, she was crushed against a rock-hard chest, her lips plundered by his hard mouth. She instinctively wrapped her arms around his neck, though she knew he wouldn't let her fall. Then, like a floodgate opening after a summer rain, her pain-dulled mind exploded with the blinding light of truth. She pulled away and looked into his eyes.

"Tyler?"

The breath of a whisper caressed his ears.

"Yes, love. I have returned as I said I would."

"As you...?"

One regal eyebrow arched in question.

She laughed and thanked God for returning her most wonderful, most annoying love to her arms. Wrapping her legs around Tyler's hips and burying her face in the warm spot beneath his chin, she squeezed him as hard as she could, hanging on for dear life.

Eternity

Chapter 33

Marie's smile grew as she read the announcement in the LA Times, which Tyler had delivered by mail every day. Lieutenant Michael Decker of the LAPD was announcing his plans to wed a fellow officer, one Rosy Kincaid. In a side that the Society page found very romantic, Ms Kincaid had nursed Lieutenant Decker through a nasty bout of some unnamed flu a few years back, a flu that had left the poor man nearly comatose for twenty-four hours. Thankfully, there had been no lasting effects, but love had bloomed over homemade chicken soup. Due to the fact that Lieutenant Decker had just been promoted to chief of detectives, there was going to be quite a celebratory bash. Marie was so happy for her old friend, she laughed out loud.

Tyler raised his eyes from the business section in which he was quite involved and arched one fine brow in question.

"Is Ann Landers particularly amusing today, sweet?"

Marie wrinkled her nose at him to show her displeasure with his attitude toward her reading material.

"Has anyone ever told you that you're a terrible snob?"

His smile was warm and slightly wicked.

"No, my love, I am an excellent snob. And you may have mentioned it once or twice."

She frowned unconvincingly and tossed a throw pillow at him, catching him square in the chest. He growled low in his throat - a sound she was certain had struck terror into the heart of many a man, but which had quite a different effect on her - rose from his desk chair and began stalking toward her. She giggled, closing the paper, and pointed a threatening finger in his direction.

"You'll never know what I was laughing at if you pounce, rend and tear."

He narrowed his eyes, a belying smile tugging at the corners of his lips. In one fluid motion, he seated himself on the couch beside her and pulled her, squealing, astride his lap, facing him, her knees pushed up against the back of the couch. Even after three years, she never ceased to be amazed at the strength of this man.

"Is it torture that will be needed for me to garner this information?"

His fingers lightly touched her sides, a warning of the vicious tickling about to commence. She

squealed again and tried to wiggle away from him. His hands tightened on her sides and a disgruntled look of pain crossed his brow.

"Hold still, wench! This torture is not meant to be mutual! Talk, or I will be forced to use more...interesting...methods."

Marie had become a bit distracted from the subject at hand by the solid lump rubbing the very tender places between her legs. She leaned forward and laid her head on his chest, trying to get her breathing under control. She was still a bit breathless when she replied.

"You always tell me I talk too much. Okay, okay, no more!"

She sat up and looked at him, a smile of happiness turning her face radiant. He still marveled at how she could sweep the heavy darkness from his heart and make it glow with light with a single look.

"Michael is getting married!"

Though both brows arched, his tone was exceedingly droll.

"Michael?"

Her brows drew together in consternation over his obtuseness.

"Yes, Michael. Lieutenant Decker? From LA?"

He gave an exaggerated sigh.

"Oh, that Michael."

Her palm made a satisfying 'smack' as it came into contact with his chest where the deep 'V' of his ankle-length black robe bared it.

"You creep, you knew who I meant. He was just promoted to Chief of Detectives."

"How nice for him."

She tipped her head to one side and gaped at him.

"How long will you stay jealous?"

He made a show of looking at the expensive gold watch on his wrist, and then returned his full attention to her face.

"Eternity sounds likely."

Her eyes darkened to molten sapphire as she slowly rolled her hips, eliciting a groan from deep in his throat. Her voice a sultry purr, she reassured her love.

"He was just a friend, my lord."

He shivered as she spoke the endearment he loved, his growing passion darkening his eyes as it hardened his loins. Marie sighed her appreciation and wriggled against him, testing his control.

"Even if Michael had been more than a friend, which he wasn't, I haven't noticed another man

since the first time you held me in your arms. Surely you know that."

She wore only a short silk kimono robe - his - she didn't want one of her own. He slowly slid his palms up her bare thighs, smiling as her body tensed with anticipation.

"Of course I know it, but if I were to take you for granted you would surely make me regret it."

His thumbs began slowly kneading her lower lips and she trembled, falling forward till her cheek rested against the warmth of his bare chest. He slid his hands around to cup her firm behind and, with a sharp tug on the tie at his waist and a slight shift to open his velvet robe; he slid his straining shaft slowly into her welcoming body. She moaned, and then gave a breathless protest.

"Unfair! I'm trying to have a conversation here!"

He chuckled, his thrusts so slow they barely constituted movement.

"By all means, converse. I assure you, I am quite capable of simultaneous actions. And I am certain that you can ask questions no matter what is happening around, or to, you."

With his strong fingers, he gently kneaded her nether cheeks, sending little jolts of sensation zinging through her. She moaned again, knowing Tyler could continue this slow, languorous lovemaking for several hours, building to a peak so intense she would need a day's rest just to recover. Her mind drifted back to the first time Tyler had used this protracted, deliberate sexual technique with her. It had been the night he returned from the dead, so to speak. He had begun right there on the floor of the sitting room, kissing, caressing, setting her ablaze then stoking the fire with his total possession of her body. After he had been inside her for a blissful eternity, he had wrapped her legs around his waist and, lifting her into his arms, stood. Completely unconcerned with their state of total undress, he had carried her that way, never losing that sweet skin-on-skin contact, to the master bedroom which Mrs. Schwartz - bless her Boy Scout heart - had prepared just in case. He'd laid Marie on the bed, easing himself down on top of her, and continued that slow thrusting, kissing her face, her neck, her breasts, and his hands caressing her backside until he must have decided she'd had about all she could take. Her fingernails digging bloody furrows into the hard skin of his back might have been a clue. He had slid one hand between them, his aim exquisite as he found her swollen center. With none-too-gentle pressure, he had sent her spiraling into near oblivion, screaming his name even as he whispered her own. For once, she hadn't asked him any questions after lovemaking. She couldn't, she had been out for the count.

When she had regained consciousness, she had been clutching a handful of blond hair. He had cast a jaundiced eye sideways to her face and said with that annoyingly superior tone of his that she loved so much, "Would you mind?" She had released his hair, a blush coloring her pale skin all the way

to the tops of her breasts. He had smiled and pulled her head onto his chest, a position she had considered Heaven from that moment forward.

"I'm sorry, I guess I just didn't want you to get away while I was sleeping."

"Indeed! I'm not going anywhere, Marie."

"Tyler?"

He had groaned but, when she had lifted her eyes to see if anything was wrong, he had been smiling. She had frowned.

"What?"

He had chuckled and begun making sensuous little circles on her back with his fingertips.

"Go ahead, love, ask your questions. But be merciful, I have only eternity to answer."

She had slapped his chest so gently; it hadn't even made a sound.

"Well, if you insist."

She had felt his eyes on the top of her head then, the look of consternation he wore clear in her mind's eye. Happy she had thrown him for a loop for once, she had settled in like a kitten snuggling against its mother's belly, and started her long list of questions with the one that had been most pressing.

"What brought you back?"

His deep whisper raised gooseflesh all across her back.

"I was always with you, my love. It was almost as if I were inside you. I saw what you saw, felt what you felt. Somehow, I knew what I needed to regain my physical body; I just couldn't seem to articulate it to anyone. It was extremely frustrating."

He had tightened his arms around her, his whisper barely discernible.

"And frightening."

His voice had returned to normal as he explained.

"You see, I also knew that if you released me before successfully restoring me to life, I would have no chance of returning to you. You would be lost to me. It took all the considerable strength of my will to make you break the rose."

She had gasped.

"I didn't break it, it just...Did I?"

He had nodded against the top of her head.

"To you, I suppose it seemed as though it had broken of its own accord, but I used what little control over you I could achieve to make you break it and cut yourself on the jagged edge."

"But one of the first things I tried was blood. I poured a whole bag of blood over those stupid

ashes. All they did was get wet."

"Please, love, you're talking about the remains of a great man."

His offended tone had made her smile.

"It was not just any blood that was necessary for my rebirth but your blood, the greatest sacrifice any vampire can make. And your tears, harbingers of emotion those of our blood are said to have lost the ability to shed."

With a finger beneath her chin, he had brought her gaze to his face.

"Since I gained my manhood, no tears had come from my eyes until I thought I might lose you. Perhaps tears are an element of love. Together, your tears and your blood had the power, the magic, to return 'those stupid ashes' to their correct state of being."

She had whispered with awe.

"Blood and tears."

They had lain quietly for a moment, each lost in their own thoughts. Then the next question had forced its way from her lips.

"Can we reattach?"

He had started, his tone witness to his confusion.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You know, if we get cut in half. Can we grow back together?"

He had chuckled and hugged her close.

"Not if our spine is severed. That is true death."

She had sagged a little, one more vampire power lost. How he hated to disappoint her.

"However, if a non-vital extremity, such as a finger or an arm, is amputated, then replaced in its proper position before natural deterioration can set in, it will reattach as though it had never been severed."

She had raised her head to look at his face, her excitement shining in her eyes.

"Really!"

He had nodded, his expression that of an indulgent father reassuring his much beloved child.

"Really. But please don't put that to the test unnecessarily."

She had shaken her head, her lip curling at the thought.

"Yuck! Not to mention 'Ouch!' No problem. But it's good to know, just in case."

She had returned her chin to his chest and thrown her arm across him.

"We've really got to check out that wolf thing, Tyler. I mean, almost all vampire legends have

some sort of metamorphic abilities involved. It stands to reason that there is some thread of truth to be found in something that is so often repeated, don't you think?"

She had felt the beginning of a chuckle for which she had been certain she was going to want to slap him.

"Most certainly. And next time I see Santa Claus, I'll be sure to...Ow!"

Her palm had found its mark low on his abdomen, letting him know that she was not pleased.

"Okay, so some legends don't bear close scrutiny, but I think vampire metamorphosis isn't one of them. I think we can turn into something if we try hard enough. Frank made a beautiful wolf."

"Frank?"

"Langella."

"Of course, forgive my poor memory. If you wish to attempt metamorphosis, be my guest."

She had raised her head once again, outrage in her eyes.

"I don't need your permission, you know."

He had given her a frown to let her know he preferred she seek it but had known it was a waste of time to attempt to control her. After a less than gentle pat to her behind, he had hugged her to his chest.

"Indeed, you do not."

She had snuggled more firmly against him.

"But I'll always tell you what I'm up to, just so you won't get an ulcer worrying about me."

"Thank you."

"This is probably a stupid question, but I don't think it's a good idea to assume anything so here goes - Can we have kids?"

Tyler's gut had clenched painfully, the one regret of his long life stripped bare by her question. He could not count the times he had wished just one of his seeds had taken root before his entrance into the life of blood. Instead, the only blood of his that still flowed in any vein but his flowed in Marie. Though he was glad of that, he had always wished for a son.

"No, love, we cannot."

The anguish in his voice had cut her to the quick.

"You didn't have any before you...um...wow, it's so weird to say `died'...before your horse fell on you?"

One curt shake of his head against the top of hers had been her only answer. Remembering how important heirs had been in his time, she had understood his sense of loss. For her part, she hadn't really

given kids much thought until that moment. 'Don't know what you've got till it's gone' had come to mind, but she had quickly shoved it aside. How could she miss something she'd never had?

"Maybe we could adopt?"

"I suppose we could, but we would be forced to watch our children grow old and die. I don't think you'd enjoy that. Or we could offer them our blood, but then they would have to hunt, and you wouldn't approve of that either. A child of my loins is all that I was denied in life, and now that I have your love, I no longer care about children."

That had been a lie, but she hadn't thought it would serve any useful purpose to call him on it at that moment. But her terrier blood had not been willing to accept his pronouncement without argument.

"I still have periods."

Out of the corner of her eye, she had seen him flush a deep crimson. Old-fashioned men just could not handle talk about girl stuff.

"Sorry, I was just thinking out loud."

"Kindly keep such thoughts silent."

His uncomfortable tone made her giggle.

"But it's not fair! If I can't have a baby, why do I have to..."

He had none-too-gently fisted her hair so he could pull her head back and capture her eyes. His thundercloud expression had spoken volumes.

"Okay, subject dropped."

He had released her and she had rubbed her cheek against his chest, mumbling under her breath, "It's not fair, that's all. It's like setting an alarm on your day off. You don't get anything for it. Just awake. And grouchy."

His soft chuckle had escaped on a breath.

"Perhaps you could use the strength of your will to turn off the alarm clock."

That had caught her interest so that she raised her head once again, excitement returning to her voice.

"How?"

"To a certain extent, we can control our bodily functions, very useful in the days when a voyage to America meant months in the hold of a ship with no available prey."

"You'd starve."

He had shaken his head.

"No, I just went into a state of deep sleep some might call 'suspended animation'. I believe it's

possible for a vampire to do so indefinitely."

He had smiled at her in that condescending way she knew meant he was about to say something to annoy her.

"However, I don't think you are capable."

Her feathers had ruffled at the bait, increasing his smile.

"Why not? I'm a vampire. What am I, some kind of second-class citizen?"

He had fluffed her hair with his fingertips, and then begun rolling her beneath him as he spoke.

"Because, my sweet, to sleep you must cease speaking and I'm beginning to think that is how you breath. You would surely suffocate."

She had huffed her outrage to which he had paid his normal close attention as he had begun speeding her pulse with his tender ministrations. But, once again, the germ of an idea had been planted in her fertile brain.

Over the years since that wonderful night, she had dealt with many disappointments in her quest to bring her dream to fruition. Several times, she had been given hope, only to have the disturbance of her sleep by cramps prove it false. She knew Tyler would be amazed by the fact that over all that time, she had mentioned nothing to him, keeping the dream to herself until she could hand it to him as an accomplishment.

They had been married one week after his rebirth in a simple, private night-time ceremony presided over by a magistrate of the small town which occupied the ground where Tyler had been born. Castle Florescu had long since been destroyed by war, neglect and time. As a wedding gift he had given her a small paperweight that contained a rock and some soil. At her quizzical look, he had explained that the rock was a stone from his castle, the soil, and his 'native earth'. The sorrow and happiness combined in his eyes that night had made her wish even more to give him the one thing he had been denied by a sometimes very cruel fate.

Now, as her mind returned to the present, she wondered if she had convinced herself because she wanted so very much to give him this special gift. Maybe. But it had been five months now. Marie didn't think even she could be that stubborn.

He was delivering little nips to her neck that brought shivers of delight to her entire body when she pushed against his chest and gained his eyes on her face, a frown of annoyance furrowing his brow.

"Tyler, do you think I'm getting fat?"

"Fat?"

He echoed her question as though he had misplaced the meaning of the word.

"Yeah, fat. You know," she ran her hands over her gently rounded tummy, drawing his eyes with the motion, "kind-of plump in the middle? What do you think?"

"Is this a trick question?"

His brows drew together, suspicion entering his lovely chocolate eyes. He spoke in that stern, no-nonsense tone she both loved and hated. It made her feel like an errant child protected from the entire world by the strength of the man who spoke.

"Marie, what are you about?"

Her smile flashing sunshine radiant, she took his face in her hands and gazed deeply into his eyes, which narrowed and darkened to black at her words.

"I was going to wait until the contractions started to be certain but I can't stand it any longer. Tyler, I'm going to have your baby!"

His entire body went stiff against her, except for the part that had been so stiff just seconds before. That softened and retreated from her body, leaving her feeling strangely bereft and confused. Why didn't he seem happier? Hadn't he heard her?

Without a word, Tyler placed his hands on her waist, lifted and replaced her on the couch beside him. Then he stood and walked to the window, staring out at the starry sky of his homeland. When he finally spoke, his tone brooked no opposition.

"No, you are not. You may wish it to be so, you may even have convinced yourself to the point that your body has chosen to exhibit the signs, but it is a false pregnancy."

Though she hadn't expected him to be quite so harsh, Marie had anticipated, and prepared for, a possible argument. She'd try being reasonable first, though, in her experience, that didn't usually get her anywhere if her love had his mind set on something.

"But, Tyler..."

"No!"

His shout shook the glass in the window frame. He ran his hand over his high forehead in weary frustration, and then turned to face her, his tone quieter but no less commanding.

"You will cease this foolishness immediately and accept that which you cannot change."

With that pronouncement, he headed for the door to the hall.

"Wait just a minute, Bubb!"

Marie stood and planted her hands on her hips, anger flushing her skin, her lovely blue eyes shooting sapphire sparks. He merely turned his face toward her, wanting no discussion on this subject that he found so painful.

"Look at me!"

He spun to face her, his nostrils flaring at the command in her tone. Eyes narrowed threateningly, he raised his chin and glared down his aristocratic nose.

"Careful, woman, you forget yourself."

"Oh, no, I haven't forgotten anything. And don't you dare give me that holier-than-thou, I-was-born-with-a-silver-spoon-in-my-mouth-while-you've-never-even-*seen*-anything-but-stainless-steel glare. I might have more humble roots than yours, Lord Florescu, but the same blood runs through my veins. I would love to know just exactly who made you the expert on vampires? Okay, so I haven't managed to turn myself into anything yet, but you haven't given me any help, or even any encouragement. You're older and you concentrate lots better than me, you might be able to do stuff I can't if you'd just open that bank-vault tight mind of yours. But will you try? Nooo! You just sit back with that superior air of yours and wait for me to get frustrated enough to give up, then offer your body as the booby prize. Hah, bet you never thought of it that way, did you?"

She raised her hand to silence him, knowing she was pushing her luck into the stratosphere and not giving a darn!

"I'm not finished!"

She wouldn't have been surprised to see steam come out of his ears at this moment, his expression was so hot, but she didn't care. She was so mad, she might match him puff for puff.

"You act like you've been around since the dawn of time, for Heaven's sake! As much as you'd like to think it - and like me to just accept it, like a good little woman - you don't know everything there is to know about being a vampire. You are *not* the be-all end-all of vampire knowledge. Face it, Tyler; you don't know anything about being a female vampire. You can be so," she searched the air above her head for the word, her eyes flashing when she found just the right one, "autocratic, it drives me bonkers!"

She clasped her hands in front of her chest and rubbed them together, taking deep breaths, trying to calm down. She lowered her voice in an attempt to transform this confrontation into the discussion she had planned, even though she was pretty sure there was little chance of that now.

"You don't *know* everything, Tyler, you just have a lot of theories. Unsubstantiated, I might add. It wouldn't hurt you to open your mind half an inch to other possibilities, would it?"

He could have been carved from granite as he stood there, his arms crossed over his chest, his eyes dark unto black, his nostrils flared like an angry stallion. She almost started when he spoke, catching herself at the last second. When he used the soft tone she thought of as 'silk-covered steel', she

cringed inwardly, wishing he would yell instead.

"Vampires cannot bear children."

"Why?"

The sparks that shot from his eyes told her she had interrupted him. She raised her eyebrows and tilted her head to show she was not going to back down.

"It isn't logical. One isn't born a vampire."

"'Logical' isn't a word I would use in an argument about people who drink blood, fly from place to place 'cause they want to and have a terminal sun allergy. How do you know you can't be born a vampire? Just because we both did the get-bitten-and-share-blood thing doesn't mean that's the only way it happens. Besides, just because something hasn't ever happened before doesn't mean it can't. There's a first time for everything, Tyler. What are you afraid of?"

He took a step toward her and for a minute she was afraid she was booked on one of those unplanned Tyler-powered flights she had been known to take once or twice in the past when he got this angry and lost his temper. He had never hurt her, and she knew he never would, but that didn't keep her from flinching away from the sheer force of his anger.

Seeing her flinch, he clenched his fists at his sides and turned away from her. She had to strain to hear his softly spoken words.

"I do not want to hope, only to face reality."

Slipping her arms around his waist, Marie pulled him close to her, her cheek against his back, loving him as much for what he perceived as weakness as she loved him for all his strength.

"Tyler, you went through all the discoveries, all the disappointments so I never had to, and I thank you for that. But maybe there are things that...oh, I don't know...maybe things aren't written in stone."

She sighed and hugged him, pulling her biggest weapon.

"Tyler?"

He turned in her arms, his bearing perhaps one ounce less untouchable than a moment earlier. She smiled up at him as she once again laid her palms on his cheeks.

"You're the expert so, if you'll do one thing for me, with an open mind, I'll bow to your judgment. Pregnant women taste different, don't they?"

His eyes narrowed, but he gave a curt nod.

"Test me."

She dropped her head back, exposing her throat in invitation.

Tyler swallowed hard, fighting the urge to push her away and flee the room. He wanted so badly to believe, yet knew it was impossible. Not even Marie's love could bring about such a miracle. Could it? He had to know, if only to save Marie from the repeated disappointments to which she would subject herself if he didn't put an end to her hope right now. As he pulled her into his arms and lowered his lips to her beautiful throat, he whispered, "You will never bow to anyone."

Her body had barely begun to quiver with the delight of his penetration when he pulled away, the shock in his eyes making her wish for the thousandth time for the ability to capture his handsome face on film. The tender, violent love in their dark depths was all the confirmation she needed.

Lifting her into his arms, he carried her to the couch and laid her down with such gentleness, she knew she had seen the last of passionate lovemaking for the next few months. She sighed for her loss.

Kneeling on the floor beside the couch, he pushed aside the silk robe and placed shaking hands on her bare abdomen, smoothing them over the soft skin there. He blinked several times before looking at her, his eyes unusually moist.

"How can it be?" he whispered reverently.

Marie shrugged and giggled.

"The usual way, I think. I mean, really, it's not like we've been careful."

This was a side of Tyler she had never thought to see. He was in shock, caught completely off-guard by a fate he had long ago decided would be forever against him. When he laid his cheek against her tummy, his eyes closed, a look of total wonder on his face, she lost her inner battle and burst into tears. She quickly explained through her quiet sobs.

"Happy tears, Tyler. Very happy tears."

He leaned back and gave her a rather disgruntled glare.

"What?"

"You will never cease finding new ways to throw my carefully ordered world into chaos, will you?"

Wiping her eyes with the backs of her hands, Marie smiled, her tears over for the moment. She looked around, and then quickly snatched the silk handkerchief perfectly folded in his breast pocket.

His tone was as dry as the Gobi Desert.

"That is several centuries old."

Marie made a helpless gesture that didn't quite reach her playful eyes.

"Tyler, the Kleenex in this place is at least a hundred years old. Really, spring cleaning is in order around here."

His eyes widened in surprise as she blew her nose on his antique silk handkerchief.

"You little witch! No," he raised his hand as she tried to return the cloth to him, "thank you. It's yours."

Her smile took on an edge of seriousness.

"Do you think I'll have a normal baby? In the normal way? Will he drink milk? Will I make milk? What if I go into labor in the middle of the day? Do you think...?"

He pulled her into his arms, stood and began carrying her toward their bedroom.

"As I have been forced to say far too many times since the fortuitous moment of our meeting, I don't know. I suppose we will just have to find out together."

She giggled as he dipped his head to kiss her throat and his neatly trimmed beard tickled her.

His chest felt close to bursting with happiness and pride. A feeling he had given up hoping for long ago filled him now. A child. But how? Looking at his own hand where it curved around Marie's breast, holding her secure, he remembered that hand melting before his eyes, turning to ash, as had the rest of him. 'How?' was no longer a question worth examining. It all came down to him and Marie. Everything seemed truly possible because of their love.

He had given her his blood so that she might live. She had returned it, along with the tears of her heart, to restore him to life. And now, together, they had created something that could only be described as a miracle. In his heart he knew that the future would hold more blood and tears for them both. But he also knew their love would see them through it. It had taken him many lifetimes to find the woman who could make him see the truth, but now he embraced it as surely as he embraced the beautiful woman in his arms.

The greatest power known to man, any man, is the power of Love.

As the door to the master bedroom closed behind them, Marie began a question, "Tyler?" then, with a long, contented sigh, "Oh, never mind, I have eternity to ask."

THE END

BLOOD AND TEARS

Robyn Crane